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Article abstract

Guillaume Bouchet’s Serées (1584, 1597, 1598) constitute an exercise in commonplacings framed as a collection of tales told around a Poitevin dining table. They engage in a form of quasi-philosophical thinking staged by and for an urban merchant community, the social world in which Bouchet operated. The second book opens with a discussion of frank speech. Writing amid civil war, Bouchet takes up this “chatouilleux” subject by turning to Plutarch, the classical authority on parrhesia (truth-telling). Recycling Plutarch, though, Bouchet does not ask how or when to speak frankly but instead examines responses to “franchise” both in the tales and from the storytellers themselves. Around Bouchet’s table, talk of frank speech leads to awkward silences and conversation grinding to a halt. This serée illuminates a context for parrhesia distinct from the familiar arena of nobles counselling autocrats or performing “liberté.” Here, philosophical self-knowledge slips uncomfortably into a feeling of social self-consciousness, revealing a distinct conception of the ethics and epistemologies surrounding frankness.

“Des responses et rencontres”: Frank Speech and Self-Knowledge in Guillaume Bouchet’s *Serées*

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*Guillaume Bouchet’s Serées (1584, 1597, 1598) constitute an exercise in commonplacing framed as a collection of tales told around a Poitevin dining table. They engage in a form of quasi-philosophical thinking staged by and for an urban merchant community, the social world in which Bouchet operated. The second book opens with a discussion of frank speech. Writing amid civil war, Bouchet takes up this “chatouilleux” subject by turning to Plutarch, the classical authority on parrhesia (truth-telling). Recycling Plutarch, though, Bouchet does not ask how or when to speak frankly but instead examines responses to “franchise” both in the tales and from the storytellers themselves. Around Bouchet’s table, talk of frank speech leads to awkward silences and conversation grinding to a halt. This *serée* illuminates a context for parrhesia distinct from the familiar arena of nobles counselling autocrats or performing “liberté.” Here, philosophical self-knowledge slips uncomfortably into a feeling of social self-consciousness, revealing a distinct conception of the ethics and epistemologies surrounding frankness.*

Les Serées de Guillaume Bouchet (1584, 1597, 1598) constituent un exercice d’utilisation de lieux communs, mis sous la forme d’un recueil de contes partagés au cours de dîners poitevins. Elles engagent une forme de réflexion quasi-philosophique mise en scène par et pour une communauté marchande urbaine, le monde social dans lequel Bouchet évoluait. Le second livre s’ouvre par une discussion sur la franchise. Pour écrire sur ce sujet « chatouilleux » en pleine guerre civile, Bouchet se tourne vers Plutarque, l’autorité classique sur la parrhèsia (dire la vérité). Cependant, en reprenant Plutarque, le dialogue de Bouchet ne demande pas comment ni quand il conviendrait de parler franchement, mais examine plutôt les réponses à la « franchise » tant dans les contes que de la part des conteurs eux-mêmes. Autour de la table de Bouchet, les discours sur la franchise débouchent sur des silences gênants et les conversations s’interrompent de manière abrupte. Cette Serée donne un contexte de réflexion sur la parrhèsia, qui n’est plus l’arène familière de nobles conseillant des autocrates ou faisant acte de « liberté ». Ici, la connaissance philosophique de soi glisse inconfortablement vers la prise de conscience de son statut social ; ce glissement révèle une conception distincte de l’éthique et de l’épistémologie autour de la franchise.

Have you heard the one about the Frenchman who spoke out of turn to the ambassador?

The first chapter of Guillaume Bouchet’s *Second livre des Serées*, printed posthumously in 1597, begins with a story.* Or, rather, it begins by telling us about a story:

Au commencement de ceste Serée, on conta une rencontre qu'un Seigneur de France fit à un Ambassadeur de feu Empereur Charles cinquieme: & de là toute la compagnie ne parla que des rencontres & responses des Seigneurs envers leurs subjects, & du peuple envers son superieur, qui sans flater, a parlé librement.¹

Writing “durant les troubles” of the French Wars of Religion, Bouchet (1514–94), printer and bookseller, “juge & consul” of merchants in Poitiers, authored three books of *contes et discours bigarrés*. Only the first was published in his lifetime, in 1584, containing twelve “evenings” or *serées* dedicated to different commonplace topics (wine, water, women, kings, and so on). He continued to work on his books of table talk until his death, and the two posthumous volumes, again covering twelve thematized “conversations,” were printed in 1597 and 1598 respectively. With “foy de marchand,” Bouchet gathered “des meilleures estoffes qui fussent en ma boutique” and offered it to his reader refashioned in a scene of friendship and intimate conviviality (“A Messieurs les marchands de la ville de Poitiers,” 1.a3r).² Distinct both from the noble frame narratives of Marguerite de Navarre and Bocaccio, structured around escape from the city, and from the genre of the philosophical dialogue (though with clear debts to the symposiac tradition, particularly as it is found in Plutarch), Bouchet’s *Serées* purport to record after-dinner conversations between friends who, after

¹ I would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for supporting this research as part of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship.

