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The nephew of Thomas and Pierre Corneille, Fontenelle (Rouen 1657- Paris 1757) began his career writing poetry and opera librettos and contributed to the *Mercure galant*, a French periodical with a broad readership. He nevertheless owed his first successes to his works of history and moral philosophy. The *Nouveaux dialogues des morts* (1683) and then *Digression des Anciens et des Modernes* (1686) confirmed his commitment to the camp of the Moderns in the *Querelle* and put forward an interpretation of history based on the assertion of the universality and durability of human nature, culminating, in the *Histoire des Oracles* (1687) and *De l'origine des fables* (1714), in an analysis of the psychological mechanisms responsible for errors and superstitions and an oblique questioning of the teachings of religion. It was, however, the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) in particular that established his status throughout Europe, a work consisting of a series of *galant* dialogues between a philosopher and a marquise, in which the author presents himself as the interpreter of Cartesian physics, liberating himself from any form of theological understanding, becoming the defender of an intellectual freedom tinged with materialism which, remarkably, evaded the censorship of the period. The *Entretiens* were even republished numerous times during the lifetime of the author, translated into several languages and served as the model for a whole series of pedagogical works intended to introduce women to scientific learning.

Buoyed by this success, Fontenelle entered the Académie Française in 1691, then the Académie des Sciences, in 1696, of which he became, in 1699, the first permanent secretary, positions that he held until 1740. He was also a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belle-Lettres from 1705, leaving it several years later in order to devote himself fully to his work at the Académie des Sciences. Fontenelle was, in fact, no mere populariser of knowledge developed by others; he belonged to the very limited group of mathematicians who had mastered infinitesimal calculus, for which he acted as an ardent advocate within the Académie des sciences. He wrote the preface to *l'Analyse des infiniment petits* by the Marquis de l'Hôpital (1696) and in turn published the *Éléments de la géométrie de l'Infini* (1727). However, his work at the Académie des Sciences also provided him with the opportunity to monitor the developments in science on a daily basis, including physics, chemistry, the natural sciences and astronomy. His position within the institution even obliged him to present to the public, on an annual basis, a volume of the *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des sciences* (1699-1740), in which he acted not only as the interpreter of the new knowledge on behalf of fashionable society, which was inquiring but not always well educated, but also, in particular, as the historian of the sciences being developed. This work should not, however, be reduced simply to that of an obligatory duty. Fontenelle used this opportunity in order to progress his work as a philosopher. He thus analysed the conditions in which the new knowledge was produced, reflected on the validity of the procedures and methods, compared theories and hypotheses and analysed the epistemological value and intellectual legitimacy of the opinions produced by the members of the Academy. He also contributed

to the development of a new philosophical and social *ethos*, that of the man of science, through the annual eulogies he dedicated to his deceased colleagues, texts that were widely circulated throughout Europe, and especially those devoted to the great names of the philosophy of the period, such as Leibniz or Newton.

Fontenelle continued to pursue his career as an author in parallel with his duties in the Academy. Thus, in addition to his poetry and plays, he published the *Théorie des tourbillons cartésiens* (1752) in which he defended the physics of Descartes against that of Newton, which he rejected, not because of its operational nature, but due to the abstruseness of the principle. This last work, published when the author was over 90 years old, earned him, unjustly, the reputation of being the last defender of Cartesianism.

At his death, Fontenelle left behind several fragments of philosophical works and a number of short texts (*De l'existence de Dieu, Du bonheur, Traité de la raison humaine, De la connaissance de l'esprit humain*). He also authored controversial works that were printed secretly (*Histoire des Ajaoiens*) as well as philosophical manuscripts expressing a materialist conception of nature and a form of atheism (*Traité de la liberté*, 1701). Despite his discretion, and as a result of both his social position and agreeable philosophy, Fontenelle exerted considerable influence on the European Enlightenment, beginning with the generation of the Encyclopedists.

Cross-references:

Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes;

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