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Fontenelle's *Éloges des académiciens*: Creating the Scientific *Persona*

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In his *Éloges des académiciens*, French philosopher Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657 – 1757) used various strategies to build the credibility of scientists. In recent publications on the history of science, the concept of *persona* has been fruitfully explored. In this article, I focus on the construction of the scientific *persona* in Fontenelle's *Éloges*, concentrating on the communication skills that scientists had to develop in order to advance new scientific discoveries. In what ways did Fontenelle rely on traditional rhetorical strategies to formulate and present a new scientific *persona*? How did the strategy of his *Éloges* relate to the notion of *sociabilité* and the social context of the Académie des sciences?

Keywords: Fontenelle – scientific *persona* – sociability – Academy of Sciences

Introduction

In his *Éloges des académiciens*, French philosopher and secretary of the Académie des sciences Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657 – 1757) used various strategies to build the credibility of scientists, promote scientific institutions, and justify scientific research in general. In this article, I investigate the construction of the new scientific *persona* in Fontenelle's *Éloges*, focusing on the communication skills that academicians (*savants*) needed to develop to enhance their credibility and advance new scientific discoveries, as observed in personal disputes and situations of conflict between theories and authorities.

Numerous publications have considered the history of the French Académie des sciences, especially after its reformation in 1699 (see, e.g., Hahn 1993; Sturdy 1995; Mazauric 2007). The texts by Fontenelle devoted to his

activities as the secretary of the Académie des sciences have been studied in various monographs on Fontenelle and his contemporaries (e.g., Niderst 1972, 1991; Dagen 1977; Marchal 1997; Mullet 2011).[1] However, the articles and works dealing with his *Éloges des académiciens* (Poulouin 2010; Schaffer 2015; Grimaldi 2020) principally refer to the most famous *éloges*, or the *éloges* devoted to great figures in the history of science (e.g., Newton, Leibniz, De l'Hôpital). The communication among scientists at the beginning of the eighteenth century has been presented in various important publications devoted to the Académie des sciences (e.g., Mazauric 2007; Passeron et al. 2008; Hilaire-Pérez et al. 2016), though not to the specific theme of Fontenelle's *Éloges*.[2]

I propose to analyze Fontenelle's *Éloges* with a social history of science approach. In recent publications devoted to the history of science, the concept of *persona* has proven fruitful (Daston – Sibum 2003; Condren et al. 2006). Stephen Gaukroger's discussion of the transition from the *persona* of a natural philosopher to the *persona* of *philosophe* is particularly useful for my analysis (Gaukroger 2008, 2010, 2016). Although Gaukroger used the eighteenth-century term "natural philosopher," I prefer to use the modern term "scientist" to describe the heterogenous group of academicians (*savants*) Fontenelle promoted in his *Éloges*.[3]

In Fontenelle's project in the *Éloges*, the question of the intended audience is crucial – Fontenelle built the credibility of the scientific *persona* on the type of credibility that was already in use and accepted by his public, as Fontenelle already tested in his successful *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686). The study of the scientific *persona* therefore needs to be compared to the social and cultural context of the *Éloges*, referring to the notion of *sociabilité*.

I. *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*

Fontenelle's *Éloges des académiciens* formed the last part of the annual publications of *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*.[4] The *Éloges* were

[1] Many relevant papers can be found in *Revue Fontenelle* (published from 2003 onward) and other journals and proceedings, e.g., Rioux-Beaulne – Seguin (2012).

[2] During the finalization of this article in 2023, the last issue of *Revue Fontenelle* was published, containing several important texts devoted to the *Éloges* (*Revue Fontenelle* 2022/14). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for the reference.

[3] For example, chemists, botanists, doctors, and technicians.