1. “Des responses & rencontres des Seigneurs à leurs subjects, & des subjects à leurs Seigneurs,” *Second livre des Serées* [...] *Reveu & corrigé de nouveau par l’Auteur* (Paris: Jeremie Perier, 1608), fol. 1r. First printed in 1597. References to book 1, first printed in 1584, are to the 1608 revised edition, *Premier livre des Serées* [...] *Reveu & augmenté par L’Auteur* (Paris: Jeremie Perier, 1608). Hereafter cited in the text by book and folio number.

2. On Bouchet’s life and business as printer and bookseller, see André Janier, *Les Serées (1584-1597-1598) du libraire-imprimeur Guillaume Bouchet (1514-1594)* (Paris: Champion, 2006), 23–55. On “contes et discours bigarrés” in late sixteenth-century France, see in the first instance the influential study by G. A. Pérouse, *Nouvelles françaises du XVIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1977), chapter 17 (372–93) of which is dedicated to Bouchet’s *Serées*; and, more recently, Frank Lestringant, ed., *Contes et discours bigarrés* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011), doi.org/10.14375/NP.9782840507482. This phrase, used to describe a genre flourishing around the 1580s, alludes to a 1610 re-edition of Jean Dagoneau de Cholières’s *Les Matinées* (1585) and *Les Apresdisnées* (1586), titled *Contes et discours bigarrez du sieur de Cholieres, desduits en neuf matinées et és apres-disnées du carnaval*.

retiring from a day’s work, take turns playing host.³ The *serée* (“soirée”) is not, as he says in a dedicatory epistle, “une Academie,” one of those “assemblees [...] toute composees de Philosophes,” but “une compagnie [de] voisins & amis qui vivent en familiers, [...] en toute franchise” (“A Monsieur, Monsieur de la Clyelle,” 2.a3v). It is within this context of “franchise” that Bouchet’s diners tell stories and jokes, rehearsing commonplaces and commonplace tales, with each evening dedicated to a principal theme or subject.⁴

The theme for this thirteenth evening, opening the second book, mirrors that which closed the first: where book 1 concludes with a discussion of “babillards & causeurs,” book 2 opens with a tale of someone speaking out of turn.⁵ As Neil Kenny has noted, Bouchet introduces his exercises in commonplacing, which is to say his diners’ evening conversations, with explicit reference to the “contingent, everyday events” that occasion them.⁶ In this first chapter of book 2, the event that gets the group telling stories is itself the

3. On the contrast with noble frame-narratives and philosophical “propos de table,” see Marie-Claire Thomine, “Des ‘Propos de table?’,” *Contes et discours bigarrés*, 209–24. Self-knowledge and frank speech, which I suggest are central to Bouchet’s thirteenth *serée*, are prominent themes in Greek symposiac works and this is especially true of Plutarch’s “Dinner of the Seven Wise Men,” which considers the Delphic commandment to “know thyself” framed in a convivial discussion between ancient sages, and his “Table Talks,” a work much more like the *Serées*, ostensibly recording learned dinner conversation. See Jason König, “Self-Promotion and Self-Effacement in Plutarch’s *Table Talk*,” in *The Philosopher’s Banquet: Plutarch’s Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*, ed. Frieda Klotz and Katerina Oikonomopoulou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 179–203. This relationship is evident also in Plato’s *Symposium*, albeit less explicitly, in which frank, friendly dialogue underpins (self-)knowledge. On this, see Eric Sanday, “Self-Knowledge in Plato’s *Symposium*,” in *Knowledge and Ignorance of Self in Platonic Philosophy*, ed. James M. Ambury and Andy German (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 186–205, doi.org/10.1017/9781316877081.

4. For the classical and early modern sources for Bouchet’s commonplaces, see part 2 of Janier, *Les Serées (1584-1597-1598)*.

5. See Emily Butterworth, *The Unbridled Tongue: Babble and Gossip in Renaissance France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199662302.001.0001. Butterworth notes how the concluding chapter to the first book “signals its own end—and perhaps that of the genre [of banquet literature]—with praise of silence” (26–29, 26).

