THE ADOLESCENCE OF FRANCE:
TEACHING FOR HISTORICAL EMPATHY

by Nicole Elizabeth Read

This thesis investigates how the analogous nature of ancien régime society and adolescent psychology can engage high school students in active learning about ancien régime society. The similarities between cultural changes in the 17th century and social changes in adolescence will be used to help students reach historical empathy. This analysis is based on the interpretation that the 17th century was the beginning of modernity in the philosophical sense. The effects of modern subjectivity on the self and social interactions will be analyzed in literature and compared to adolescent psychology for writing effective, engaging, and relevant lesson plans.
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Dedication: This thesis is dedicated to the professors at Miami University who sparked my interest in 17th century literature, and to my students who inspire me to continue the tradition by finding a way to make these works accessible and enjoyable for them.
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**The Adolescence of France: Teaching for Historical Empathy**

**Introduction**

The ancien régime in France appears, at a glance, to be a mysterious and distant historical period. The study of the ancien régime seems esoteric for the American student of French not only due to the archaism of the 17th century but also the cultural distance that is ever-present for a world language student. The intricacies and subtleties involved in coming to a deep understanding of the time period make introductory studies of literature, history, and philosophy especially difficult to grasp for a young, inexperienced American student. In order to understand historical literature, a student has to first understand the history, culture, and contexts of the works. Despite inherent difficulty in teaching this period, however, the educational benefits are manifold.

The ancien régime marks a distinct social and political evolution that forever changed societal structures and the development of conceptions of human subjectivity. Human self-perception today was greatly influenced by thought in the 17th century. René Descartes posited “Je pense, donc je suis” and inverted the status of subjectivity. The individual now took precedence over external conditions whereas previously philosophy was dominated by the transcendence of god, nature or being. With the publication of Descartes’ *Le Discours de la Méthode*, people began to understand a more modern state of the human condition. The 17th century is a key stepping stone to modernity in the philosophical sense of the individual questioning their position in relation to the world. ¹

This new individualist dynamism was an inversion of the traditional submission to a higher order of god, being, and nature. Jean Rohou writes extensively about how this development and others changed 17th-century society and marked the beginning of modernity. The central argument of his book *Le XVIIe Siècle, Une Révolution de la Condition Humaine* is that the 17th century in France can be considered the birth of the modern human condition. He studies how human beings relate to the world and others by

¹ Jean Rohou describes the end of the 17th century as a time of subjective transformation “En cette fin de siècle, les hommes ont commencé à s’émanciper de l’ordre hérité pour devenir un peu les sujets de leurs propres entreprises: pour les mener à bien, ils élaborent une méthode rationnelle. Ils ont aussi commencé à développer leur subjectivité, la liberté de leur vie intérieure.” (Rohou 134)
analyzing several texts and their contexts. The individual and subjectivity were forever changed during this time period. Citizens of 17th century France were slowly emancipated from their subjugation to nature and fate as they became autonomous individuals ruled by reason and drive. Curiously enough, this shift occurred as the monarchy became increasingly absolutist. The role of the “emancipated citizen” amidst an absolutist monarchy is a fascinating area of study. After questioning the individual’s place in the universe, the people of the ancien régime also began to question their place in society. The duality of this particular time period can be cause for confusion for those learning about it for the first time.

The present-day study of this specific age is essential to intermediate and advanced level American students of French since the history of the ancien régime is so central to the collective memory and culture of France. Comprehension of this historical period clarifies literature that serious students of French will undoubtedly encounter.

In Salons, History and the Creation of the 17th Century, Faith E. Beasley included a chapter titled “Teaching ‘Le Grand Siècle’ ” in which she posits that this time period more than any other is emphasized in French curriculum as a way of creating national identity. As France’s centralized educational system developed at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, the literature of the 17th century was decidedly taught more than the writing of any other time period. Beasley states that through its emphasis in curriculum and in the national exams, it is clear that this time period is essential to the intellectual culture of France. Knowing the literature of the 17th century became essential to being French. “The 17th century became a “citadel” and a “sanctuary” in which reposes the essence of Frenchness to be transmitted” (Beasley 262-263).

For an American student, reading literature from this time period not only teaches a lesson in French history but helps in gaining a perspective about what it means to be French. The literature of the siècle classique is so central to French culture that it is essential to anyone wishing to truly understand French society.

2 “L’homme se définissait par son assujettissement. L’homme moderne se veut au contraire un individu autonome, sujet entreprenant de sa raison, de sa conscience, de sa volonté, de son désir. Avant Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant et Kierkegaard, Descartes exprime une première étape de cette inversion” (Rohou 209).
Despite the weight of this acquisition of knowledge, high school and college students studying 17th and eighteenth century France for the first time are often frustrated and confused by the elusiveness and inaccessibility of a time in history that is upon first examination so unlike our own. Such notions as self-fashioning, illusion, the nature of court life, the panoptical power of the king, and the search for reason seem out of reach. This confusion stems from the fact that the ancien régime is the historical period *par excellence* when nothing was what it seemed. Oppression was masked by opulence and intrigue. Meanwhile, knowledge and reason were making their way to the forefront of French culture. It is no wonder that this fascinating period is often lost to a younger, inexperienced audience.³

The factual importance of the ancien régime to history and to our current condition is clear. What is yet to be examined is what additional benefits can be gained by students and how they can become more emotionally engaged by this material. Fortunately, teaching the ancien régime to a young adult audience has a lot to offer in the sense of students relating to the material and reaching a deeper understanding of history and ultimately transcending it. Comprehension and clarification alone should not be the sole goals of teaching and learning about the ancien régime. The dreaded question of *why* we teach and learn about history and literature must be raised. History should not be taught merely to impose a series of facts for the betterment and increased sophistication of students’ knowledge. History is essential to self-knowledge. Knowing oneself means knowing one’s capacities. Since potentiality is uncertain without first having attempted something, history is the only clue to what individuals can do since it is the documentation of what people have done. (Collingwood 10). How the instructor and students interact with French history may perhaps be as much a reflection of current concerns and realities as it is the actual interpretation of the past. We cannot begin to understand who historical actors were and why they acted as they did until “we have acknowledged differences between the presuppositions that prevailed in their time and

³ “If we say that there is a new stress on the executive power of the will, we must say that there is the most sustained and relentless assault upon the will; if we say that there is a new social mobility, we must say that there is a new assertion of power (…) to determine all movement within the society” (Greenblatt 2).
the ones that prevail in ours” (Haskell, 6). Without knowing history, we cannot know ourselves. Without any continuum to the human experience we will have forgotten who we were and will ignore who we could become. Literature gives us the added benefit of seeing history from the inside. Though history tells us what happened, literature tells us how people lived. Reading historical texts involves the exploration of human conditions, emotions, and experiences. Literature is the journal of history which offers a unique opportunity for understanding the past, our present, and a future that includes the two.

What is striking is the pertinence of this epoch to the lives and frustrations of young adults. These similarities can be manipulated to engage the students in the relevance of the material beyond the historical importance of the ancien régime. Theories about adolescent psychology and sociology resonate with concerns and themes of the literature of 17th and 18th century France. The philosophical shift of the importance of the self in the human condition is not unlike the individuation of teens from their parents and Peter Blos’ second oedipal conflict. The new-found self-importance of individuals of the ancien régime subscribing to a new human subjectivity also mirrors the intense narcissism that comes with adolescence.

Literature of the ancien regime often explores themes that are strikingly relevant to adolescents. One area in particular that I will be explore throughout the paper is group dynamics, and social structures. In group dynamics, young adults react much as the aristocracy did in court life. As observed in French literature, many courtiers put on airs and were artfully delusive when it came to gaining the favour of the court and of the king. This crisis of selfhood is not unlike E.H. Erikson’s “Eight Stages of Man” in which adolescence marks the threshold of “Identity vs. Identity confusion”. Adolescents often attempt to model themselves into what they are not. The instability of social groups, peer pressure, and the quest for popularity are apparent in both modern youth culture and the culture of the period of study.

When examining the similarities between the ancien régime and the adolescent experience the deployment of space and power also provide parallels between the ancien régime and adolescence. The panoptical nature of court life kept the noble class in close

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4 It must be noted here that “adolescence” does not imply “teenager”. Adolescence is considered to be the developmental phase before financial and emotional independence from parents. Often adolescence can span well into a young adult’s twenties.
quarters. Louis XIV tried to see and control everything in the palace of Versailles. This newly controlled space influenced trends of social behavior in court. The noble class clamored to reinvent themselves and occasionally destroy others. Their lives were filled with secrets and intrigue. Suffocating and intoxicating power was everywhere. Students would be familiar with some of the same experiences based on their own education. Students who are forced to share the same space throughout the day sometimes find themselves in a social arena where control, confined space, and agency cause similar behavioral patterns. The social issues of popularity and personal melodrama and gossip are not completely unlike the court life of Versailles.

Amidst the social confusion and self-creation, the quest for reason also characterizes both adolescence and the ancien régime. Descartes not only posited a new vision of the place of the individual in the universe but went on to encourage readers to question everything. As such, the Cartesian quest for knowledge and reasoning was an essential part of the history of the ancien régime. Young adults, too, must formulate their own understanding not only of who they are but also how they factor into society. At this stage in life the young mind struggles to find reason and logic in an attempt to understand our world.
Teaching through the Looking Glass: The Analogical Mirror.

A pedagogical strategy for deeper comprehension of the ancien régime in France is to shorten the gap between this period and our time by creating an analogical mirror so that students can see themselves in the people of the 17th century. Because all of the themes discussed earlier are outlined in Le XVIIe Siècle, Une Révolution de la Condition Humaine, Jean Rohou’s work serves as a key source in the analysis of the parallels between this period in history and the life stage of adolescence. It is not the goal of this paper to elaborate on specific lessons, but rather to establish the links that could be elaborated as such in an empathic historical reading of literary texts. For a more natural, anticipatory approach to applying the analogy of adolescence to the ancien régime the following methods might be helpful. Instructors should select discussion topics to align with potential psychological and sociological parallels to ancien régime society. Students must react to prompts about certain aspects of their lives without knowing the pertinence these topics may have on the next unit of study. They then must try to identify these themes in excerpts of ancien régime literature or from other sources presented to them. In this mirror students can remark similarities as well as differences in life and culture of the two time periods. This method can also be a tool for a more critical approach to understanding the ancien régime, and students’ self-awareness.

Students must relate their lives to the lives of those who lived at a time when everyone fashioned themselves under oppressive conditions. They must explore and develop ideas about the new philosophy of self-discovery and self-importance, while discovering their own individuality and place in the world. Students must attempt to grasp the Cartesian quest for reason and the beginning of the enlightenment while questioning everything: a characteristically adolescent trait.

Learning to teach the 17th century in France to an adolescent quickly becomes a study in the psychology and sociology of the ancien régime itself. The student might even become the teacher by providing new insights. Could one go so far as to say that the ancien régime was, in fact, the adolescence of France? Adolescence is, after all, the troubled and confusing time in which individuals explore their relationships to social
structures, establish a sense of self, and apply reason to understand the world around them.

An analogical image of adolescence and the ancien régime cannot be established without first providing several views of similar traits to the students. Since we cannot directly observe how people of the past lived, we must rely heavily on texts. The use of varied texts is not a new idea in French studies programs. This approach to teaching literature is distinct from historical studies proper because it recounts life as it was told as opposed to life as it was lived. By reading historical literature, students are able to observe the concerns, motivations, emotions, and culture of the period they are studying. A cultural studies approach to teaching brings these human aspects to life by joining such diverse elements as the religion, history, philosophy, technology, and general intellectual trends of a place and time. Contextualized literary readings will not only compare texts of many origins, but will compare texts and contexts.

