



Pierre-Daniel Huet.

Huet, Pierre-Daniel (1630-1721)

by Linda Rapp

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One of the most learned men of his age, Pierre-Daniel Huet was a polymath--a philosopher, a scientist, a novelist, a cleric, and a member of the Académie française.

The family into which Pierre-Daniel Huet was born on February 8, 1630 in the city of Caen in Normandy enjoyed a reasonably comfortable economic situation. When he was only three, however, his father died, and his mother expired three years later. The young lad was then passed from one relative to another.

At the age of eight he was sent to study with the Jesuits at the nearby Collège du Mont, where he immediately proved himself a brilliant student. He excelled in both sciences and letters, quickly learning Latin and Greek and also developing an enduring love for French literature, especially poetry.

Bright, charming, and handsome, Huet became a favorite among the Jesuit tutors, at least one of whom seems to have become quite infatuated with him.

The *libertins*, including Philippe, duc d'Orléans, were gaining prominence at the French court. Huet was drawn to their way of thought and cultivated friendships among the members of the "Republic of Letters," becoming, in the words of Philippe-Joseph Salazar, "the toast of humanist circles in Paris, a boy-wonder" while still in his twenties.

Pragmatically, Huet also reinforced his ties with men of the church. He moved between the two worlds, developing passionate friendships along the way.

In his early twenties he traveled north, first to Holland and then on to Sweden. In the Netherlands he met and had a love affair with Alexandre Morus. The two young men both had literary aspirations and encouraged each other in efforts to write poetry--enjoying some success according to Huet in his memoirs. Indeed, Morus later went on to establish a modest reputation as a writer of Latin poetry.

Arriving in Sweden in 1652, Huet was received by Queen Christina, known as the "Minerva of the North" for her erudition and enthusiastic patronage of scholarship. She invited leading thinkers of the day to her court. Among them was René Descartes, who had died in Stockholm two years earlier. Huet would study his works closely and then come to oppose them emphatically.

In his memoirs Huet recalled a curious incident: Christina attempted to force her attentions on him, whereupon he responded with a witty Greek pun that he would never marry a woman. The well-educated king--Christina's official title--responded in the same language that neither would she ever marry a man. Indeed, her aversion to marriage was of long standing. It had caused considerable consternation at court and was an important factor in her shocking decision to abdicate in 1654.

Christina had amassed an extensive library that included a commentary on the gospel of Saint Matthew by the philosopher Origen. Huet obtained a copy--or possibly stole the original--and returned to France, where

he published his commentary on the text, *Origenis in sacrum scriptam commentaria* (Commentary of Origen on the holy scripture), in 1669.

Ever since his trip to Sweden, Huet had been establishing a network of contacts among the leading thinkers of Europe. Already a rising star himself, Huet solidified his reputation with the publication of the commentary.

In the meanwhile Huet was also enjoying a very successful career at the French court. King Louis XIV granted him a pension in 1663. In 1670 Huet became the tutor of the king's son, the *dauphin* Louis, a post for which he was exceptionally well qualified because of the breadth of his learning.

Huet had founded an academy of sciences in Caen in 1661. There he pursued his numerous interests, studying and writing on anatomy, zoology, astronomy, and chemistry, as well as mathematics.

Huet also maintained his love of literature and frequented the salons of the sophisticates of the *préciosité* school. His literary endeavors included collaborating with Madame de la Fayette, whom he appears to have assisted in the writing of *La princesse de Clèves* (1678), a masterpiece of French literature esteemed for its dramatic power and skillfully drawn characters.

Huet himself was the author of the novel *Le faux Ynca, ou Diane de Castro*, probably written around 1667 but only published posthumously in 1728. He also wrote *Traité de l'origine des Romans* (Treatise of the origin of novels) (1666), the first history of the novel in Europe.

Noted as a philologist, Huet not only wrote poetry in Latin and Greek but also made numerous translations of and commentaries on ancient texts. His projects included *Notae ad Anthologiam epigrammatum Graecorum* (Notes on an anthology of epigrams of the Greeks) (1700), an annotated collection of mostly pederastic verse.

Huet is most renowned for his writings of philosophy. In addition to the commentary on Origen he authored *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* (Against Cartesian philosophy) (1689) and *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei* (Questions concerning the relationship of reason and faith) (1690), in both of which he took issue with Descartes's famous dictum "Cogito, ergo sum," arguing for fideism, the belief that faith, provided by God, is the source of ultimate certainty, as opposed to human reason and observation, which are inevitably subject to error. His last and best known work, *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain* (Philosophical treatise of the weakness of the human spirit) (1723), was published posthumously.

For his contributions to French letters Huet was elected to the Académie française in 1674.

Huet stated in his memoirs that he had had an inclination toward a career in the church from his earliest years, but it was only in 1671 that he received minor orders. He was named abbot in 1678 and seven years later was chosen by the king to be bishop of Soissons. Pope Innocent XI, who, as Salazar puts it, "had no time for sodomites. . . nor for humanists who were too well versed in canon law," refused to confirm him in the post.

Under the succeeding pope, Alexander VIII, Huet was created bishop of Avranches in 1689. After ten years in that position he retired to the Jesuits' house in the Faubourg Saint-Jacques (a neighborhood that, as it happens, is now a center of Paris's gay community). Huet spent his last two decades in the Jesuits' facility, where, as Salazar states, "he held court, surrounded by younger men who seem to have helped him pass sweet old years, a seventeenth-century André Gide."

Huet died there on January 26, 1721. Throughout his life he had displayed both amazing intellectual curiosity and accomplishment and a keen instinct for social survival. His academic interests were among

the widest that can be imagined: his expertise encompassed literature, linguistics, philosophy, mathematics, and multifarious issues in the natural sciences (including inquiries into vampirism). He also managed to establish a network of friends in the court, the church, academia, and high society that allowed him to lead a rich and rewarding life as a man who would probably be called gay in contemporary terminology.

Huet bequeathed his library, consisting of over 8,000 volumes, many annotated in his own hand, to his order. The collection was subsequently bought by the Bibliothèque Nationale of France.

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