6. Neil Kenny, “The Stench of Knowledge: The *Vilain Dreamer* in *Les Serées* by Guillaume Bouchet,” *EMFS* 39.2 (2017): 184–93, doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2017.1380571; “‘Ce qui occasionna ceste Serée fut...’: les ‘causes’ du savoir dans les *Serées* de Guillaume Bouchet,” *Contes et discours bigarrés*, 103–16. Kenny argues that this emphasis on “occasions” responds to a “souci épistémologique plus que documentaire” (“Ce qui occasionna ceste Serée fut...,” 109).

telling of a story. This story prompts an outflow of tales about frank speech, of *rencontres*—encounters (fortuitous, accidental, perhaps confrontational) but also witticisms—in which someone “sans flater, a parlé librement.”⁷

Bouchet's treatment of frank speech and his attention to moments of confrontation both in the stories and between the storytellers around the dinner table offer a revealing perspective on a dominating concern in late sixteenth-century France. Truth-telling, frank speech, and navigating conflict became focal points for literary-philosophical writing across a range of genres, with authors and readers grinding an equally broad range of philosophical, political, and religious axes.⁸ Until recently, Bouchet's *Serées* have been read as a bourgeois digest of humanist encyclopaedism, adapted for a less learned, aspirational market; as a commonplace book, a collection of textual scraps in want of an author; or as a Montaignian *essai*-in-waiting, struggling to shake off the conceit of a frame narrative.⁹ My aim is not to make the case for Bouchet as a literary figure, a philosopher, or a humanist. But the *Serées* do reveal a way of thinking about frank speech that has not hitherto been considered in scholarship on early modern truth-telling. They are particularly revealing when read in light of *parrhesia*, that form of truth-telling aligned, as Foucault showed,

7. On the polysemy and “energie” of the term “rencontre” in sixteenth-century French, see Olivier Guerrier, *Rencontre et reconnaissance. Les Essais ou le jeu du hazard et de la vérité* (Paris: Garnier, 2016), 21–28, and Nicolas Kiès, *Rencontrer en devisant: La conversation facétieuse dans les recueils bigarrés des années 1580 (Du Fail, Cholières, Bouchet)* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015). For Kiès, Bouchet's “rencontres” and “facéties” “jouent un rôle structurant: elles contribuent à ranimer indéfiniment les discussions et déploient une parole qualitativement singulière, fondée sur les jeux de mots, les incongruités et les décrochages logiques” (“Position de thèse,” 5). For the militaristic, combative undertones of this term, see Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611): “A hap, or adventure; also, a meeting, or incounter (as of adverse troopes [...]) an accidentall getting, obtaining, or lighting upon; also, an occurrence; also, an apt or unpremeditated jeast, conceit, wittie saying.” The combative and the comic senses are also seen coming together in Robert Estienne's entry for “jacio” in his *Dictionarium latinogallicum* (Paris: Charles Estienne, 1552): “Iacere et mittere ridiculum. Cic. Dire quelque parole pour rire, Rencontrer sur aucun pour rire.”

8. On the limits of compassion and toleration in the aftermath of the French Wars of Religion, key notions related to the management of frank speech in a period of conflict, see Katherine Ibbett, *Compassion's Edge: Fellow-Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), doi.org/10.9783/9780812294569.

9. See Hope Glidden, *The Storyteller as Humanist: The Serées of Guillaume Bouchet* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1981); Michel Jeanneret, *Des mets et des mots: banquets et propos de table à la Renaissance* (Paris: Corti, 1987), 177; Pérouse, 370.

with attention to, practices of, and knowledge of one’s self.¹⁰ Bouchet’s form, his framing of his “propos de table” as a discussion not between philosophers or nobles but between friends, his re-use of common textual stock along with his attention to how these old jokes are received come together to uncover a context for truth-telling different from that of the royal court. Away from the archetypal setting for *parrhesia*, in which early modern treatises explore how best to counsel a prince or how to prove oneself—and to detect in one’s circle—a true friend and not a flatterer, Bouchet’s *Serées* direct us towards a model of truth-telling adapted for an age of conflict, testing the limits of “amitié” and asking how frank encounters with another might structure different encounters with oneself, bearing distinct epistemologies and ethics.

I will return to the relationships between Bouchet’s presentation of frank speech and its contemporary and classical parallels shortly. First, though, like Bouchet himself, I have introduced a joke only to leave it hanging. What was that story, then, about the French lord who spoke “librement” to the ambassador? Bouchet doesn’t tell us.¹¹

Or la rencontre qui ocasiona ceste Seree, encores qu’elle fut de pareil à pareil, si est-ce que le *somma & dicterium* [jibe and witticism] s’adresse à un grand Prince, & à tout son peuple: parquoy ayant grand difference entre la parole & l’écriture, de peur de desplaire à personne, les ennemis pouvans venir amis, je me passeray pour ceste fois d’escrire la rencontre, un peu aigre & poignante, qui fut dite toute la premiere. (2.1v).

Bouchet’s discussion of “la liberté de parler” is marked from the outset not by talk and chatter but by reservation and the watching of words—by things left unsaid (lessons seem to have been learned from the previous *serée* dedicated to instructive tales of people who speak too much). The unheard *bon mot*

10. On *parrhesia*, see Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France between 1981 and 1984: *L’Herméneutique du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), and *Le Courage de la vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

11. This is a rare but not unique instance of Bouchet concealing the evening’s “occasion.” See *Troisième livre des Serées* (Rouen: Robert Valentin, 1608), 1r: “Je ne diray point qui fut l’occasion qu’en ceste Seree on ne parla que des gens de guerre, veu que du temps de nos seditions civiles (durant lesquelles ces Serees ont esté faites) il ni avoit heure au jour qu’on n’entendit parler de leurs deportemens.” See Kenny, “Ce qui ocasiona ceste Serée fut...,” 112.

is, moreover, between social equals, mirroring—albeit at a different rung on the social ladder—the dinner-club of “voisins & amis.” As Bouchet tells us in his opening sentence, this story of “franchise” between equals serves as a springboard for tales concerning “Seigneurs” and “leurs subjects,” offering some reassuring distance between the world of comic outspokenness and the environment of “amitié” occupied by Bouchet’s diners.