The diversification of sources follows the model for an empathetic approach to historical teaching. By developing an understanding of the historical situation from varied contexts, students are able to more aptly understand the motivations and preconceptions of the time period. When students can imagine life and thought of the period of study from several different angles, they are more capable of understanding it.

This empathetic approach to historical pedagogy has become increasingly popular. Rather than teaching history as a series of facts, empathetic historical pedagogy attempts to create a deeper understanding of history by creating interdisciplinary and affective connections. Students participating in this style of learning also experience identification by putting themselves in the mind and feelings of the historical actors.

Tony Boddington states in his article “Empathy and the Teaching of History” that an empathetic pedagogical approach has the benefits of increased comprehension and sophistication of knowledge as well as a “potential contribution to personal development through vicarious experience of humanity” (Boddington 13). He also states that the practice of identification initiates imaginative processes that provide a “means whereby the experience and understanding of other people is extended beyond the limitations of immediate contacts” (Boddington 13).
Subsequently, history is essential not only to the acquisition of factual information but also to self-knowledge. Arguably, comparative literary history offers more than most historical studies in terms of personal and interpersonal development because of its uniquely human character. The complex level of emotional understanding that can be attained by this methodology involves identifying with historical actors and then coming to terms with current historical conditions. Students consider past situations and people and then compare them to our current reality and society. By consolidating knowledge of the past and present, students come to a better understanding of contemporary existence. Learning history in this way enables students to become more emotionally invested in the education they receive and to benefit from additional interpersonal and personal enrichment. In order to understand the people of the past we must first come to understand ourselves. Thus, the interaction that the class has with the lesson is as much a reflection of current concerns, culture, and reality as it is an analysis of the past. (Haskell, 6).

The goal of this paper is to provide more than interdisciplinary connections from the ancien régime. Rather, there will be a dual emphasis of interdisciplinary and psychological connections for increased historical empathy and self-awareness. I will present three major interdisciplinary themes that teachers can draw on for reaching historical empathy in each unit of study: self perception, influence and identity, and the pursuit of knowledge. Within each theme, psychological parallels between the adolescent situation and ancien régime society will be identified. These psychological elements will be used to link each theme to the central idea of “the adolescence of France”. If adolescents can connect to various literary and historical texts of the ancien régime through their own emotional experiences, they will be more likely to identify themselves with the people of that time period and reach historical empathy. Emotional and psychological investment in the material to be covered is central to the unit of study and may also provide a unifying theme.

Students will learn how individuals of the ancien régime perceived themselves, compassed their relationships to others, and understood the world. While learning about the personal and interpersonal relationships of the past, students will also observe and comment on their own relationships and experiences. By examining how others viewed
the world, it is possible that they will more clearly see how they themselves perceive it. Several varied texts and contexts will provide students with the tools needed to reach a critical understanding of history and some new insights into their own lives by way of a methodology that combines empathetic historical pedagogy, comparative literary history, and adolescent psychology.

The literature that will serve as examples for this study will consist of three genres. The Maximes by François La Rochefoucauld serves as an excellent introduction to a 17th-century thematic because these short quips introduce the themes that will be explored in future works. In order to observe a mise en abîme of theatricality, students will then read Le Misanthrope by Molière. Finally students will study the novel by reading La Princesse de Clèves by Madame de LaFayette.
Chapter 1

On a Path of Self-Discovery: Descartes’ “Je pense donc je suis” and Adolescent Identity Formation.

The focus of chapter one is to explain how modern subjectivity deeply changed the culture, literature, and people of the 17th century. I will explain how Blos’ psychological stage known as the second individuation process bears some striking similarities in its effect on adolescents and peer groups. Lastly, I will explore pedagogical applications that incorporate the parallels between Blos’ second individuation process and Descartes’ new subjectivity.

It is difficult to imagine the world before modern subjectivity. Dalia Judovitz highlights Merleau-Ponty in her interpretation of subjectivity when he describes this dilemma by stating “La subjectivité est une de ces pensées en deçà desquelles on ne revient pas, même et surtout si on les dépasse.” (Merleau-Ponty, 194). Modern conceptions of subjectivity so structure our understanding of the human experience that it becomes difficult to imagine prior conceptions. Rohou writes extensively about the development of the human condition throughout the 17th century. To help readers better understand a world without modern subjectivity he explains that the human condition prior to the 17th century is based on heritage. The very essence of a human being was a sum of everything that came before him. Life was based on transcendence; the transcendence of god, of nature, of the community and of the past. Citizens before modernity had little control over their own thoughts or ways of life because dogma and tradition defined these processes. (Rohou, 623)

A French citizen before the 17th century was subjugated by systems, categories, dogma, and traditions to such a degree that the self was only identifiable through the pre-eminence that dominated life of the time. Rohou explains:“À cette époque, s’identifier, c’est encore se ramener à une combinaison d’exemples connus; s’exprimer, c’est imiter.” (Rohou, 86)

Imitation extended well beyond the limits of selfhood. Literature was controlled by the echoing of common themes and styles. It is then appropriate to seek out a break from imitation in literature as a way of seeking a break towards a new human condition in French life. Rarely did an author speak of himself or herself. The self is, however, one of
the main subjects of Montaigne’s *Essais*. This canonical work is one that students will undoubtedly encounter. The introspective, intimate and almost journal-like nature of this work is particularly appealing to this age group because it is not unlike a journal that a student might have at home. There is something deeply personal and refreshingly surprising about *Les Essais*. This work is less concerned with imitation than simply stating observations about the world. Montaigne goes so far as to say “C’est moi que je peins” and “Je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre.” in his introduction entitled *Au Lecteur*. (Montaigne, 2).

Even before Descartes we can begin to see traces of what will become modern subjectivity when Montaigne states “Me trouvant entièrement dépourvu et vide de toute autre matière, je me suis présenté moi-même à moi pour argument et pour sujet.” However, the self of Montaigne is still subjugated by the wisdom and power of Nature and superstition. Rohou describes Montaigne’s submission to Nature by outlining some of his views on the subject. He claims that many of these views are symptomatic of the time of Nostradamus during which Montaigne lived. “Dans le dessaroi des guerres civiles, on cherche partout des signes, on croit à la Fortune, aux demons, aux sorciers. On célèbre encore plus qu’auparavant les prodigues mais aussi la sagesse de la Nature…Il faut ” suivre la Nature” répète Montaigne “Nature est un doux guide” (Rohou, 1113) Rohou continues by stating “Les lois de Nature nous apprennent ce que justement ce qu’il nous faut.”(Rohou, 1009) Though Montaigne’s work was revolutionary, according to Rohou’s reading, he was still dependant upon the transcendence of nature. His work serves as a stepping stone towards the area of study.

The work *par excellence* that takes the idea of the self away from imitation and further towards modern subjectivity is Descartes’ *Discours de la Méthode*. This text was written directly in French, unlike the scholastic tradition of writing in Latin. *Le Discours de la Méthode* was the first philosophic work written entirely in French, which was surprising enough, but it was the content that was even more revolutionary. (Pavel, Thomas, 284). When Descartes was meditating in his *poële* writing, he might as well have been in the pressure-cooker of adolescence. In effect, he reached the same conclusion that all well-adjusted young adults must face: “Je pense, donc je suis.” (Though they certainly would not phrase it the same way.) What is meant by this
comparison is that an epiphany is reached whereby the individual realizes that subjectivity is central to the ego or reality. Both the adolescent and Descartes reject pre-established institutions and figures as the sole determining factors for existence.

For Descartes, this meant inverting the status of external conditions like god, being and nature with the individual. An individual’s understanding of the world was now to come from questioning and interpretation rather than dogma. In Discours de la Méthode, Descartes started his line of reasoning by doubting everything in order to gain a fresh perspective of the world without any preconceived notions. “Le premier (loi) était de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle.” (Descartes 47).

Descartes used a building metaphor to illustrate how opinions and our own thoughts are the foundation of our later perceptions. He used the analogy of tearing down the house to its foundation in order to build a solid edifice. Descartes illustrates the permanent nature of ideas and opinions by saying “Et je crus fermement que, par ce moyen, je réussirais à conduire ma vie beaucoup mieux que si je ne bâtissais que sur de vieux fondements, et que je ne m’appuyasse que sur les principes que je m’étais laissé persuader en ma jeunesse.” (Descartes, 43). In other words, the core principle is that one must not seek to build on old foundations of knowledge, but should look for other fertile land to build knowledge upon. It is interesting to note that within this statement, Descartes references “les principes que je n’étais laissé persuader en ma jeunesse”

In Michael Moriarty’s reading of Descartes there are striking similarities to child psychology. Though Descartes’ method rejects pre-conceived notions and encourages individuals to question everything, he seems to make an exception for infants and children. Moriarty interprets both the Principes and letters from Descartes to Regius in order to explain that a child is not yet in a position to put reality into question.

In early childhood, the soul is so closely linked to the body that it applies itself only to what produces impressions within itself, not knowing even whether any cause of the impressions exists outside of itself(…) Strikingly, Descartes contends that the child is not at this stage subject to error. (No doubt to emphasize the point that we give rise to errors by our own thinking, and that God is not responsible for them.) (…) It is when the child philosopher goes on to conclude that (…) stone is more substantial than air; the stars are the size of a candle flame, the earth is flat and motionless that the false pre-suppositions that will later have to be torn down are formed. (Moriarty 91).
Through Moriarty’s interpretation of Descartes, it is possible to observe the correlation between age, cognition and self-awareness. The age at which these attributes come to fruition is adolescence.

Adolescence is the period during which those principles taken upon trust are put into question. Most young adults might not seem concerned with “subjectivity”. If, however, someone were to ask an average adolescent if they thought, interpreted, understood and viewed the world exactly like their parents, a predictably negative answer would most likely be the result. Such a reaction would likely be due to a developmental stage called the second individuation process. This term was coined by the psychologist Peter Blos in his canonical work *The Adolescent Passage*.

Blos defines the second individuation process as follows: “Individuation implies that the growing person takes increasing responsibility for what he does and what he is rather than depositing this responsibility on the shoulders of those under whose influence and tutelage he has grown up.” (Blos, 148).

Blos subscribes to the object relations theory of development. Freud was the first to coin the word “object” as anything an infant is driven by libidinally or aggressively to reach satiation. Object relation theorists, such as Blos, believe objects are anything or anyone meeting relational needs for human development. Objects can be people (mother, father, or others) or things to which a child transitionally forms an attachment. The relationship that the child builds with these “objects” is incorporated into the self; becoming central to a personality blueprint.

Blos added to modern object relations theory by distinguishing between two important life stages in child development. He refers to adolescence as the “second individuation process.” The first individuation process occurs around age three when a child undergoes the separation phase of infancy by discovering “I and not I.” (Blos, 142). Blos describes this phase as:

when the child gained psychological separateness from a concrete object, the mother. This was achieved through the process of internalization that gradually facilitated the child’s growing independence from the mother’s presence, her ministrations, and her emotional supplies as the child’s chief, if not the sole regulator of psychophysiological homeostasis.” (Blos 143).
Though the child begins to assert some independence during this stage, Blos explains that the parental ego remains selectively available to the child as a legitimate ego extension until adolescence when the child reaches the second individuation process. During this stage, the adolescent must consolidate the self that was built through object relations (especially with parents) and the self that is forming, thus creating a self that is influenced by, yet distinct from these infantile objects. The young adult must determine separateness in order to establish how to re-define these early formative relationships.

What adolescents undergo during the second individuation process is not unlike the inversion of subjectivity that Descartes created when he stated “Je pense, donc je suis.” In both cases, the understanding of oneself and of the world must come from questioning and interpretation rather than from ego-extension. Young adults must disengage from infantile objects as Descartes disengaged from the transcendence of god, and nature. Neither wish to completely dispel these powerful objects; they rather emphasize the importance of individual subjectivity.