[4] *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences. Avec les mémoires de mathématiques et de physique* (Paris, 1699 – 1790), henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as HARS, using modern French orthography, with the author´s English translation. The *Éloges* were also published separately, starting in 1708. For Fontenelle's work on *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, see Seguin (2012, 365 – 379).

devoted to the correspondents and members of the Académie des sciences who had died in the past year. The whole corpus of Fontenelle's *Éloges* is composed of 69 texts; the first was dedicated to Claude Bourdelin (1699) and the last one to Charles-François de Cisternay du Fay (1739). In his texts, Fontenelle used the lives of individuals to shape the new ideal of the scientist; the examples of illustrious academicians served to form the new scientific *persona*, stressing various features of their character and scientific work.

Fontenelle developed the traditional genre of *éloges* of *grands hommes* found in ancient literature and rediscovered during the Renaissance (Grimaldi 2020, 49 – 51). In France, the *Journal des savants* also published *éloges* of important scholars; the genre flourished in the Académie française where the *éloges* of dead academicians became a ceremonial ritual (Mazauric 2007, 97). However, D'Alembert in his article "*Éloge académique*" in the *Encyclopédie* noted the difference between the *éloges* at the Académie française, describing them as *éloges oratoires*, consisting exclusively of eulogies, and the *éloges historiques* presented at the Académie des sciences, in which the descriptions of the lives of academicians were to be truthful (D'Alembert 1755, 527). Fontenelle himself stated that the history of the Académie des sciences should be the history of academicians, and his descriptions of their lives and works were to be based on correct and unbiased observation (Seguin 2015, 413).[5]

Before their publication in the *Histoire de* l'*Académie royale des sciences,* the *Éloges* were presented during two annual public sessions of the Académie des sciences, as was formally stated in the Réglement XXXV of the renewed Académie des sciences: "All persons shall be admitted to the public meetings, which shall be held twice a year" (HARS 1699, 8). The audience for the *Éloges* thus went beyond the close community of the members of the Académie des sciences; Fontenelle's strategies to formulate a new scientific *persona* and communicate scientific research had to take this element into consideration.

II. From *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* to the *Éloges*

The corpus of the *Éloges* has to be read in relation to Fontenelle's other texts, starting with his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686). Fontenelle presented imaginary dialogues between a philosopher[6] and a curious marquise during their evening walks in a chateau park, describing the Cartesian theory of the universe and introducing his ideas on the possible inhabitants of other worlds.

[5] Fontenelle explicitly stated his neutrality in his *Éloge* of Newton (HARS 1727, 153).
[6] The term "philosophy" in Fontenelle's time covered the domain of natural sciences as well, including physics and cosmology.

In *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, the communication between the philosopher and the marquise prefigures the description of the lives of academicians and their transmission of science. As a member of the scientific community, the philosopher aims to explain scientific discoveries to the marquise, stressing their usefulness and revealing a passionate approach to the study of the world. Fontenelle thus created a fictional model scientist (natural philo-sopher) with communication skills that will also be described in the *Éloges*.

It is important to recall that with his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, Fontenelle addressed the members of salons in Paris, a mixed society composed of both *savants* and socialites (*gens du monde*) (see Shank 2005, 93). Fontenelle wrote in the Preface to the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* that he wanted to present philosophy in a way that "is neither too dry for men and women of the world nor too playful for scholars" (Fontenelle 1990, 3), using both scientific discourse and the rhetoric of *galanterie*.[7] The explanation of the universe in *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* was presented in both scientific and aesthetic terms, combining *savoir* and *plaisir*, which are closely connected in our approach to the world.

In the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, the marquise often expressed her impatience and wanted to continue the imaginary journey to learn about the universe. The passion for knowledge became the impulse that led the philosopher's presentation of the world and of the scientific theories that described it. Guilhem Armand wrote that the scientific approach in Fontenelle's conception aimed to show the beauty of nature and of the science that tries to explain it (Armand 2006, 92). In this sense, scientific research, based on the model of *galanterie*, leads to a constant invention of new pleasures (see Martin 1998, 27 – 30; Hochedez 2006).