Most significantly, though, the decision not to tell the rest of the story is marked also by a care for how frank speech, and tales about frank speech, might be received. The false start is excused on the grounds that Bouchet doesn’t want to offend anyone, not even his enemies, but it is the false start, the story that isn’t told, that affords the author an opportunity to address more broadly the responses he expects from readers encountering his tales of “franchise.” Between introducing the story and informing us of his decision not to retell it, he notes how the subject of the evening’s discussion—along with the context of the tale and its telling—“est un peu chatouilleux, & [...] nous sommes en un temps qu’on n’aime pas à ouïr la verité” (2.1r–v). Navigating a sensitive issue in a fractious society, he works to reassure his reader—while distributing any potential blame among his fellow (fictional) diners: “là où nous pensions employer la Seree à des rencontres modernes, & de nostre temps, la plus part aima mieux renouveler les anciennes responses.” These, he says, let us judge “la liberté de parler d’un temps à l’autre” (2.1v). In dodging offense, though, Bouchet sees himself running into another problem: “Que si ces rencontres vous faschent pour leur antiquité, & pour estre communes, ne les lisez point: que si vous voulez les sçavoir, ne vous en prenez pas à moy, qui fidellement les ay redigees, mais à ceux qui les ont dites.” In any case, he admits, “à fin qu’on n’y soit trompé,” that there will be contemporary stories “meslees avec les anciennes” (2.1v). Amid these concerns about giving offense, his tale about the Frenchman and the ambassador works to elicit a quite different response: introduced only to be left hanging, returned to after a series of caveats with a phrase that promises only to disappoint (“Or la rencontre qui occasionna ceste Seree [...]”), this story is deliberately tantalizing, hinting towards gossip and intrigue while keeping us out of the loop.

Anticipating his readers’ affective responses, practising what we might want to call “mind-reading,” Bouchet’s introduction reveals a concern centred on that “grande difference entre la parole & l’écriture.” Here, much more than elsewhere in the *Serées*, we feel the precarity of our status not as participants

in, but as observers of, this “banquet d’amis.” Bouchet is decidedly, ironically cagey in introducing “la liberté de parler”: he grapples with the distance between himself and his reader, and with the unknowability of the responses his writing will provoke. This is an introduction to frank speech concerned overwhelmingly with not speaking and with the problems of knowing how, if one does speak, someone will react—a problem compounded for Bouchet by the one-way medium of addressing an unknown reader. In his prefatory “Discours sur les Serées,” he writes: “Nous pratiquons l’institution de Lycurge [...], Nulle parole ne sorte par icy” (1.e1v). In opening his chapter on frankness, Bouchet seems to be asking himself how far this “nous,” and the relationships of friendship and “franchise” it describes, should be understood to include the reader.

Recent scholarship has given significant attention to the place of frank speech in early modern Europe, and there has been a similar focus on related concepts, relationships, and practices that structure civil society and toleration.¹² In the French context, studies of early modern *parrhesia* have underscored Montaigne’s *conférence* as “a truth-telling contract with the reader” in which the essayist guarantees a harmony of *bios* and *logos*; they have unpicked the weaving of voluntary *parrhesia* and shameful confession in the *Essais*, considered Montaigne’s Socratic “naïfveté,” and traced the adoption of “licence” as a rhetorical guise in Ronsard.¹³ More broadly, scholarship has focused on early modern concerns regarding how best to speak frankly, often taking readings of Plutarch’s “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend” as a site in which early moderns learned and taught the limits of confrontation and argumentation.¹⁴ Renaissance mirrors for princes and, as we will see, Plutarch’s

12. In addition to Ibbett’s *Compassion’s Edge*, cited above, see Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.4159/9780674972728.

13. Reinier Leushuis, “Montaigne *Parrhesiastes*: Foucault’s Fearless Speech and Truth-Telling in the *Essays*,” in *Montaigne after Theory / Theory after Montaigne*, ed. Zahi Zalloua (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 100–21, 115; Virginia Krause, “Confession or *Parrhesia*? Foucault after Montaigne,” *Montaigne after Theory / Theory after Montaigne*, 142–60; Guerrier, 180–92; Butterworth, *The Unbridled Tongue*, 101–26.