When Descartes explained in the Discourse how he founded his method, he first describes his education. He was first educated by the great minds of teachers and philosophers. Next, he learned by his life experiences. Finally, Descartes determined that true knowledge must come from himself. Similarly, the adolescent learns from his or her parents and teachers, as well as through life experiences. The second individuation process is the consolidation of this knowledge with the newly emerging self. The challenge for both the young adult and the Cartesian thinker is to come up with an understanding of the world that stems primarily from the self.

Subjectivity proceeds from a person’s mind rather than the external world. Individual subjectivity as it is understood in this way fits both the second individuation process and Descartes’ introduction to the new self of modernity. The young adults’ understanding of the world slowly begins to come from individual experience and opinion rather than directly from the external forces of parents. The adolescent questions

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5 A trend that influenced self-fashioning according to Stephen Greenblatt: “Thus separated from the imitation of Christ—a separation that can, as we shall see, give rise to considerable anxiety-self-fashioning acquires a new range of meanings: it describes the practice of parents and teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one’s nature or intention in speech or actions” (Greenblatt 3)
everything in order to develop a way of understanding the world that is distinct from others’ views. How better to describe the young adult’s struggle for independence and individuality than as an internal analysis, and often times a rejection, of extrinsic forces? The self emerges at this stage as a critical thinking being who places individual interpretation above the influences that dominated the early stages of life. Similarly, the Cartesian method was designed to eliminate the confusion of external forces as much as possible when seeking the truth. Yet both Descartes and the young adult struggle to completely separate themselves from these influences. In “La Subjectivité” Jocelyn Benoist describes this interplay of influence, identity, and subjectivity. She does not define subjectivity as one person’s view of the world but rather how the world and others contribute to the self and to one’s interpretations. According to Benoist the search for subjectivity and the self leads us to others and to other forms of social relations. The way that the self ebbs and flows in various social situations is subjectivity.

As Benoist describes, subjectivity does not exist independently. Our interpretations are formed and influenced by our environment and by those around us. While the individualistic dynamism of the 17th century and the second individuation process of adolescence mark the realization that subjectivity is central to the ego or reality, neither refutes the prepotency of outside influences. Descartes’ vision was to establish a line of reasoning by doubting everything, so as to assess the world from a fresh perspective, clear of any preconceived notions. He, however, was fully aware of the external forces that could manipulate his interpretations.

A young adult is even less immune to outside forces than the cartesian philosopher. In fact, when studying adolescent psychology, peer and societal influences are as much (if not more so) a factor for development than the perception of self and developing one’s own opinions. Society plays a key role in the evolution of individual subjectivity. When separating from infantile objects and established ideas, an urgency is placed on the “I” of subjectivity. Because of the broken ties of ego-extension, there is a malaise associated with this stage in life. 6

6 Blos explains “The subjective experience of the adolescent-expressed in the quandry of “Who am I?”–contains multitudinous perplexities. It reflects what is conceptualized as ego loss and ego impoverishment.” (Blos 159).
Pedagogical Applications for drawing Parallels between Cartesian Subjectivity and Adolescent Individuation.

It is with this interplay between influence and subjectivity that the interdisciplinary and affective connections in the classroom can best be reached. Because of the parallels between Cartesian radical doubt and the adolescent individuation process, it can be productive to engage students in reading ancien régime literature by studying Descartes’ *Discours de la Méthode*. Once students have made connections, they will be better equipped to tackle the complexity of the relationship between an individual rational thinker and ancien régime society in history and literature discussed in Chapter Two. There are several educational applications for teaching the role of a new subjectivity in ancien régime society. The following ideas are suggestions for pedagogical approaches to reach historical empathy in the young adult learner. Prior to reading historical texts, students should respond to prompts that encourage them to discuss how they are individualizing and how they question reality. It would be best to keep these statements as general as possible, as sometimes the individuation process can be a painful and stressful period for students. By asking questions such as: “How are teenagers less like their parents than young children?” or “How do you know something that you’ve learned or accept is true?” and/or “How can a teenager understand what is real or true better than a child can?”

If a student wishes to personalize his or her answer then these questions offer that opportunity while still allowing a student who does not wish to elaborate on his or her personal experience to speak using generalizations. After discussing these prompts as a group, students should read texts describing French society before the ancien régime. Students will learn about imitation in literature and thought as well as how lineage, dogma and traditions defined status, thought and everyday life. For this section, I like to use an anthology such as *Moments Littéraires* (Bette Hirsh and Chantal Thompson, eds.) which offers readings about each century and how history affected literature. Reading in middle French without much knowledge of the classics being imitated is a great deal to ask from an intermediate student. I do like to end this unit with the poem *Heureux qui*.
Comme Ulysse by DuBellay to show classical references, but a slow preference towards that which is French.

After having studied life before the 17th century, students will read part four of Le Discours de la Méthode and discuss the importance of the sentence “Je pense donc je suis”. Students will be encouraged to make the connection between their relatively newfound independence in thought from their parents and the inversion of subjectivity after Descartes. Next, students will be asked to make predictions about how society might have changed based on how their interactions with others changed during adolescence. These predictions will serve as a springboard for the next set of prompts presented in chapter 2. The main ideas covered in the second unit will be self-discovery, identity within peer groups, as well as the role of authority on the rational individual.
Ch. 2: In the Hall of Mirrors: Self-fashioning and Social Mobility in Modern Youth Culture and the Ancien Régime

A. Adolescent Peer Relations (or Narcissism) and Amour de Soi.

Now that the link between subjectivity in the 17th century and adolescent individuation has been made, I will explore how the newly self-aware in both ancien régime and modern youth culture interact in a social setting. Chapter Two will explore the parallels between adolescent peer relations (rooted in narcissism and ego-extension) and 17th century amour de soi.

The struggle of adolescence often centers on the idea of identity and peer relations. Subjectivity is only one factor in determining individuality. One must also learn how to participate in society as a free-thinking, independent, conscious being. The newly developing adolescent ego that is undergoing the second oedipal conflict is indeed in conflict.

The ego impoverished youth finds compensatory relief in a group setting. The peer group is quite often a substitute for the family and the adolescents’ infantile object attachments. This experimental stage allows adolescents to identify with a group without any real commitment. It is chiefly due to these adolescent psychological traits that we witness such instability and conflict in peer groups of that age. Adolescents are trying to reinvent themselves. Though the motivations of adolescents and the aristocrats of the 17th century are clearly different, the outcomes of social interactions bear some striking similarities. Psychologists claim that part of the reason for the insecurity of adolescent peer groups is due to the participants using each other as impermanent sources of ego-extension, whereas the nobility used peer groups as a way of advancing in society and gaining favor and power.

Arguably, young adults also have the motivation to gain influence with their interactions. Because of the new subjectivity of adolescence; meaning the separateness of

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7 “The group permits identification as role tryouts without demanding any permanent commitment. It also allows for interactional experimentation as a severance from childhood dependencies.” (Blos 160).
the “I”, there is also an inflated view of the self. Blos describes this narcissism in its relation to the second individuation process as such:

We observe in adolescence that object libido-in varying degrees to be sure-is withdrawn from outer and inner objects and is converted into narcissistic libido by being deflected onto the self. This shift from object to self results in the proverbial self-centeredness and self-absorption of the adolescent who views himself to be independent from the love and hate objects of childhood (Blos 166).

Not only does the young adult seek separation from infantile love objects, but also the substitution of a new found self-love. The love that the adolescent once had for parents is partially replaced by self-love. 8

A similar narcissism emerged in ancien régime France. The French even gave it a name- l’amour propre or l’amour de soi. Though this self-love had its critics, historical factors such as Cartesian thought allowed for the existence of l’amour propre as an admirable trait in many circles. The change to the valorization of l’amour de soi is due to the fact that self-love was not considered to be mere narcissism, but rather as a legitimate self-confidence that arose from valor and virtue. L’amour de soi was seen as confidence in the possibility of the realization of one’s ideal. (Rohou, 247).

Because of this notion of l’amour de soi was so widespread during the 17th century, it appears in literature as a recurrent theme. Rohou explains:

Demandez à LaRochefoucauld, Pascal, Bossuet, Boudalouse, Nicole, LaFontaine, ou même vieux Corneille, quelle est la motivation fondamentale des hommes, quel est le principe de leur sentiments et comportements (…) Pour eux, c’est l’amour de soi-même et de toutes choses pour soi. Et c’est aussi, explicitement ou non, la réponse de presque tous les autres écrivains et moralistes à partir de 1660. (Rohou ,314)

An analysis of l’amour de soi in canonical literature often studied by intermediate to advanced students of French is to follow. However, l’amour propre cannot be discussed without mentioning its by-product: l’intérêt. L’intérêt; meaning the desire for personal gain. L’intérêt becomes the libidinal object of l’amour de soi, as well as the source of many intrigues and manipulations at court which fuel the literature of the time. L’intérêt is a political and economical motivation.

8 “The love of the infants’ parents is, partially at least, replaced by the love of the self or its potential perfection” (Blos 180).
Adolescents could undoubtedly relate to ideas of self-absorption, manipulation, cliques, and plots to increase popularity and influence in a group setting. All of these are symptoms (for better or for worse) of the psychological development of the young adult.

17th century court politics depended on psychological factors that closely parallel those of elements in adolescent group psychology. *L’amour de soi* and *l’intérêt* could play in Louis XIV’s favor. During his reign, subjugation was rigid under absolutism. The new individual of the 17th century would not follow these rules willingly without some manipulation. Just as the individualist dynamism of the late sixteenth century inversed the order of external forces and the mind, Louis XIV inversed his power. Louis XIV used *l’intérêt* and *l’amour de soi* to his advantage. Though he would still be the essential conduit by which *l’intérêt* and power could be reached, he created a society at Versailles where the aristocracy themselves controlled their own roles through interactions and gaining his favor. ⁹ Louis XIV both maintained and desired a certain level of tension and competition, because this kept court society from unifying against him. As Norbet Elias explains “What is characteristic of this dominion is the exploitation of enmities between subjects to reduce their hostility towards, and increase their dependence on, their sole ruler, the king.” (Elias, 121). The focus on the self at court and *l’amour de soi* were essential to the politics of Louis XIV.

After questioning the individual’s place in the universe, the people of the ancien régime also began to question their place in society. The first step towards adolescent subjectivity is the second individuation process by which young adults distinguish themselves from their parents. Just as the role of their parents change, the role of the king changes in the ancien régime.

The kings’ function had to shift as the population became a society of rational thinkers. He could no longer exist as a *father figure* (in a very literal sense) to a Christian community, rather as an absolutist leader who let his subjects, to a certain extent,

⁹ Rohou states: “…les individus ne se contentent pas à subir ces règles. Le système ne fonctionne que dans la mesure où ils les mettent en œuvre-ce qui renforce conscience de soi et agilité tactique, et inverse l’ancien rapport à l’ordre. Ce n’est pas lui qui détermine directement les personnalités ; ce sont les sujets eux-mêmes, par la discipline qu’ils s’imposent pour s’y adapter afin d’en tirer parti (…) Malgré l’assujettissement qu’il impose, l’absolutisme achève en un sens son émancipation. » (Rohou, 379).
determine their own place in society. This new critical citizen was a powerful threat, yet one that was limited by playing into *l’intérêt* and *l’amour de soi*.