In the last part of *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, the philosopher described the "*génie*" that leads the reader to overcome the dry speculations of science and to find pleasure. In his final talk with the marquise, the philosopher asks her to accept this spirit and look for the unity of *savoir* and *plaisir*. *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* conclude by connecting the domain of science and sociability: the two spheres should not be approached as separate; furthermore, their connection was described as an advantage.

Another aspect of the social value of science was developed in Fontenelle's *Préface sur l'utilité des mathématiques et de la physique* (1702), which served as an introductory text to *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences* (Fontenelle 2015,

[7] The concept of *galanterie* is analyzed in detail in Denis (2001) and Lilti (2005).

308 – 318). Fontenelle stressed the fact that the general public did not know about the utility of scientific discoveries, though the discoveries had an important role in improving their lives: "It will always be easier for the public to enjoy the advantages that it (a learned society) will provide, than to know them" (Fontenelle 2015, 310). Fontenelle noticed that even the theories without direct applications in ordinary life were useful as they served to point to other, more practical, theories or to sharpen our intellectual skills (Fontenelle 2015, 313).

The explanation of the utility of scientific research was an important part of the strategy of the renewed Académie des sciences, in terms of both practical applications of scientific research and cultural relevance, boosting the prestige of the French language and erudition in an international context. In his *Préface sur l'utilité des mathématiques et de la physique,* Fontenelle noted that in order to improve the status of scientists and the prestige of the French institution, the Académie des sciences, it was necessary to inform the general public about scientific research and explain its relevance.

The strategy to communicate scientific results to other scientists and the general public was already evident in the formulation of the program of the renewed Académie des sciences (1699), as stated in the Règlement XXVII:

> The Academy will take care to be in contact with the various scientists, either of Paris and of the kingdom provinces, or even of the foreign countries, in order to be promptly informed of what will happen there of interest for mathematics, or for physics, and in the elections to fill the places of academicians, it will give much preference to the scientists who will have been the most careful about this type of contact (HARS 1699, 7).

Simone Mazauric has shown that the relations between scientists are based on their sociability within academic circles and toward the general public (Mazauric 2007). First, Fontenelle developed in his *Éloges* the strategy of *sociabilité savante*, stressing the need to communicate knowledge within the scientific community (e.g., in the *Éloge* of Chazelles, HARS 1710). The scientists were invited to work in cooperation and to discuss their ideas in French and international contexts, also making use of the foreign correspondents of the Académie des sciences. The academicians had to share the results of their research, forming a large scientific network that promoted scientific progress.

Second, Fontenelle described the *sociabilité* of scientists in relation to communication with the general public. Fontenelle referred to the qualities traditionally ascribed to the *honnête homme* and the *bel esprit.* Though the notion of the *honnête homme* was complex and variable in seventeenth- and eighteenth-

century French texts, it is possible to outline the main features, based on the first edition of the Dictionary of the Académie française (1694), in which the "*honnête homme*" was described as a *"homme de bonne conversation, de bonne compagnie*"[8] (Dictionnaire 1694). The category of "*bel esprit*" was described in the Dictionary in similar terms: "*On appelle beaux esprits ceux qui se distinguent du commun par la politesse de leurs discours et de leurs ouvrages*"[9] (Dictionnaire 1694). In the turbulent seventeenth century French quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, the category of *bel esprit* was assigned to the Moderns.[10] The notions of *plaisir* and *politesse* mentioned in the definitions were essential in Fontenelle's attempt to integrate science into the culture of the intended public. His portraits of academicians tended to paint their lives devoted to science as a path to happiness and pleasure (e.g., *Éloge* of Tournefort, HARS 1708).[11]

J. B. Shank also connects the *politesse* included in the Règlements of the renewed Académie des sciences to the category of *honnête homme* and highlights the transfer of social norms to the norms promoted by the new institution (Shank 2018). The Académie des sciences was intensely marked by the culture of *honnêteté.*

The creation of the scientific *persona* in Fontenelle's *Éloges* was thus influenced by the categories of *honnête homme* and *bel esprit*, developing the features that emphasized the sociability of scientists and their (polite) communication, as I will show in the following section.