14. See, for instance, David Colclough, *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Scott Francis, “The Discussion as Joust: *Parrhesia* and Friendly Antagonism in Plutarch and Montaigne,” *The Comparatist* 37 (2013), 122–37, doi.org/10.1353/com.2013.0028;

treatise are framed for a noble receiver of advice, though their focus lies not with how to take criticism as much as from whom to take it; and it is the character or disposition of the truth-teller, not the listener, that must be shaped appropriately.¹⁵ These studies have helped to illuminate an early modern attention to the practice of truth-telling, focusing on the truth-teller speaking freely as a counsellor to an autocratic prince or as a noble agent, indexing their “liberté.”¹⁶

Bouchet’s *Serées* offer us a distinct perspective, and not only on account of their distance from noble practices of counselling and performing “franchise.” In what follows, I want to suggest that Bouchet’s treatment of frank speech in this chapter is concerned not with the proper practice of *parrhesia*—not with commonplace themes of how best to offer frank counsel or how to distinguish between moderate, excessive, and feigned freedom of expression—but rather with responses to the “poignant” language of those who speak freely.¹⁷ Put another way, Bouchet’s dialogue centres on how people feel when confronted with frank speech and how they act in response to both that confrontation and the feelings it provokes. The focus on responses to “franc-parler” is not limited to responses within the stories shared at the dining table but attends closely to how the diners respond themselves and, as we have already seen, Bouchet is careful to predict and anticipate the responses of the reader. What emerges is a thinking through of a distinct ethics surrounding speech and conviviality along

Annalisa Ceron, “How to Advise the Prince: Three Renaissance Forms of Plutarchan *Parrhesia*,” *History of Political Thought* 38.2 (2017): 239–66.

15. Ceron notes, for instance, that Erasmus, Thomas Elyot, and Castiglione follow Plutarch not only in asking whom the prince should listen to but also in examining the character of the good counsellor (Ceron, 239).

16. On “liberté” and “franchise” in Montaigne’s *persona* as a free, noble agent, see Warren Boutcher, *The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1:206–10, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198123743.001.0001. On *parrhesia* as the form of “courageous” speech required for the counselling of autocratic kings, see Foucault’s study of “*parrêsia* politique,” *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*.

17. On receiving frank criticism in early modern France, see studies of Béroalde de Verville by Emily Butterworth, *Poisoned Words: Slander and Satire in Early Modern France* (London: Legenda, 2006), 47–50, and Neil Kenny, “‘Car le nom mesme de libéralité sonne liberté’: les contextes sociaux et économiques du savoir chez Béroalde de Verville,” in *Béroalde de Verville, 1556–1626* (Paris: Presses de l’école normale supérieure, 1996), 7–24.

with a similarly reworked understanding of the relationship between *parrhesia* and knowledge of oneself.

In a context of civil war in which, as Montaigne noted, the enemy is indistinguishable from the friend, the question of how best to speak frankly, how and when to speak “courageously” in Foucault’s terms, was understandably a pressing one.¹⁸ But so too was the question of how to respond to frank criticism and to those who speak with perhaps a little too much “liberté.” Bouchet’s dialogue reveals one early modern attempt to think through this second question and one, notably, that responds not only to its social-political moment but also to those key texts and ways of thinking about *parrhesia* with which we are more familiar: Bouchet’s attention to being on the receiving end of “franchise” is shaped by a careful reading and re-use of Plutarch. It is, I suggest, in re-reading Plutarch, and in responding in his particular way to the problem of frank speech, that Bouchet developed a distinct conception of *parrhesia*’s constant partner: self-knowledge.

“Cognoy toy mesme”: reading frank speech in Plutarch

Plutarch’s essay on flattery and frank speech, “Comment on pourra discerner le flatteur d’avec l’amy,” translated by Jacques Amyot and printed in his 1572 *Œuvres morales et meslées de Plutarque*, is evidently present in Bouchet’s thinking.¹⁹ Towards the end of the evening’s conversation, Bouchet’s diners affirm that princes must avoid the “meschanceté & malice des flatteurs,” only for someone to echo Plutarch directly: “Mais s’il est mal-aisé, demanda quelqu’un, de pouvoir discerner l’amy du flatteur, le flatteur estant un doux ennemy?” (2.18r–v). But Bouchet draws also on another Plutarchan opusculum, one that is

18. “Le pis de ces guerres, c’est que les cartes sont si meslées, vostre ennemy n’estant distingué d’avec vous de aucune marque apparente, ny de langage, ny de port, nourry en mesmes loix, meurs et mesme air, qu’il est mal-aisé d’y éviter confusion et desordre.” In Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), 2.5.366.