Paraître, s’adapter, complaire, séduire, c’est jouer sans cesse un rôle, pour cela simuler ce qui plaît en dissimulant ce qu’on pense, ce qu’on veut et ce qu’on va faire. Louis XIV donne l’exemple. Le principal secret peut être de sa réussite fut de s’identifier parfaitement à son rôle, d’en offrir un aux courtisans par la valorisation d’une incessante cérémonie et de les obliger à s’y tenir par une vigilante surveillance. (Rohou, 356)

When applied to the context of Louis XIV he term *father figure* is of particular interest to this study. Since we are concerned with drawing parallels between adolescent individuation and ancien régime society, it would appear problematic to understand the kings role in such a way. Yet in his memoirs, Louis XIV himself stated: “Je parus enfin à tous mes sujets comme un véritable père de famille qui fait la provision de sa maison, et partage avec équité les aliments à ses enfants et à ses domestiques.” (Louis XIV, 111)

I argue here that we could interpret Louis XIV both as a father figure and as breaking that mold. In *Subjectivity and Subjugation in 17th-Century Drama and Prose*, Mitchell Greenburg interprets Althusser’s “sovereign subject” as being remarkably similar to Freud’s theories about a powerful self-contained leader. According to Freud an all-powerful leader becomes the object of desire and fear in all lesser males, essentially castrating them. Like the oedipal conflict, the desire in the lesser males is to kill, but also castrate the father. It is the killing of this primal father that created, according to Freud, the first guilt which began society. Greenburg states

All the great leaders, all those capable of fixing on themselves the often contradictory desires of a population, do so by placing themselves, for their people, in the non-contingent place of the dead father. They all capture and hold their subjects in their thrall by an ambiguous promise, the promise of love and the promise of their own immolation, their own narcissistic self-immolation to the people or nation they represent. (Greenburg, 11).

The court at Versailles was artfully set up so that courtiers had to climb a social ladder of influence in order to have the king’s audience for their requests. In *French Society, 1589-1715*, Sharon Kettering describes numerous accounts of nobles who came to court to speak with the king and the manipulation it took to get his attention. Some courtiers would stay at court for months on end year after year trying to gain influence. She compares the royal court to a pyramid where individuals maneuvered for position based
on rank, title, and fortune. The only variable was the king himself at the summit. Only he could change the places of those beneath him whom he favored. Kettering says that literature and memoirs of the time show that nobody was tranquil or indifferent at court. Everyone was busily trying to better their position by pleasing, helping or hindering someone else. Elias explains how this society of competition structured court by explaining

(courtiers experienced)...identification with a social formation that, again in varying ways and degrees, has the function of an advancement-mechanism for all those involved, and finally the common interest in performing the expansionist tasks of the group as well as the necessity of securing and perfecting its elite character. (Elias, 124).

This society of competition that had to be masked by likeability created a new social player at court. Anyone who planned to move up the ranks had to become an expert in *les arts de plaire et de se faire*. By putting the elite into a competitive situation like life at court and in the salons, Louis XIV enforced a strategy of semblance and duplicity. The social players mastered their wit and spontaneity in order to fulfill their goals (often seducing others in order to achieve them). ¹⁰ Louis XIV established and promoted the qualities of a good courtier. The model became that of *l’honnête homme*, a courtier who was capable of both permanent self-control and giving the impression of perfect naturalness. Jean-Marie Apostolidès explains this cultural trend by stating: “*L’homme du cour* (“the perfect courtier”) invented his own personage, using his body as the starting point. He limited himself to socially approved gestures, carried himself lightly, smiled at everyone, and spoke according to the canons of current usage(…).” (Apostolidès, 320)

The obsession with the self, the creation of an idealized self in *l’hui homme du cour*, and the shifting social circles and duplicity of peer-relations are all trends from the 17th century that can apply to our pedagogical study of the adolescent reader. Adolescence is a time marked with narcissism bound in the creation of an idealized self and in creating

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¹⁰ Rohou explains “…à l’age du Roi Soleil, du courtisan caméléon, de Tartuffe, Dom Juan, et Célimène, le comportement, la personnalité, l’art, la littérature se caractérisent par la maîtrise des apparences et de leurs effets. Et si elles sont trompeuses, c’est qu’on a l’interêt à ce qu’elles le soient.” (Rohou, 382).
social bonds for self-identification. Because social groups are unstable during adolescence, similar duplicitous trends to 17th century society can be observed.
B. Pedagogical Applications

The 17th century society of competition can easily be manipulated in order to engage an adolescent audience. The links between social mobility and l’art de plaire and adolescent peer-groups and ego-extension are numerous. The social player at court is of particular interest to the young adult reader in question because of these inherent connections. As discussed earlier in this chapter, adolescent psychology identifies instable peer groups, narcissism and ego-extension as major themes.

In order to take these theories one step further and to emphasize the resonance that the connections to the themes of l’amour de soi, l’intérêt, and life at court could have on adolescents, there is one more theory that is important to consider. Erik Erickson’s Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development is an important theory in the study of psychology, especially in youth. Erikson pinpoints eight stages of life during which he identifies necessary steps toward maturity and eventually death. During each life phase, there is a positive or a negative development that can occur. With regards to the age group in question, the essential developmental dilemma is “Identity vs. Identity Confusion”. According to Erikson, it is through forming peer groups and experimenting with different ideas of the self that the adolescent either builds meaningful relationships and a strong self-esteem or else experiences ego-impoverishment followed by a feeling of isolation and self-doubt.

Though these were not the concerns of the aristocrats who were present at court, playing into these central concerns will inevitably help young adult students reach historical empathy as they read a variety of texts.

So as to better analyze how the themes of l’amour propre, l’intérêt, and social interactions at court materialize in literature of the 17th century, several canonical works from varying genres will be studied. This variety of texts further illustrates how pervasive and influential these themes actually were. I will explore the works of the moralist La Rochefoucauld to see how the wit that was so essential to winning people over in court, was also effective in dissecting the flaws of the courtiers. This particular work is a perfect springboard for intermediate students. The maximes are easy to read and understand, but also quickly and concisely introduce central themes and problems of 17th-century court
life. Because one of the themes that will be discussed in the maximes will be theatricality, it is only logical to follow them with a study in theatre. Alceste, the title character of Le Misanthrope, will be our guide to understanding interactions at court. His critical eye will mirror that of LaRoche Foucauld. To represent the emerging genre of the novel, I will explore the central ideas as they appear in La Princesse de Clèves. This work will serve as a smooth transition from the genre of theater, since it is so theatrical and visual in nature. As proof that these l’amour propre and l’intérêt were not merely flaws of the time, it is important to at least mention guides to court life such as Nouveau Traité de la Civilité by Antoine de Courtin or Discours sur la Bienséance by Jean Pic so as to prove that these attributes were actually considered to be positive.
Chapter 3: La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes: an Introduction to a 17th Century Thematic

This chapter will focus on how Les Maximes by François de La Rochefoucauld is an ideal introduction to a 17th century unit of study. This work will be analyzed with regards to its pertinence to the adolescent experience. By reading excerpts of works by moralists such as La Rochefoucauld students can learn about the themes of self-discovery, peer-relations, and knowledge (as discussed in Chapters One and Two in short quips all while observing the ever-important esprit that was so essential to 17th century court culture.)

It is important to include a moralist in this discussion because in order to consider intellectual life of the 17th century one cannot omit the salons. Several of the same concerns of court life resonate throughout the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, who was inspired by conversations and letters of the salons that he attended. In the salons, intérêt and amour propre still come into play but all were dependant upon one’s esprit. The maxims expertly expose such themes as false appearances, la bienséance, intérêt, friendship, and self-awareness in the style that would have been popular in the salons of the ancien régime. The Maximes are ideal for use in an intermediate to advanced French course. Unstable peer groups, narcissism, love, and friendship are all central concerns of students who are likely to be studying the maxims for the first time.

The short, witty nature of this particular genre means that the maxims can be presented in smaller, more manageable doses than some other types of period literature. One day could be spent specifically on maxims about a certain theme and discussions about modern applications. After several days and themes, some of the central cultural trends of the 17th century (such as l’amour propre, la bienséance, l’interêt and l’esprit) would become more apparent to students. Even when reading later works perhaps it would be beneficial to add a maxim or two per class during a course of study focusing on the 17th century.

I have found in my own teaching that studying wit and bienséance by reading excerpts of Les Maximes and watching parts of Patrice Leconte’s 1996 film Ridicule make students much more capable of picking up on these sorts of remarks in plays such as Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, for example.
The maxims of La Rochefoucauld never fail to inspire conversation in class, just as they did in the salons for which they were written. Some ideas are applicable and truly timeless. Of course the style of the Maximes is also of note. The complexity of the language used, presented in a manageable length, make the Maximes a perfect choice for a student studying French as a second language. To many students these quips are riddle or puzzle-like. Thweatt asserts this observation when he states “LaRochefoucauld’s irony is not so much heroism or merit or even virtue as it is the web of words that masks the truth and the verbal shadow play of social life that passes as the substance of the self” (Thweatt, 205). The masterful use of language and wit, as well as the integration of central themes found throughout the literature of the ancien régime make Les Maximes and indispensable tool for teachers. This is particularly true because the art of conversation was so essential in the salons and in court for advancement. The importance of language and elocution are clear in Les Maximes and the questions that they raise inspire the same kind of elevated conversation as they did at the time they were written.

One aspect of 17th century life of which LaRochefoucauld was particularly critical was false appearances. In a society obsessed with self-advancement (often at the expense of others) the problems of falsehood and insincerity ran rampant. This falsity stems from l’intérêt ; the motivation behind the mask. The problematic of deciphering appearances and seeing people for who they really were can be found throughout LaRochefoucauld’s work in statements such as:“La vérité ne fait pas tant de bien dans le monde que ses apparences y font du mal” (Maxime 64) and “Les hommes ne vivraient pas longtemps en société s’ils n’étaient pas les dupes les uns des autres.” (Maxime 87)

The theme of intérêt and false appearances will be explored further in Chapters Four and Five with readings of Le Misanthrope and La Princesse de Clèves. It is essential to introduce this idea to students early in order for them to better understand what resembles paranoia in these two later works. Another theme that should be explored with Les Maximes before reading other works is how appearances are also influenced by the elaborate social codes of the time known as la bienséance. As much as these appearances might have been unnatural or forced, LaRochefoucauld also argues that “La bienséance est la moindre de toutes les lois, et la plus suivie.” (447 :83).
Students may also believe that *la bienséance* as a relatively unimportant or insignificant set of rules. However, by introducing this particular maxim students will gain a better understanding of just how central social codes were to 17th century culture. Students with this background will be less thrown off by such characters as Célimène in *Le Misanthrope* and Mme de Chartres in *La Princesse de Clèves*. These two characters are particularly ruled by the expectations for behavior at court.

In the salons, as at court, moving up the social ladder may have still included *l’amour propre* and *l’intérêt*, but *l’esprit* was king because movement in social circles was reached through conversation. Conversation was extended to the form of letter writing and the exchange of books. The exchange of these currencies became essential to social mobility in the society of *la bienséance* and *l’esprit*. Thweet observes: “Certainly for the 17th century the conversational art enlarged to encompass the art of letter writing and the *commerce de livres*—was particularly synonymous with social commerce per se. Conversation, friendship, and love were *trios commerces* of the time.” (Thweet, 45-46)

It is not unusual that there are so many notable similarities between the concerns found throughout the *Les Maximes* and *Princesse de Clèves* since LaRochefoucauld actually attended Madame de Lafayette’s salon and quite possibly contributed to the work itself.12 These similarities fit perfectly into a thematic study of the 17th century. These authors were not only influenced by the time during which they wrote; they also influenced each other. One could go so far as to say that they were friends, but as we will explore, this is a term to use cautiously.