III. Scientific *persona* and Communication

The *éloge* focusing particularly on the communication of science was the text devoted to the Marquis de l'Hôpital, who died in 1704. L'Hôpital's work *Analyse des infiniment petits* (1696), based on the lectures by his teacher Johann Bernoulli, was the first textbook devoted to infinitesimal calculus. In the *éloge* of Marquis de l'Hôpital, Fontenelle openly criticized the fact that the members of the aristocracy had been forced to be careful about exposing too much of their scholarly knowledge (HARS 1704, 126). Fontenelle stressed the social aspect of science and emphasized the Marquis de l'Hôpital's activities that

[8] In English: "a man of good conversation, good company."

[9] "We call persons of wit those who distinguish themselves from the common by the politeness of their speech and of their works."

[10] Jin Lu holds that Fontenelle's role in the advocacy of the position of the Modern has been crucial and is reflected in all his works (2005, 20).

[11] Alain Niderst wrote that Fontenelle himself followed the trajectory from the seventeenth century *bel esprit* to the Enlightenment *philosophe* (Niderst 1972, 208).

diffused knowledge in society. Marquis de l'Hôpital was a new model of *honnête homme* compatible with the scholar, forming the new scientific *persona* in the *Éloges*. The same aspect was stressed in the *Éloge* of the astronomer Jean-Dominique Cassini (1712), who actively communicated his discoveries and his theories to other scientists, even at the risk of being deprived of them. According to Fontenelle, Cassini thus served the progress of science rather than his own glory (HARS 1712, 104).

In the *éloge* of the chemist Charles-François de Cisternay du Fay (1739), the academician was described as an important member of the institution who knew how to convey the results of sciences to the general public: "M. du Fay was a kind of amphibian, able to live in both elements, and to make them communicate together" (HARS 1739, 83).[12] According to Fontenelle, the Académie des sciences was occupied with the highest sciences beyond the reach of the general public and needed to rely on scholars who knew both the language of science and the language of the world.

The *éloge* devoted to the chemist Nicolas Lémery (1715) stressed the importance of explaining the outcome of scientific research clearly. Fontenelle described Lémery as the first scientist to dispel the natural darkness of chemistry and reduce it to clear and simple ideas, stressing his influence on other scientists all over Europe (HARS 1715, 76, 82). In this sense, Fontenelle held in the *Éloges* that it was important to know the history of one's discipline and other contemporary scholars, participating in the general development of the human spirit.[13] All discoveries were part of the process of the transgenerational progress of the human spirit. The variety of ideas and paths to scientific discovery was instructive, and historical knowledge was important, especially for the greatest minds and for their awareness of their limits: "The history of the ideas of men…teaches the greatest geniuses that they had equals, and that their equals were mistaken" (HARS 1716, 105 – 106).[14]

Fontenelle furthermore noted the importance of communication with other scientists in an international context, describing in detail the roles of the foreign members of the Académie des sciences, their meetings in Paris, and the journeys they took to learn from the best specialists in their disciplines. For example, in the *éloge* of the physician and chemist Guillaume (Wilhelm) Homberg (1715), Fontenelle presented a scientist who spent his life traveling for scientific concerns.

[12] The *éloges* not included in the 1717 English collection are quoted with author's translation.
[13] For the study of the progress of the human spirit in Fontenelle's work, see, e.g., Mullet (2012, 335 – 347) and Audidière, Rioux-Beaulne (2015, 229 – 249).
[14] In the *Éloge* of Leibniz.

Homberg was interested in the exchange of ideas and "physical curiosities" as well, building his own collection. In all his journeys, he cared about the singularities of the countries' natural history (HARS 1715, 85 – 86). Travel in order to gain new knowledge was mentioned in many *éloges*. For example, in the *éloges* of the first secretary of the Académie des sciences, Jean-Baptiste du Hamel (1706), and of the hydrographer Jean Mathieu de Chazelles (1710), Fontenelle again stressed the importance of international cooperation among scholars and the knowledge of the history of the discipline: "It is necessary for the perfection of this science that the astronomers of all the centuries transmit their knowledge to each other and join hands" (Fontenelle 1717, 157).