19. Though Bouchet is keen to differentiate his *serées* from symposiac literature, Plutarch’s “Propos de table” and “Banquet des sept Sages” certainly shaped the form of this French book of table talk. André Janier’s work on Bouchet’s sources shows that Plutarch is Bouchet’s most frequently cited Greek author, *Les Serées (1584–1597–1598)*, 349–50. On Plutarch’s symposiac literature, see *The Philosopher’s Banquet: Plutarch’s Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*, ed. Frieda Klotz and Katerina Oikonomopoulou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

less frequently considered in light of *parrhesia*, “Comment on pourra recevoir utilité de ses ennemis,” a much shorter work, only a quarter of the length of the essay on flattery, and one that offers a significantly different perspective on “franchise.” Before turning to consider Bouchet in detail, then, I want to look briefly at how Plutarch establishes the relationships between frankness and self-knowledge in these two texts, for it is in response to this that Bouchet presents his diners learning how to live together.

Plutarch’s discourse on flattery is concerned principally with the reading of character. We are blind to ourselves, unable to read our own character on account of “l’Amour de soy-mesme”: “nul ne peult estre juste & non favorable juge de soy-mesme,” he writes at the beginning, “car l’amant est ordinairement aveugle à l’endroit de ce qu’il aime.”²⁰ Frank speech, *parrhesia*, is the medicine Plutarch prescribes to cure this ailment: “[la] parole mordante, & [...] liberté autorisée” of the “vray amy” pierce this blindness, allowing for correction (43v).²¹

Twice, first at the beginning and then just after the half-way point of the essay, Plutarch invokes Apollo and his commandment to “know thyself.” “[I] fault estimer,” he writes in the first instance, “que le flatteur doncques est enemy des Dieux, & principalement d’Apollo, pource qu’il est tousjours contraire à cestuy sien precepte, Cognoy toy mesme” (40r). The flatterer keeps us from knowing ourselves, Plutarch tells us, not only by pandering to our baser desires but by imitating the reprimands that one receives—or ought to receive—from a proper friend, “tellement qu’[on] ignore les biens & les maux qui sont en soy” (40r). The question, then, is that of the title: how can you tell the difference between feigned “franchise” and the real thing? When Plutarch returns to Apollo’s commandment, though, he flips the perspective, no longer addressing the recipient of frank speech, attempting to distinguish the true friend from the flatterer, but the friend himself. This return to Apollo acts as something of a conclusion—it is followed, notably, by a second address to “Amy Philopappus,” the opusculé’s addressee—though Plutarch’s argument in this long, circuitous

20. Plutarch, “Comment on pourra discerner le flatteur d’avec l’amy,” *Œuvres morales et meslees de Plutarque*, trans. Jacques Amyot (Paris: Vascosan, 1572), 40r. Hereafter cited in the text; all references to Plutarch are to this edition.

21. The pharmacological metaphor is Plutarch’s: where the flatterer and the friend both have a “bonne odeur,” the former is only “une huyle de parfum,” the latter “quelque drogue de medecine” (43v).

sentence seems to be the inverse of what he has spent most of his essay expounding:

C’est pourquoy dès l’entree de ce discours nous avons admonesté [...] de chasser arriere d’eulx l’amour & l’opinion de soy-mesme, car ceste presumption là nous flattant premierement nous mesmes au-dedans, nous rend plus tendres & plus faciles aux flatteurs de dehors [...]: [...] si obeissans au dieu Apollo [...], qui nous commande de nous cognoistre nous mesmes, nous allions rechercher nostre nature, nostre institution, & nostre nourriture quand nous y trouverions infinies defectuositez [...], nous ne nous abandonnerions pas ainsi facilement aux flatteurs. (50r)

Where Plutarch began by arguing that we need someone to speak to us frankly so that we might know ourselves, here we find that, if we are to know who is speaking frankly (and whose “franchise” is toothless but all the more dangerous for it), then we must look within ourselves.

With this shift in his approach to the relationship between *parrhesia* and self-knowledge, Plutarch’s discourse undertakes a further shift: in what remains of his discussion, his advice is directed at the true friend, at those “qui osent librement & franchement parler à leurs amis” (50r). But while the discourse shifts perspective, its focus remains on the actions, customs, and disposition of the speaker. Where Plutarch began by counselling the recipient of frank speech to study his interlocutor’s character, to consider “s’il y a égalité uniforme en ses intentions & actions” (41v), he advises the *parrhesiastes* to act like the surgeon, applying “grande dextérité, netteté, & propreté en son fait” (51r). Asking “[e]n quelles occurrences doncques est ce, que le vray amy doit estre vehement” (52v), how this true friend should moderate or apply emotion, Plutarch instructs him to manipulate his own affective state in order to control that of his interlocutor: “l’oeil enflammé ne reçoit une claire lumiere, ny l’ame passionnee un parler franc” (54r). In the first half of the essay, the recipient reads the speaker’s character because they cannot read their own, while in the second, the speaker reads the recipient so that they might adjust their own character: at every stage, it is the action and character of the speaker, the *parrhesiastes*, that is prioritized as the site for examination and judgment as appropriate or not. The “vray amy” must apply anger and reproach, gentleness and flexibility, “quand l’occasion se presente” (52v):

il faut user de grande prudence & de grande circonspection à faire remonstrances & parler librement à ses amis [...]: celui qui aura fait la remonstrance dextrement, apres avoir donné le coup de la pointure ou morsure, ne s'en fuira pas incontinent, ains [...] adoucira & resjouira celui qu'il aura contristé (55v).²²

Plutarch's parrhesiasts, then, find themselves in a game of mind-reading in which their actions are read as evidence of authenticity and in which they anticipate the affective state of their interlocutor so that they might adjust their own. This is a discourse of two halves, considering in turn each participant in this reciprocal mind-reading, and yet it aligns frank speech with emotion and self-knowledge such that the parrhesiasts take responsibility for both themselves and their addressees.

