Despite these objections, this remains an intelligent and thought-provoking book. It may be profitably read alongside other accounts of seventeenth-century science, religion, and politics.


In the canon of French verse, the didactic and scientific poetry of the seventeenth century has not met with great favor on the part of the general public; nor has it elicited vast attention within the scholarly community. Philippe Chométy’s impressive examination of this body of poetry does much to fill this lacuna, and his study represents an important contribution to the field. Examining the works of poets ranging from the great to the forgotten, from La Fontaine to Magnon, Chevalier, and Vion Dalibray, Chométy displays both vast erudition and scrupulous methodological rigor in calling attention to a rich and fascinating literary corpus, the understanding of which is revealed in the multiple tensions and paradoxes embodied therein. Faced with the pronounced task of disentangling and elucidating the various problematic issues inherent in these works on both a theoretical and textual level, the author succeeds admirably in bringing to light the essence of these poems within their literary, social and philosophical contexts.

The difficulty of this undertaking is evident in the very nomenclature required to characterize the poems studied, for the province of their scope is varied and wide, embracing the philosophical, scientific, moral, and didactic. The author notes that the seventeenth century could classify them all under the rubric of “philosophie,” in as much as the word itself, as evoked by Chevalier in his Nouveau Cours de philosophie en vers français, referred to the “connaissance/Des choses que l’esprit humain peut penettrer” (273). For the basis of his study Chométy has chosen the designation la poésie d'idées.

But problems presented themselves beyond the question of terminology. For in an era of Cartesian rationalism, the very attempt to discuss in poetic tropes and cadences such matters as philosophical systems, the history of ideas, the nature of the cosmos, mathematics, natural sciences, or the latest scientific discoveries occasioned skepticism as to whether the genre of poetry
could accommodate such considerations. To explain theoretical principles or natural phenomena in an objective and scientific way seemed intuitively to require a discourse of scientific clarity and precision and a mode of expression seemingly incompatible with the strictures and structures of poetry. La Grange’s statement in his *Principes de la Philosophie*, “toutes ces métaphores sont un peu grotesques, quand il s’agit de décider un point de Philosophie” (29), reflects a train of thought that would immediately cause the learned to look askance at poetic efforts to engage in scientific discussion. The mere act of expressing oneself in a figurative or fanciful way seemed automatically to exile a poet from the dispassionate purloins of savants. Thus, when La Fontaine, in his *Poème du Quinquana*, affirmed as his intent, “Philosopher en langage des dieux,” we are struck by the irony that a language that was fit for the gods (and La Fontaine), was deemed to be not good enough for philosopher/scientists.

Yet, as revealed in La Fontaine’s proclamation, the poets of the seventeenth century themselves were not deterred by such thinking. Seeing their art entirely capable of satisfying the dual goal of instructing and pleasing while disseminating and celebrating knowledge, they set themselves wholly to the task, and as difficult as it was, they prided themselves on having succeeded in “la difficulté vaincue.” Indeed, as Chométy argues, the language of poetry had powers of didacticism that could surpass those of prose. The elevation and inspiration of the poetic muse could infuse the subject of the poet’s lyre, which, in turn, could inspire its reader. Verse could also facilitate instruction and retention by means of striking imagery or rhetorical phrasing that colorless explanation in prose could not match. Finally, a poetic masterpiece could provide its subject with the sort of immortality conferred upon the works of a Hesiod or Virgil.

While detailing the tensions between the domains of poetry and philosophy during the seventeenth century, the author equally points out their affinities and affiliations within their social milieu. Poets admired philosophers and vice versa, and whilst poets engaged in philosophy, so too did philosophers set their pen to verse. They frequented the same social circles, and breathed in the same intellectual climate. By studying the complex interrelationship between the two realms and their practitioners, the author captures and conveys both the strains and bonds between two disciplines existing within a shared and strangely symbiotic space.
After careful examination of this dynamic, the author turns his attention to analyses of the poems themselves from a number of perspectives. His observations are cogent, insightful, and persuasive. One of his most interesting revelations is how diverse were the structures and tonalities that could be assumed by the poetry of ideas. It could present itself in modes ranging from the philosophical to the lyrical, from the elegiac to the satirical, from the lighthearted to the heroic, and in formats extending from expansive scientific tracts to the evanescent bagatelles of fugitive verse. In assessing the value as these poems as works of art, though wholly cognizant of their deficiencies, the author does not fail to underscore their merits. Making the case for their rehabilitation, Chométy shows that this poetry may be appreciated on both a didactic and an aesthetic level. It remains to be seen whether his work will occasion a reassessment of these poems on the part of either scholars or the public at large. At the very least, the author demonstrates that reconsideration is in order.

In addition to the acuity of his arguments and assessments, the author impresses by the breadth and scope of his knowledge and research. His footnotes provide a wealth of valuable information and references, complemented by an extensive bibliography. Particularly helpful is a glossary with biographical information on the lesser-known poets of his focus. Chométy’s writing is both exacting and commanding, and the reader is advised to have a thorough knowledge of rhetorical terminology. As a scholar of ideas, Chométy provides a study of ideas that is at once rich and richly rewarding.


In this edition, La Rochefoucauld’s text is prefaced by a short Forward which gives the date of original publication, and situates the Maxims within the salon culture of seventeenth-century Paris; brief mention is also made of stylistic aspects of the maxim as a literary form, and of their ability to provoke controversial reactions, both among their original readers and now. In addition, a short Biographical Note about La Rochefoucauld is appended to the text, but, with these two exceptions, the translator offers us a completely