Friendship and love are themes that extend beyond court and the salons into the maxims, conversations, and literature of the time. La Rochefoucauld is highly skeptical of the possibility of true friendship or love. It is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Between the shifting loyalties of the Fronde and the competitive nature of court, there was little place for disinterested friendship or for trust. “Ce que les hommes ont nommé amitié n’est qu’une société, qu’un management réciproque d’intérêts.” (Maxime, 83)

12 “Somewhat later when he (LaRochefoucauld) held court in Mme de LaFayette’s salon, he read history for diversion and collaborated, in all probability, in writing *La Princesse de Clèves*; he revised his own work, adding new maxims and eliminating others.” (Thweet, 43).
For LaRochefoucauld however, there seems to be a focus not only on the distrust of potential friends but also of the difficulty and problem on knowing oneself. Just as in adolescent peer-relationships, the instability of social groups and friendships is partially due to the fluctuating, uncertain self. A society that is as disingenuous as that of the ancien régime certainly offered little possibility for the solace and ego-extension that deep friendship inspires. Yet even doubtful LaRochefoucauld could not dispel the importance of this emotional need. “Celui qui croit pouvoir trouver en soi-même de quoi se passer de tout le monde se trompe fort. » (Maxime 201) Although friendship is considered to be even rarer than genuine love, it is at least theoretically possible in maxime 81 . La Rochefoucauld gives true friendship a relatively positive definition: 13 “Nous ne pouvons rien aimer que par rapport à nous, et nous ne faisons que suivre notre goût et notre plaisir quand nous préférons nos amis à nous-mêmes ; c’est néanmoins par cette préférence seule que l’amitié peut être vraie et parfaite.”

La Rochefoucauld’s theories about friendship and love are not unlike Blos’ theories of adolescent peer relations. Blos felt that adolescent friendships are primarily formed in a desperate attempt to define the newly inflated sense of “I.” Narcissism and ego-extension are the primary motivations of social relationships throughout adolescence. However, let us not forget the important contributions of Erikson, who like LaRochefoucauld, identifies friendship as a necessary element of a successful human being in his theory of “Identity vs. Identity Confusion”. Any young adult who does not successfully identify with a group (though there will be much trial and error involved) will suffer from isolation and imbalance.

Knowing oneself was not the only hindrance to forming meaningful relationships according to LaRochefoucauld. Like many other authors of his time he focuses on l’amour de soi and l’intérêt. 14 After all, “L’intérêt est l’âme de l’amour propre.” (Maxime posthume 26)

13 (…) although true friendship is an oasis of mutual support and respect in the wasteland of social commerce, the pays de l’amour propre is nevertheless dominated by the vanity of the self” (Thweatt, 198).

14 “Il (LaRochefoucauld) parle d’intérêt encore plus que d’amour propre. Le premier terme apparaît dans 25 réflexions du texte définitif contre 16 pour le second.” (Rohou 349).
Certainly, LaRochefoucauld was critical of 17th-century society, however, he also admired the skill that it took to achieve one’s goals, despite the means. He shows that the falsities presented by the nobles were advantageous to one’s intérêt. Though his work is for the most part critical of this society, he does show some admiration for the skill needed to maintain the disguises. (Rohou, 360).

LaRochefoucauld demonstrates this admiration with maxims such as: “Il y a des faussetés déguisées qui représentent si bien la vérité que ce serait mal juger que de ne s’y pas laisser tromper.” (Maxime 282) and “L’intérêt parle tout sorte de langues, et joue toutes sortes de personages, même celui de désintéressé.” (Maxime 39)

In a surprising interpretation, Jean Rohou demonstrates how LaRochefoucauld complements the very thing he criticizes the most; l’intérêt. According to Rohou’s interpretation LaRochefoucauld tried to replace the nostalgic sense of the self that was based on the adhesion to traditional values and replace it with a self that is lucid and authentic. Being a part of the culture of paraître and vraisemblance undoubtedly spurred this sentiment. Knowing oneself and one’s motivations while being aware that everyone had similar projects was essential to survival in high society.

Ainsi, “l’intérêt, que l’on accuse de tous nos crimes, mérite souvent d’être loué de nos bonnes actions » (M.305). Il peut produire la bonté (M. 236), l’amitié (M. 83, M. 88), l’amour ( M. 262), la fidélité (M. 247) (…) Notre goût et notre plaisir d’être égocentriques sont le seul fondement d’une “amitié (…) vraie et parfaite” (M. 81). Cet égocentrisme industrieusement intéressé fera la prospérité de l’ère libérale. (Rohou 351).

Just as anyone in 17th-century society had to be not only self-aware, but also aware of the motivations of others, contemporary students must also be conscious of changes within themselves and fluctuations within unstable social groups. Students will likely identify with this problematic. La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes are an excellent conduit through which students can reach this awareness. Students will be able to recognize such universal themes as unstable peer groups, narcissism, love and friendship while providing them with a new and essential cultural awareness needed for further study in 17th century literature. Reading and becoming aware of cultural trends in Les Maximes will prepare students for more lengthy and difficult readings such as Le Misanthrope and La Princesse de Clèves.
Chapter 4: Le Misanthrope: The Theatrics of Social Interactions and Self-Awareness.

In Chapter Four I will explore how the genre of theatre is particularly appropriate to the similar structures of ancien régime society and contemporary adolescent concerns by examining how theatricality played a part in 17th century life. I will then show how a play such as *Le Misanthrope* can be used to further demonstrate analogous psychological and sociological themes with an adolescent audience. The analysis of a play using adolescent psychology as an analogous mirror to ancien régime society will engage students in an empathetic reading of period literature. Theatre is particularly effective in demonstrating some of the ideas that appeared in *Les Maximes*, (and that will later appear in our study of *La Princess de Clèves*) because theatre takes these ideas further. Watching and reading about actors on the stage playing their duplicitous roles will serve as a *mise-en-aïme* of roles and semblance for students to observe.

What is theatre if not theatricality? Theatricality is also one of the key factors of ancien régime culture that this analysis has ventured to explore. Theatre, like life in the 17th century, was meant to be played. More interesting still is the question of how the audience interacts and interprets the work. After all, theatre is a diversion by which people escape, but it also has to serve as a mirror to how we live. This being considered, it is of particular interest to anyone studying the 17th century to see how dramaturges and actors (on scene and off) depicted their roles.

Theatre lets the spectator move forward and backward in time by relating to the actors and situations on stage. The description of theatre here is strikingly similar to the description of empathetic learning. Theatre is thus a conduit by which empathetic learning can be reached. What is equally interesting about incorporating theatre into this particular study is the *mise-en-abîme* of theatricality that it presents. 17th-century plays show actors playing the roles of characters, obeying the social codes of *bienséance* and *honnêté*, thus playing their social roles, in turn.

Equally important to consider is the voyeuristic nature of the stage. The spectator sees while being seen. In several cases, as discussed throughout the analysis of the politics of Louis XIV, this was the reality of court life. ¹⁵

¹⁵ “Perspective also defines reality as a spectacle designed to be seen by, and organized so as to affirm, a subject occupying a fixed position. Significantly, monarchical palaces, and
When considering the antique mirror into which the modern spectator views theatre of the 17th century, it is important not to forget the historical context of the vision we see. The crisis, or major development, of the period in question is modernity. It is the goal of this study to find psychological links between the crisis of modernity and the crisis of adolescent self-hood. In Molière’s comedy Le Misanthrope, one can clearly observe some of these “growing pains”.

Larry Riggs explains in his preface to Molière and Modernity: Absent Mothers and Masculine Births that: “Molière certainly lived and worked au Carrefour de la modernité (…) In a number of ways, I believe, Molière’s theatre is a response to cultural and political trends and tensions that produced what we call modernity” (n.p.) In order to frame modernity into the analogous nature of the adolescent experience, I began with Descartes and explaining how “Je pense, donc je suis” created what can be compared to the individuation process. The importance of the self in determining the truth is central to both the adolescent crisis and early modernity. However, the influence of Descartes runs much deeper than that. Upon affirming that the only thing that cannot be doubted is that “Je pense,” Descartes continued to say that the senses can be deceiving, particularly that of sight. Let us not forget the example of refracted light in water.

The skepticism for what one sees runs deeper than the falsities at court. It is a cultural and philosophical trend of the time. Riggs takes the philosophy of Descartes and applies it to how the early modern condition affected culture and literature by explaining:

Early modernity is the age of the method, then, and a method is a means of transforming conscious intentions into masterfully controlled effects. (…) Of course, Descartes’ Discours de la Méthode is the most relevant real-life example here. (…) The early modern expansion of literacy and knowledge production featured a tremendous emphasis on how to do things, and this is associated with the accompanying popularity of what we now call “self-improvement”. Self-improvement and self-fashioning are obviously synonymous. (Riggs 9). With the acquisition of knowledge and a better understanding of the self, comes a desire to improve. Descartes’ method influenced not only the individual’s perfectionism with regards to scientific observations, but also to self-observation and critique.

most notably Versailles, feature both carefully constructed perspectives and enhanced opportunities for surveillance. In fact, Versailles was brilliantly conceived technology of surveillance and control. It housed bureaucrats busily processing and filing written documents, and it was equipped with mirrors, lighting, and spaces maximizing the visibility.” (Riggs 14).
Molière’s comedies were a reaction to some of the doubts that people had about their own time. Greed, snobbism, and cultural trends are just some of the subjects of which Molière makes a mockery. The influence of Descartes goes further than doubt. Cartesian thought spurred an obsession with knowing essentially “how-to”. The focus on the self was more than just the *amour de soi*, it was also perhaps the method for self-improvement. The culture of the ancien régime was based on conformity and respect for the strict social codes that had been set. These prescribed rules were called *la bienséance*.

To emphasize just how indispensable these rules were, Rohou describes how manuals for “savoir-vivre”, or rules of court life, almost doubled during the second half of the 17th century. In Rohou’s *Le XVIIe Siècle, Une Révolution de la Condition Humaine* *La bienséance* and *la civilité* can be understood is defined in manuals by Courtin and Pic that state “se connaître soi-même, à connaître les autres, à observer les lieux et temps de façon à se rendre toujours agréable.” 16 or that “Un honnête homme (...) se doit transformer par la souplesse du genie, comme l’occasion le demande (...) Que votre esprit soit docile et propre à recevoir toutes sortes de formes. Rien n’es plus nécessaire(...) que de savoir plier selon l’exigence des occasions.” 17

It is important to note that this duplicitous nature is not only recommended but deemed *necessary*. This sort of analysis is essential to any student prior to reading works from *le grand siècle*. Yet, by criticizing what was wrong with people and trends of the time period, this may have also been Molière’s method of demonstrating a desire to improve.

With the importance of the genre of theatre and the historical context for its interpretation, let us now consider how an analysis of *Le Misanthrope* by Molière can further this study. A play entitled *Le Misanthrope* will certainly raise questions about social interactions. Alceste, the misanthrope claims: “Je ne trouve partout que lâche flatterie/Qu’injustice, interêt, trahison, fourberie.” (I, i, 93-94)

However, the role of the protagonist is not altogether heroic. In fact, he is laughable. Célimène exposes Alceste for his contradictory nature.

Et ne faut-il pas bien que Monsieur contredise?
A la commune voix veut-on qu’il se réduise,

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16 Courtin, *Nouveau Traité de la Civilité*, 1671, 17-18
17 Pic, *Discours sur la bienséance*, 1668, 76 et 302
Here Célimène criticizes Alceste and his contradictory nature. Statements such as “Il prend toujours en main l’opinion contraire” and “Le sentiment d’autrui n’est jamais pour lui plaire” are examples of this criticism. What Célimène criticizes the most is not that Alceste is contradictory, but rather that he is insincere. He disagrees with others for the sake of disagreement. Célimène claims that if someone were to second one of Alceste’s opinions then he would no longer support it. “Et ses vrais sentiments sont combattus par lui, aussitôt qu’il les voit dans la bouche d’autrui.”

