

François Duc de La Rochefoucauld Biography

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Biography

The French moralist François, Duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680), is best known for his "Maxims," which presents a disillusioned view of mankind.

François de La Rochefoucauld was born in Paris on Sept. 15, 1613. He saw military service in Italy and elsewhere and took part in various court intrigues during the 1630s and 1640s. Learning of the first episodes of the Fronde, or revolutionary opposition to the Regency and its prime minister, Cardinal Mazarin, he joined the Frondeurs in December 1648. During the very complex military action and intrigues that followed, he was wounded attempting to break the blockade of Paris and organized the brilliant but unsuccessful defense of Bordeaux against the royal armies. In later phases of the Fronde, La Rochefoucauld was gravely wounded again in the battle of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in 1652.

In ill health, La Rochefoucauld spent the next few years working principally on his *Memoirs* (first published, without his consent, in 1662). As he gradually regained the tolerance of the Crown, he came to frequent various Parisian literary salons. From the discussions of the *précieuses* and men of letters in the salons, as well as his own reading and reflections, he distilled his famous *Maxims*, which he first published in 1665.

A collection of just over 500 sayings and reflections on various topics, La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* criticizes extensively such human virtues as bravery, friendship, altruism, and love. All of them, he asserts, are motivated by either self-interest or self-esteem, the famous *amourpropre* which, according to La Rochefoucauld, underlies all human action and thought. In place of the moral virtues he attacks, La Rochefoucauld seems to value only a single intellectual one, that of lucidity. If man cannot help others without hypocrisy or love others without loving himself more, he may at least hope to understand his motives and those of others for what they are. As he states in one of his best-known maxims, the sovereign talent is to understand the price of things--that is, to see through hypocrisy and self-delusion to the nature of things as they are.

After many years in Paris, during which he may have contributed something to the novels of his great and good friend Madame de La Fayette, La Rochefoucauld died on the night of March 16, 1680, in Paris.