Plutarch's other discourse related to this subject, "Comment on pourra recevoir utilité de ses ennemis," though ostensibly not about the rough and tumble of frank speech between friends but about insults from enemies, nevertheless draws a line of equivalence between these two ways of speaking: "Et pource que maintenant l'amitié a la voix fort gresle & foible à remonstrer franchement à son amy, & qu'au contraire la flatterie d'icelle est grande babillarde à louer, & muette à reprendre, il nous reste d'ouir la verité de noz faicts par la bouche de noz ennemis" (110v–11r). Here, though, in contrast to the discourse on flattery, the responsibility for moderation and control both of feeling and action lies with the recipient of frank speech: "si ton ennemy t'injure, en t'appellant ignorant, augmente ton labeur, & prens plus de peine à estudier: s'il t'appelle couard, excite la vigueur de ton courage & te montre plus homme: s'il t'appelle luxurieux ou paillard, efface de ton ame s'il y a aucune trace cachee de volupté" (110v). Here, the games of mind-reading, of reading character and deciphering intention, have vanished and what remains is a self-centred response to Xenophon's saying, "que l'homme prudent & sage sçait tirer profit & utilité de ses ennemis" (109r).

Where the discourse on flattery stages the searching of other peoples' souls, here Plutarch compels us to turn inwards: "si d'aventure il t'eschappe de luy dire quelque injure, donne toy bien garde d'approcher puis apres aucunement des vices que tu luy reproches en l'injuriant: entre dedans de ta conscience,

22. On "occasion" (*kairos*), see Joanne Paul, "The Use of *Kairos* in Renaissance Political Philosophy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 67.1 (2014): 43–78, doi.org/10.1086/676152.

considere s’il y a rien de pourry, de gasté & de vicié en ton ame” (110r). It is in this context of self-study that Plutarch turns once again to Apollo: “car il semble qu’Apollo n’adresse à personne tant cestuy sien commandement, cognoy toy-mesme, qu’à celuy qui veult blasmer ou injurier autruy, de peur qu’il ne leur adviene qu’en disant à autruy ce qu’ils veulent, ils oyent qu’autruy leur die ce qu’ils ne veulent pas” (110v). Confronted by frank truths from not a friend but an enemy, Plutarch impels us to draw on precisely that self-knowledge which is elsewhere described as the product of “franchise” and “franc-parler.” Rather than respond in kind to our critics, Plutarch would have us improve ourselves such that we might be beyond reproach, avoiding hypocrisy by being better than those who attack us and whom we might attack in return.²³

Across these two texts, the invocations of Apollo’s “know thyself” pull at the relationship between frankness and self-knowledge, proposing shifting understandings of how, and how much, we might be able to understand ourselves, how clearly we might be able to read our own character and that of our interlocutor, and how we might control feelings—our own and those of others—of self-love, offense, and injury. In these different contexts, though, it remains the case that social interaction is entwined propaedeutically with introspection and with a turning inwards as part of a practice of philosophical, ethical self-study.

“Doux & modeste”: responding to frank speech

How, then, might we situate Bouchet’s relaxed, free-flowing discussion in relation to this complex and circular if not contradictory argument that self-knowledge is both the product and the touchstone of frankness; a model in which the true friend is mimicked by the flatterer but readily replaced by the enemy? And what role might be played by these moral treatises, advocating deliberate practices of philosophical self-care, in a work that takes pains

23. This lesson is broadly compatible with Christian ethics. While Bouchet does not make explicit use of the New Testament in his twelfth *serée*, comic “responses” from certain popes and cardinals provide material for a (relatively small) number of Bouchet’s jokes (see 2.5v–6v). Bouchet’s focus, though, is secular and his comic tales about churchmen lack the polemic bite of a work like Henri Estienne’s *Apologie pour Hérodote*. On comic “rencontres” in Estienne, see Bénédicte Badou, “Les ‘contes pour rire’ dans l’*Apologie pour Hérodote*,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 57.2 (1995): 321–44.

to present itself as non-philosophical? What happens when discourses on *parrhesia* are translated into a scene of convivial, friendly storytelling?