The complexities of a salon lifestyle worthy of critique and courtiers that can criticize in turn any accuser is noteworthy. What is the ideal here? If everyone can be criticized and mocked, then whom should we emulate? Since we’ve already seen the morality that is evident in the *Maximes*, we should be looking for a moral in this work as well.

To use Greenblatt’s influential term, what Alceste is critiquing in this scene is the means by which people self-fashion. This culture came to fruition at a time of a double paradox when the transcendent subject of modern science was also literally sovereign subject of absolutist monarchy. The self-fashioning individual existed because the stability of a society made up of groups defined by mutual obligations was being lost. This lead to the release of the individuals from these groups, which created the idea of a transcendent subject. This new subject was capable of achieving mastery in politics and logic, and perceived this mastery as necessary. (Riggs, 7).

What is striking about the idea of self-fashioning as presented by this play is how it can relate to the theories of adolescence that have been presented throughout this analysis. “One way in which the idea of self-fashioning can be understood is as a
realization of the Oedipal wish to father oneself...to be the source of one’s own being and fate.” (Riggs, 37).

We can observe self-fashioning, to a great extent in *Le Misanthrope* as social mobility by association in social circles. Take for example the clamoring of suitors to be associated with Célimène. This character is highly esteemed by many, but clearly a master of *l’art de plaire*. As Philinthe questions Alceste’s affections, he criticizes Célimène by saying:

La sincère Éliante a du penchant pour vous,
La prude Arsioné vous voit d’un œil fort doux
Cependant à leurs vœux votre âme se refuse,
Tandis qu’en ses liens Célimène l’amuse,
De qui l’humeur coquette et l’esprit médisant,
Semble si fort donner dans les mœurs d’à présent,
D’où vient que, leur portant une haine mortelle
Vous pouvez bien souffrir ce qu’en tient cette belle ?
Ne sont-ce plus défauts dans un objet si doux ?
Ne les voyez-vous pas ? Ou les excusez-vous ?
(I, 1, 215-224)

Association with someone who is so skilled in *la bienséance* and *l’art de plaire* is to be someone of high standing. This sort of ego-extension is typical among adolescent peer-groups. At a time where life at court and in the salons depended on *l’art de plaire*, *Le Misanthrope* deals with the problematic between self-affirmation and adapting to others. Where is the balance between authenticity and complacency?

To explore this question, Molière contrasts characters like Philinthe against characters like Oronte or Célimène. Philinthe uses *l’art de plaire* to avoid conflict and remain likeable whereas Célimène and Oronte use *l’art de plaire* to advance themselves. Alscete rejects *l’art de plaire*, but in doing-so, puts down those who attempt it, thus also trying his hand at bettering his situation. Social position depended on who a courtier was associated with. Because Célimène was so influential, her salon sets the scene for the social clamoring that will take place there.19

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18 This Oedipal wish is referred to as the second Oedipal conflict, which is essentially the same problematic as the second individuation process, but without the psychosexual connotations.

19 “l’autolâtrie d’un moi pour qui les autres ne sont que des miroirs, et qui se contemple dans ses images fautes de personnalité substantielle, parce qu’il ne peut s’investir dans
Alceste is not independent from this ego-extension. Lionel Gossman argues in *Men and Masks: A Study of Molière* that he is attracted to the very woman that he should detest. Philinthe makes this same point clear in the quote mentioned earlier when he says:

De qui l’humeur coquette et l’esprit médisant,
Semble si fort donner dans les mœurs d’à présent,
D’où vient que , leur portant une haine mortelle
Vous pouvez bien souffrir ce qu’en tient cette belle ? (I, i, 215-224)

This is not mere irony. Gossman claims that this desire gives the spectator insight into Alceste’s character.

It is precisely because Célimène is the most sought after and worldly of women (to all appearances the most unsuitable for Alceste) that he falls in love with her. It is not Célimène as a person to his “love.” To have at his feet this woman whom all the world admires and courts would be to win the recognition of the world himself. (Grossman, 78).

The statement that Célimène is (and Alceste desires to be) the one whom “all the world admires and courts” brings the idea of ego-extension even further. Characters like Célimène (and, based on Gossman’s interpretation, Alceste) have an ego-extension of their own. The absolute monarch aspires to be the subject of desire in his realm, controlling the ambitions of the other self-fashioning individuals who are his subjects. However, the modern, autonomous individual is modeled on the absolute monarch. The king serves as the ultimate source of ego-extension. “The image of the royal body, which is always a projection of each subject’s own fantasy of the absolute thus, would serve, as Freud suggests, as a compelling substitute in his subjects for their ‘ego-ideal’.” (Greenberg, 19).

Every absolutist and every sovereign subject is inevitably the rival of everyone around them. (Riggs, 7) This essentially mirrors trends in adolescent psychology. The need for ego-extension is very strong at this stage due to the ego-impoverished subject who has just recently rejected the primary ego-extension up to that point; the parent. In adolescent peer-groups and in 17th-century France the ego ebbs and flows with the influences that surround it. In short, everyone is functioning under his or her own *amour propre*, while using the influence of others to increase this already inflated sense of self.

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une activité importante.” (Rohou, 433).
When speaking of an inflated sense of self, it is impossible to ignore the case of Alceste and how his situation plays into the adolescent crisis. Alceste squashes the world he wishes to have at his feet in order to raise himself above it. His sense of self is such that he seems to feel that he is above the society that he is critiquing. When speaking of his hatred for society, Alceste professes:

Non elle (ma haine) est générale, et je haïs tous les hommes,
Les uns, parce qu’ils sont méchants et malfaisants,
Et les autres, pour être aux méchants complaisants,
Et n’avoir pas pour eux les haines vigoureuses
Que doit donner le vice aux âmes vertueuses,
(…)
Au travers son masque on voit à plein le traître ;
Partout il est connu pour tout ce qu’il peut être.
(I, 1, 118-122, 125-126).

Even La Rochefoucauld criticizes this kind of narcissistic superiority when he states “L’orgueil a bien plus de part que la bonté aux remontrances que nous faisons à ceux qui commettent des fautes; et nous les reprenons bien moins pour les en corriger que pour les persuader que nous en sommes exempts.” (Maxime 41).

Yet even Alceste’s superiority complex cannot exist without the very people he despises to enforce it. He refuses to find himself in the same situation as everybody else; he wants to be above all others. “Je veux qu’on me distingue” (I, i, 63), Alceste cries out only to have no one hear him.

In this cry of need the supposed misanthrope who experiences “des movements soudains/De fuir dans un desert l’approche des humains” (I, 1, 143-144) acknowledges his utter dependence on the humanity he despises, his total infatuation with that which he professes indifference to. (Gossman, 67-68)

This particular scene is reminiscent of Erikson’s 8 stages of human development and the adolescent crisis of Identity vs. Identity Confusion. Anyone who doesn’t successfully identify with peers either takes on an air of superiority (as we observe with Alceste) or goes into isolation (as Alceste wishes to do by leaving court behind). In act Five, Alceste proposes that he and Célimène leave the world of man behind:

J’en saurai, dans mon âme, excuser tous les traits,
Et me couvrirai du nom d’une faiblessé
Où le vice du temps porte votre jeunesse,
Pourvu que votre cœur veuille donner les mains
Au dessin que j’ai fait de fuir tous les humains,
Et que, dans mon désert, où j’ai fait vœux de vivre,
Vous soyez, sans tarder, résolue à me suivre.
(V, 4, 1757-1764).

Because Alceste cannot satisfy his superiority, he must go into isolation, as he does at the end of act Five when Célimène refuses to join him in fleeing society. Criticizing society does very little for the ego. It is essential to both 17th century society and modern psychological theory that peer-groups and ego-extension play a part in self-creation. Without peer-groups, a person is left isolated and with a sense of superiority. This interpretation corresponds to the theories of adolescent psychologist such as Blos and Erikson.

_Le Misanthrope_ is an excellent example of a text that can be used to engage students in an empathetic historical reading. Within this text we can observe themes such as friendship, alienation, and self-discovery. The very nature of the genre lends itself to discussions about 17th-century culture. It should not surprise readers that theatre was privileged above other literary forms during the ancien régime. Louis XIV put such an emphasis on the spectacle of seeing and being seen.

It is this emphasis on the active visual dimension rather than on the other aspects of dramatic art that strikes me as particularly revelatory of the theatre’s importance in the elaboration of a classical ideology. As the century unfolded this ideology was reinforced, gradually becoming hegemonic. (Greenburg, 14)

The fact that Alceste is a character who criticizes society is also an important consideration in choosing the play _Le Misanthrope_ in a unit of 17th century. By reading his criticisms and observing the reactions of those with whom he interacts, students are given a unique opportunity to see both sides of the argument. The fact that this is a critical piece also makes it a good segue between _Les Maximes_ and the next work of fiction to be studied, _La Princesse de Clèves_.

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Chapter 5: La Princesse de Clèves and Erickson’s Identity vs. Identity Confusion

In Chapter 5, I will explore how the novel La Princesse de Clèves is also an appropriate source for a 17th century thematic that includes aspects of adolescent psychology. Reading this novel would be an excellent culminating exercise for students as all of the themes mentioned in previous chapters appear in this book. In my analysis of the potential for empathetic learning I will identify themes such as narcissism, interêt, la bienscéance, peer-relations, and individuation.

La Princesse de Clèves by Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne, comtesse de La Fayette is an appropriate work to use as a progression from a play to a novel. Mitchell Greenburg writes extensively about the theatrical quality of La Princesse de Clèves. One of the first similarities is in its structure. The story plays out like a classical tragedy. The novel, like a play, is also very visual. I will, however, explore the effect of sight on the novel La Princess de Clèves later in this chapter. The goal of reading the Princesse de Clèves is to understand the historical context of the work, and in so doing, discuss the reactions and motivations of the characters and of the peculiar culture that formed during the reign of Louis XIV represented in a historical novel that is a superimposition of the court of Henri II and Louis XIV.

This work is of particular interest due to the focus on social interaction and deception. It also was a work that lead to lively discussion at the time it was written. By writing a book that was considered a perfect imitation of life at court as it was lived and creating a heroine that cannot live within its constraints, Lafayette stirred up some controversy.

What makes this novel notable for this nature of study is that it begins with the character Mlle de Chartres as she is introduced to, and warned about, court life. Through her experiences, the reader follows her as she observes and emulates court life. Her education becomes the readers’, as Mlle de Chartres transforms into la Princesse de Clèves, thus being thrust into high society and the social players and intrigues that she

20 “That the novel, in both its structure and in its presentation of the female protagonist, has, since its publication, been linked to the theater will not come as a surprise to us. Its narrative divisions have been seen to reproduce the acts of a Classical tragedy.” (Greenburg 176).
encounters. She is quite appropriately sixteen; roughly the age of the audience being addressed by this study. The young woman and the reader are introduced to the world of appearances or *vraisemblance* and the accepted social code that enforces them—*la bienséance*.

In her essay “Approaches to Teaching Madame de Lafayette’s The Princess of Clèves”, Inge Crosman Wimmers argues that *La Princesse de Clèves* is an excellent choice for the active reader response that we seek in an empathetic reading of a text.

(...) the central function of literary texts is to make us aware of norms and conventions by questioning and negating these norms in order to encourage us to imagine something new, then “La Princesse de Clèves”, by rewriting *vraisemblance* and *bienséance*, is an excellent example of a fictional work that takes the reader of its time beyond habitual frames of reference and by doing so makes for active reader response. (Wimmers, 85)

This book was conducive to active reading for those who read this book at the time it was written and it maintains this quality for the modern reader. As a reader follows the princesse de Clèves’ movements and development at court he or she observes what the princess herself observes. Young adult readers will be intrigued to follow a character that is close in age who is also an outsider to the society being observed. Before Mlle de Chartre’s mother brought her to court she knew very little about the demands and challenges that this lifestyle presented. Because the princess views life at court with a critical eye, she encourages the reader to do so as well. The reader learns about the culture of the time just as the princess does, bridging the gap between the ages. Perhaps a reader may go so far as to wonder what he or she would do under similar circumstances. Further adding to the possibilities for an empathetic reading of the *Princesse de Clèves* is how some central themes of adolescent development resonate throughout the work.