In the *Éloges*, Fontenelle often mentioned the scientists' personal characteristics that were useful in the communication of science and in relations with other scholars and that should thus become creative elements of the new scientific *persona*. For example, Jean-Dominique Cassini was described as such a model of modesty and sincerity that his contemporaries were not jealous of him (HARS 1712, 103). The same was said of Nicolas Malebranche (1715); Fontenelle noted his humility as a part of the strategy to communicate the truth: "…he knew that it is only with a humble and submissive air that the truth can slip through to men" (HARS 1715, 113). That was also an important strategy in describing the mathematician and hydrologist Domenico Guglielmini (1710), who proposed his ideas with a modesty that disarmed potential critics (HARS 1710, 154). In the *éloge* of the mathematician Vincenzio Viviani (1703), Fontenelle marked the two virtues of a scientist: simplicity and an ability to communicate:

> He had that innocence and simplicity of manners that are usually found in those that converse less with men than books, but he had none of that roughness and kind of savage temper which commonly results from our conversations with books only (Fontenelle 1717, 21).

In his *Éloges*, Fontenelle described various other qualities of academicians that were useful for the communication of science. One of the crucial qualities was the ability to accept one's own mistakes and learn from them. Fontenelle showed the errors of great men, not only their successes and achievements.[15] In the famous *éloge* of the Marquis de l'Hôpital, Fontenelle mentioned l'Hôpital's simplicity, modesty, and openness to learn from others and rectify his own knowledge: "true modesty of a great man, ready to own his ignorance,

[15] The "*hypothèses erronées*" are further commented by Armand (2006, 86) and Seguin (2015, 416).

and to receive instructions" (Fontenelle 1717, 36). Further on, mistakes were also mentioned in the *éloge* of Domenico Guglielmini (1710), who participated in several debates with his opponents, for example with Denis Papin. Fontenelle stated that Guglielmini opposed Papin's ideas with all the honesty of someone who sincerely accepted the possibility of their own errors (HARS 1710, 157). In the *Éloges*, Fontenelle used the traditional metaphor of a map to describe the task of the scientists to explore all the possible paths of research, both successful and unsuccessful ones (HARS 1704, 130). The scientists had to participate in a collective "cartographical" project. Even the discoveries that proved wrong were necessary for the progress of science. Scientific truths were considered by Fontenelle as subject to changes and had to be situated within the general concept of the progress of the human spirit.[16]

In his *Éloges* Fontenelle held that controversies were an intrinsic part of scientific research, as many observations were subject to mistakes. In the *éloge* of Jean-Dominique Cassini (1712), Fontenelle mentioned the problem of precision in astronomic observations, where measurements were so difficult to determine that the results of various astronomers differed considerably and sometimes even the same astronomer was unable to agree with himself (HARS 1712, 95). Fontenelle praised calm discussions in which the scientists' temperaments were under control. In the *éloge* of botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1708), Fontenelle emphasized his peaceful discussions with his colleagues, in spite of his passionate approach to scientific research. Fontenelle mentioned Tournefort's dispute with English botanist John Ray, which he appreciated as an exemplary exchange: "The dispute was without bitterness; and even handled civilly enough on both sides, which is remarkable" (Fontenelle 1717, 126).

It should be noted that scientific disputes were mentioned in the Réglement XXVI of the Académie des sciences (1699), in which the members of the Académie des sciences were invited to follow the rules of politeness:

> The Academy will guarantee that on occasions when some academicians are of different opinions, they will not use any contempt or bitterness against each other, either in their speeches or in their writings, and when they contest the feelings of some scholar, the Academy will urge them to speak of it only with gentleness (HARS 1699, 7).

[16] As the research of Lorraine Daston stresses (e.g., Daston – Park 2001; Daston – Galison 2007), the epistemic categories of scientific facts and objectivity must be carefully interpreted within contemporary debates.