We will not see the terms used in adolescent psychology to describe the *Princesse de Clèves*. What follows is essentially a dictionary of words that have an equivalent (or near equivalent) in adolescent psychology. Narcissism can be seen as *l’amour propre*, l’interêt, as its libidinal process, and *bienséance* as the cultural code in a group setting that allows such instability. If one word could sum up the problematic of the entire book it may very well be *la vraisemblance*. *La vraisemblance* is the appearance of truth, but not everything was what it appeared.
Sembler or paraître; la vraisemblance; these words and their derivatives and synonyms appear constantly throughout the text itself. This not only emphasizes the importance of these phenomena, but also highlights how prevalent they were in 17th-century society. Rohou explains:

Paraître: ce terme se rencontre une fois par page dans la Princesse de Clèves, dont une fois sur cinq dans les expressions faire paraître ou laisser paraître, qui impliquent une stratégie et l’ensemble des termes qui désigne ce qui se donne à voir s’y rencontrent sept fois par page en moyenne. (Rohou, 382).

With the recurrence of the aforementioned vocabulary, it is indisputable that appearances are a central theme to La Princesse de Clèves. Because this novel was considered to be such a powerful representation of court life, a modern-day reader should consider that la vraisemblance was a very real concern for the courtiers. What was important to this culture of appearances was that the hierarchy of social players was always representing themselves in a way that would benefit them. The ability to do so lead to social advancement and power. Semblance was both the entertainment and the crisis of the self in the 17th century. (Rohou, 383).

Since so much emphasis is placed on how things appear both in the text of La Princesse de Clèves, and in the life of a young adult it is important to study how sight is portrayed in the novel to be studied. As we have seen with La Rochefoucauld and Molière, words were not to be trusted. In fact, actions were equally suspect. Courtiers were so concerned with how they appeared that they often manipulated their actions and reactions to gain favor in some way. Sight was essential and could be deceptive, as Descartes would have us know. Yet the occasional glance would catch a moment of truth, a slip in the façade. The art of life at court was to see without really being seen. Greenburg explains:

In a world where all is appearance, where all verbal communication is either foreclosed or highly suspect (...) the only truth that may be had is the truth of the glance, of the darting look that seizes a blush, a surprise, a facial movement that is not controlled quickly enough. (Greenburg, 180).

The gaze is an important theme throughout the novel La Princesse de Clèves. While the novel is set in the court of Henri II, it presents a world very similar to that of Madame de Lafayette during the reign of le Roi Soleil. Louis XIV demanded that his noble subjects...
live at court under his omniscient gaze while he himself was always on display. The art of seeing and being seen was thus emphasized. Since the courtiers were obliged to live at court without taking on any meaningful profession, they created a complex system of social gestures.

Mastering this coded language of word, glance, and gesture constitutes the biggest hurdle facing the young heroine of La Princesse de Clèves and serves as a metaphor of her internal struggle as well. Her story follows a movement from blindness (or inability to ‘read’ social codes and a lack of self-knowledge) to sight (public awareness) and insight (private lucidity). (Douthwaite, 109).

Mlle de Chartres’ challenge becomes our own as the reader is educated alongside this character. She was introduced to court as a teenager but her mother sheltered her and educated her away from court culture. Thus, her introduction to court was a confusing transition from that which she had learned from her mother and her own self-discovery. I would go so far as to say that Mlle de Chartre’s introduction at court serves as a catalyst for her own individuation process. (I will discuss later how she fails to properly separate herself from the influence of her mother.) As she is introduced to court and becomes a part of it, she is warned by her mother of the dangerous and deceptions she will face: “Si vous jugez sur les apparences en ce lieu-ci, répondit Mme de Chartres, vous serez souvent trompée : ce qui paraît n’est presque jamais la vérité.” (LaFayette, 265).

Just as the princess is warned of the danger in appearances, the reader is warned by the author that all is not what it seems at court. We follow her in her education as the narrator tells us of the culture of interêt and le paraître by informing the reader that:

l’ambition et la galanterie étaient l’âme de cette cour et occupaient également les hommes et les femmes. Il y avait tant d’interêts et tant de cabales différentes, et les dames y avaient tant de part que l’amour était toujours mêlé aux affaires et les affaires à l’amour. Personne n’était tranquille, ni indifférent(…) on songeait à s’élever, à plaire, à servir, ou à nuire (…). (Lafayette, 32).

We can, as Rohou suggests, believe that this system of court was artfully set up by the Sun King. He is famous for gathering the nobles around him and putting on such an elaborate spectacle while allowing the possibility for advancement. This advancement was essentially determined from within the group itself. The rules of engagement became extremely detailed and complex because they were set up by an idle society. Yet, it is this society that is cohesive to the restrictive and falsifying rules of la bienscèance. The
judgment of the peer group (court or the salons) gave courtiers social mobility. Cohesion to this group was in each courtiers best interest. Semblance seems to play a role in what court society deems to be “le perfectionnement de l’homme”. 21

It is the group itself that determines the value of le paraître. How well a courtier plays the game of plaire and se faire determines his or her status. Such a system helps to reinforce the status-quo. Kreiter explains how the group dynamic plays a part in the gaze and le paraître when he explains

Le paraître des personnages est également l’élément dynamique des relations sociales. Puisque le groupe-spectateur doit, par son verdict, établir la valeur de l’individu, celui-ci tend à se modeler sur l’idéal professé ; il renforce ainsi l’homogénéité du groupe. L’action qu’inspire sa volonté de conformisme embellit la société puisque cette action reproduit le beau tel qu’on l’y a défini (…) D’autre part, puisque les individus s’efforcent de maintenir un paraître constant, un certain ordre, une certaine sécurité (on connaît l’individu et on sait à quoi s’attendre) sont transmis aux rapports sociaux. (Kreiter, 159-160).

Because it is the goal of this paper to establish links between the adolescent condition and ancien régime society, I suggest re-reading the previous paragraph analysing 17th-century society and reframing it within the context of adolescent peer-pressure. “le groupe-spectateur doit (…) établir la valeur de l’individu, celui-ci tend à se modeler sur l’idéal professé ; il renforce ainsi l’homogénéité du groupe.” Certainly an analysis of the novel La Princesse de Clèves with ideas such as the instability or uncertainty of the self as well as the influence and pressures of peer groups would be beneficial to an adolescent reader.

The princess is warned by her mother about a society that is so heavily influenced by appearances and homogeneity that she heeds these warnings about court, but also attempts to follow her mother’s advice on one other matter; that of marriage. According to Mme de Chartres, the only way for a woman to be happy at court is to find a husband to love, and to be loved in return. 22 Ever the obedient and cautious daughter, our young protagonist married the prince of Clèves. She had no way of knowing that when she married le prince de Clèves their union would be her undoing rather than her salvation.

21 Kreiter, 162
22 “(...)elle lui faisait voir aussi combien cette vertu, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même, et par un grand soin de s’attacher à ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d’une femme, qui est d’aimer son mari et d’en être aimée. » (Lafayette, 74).
Believing that marriage will protect her from the trials of court, la princesse de Clèves only compounds the issue when she encounters her love interest; the duc de Nemours. It is through her interactions (or avoidance thereof) with him that the reader observes early on a manifestation of the princess’ distrust of the court and of gallantry. She is very aware of the ever-present gaze of the courtiers. The princess is afraid to blush or act in any way that would betray her love for Nemours.

Little by little the princess (and consequently, the reader) learns that this is the way of life at court. Appearances were everything but they often masked ones’ desires or interests. The magnificence of the spectacle and *la bienséance* served to disguise the hidden desires of social players at court.23

The system of being on display without ever really being seen is demonstrated throughout the novel. It is particularly remarkable to modern readers of *La Princesse de Clèves* upon reading the first few pages of the book. How are we meant to interpret this long listing of names and descriptions? Though this introduction may seem perplexing to the reader, it is of value to study exactly how these characters are introduced. With the exception of the quality of *l’esprit* (which can be attributed to *la bienséance*, and thus another masking trait) each of the descriptions focus on physical characteristics and how each of the courtiers are viewed by everyone else present.24

These descriptions are remarkably vague and archetypal. Though the description of the members of court goes on for pages, the readers (and presumably the cast of characters) really have little sense of knowing any of the courtiers who were introduced. The vision that is conjured is one of physical splendor and admiration. It is only upon

23 Kreiter states “Pour mieux jouer leur jeu, pour se protéger de l’œil cache qui les guette, les personnages disposent de certains moyens qui rendent plus subtil encore le jeu de l’être et du paraître.” (Kreiter, 165).

24 “(…) we read that the king “réussissait admirablement dans tous les exercices du corps”, that the queen “aimait la grandeur, la magnificence et les plaisirs”, that the king’s daughter Elizabeth has an “incomparable beauté” and that the Dauphine is “une personne parfaite pour l’esprit et le corps”. This superlative display is not limited to the immediate royal family. The courtiers as a body are quite simply “l’ornement et l’admiration de leur siècle” (…) Many of the courtiers are also presented as being universally loved and respected: Navare “attraît le respect de tout le monde”, Guise is “aimé de tout le monde”, Nevers “faisait les délices de la cour” while Nemours has “un enjouement qui plaisait également aux hommes et aux femmes.” (Cambell, 87).
reading further into the novel and by discovering several character’s secrets, that the reader gains a sense of knowing who these characters were. One can imagine that this is how it must have been at court as well. It is no wonder, then, that so much emphasis is placed on spying, discovering, and being afraid of being found out in this novel. The spectacle served to hide a truth that is decidedly unattractive. Yet these traits were accepted norms during the reign of Louis XIV (upon which, it is assumed, the court of La Princesse de Clèves is based).

Rohou notes in his research of manuals for savoir-vivre or bienséance that these behaviors were not only tolerated but expected. He includes an excerpt from l’Homme du Xours XIII 25 which explains that:

L’homme adroit (…) ne fait jamais ce qu’il montre avoir envie de faire. Il mire un but, mais c’est pour tromper les yeux qui le regardent(…) S’il dit un mot, c’est pour amuser l’attention de ses rivaux ; et dès qu’elle est occupée à ce qu’ils pensent, il exécute aussitôt ce qu’ils ne pensaient pas (…) Et puis, quand son artifice est connu, il raffine sa dissimulation en se servant de la vérité même pour tromper(…)son artifice est de n’en avoir plus.

This statement confirms the confusion and distrust that the princess felt as she entered court. The princess begins to learn the lesson about the double-nature of court life early on. On the social stage Mme de Tournon appeared to be a chaste widow who seemed deeply affected by the loss of her husband. In reality, le prince de Clèves learned that she duped not only society, but also his close friend Sancerre. It turned out that she was unfaithful not only to the image that she presented of herself, but also to Sancerre. She was having an affair with him, and also with one of his good friends.

This duplicitous tale serves as a warning to the princess. We learn that this secrecy goes all the way to the top of the social ladder at court. The queen, for example, must dissimulate her jealousy for the King’s mistress. When describing the queen, Madame de Lafayette wrote:

(…)il semblait qu’elle souffrait sans peine l’attachement du roi pour la duchesse de Valentois, et elle n’en témoignait aucune jalousie, mais elle avait une si profonde dissimulation qu’il était difficile de juger de ses sentiments, et la politique obligéait d’approcher cette duchesse de sa personne, afin d’en approcher aussi le roi. (Lafayette, 241-242).

25 No citation was provided. (Rohou, 389)
The queen is the ultimate example of how secrecy and hiding one’s emotions were key to success at court. She feigned indifference to the affair that her husband was having with the duchess of Valentois, however this indifference is once again not as it seems. The queen confides in the Vidame: “Je souffre en apparence, sans beaucoup de peine, l’attachement du roi pour la duchesse de Valentois, mais il m’est insupportable. Elle gouverne le roi, elle le trompe, elle me méprise, tous les gens sont à elle.” (Lafayette, 317-318). Both examples given here are of deception around *l’intérêt* and love. Madame de Lafayette makes no distinction between the two because they are so intertwined at court. Secret desires lead to false realities.

Upon observing such masked emotion, the princesse de Clèves does not trust the duke de Nemours’ love nor his intentions. This all begs the question of how this type of society could possibly be accepted by those who participated in it. After all, nobles had to play the role of a character that was conducive to achieving their *intérêt*. They lost true spontaneous liberty, but gained a system of incredible strategic subtleties. Because everyone was playing a role, the lives of nobles consisted of looking for clues, analyzing situations and guessing the motivations of those around them. (Rohou, 387)

How then can we interpret this skeptical character; the princess, herself? Clearly, she is leery of court and especially of the Duc de Nemours because of the education she received from her mother as well as her own experiences. Kreiter argues that in addition the princess’ skepticism might be more a product of her time than a mistrust of *la bienséance*. Cartesian thought, brought on by Descartes (as examined in Chapter One) may also be a factor. “(…)ceux meme qui ont les plus faibles âmes pourraient acquérir un empire très absolu sur toutes leurs passions, Si on employait assez d’industrie à les dresser et à les conduire.” (Descartes *Les Passions de l’Ame*, 66).

To better understand Descartes in the context of the princesse de Clèves’ education we must understand that she is a follower of Descartes more so than of Corneille. Mme de Chartres taught her daughter to defend herself against internal and deceptive problems by distrusting herself. 26 The princess cannot give in to her feelings

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26 “…l’élément le plus redoutable qui menace l’individu dans la voie que trace Mme de Chartres, c’est la passion qui peut insidieusement emprisonner l’être et détruire sa liberté.” (Kreiter,172).
for Nemours even after her husband’s death because she had been so conditioned to mistrust those feelings. To give in would be to lose control. As we have learned throughout this chapter, the loss of control in the culture of 17th century court life would be the ultimate failure.

The unusual character of the princess and her decision not to be with the duke of Nemours, but rather to join a convent has puzzled many a reader. Perhaps the psychology of adolescence can provide some insight into the condition of the princesse of Clèves.

I once again must stress that the motivations and situations of modern youth and the courtiers of the 17th century have very little in common, but that some of the psychological and sociological similarities are striking. If we reconsider Erikson’s eight stages of human development and the essential growth of the adolescent stage as being “Identity vs. Identity Confusion”, then it will become clearer as to how this theory can be applied to the novel in question. According to this theory, a successful young adult will gain a sense of self through peer-groups and by consolidating this new self with the self formed within the family group. An unsuccessful or ill-adjusted youth, on the other hand, either does not fully separate from primary objects (parents or care-givers) or feels isolated or superior to peer groups. A maladjusted adolescent will be lonely and confused.

It is arguable that the princess of Clèves never fully shakes off the influence of her mother. She never trusts her peers, she cannot love, and forms no meaningful relationships after the death of her mother. Unlike the queen, the princess does not have a confidant. Her mother filled both this role and the role of mentor in the early part of the book. However after her mothers’ death, the princess no longer has anyone in whom she can confide. Evidence of this is when her husband shuns her and dies once her appearance is tarnished after she admits that she cannot be at court because she is avoiding Nemours. The need for true friendship is as essential to characters in literature during the age of appearances as it is to the adolescent at the age of appearances. Kreiter observes the importance of friendship in the novel *La Princesse de Clèves* by explaining:

Le secours du confident (…) aide aussi les personnages à mieux jouer leur jeu. Sa nécessité est d’ailleurs affirmée. (…) Le confident procure à l’individu la détente psychologique qui l’aide à maintenir en équilibre les mouvements de son âme. La confidence nécessite une ambiance spirituelle où règnent l’amitié et l’affection; le
Mme de Clèves is the only character in *La Princesse de Clèves* who does not have anyone to help her maintain a sense of who she really is. Without the omniscient narration present throughout the novel, it would be difficult to know that all characters had this kind of release or down-time from the role that they were playing. It is no wonder that the princess is the one who cannot sustain this lifestyle by the end of the novel. There is also a certain superiority in the way the princess never caves in to her desires or intérêt. After all, these flaws offer us virtually our only view of the “real character” as a reader. Has the princess developed a true sense of self or is she so consumed by the rules that she is to follow that they completely consume her?

Finally the threat of isolation is the worst outcome of Erikson’s theory, and perhaps the most pertinent to our interpretation of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Rather than let go of social rules and give in to her desires and herself, the princess is resigned to spend the rest of her days in a convent. We learn that she dies shortly thereafter.

What message can we take from the character “inimitable”? Since we are discussing the themes of adolescence and psychology, it is important to note that we observe the princess’ adolescence and her entry into adulthood in this novel. After all, she is only sixteen when she is first presented at court. This character is essentially existing in a mise-en-abîme of the adolescent situation according to this particular study. Not only are her psychological needs going to be that of an adolescent, but she is also a part of a society that mirrors many of the same trends. What is troublesome about this character is that she does not develop healthfully. One of the most important stages of adolescent development is the creation of friendships, peer-groups, and a sense of identity.

It is clear that the princess does not from meaningful relationships throughout the novel. In fact, all attempts seem to end in death. Her mother was her main relationship early in the plot as well as her most important influence throughout the work. However, this key character dies and her daughter never fully detaches from her. The princess also

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27 This is how la princesse de Clèves is described in the conclusion of the novel.
does not form a deep relationship within her marriage to her husband. He shuns her and dies from the pain he feels when she confides in him the reason she avoids court. Her attempt to be honest and form a more meaningful relationship with her husband, by having him serve, in a sense, as her confident, backfires dramatically. It would have rather believed, as the other courtiers, that she had been ill, as la bienséance required.

The third possible relationship was the one the princess could have formed with the duc de Nemours. Her failed relationships in the past and her inability to detach from her mother’s lessons make the princess completely skeptical of everyone whom she encounters. The princess’ development was such that she could not sustain the relationship that she could have had with a man like the duc de Nemours.

The princess had not learned to create meaningful bonds at this key stage of her life. The outcome is that which Erikson warns us of; isolation. A maladjusted youth is confused and isolated, according to this particular theorist. The princess indeed isolates herself. She leaves Nemours and court behind to join a convent. We also learn, in an anticlimactic conclusion, that she dies shortly thereafter. The princess dies “quelque temps après”. The lack of specificity and depth seems to suggest the relative unimportance of this death.

A new interpretation comes out of the ashes. Perhaps the princess’ death is less about an honest woman being, quite literally, unable to live at court as one might expect. Perhaps the overall message of this book is concerned less with the corrupt nature of court and more with the human need for meaningful relationships and an existence beyond the rules of la bienséance. After all, anyone who dies alone in a convent, and whose death is described so matter-of-factly, can hardly be considered the ideal citizen. Maybe Lafayette’s use of “inimitable” serves as a warning more so than as a term used to venerate the character of the princesse de Clèves. Maybe what is inimitable about this character is that she existed solely on the plane of social rules and expectations without learning the coping mechanisms needed to sustain such a role. The unsustainable culture of court is certainly criticized, yet maybe the first “modern novel” provides an early glimpse into the psychological needs of human beings. This novel shows the importance of thought beyond “Je pense donc je suis” in showing the torments of a character who

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28 It must also be noted that his persistent questioning and accusations would not be conducive to such a relationship.
cannot express what she thinks. If thought is the only certainty about one’s existence, can one really be if it is the very thing that cannot be expressed? The princess is so confined to a series of rules that she can never really exist. Our thoughts and feelings are what define us. Her death is as much the death of the self as it is her literal death.  

This is only one conclusion of many that could be drawn from reading this text. Students would likely be intrigued by the unstable friendships, love interests, and dishonesty in this story. It is striking how many similarities there are between modern psychological theories of adolescence and this particular novel, making it an excellent candidate for the young adult reader. What would happen if a young adult never fully separated from parents and discovered their own individuality? What if a teenager never took a real risk? There may also be a significant lesson for this age group in that succumbing solely to the weight of peer-pressure is unsustainable. Nothing replaces the psychological and emotional need for friendship, love, and self-expression. Life at court is observed, critiqued, and analyzed throughout La Princesse de Clèves. From this novel, a class could learn a great deal about history, culture, and ideally themselves.

**Conclusion**

There is a recurrent thread that links these three works analyzed in this paper and theories of adolescent development. The crisis of modernity/adolescence is the distinction of the self from pre-conceived ideas. Everything is put into question. The separateness of the self leads to narcissism, yet the newness of this independent self causes a need for identifications through peer groups. A lack of strong peer-groups leads to confusion, a sense of superiority, or isolation. The message to the young adult reader is both a clear and powerful one.

Learning about our histories teaches us about the human condition, and thus about ourselves. The lessons of early modernity provided by literature of the 17th century will resonate strongly with this age group. Though it is both exciting and confusing to find oneself and one’s place in the world, one should never underestimate the importance of strong relationships. There are clearly many differences between life in the ancien régime and the life of a modern adolescent, but one thing is certain. The human condition stretches beyond the boundaries of the centuries and allows for a connection that defies time. One conclusion can be drawn from all three texts and all three genres studied in this paper.

The princesse de Clèves is leery and critical of court life so she hides behind the code of *la bienséance*. Unable to form the meaningful relationships necessary for developing a successful sense of self, she isolates herself from society and dies shortly thereafter.

Even LaRochefoucauld, perhaps court’s greatest critic (but like Alceste, still a participant), would agree that: “C’est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul.” (Maxime 237) or “Celui qui croit pouvoir trouver en soi-même de quoi passer de tout le monde se trompe fort.” (Maxime 201)

And finally Alceste, who is highly critical of the very society on which he depends. He feels superior to those whom he observes, yet cannot affirm this superiority without their consent. This leaves him feeling confused and isolated. He leaves society, entirely alone. The ancien régime in France *appears*, to be a distant and foreign historical period. American students of French might find this particular period of history difficult to comprehend not only due to the archaism of the 17th century but also the cultural
distance that is ever-present for a world language student. By appealing to the psychology and experiences of the young adult, a teacher can hope to help bridge the gap between the American student and 17th century French studies.

Despite inherent difficulty in teaching this period, the educational benefits are manifold. History is essential not only to the acquisition of factual information but also to self-knowledge. We cannot come to know who we are if we never know who we used to be. In addition, this particular study focuses a great deal on self-awareness and self-creation; topics that are very appealing to students of this age group. Arguably, contextualized literary readings offer more than most historical studies in terms of personal and interpersonal development because of its uniquely human character. The complex level of emotional understanding that can be attained by this methodology involves identifying with historical actors and then coming to terms with current historical conditions. Students consider past situations and people and then compare them to our current reality and society. By consolidating knowledge of the past and present, students come to a better understanding of contemporary existence.

Learning history in this way enables students to become more emotionally invested in the education they receive and to benefit from additional interpersonal and personal enrichment. In order to understand the people of the past we must first come to understand ourselves. Thus, the interaction that the class has with the lesson is as much a reflection of current concerns, culture, and reality as it is an analysis of the past. The 17th century in France is such a fascinating period of study due to the pre-occupation with the self. Self-distinction, self-awareness, and the self in relation to the other are all major concerns. Hopefully this study of the self in the 17th century helps to guide students onto their own path of self-discovery.
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