As proven by the example of Tournefort, the gentle art of communication did not exclude a passion for science. The pleasure and happiness of a life devoted to scientific research were mentioned in many other *éloges*, for example of the mathematician Pierre Varignon (1722), who

> laughed readily when he spoke of geometry, and to see him one would have thought that one had to study geometry to be well entertained. No condition was so much to envy as his; his life was a perpetual and perfectly calm possession of what he exclusively loved (HARS 1722, 139).[17]

The need to communicate scientific research was mentioned in the famous *éloges* of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1716) and Isaac Newton (1727) as well.[18] Fontenelle explained the difference between Leibniz and Newton, preferring the approach of the German philosopher, who cared about the diffusion of knowledge and his own theories. Leibniz was praised for his rich communication with other scholars (HARS 1716, 127). Fontenelle noted that Leibniz was conscious of the development of his theories: "He said that he liked to see plants grow in other people's gardens for which he had provided the seeds" (HARS 1716, 109). Leibniz was also able to communicate within the circle of socialites, and this ease of communication made him beloved by everyone. Even though Fontenelle tried to hold his judgment and remain neutral in his description of the dispute between Newton and Leibniz, it was evident that he did not approve of Newton's neglect of the transmission of knowledge and scientific discoveries.[19] As the *éloge* of Newton shows, Fontenelle also presented criticism of the features that the scientists should avoid. The *Éloges* can thus be viewed as a collection of both the positive characteristics to be emulated and the negative features to be avoided in the new scientific *persona*.

The description of the lives of individual scientists in the *Éloges* forms part of Fontenelle's general conception of the history of science as the history of the progress of the human spirit. As recent publications by historians of philosophy have shown (Mazauric 2007; Seguin 2016; Rioux-Beaulne 2022, Špelda 2024), the search for knowledge was considered by Fontenelle as an open future-oriented process where individual work became part of collective goals. The knowledge

[17] The theme of passion in Fontenelle's writings is analyzed in detail in Seguin (forthcoming).
[18] The *Éloge* of Newton has been the subject of several articles, e.g., Schaffer (2015) and Poulouin (2010). Schaffer noted Fontenelle's concern that Newton's virtues of genius could be transformed into the "vices of obscurantism and tyranny" (Schaffer 2015, 58).
[19] Cf. the *Éloge* of Newton, HARS (1727, 153). See Newton's complaint about Fontenelle's summary of the dispute of the calculus priority, Schaffer (2015, 52).

of the present scientists had to be viewed only as temporary and would be overcome by the knowledge provided by future generations.

IV. Conclusion

In his *Éloges*, Fontenelle built the credibility of the new scientific *persona* on the type of credibility that was already in use and accepted by his public, stemming from the categories of *honnête homme* and *bel esprit*, capable of transferring knowledge in a comprehensible form. The emphasis on the necessary communication skills of scientists was based on traditional requirements of sociability, both among other scholars and toward the general public. In this sense, Fontenelle took strategies already in use and adapted them to the creation of the scientific *persona* to legitimatize scientific research and to communicate its value to the general public. The *Éloges des académiciens* presented various personal qualities that enabled scientists to develop, exchange, and apply their knowledge, stressing the ability to explain their discoveries in simple terms and enter scientific debates with openness, modesty, and peacefulness. The descriptions of scientists also showed their passion for theories and discoveries, revealing the pleasure they found in their lives as scientists and in the search for knowledge. The new scientific *persona* was an integral part of the community; scientists found value and happiness in helping to contribute to the progress of society, even though their individual efforts were necessarily incomplete and had to be evaluated in the ongoing progress of the history of the human spirit.

Emphasizing the communication skills of scientists in their biographies in the *Éloges*, Fontenelle himself used similar procedures in explaining scientific discoveries and new theories in his other works, starting with his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, an eighteenth-century bestseller. Fontenelle's formulation of the new scientific *persona* in the *Éloges* thus reflected the strategy he had already successfully applied in his literary chef d'oeuvre.

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