Bouchet's introduction to this *serée*, as we have already seen, primes us to consider the limits of "amitié" and "franchise" even in the context of telling tales around the dinner table. After the first story, though, the one that is kept from us, "on se va mettre sur d'autres, pour monstrier qu'il y a des Seigneurs qui ont enduré de leurs gens des choses qu'il facherait bien à une personne privée de les endurer: tant ils ont esté doux & modeste" (2.2r). As promised, Bouchet's diners turn to stories from antiquity that stage exemplary characters enduring frank criticisms with softness, pliancy, or clemency—stories in which exemplary figures respond to criticism without passion. We hear, by way of opening, that Philip of Macedon resisted calls to expel a critical courtier, "disant qu'il valoit mieux que cestuy-cy dist mal de luy avec peu de gens, que par tout où il iroit" (2.2r).²⁴ Philip's political pragmatism, though, is described not in terms of utility but as an ethical virtue: "ce mesme Roy Philippes," Bouchet continues, "parla de mesme *modestie*" (my emphasis), with moderation and temperance, when told that the Greeks, for whom he had done so much, spoke ill of him. "Regardez qu'ils feroient," he replied, "si je leur faisois du mal" (2.2r).

Bouchet's companions continue telling stories of this sort, stressing the emotional temperance and pliancy, the "softness," of ancient leaders. We see this characteristic being tested and defined as they turn to a story about Agathocles, tyrant of Syracuse, "[qui] s'estoit monstré plus rude" when, while besieging a city, its inhabitants heckled him, asking how and when he would pay his soldiers (2v). "Quand j'auray prins vostre ville," he says, before taking them prisoner, selling them into slavery, and warning them not to criticize him again lest he tell their new masters. In this story, we see Bouchet distinguishing between the witty response of Philip, a way of responding that is "doux & modeste" and characterized by its use of temperance to side-step conflict, and,

24. Philippe de Lajarte has compared Bouchet's treatment of this commonplace with that of Montaigne (1.12.45), suggesting that "les éléments que le discours montaignien avait [...] investis d'une fonction épistémologique, se trouvent dans *Les Serées* ramenés à leur existence brute de matériaux, de simples données," in "'Pravus nunc vobis videor, quia vobis jam non intelligor': Le dessein de Guillaume Bouchet dans *Les Serées*," *Contes et discours bigarrés*, 89–101, 94. This is certainly the case and is true also for other instances in which Bouchet borrows from Montaigne (see, for instance, the point that torture is "plustost un essay de patience que de verité," 2.61v; Montaigne, 2.5.368–69). As I hope to show, though, Bouchet's framing of these "simples données" affords an exploratory and critical way of thinking.

on the other hand, a way of responding that is “rude,” harsh, and punitive. It is a story, notably, that comes from Plutarch but, in Bouchet’s retelling, Agathocles’s way of responding “sans s’esmouvoir [et] tout doucement” (Plutarch, “Les dictz notables des anciens roys, princes, et grands Capitaines,” 190v) is stripped of its softness. In reworking this story, judging the actions and character it describes, Bouchet draws a distinction between those whose gentleness allows them to accommodate and absorb the violence of criticism and those who, like Agathocles, are unmoved by insults, provided they have opportunity to respond in kind and gain the upper hand.²⁵

Bouchet rattles through this first handful of stories reasonably quickly: there is little by way of development and none of the detail describing the conversation itself which is found at other points in the *Serées*, the stories being joined together by a summary overview (“Il fut dit que [...]. Et que [...]. On adjousta que [...]). It seems, then, that Bouchet is here compiling a collection of exemplary anecdotes, moments from history in which we might learn how to act “modestly,” gently and with temperance, in the face of criticism. These are stories not of the proper practice of *parrhesia*, of the skill of the *parrhesiastes* confronting an interlocutor, but of character and *mœurs* that dissolve tension—or rather skirt around it, avoiding conflict without erasing it.

The exemplary value of these tales for Bouchet, his diners, and his readers responds clearly to their social and political moment. A collection of such stories is perhaps exactly what we might have expected, given Bouchet’s prefatory letters both to this volume and its predecessor in which he compares his current age with the “ancienne preud’homie du bon vieux temps & simplicité de nos peres [...], corrompue par le malheur des guerres civiles” (“A Messieurs les marchands de la ville de Poitiers,” 1.a2r). Living in a “saison [...] si longue & fascheuse,” he notes how his writing, his portrayal of community and conviviality, might console his readers: “& [...] si ce n’est pour les resjouir & faire adoucir le temps, ce sera peut estre pour les remettre en souvenance de la prosperité dont ils ont jouy tant qu’ils ont vescu en paix, & leur faire regretter

25. Notably a number of the stories that open this chapter present “gentle” responses not to direct frank speech but to reports of what people have said, further removing the presence of conflict and confrontation. Note, however, that the reporting of criticism, its circulation, may sharpen its effect. See Bouchet’s story, below, about the man from Poitiers concerned that someone may have heard him being mocked.

le passé” (“A Monsieur, Monsieur de La Clyelle,” 2.a4r).²⁶ Bouchet’s stories, taken from the lives of military figures, detailing responses to inflammatory speech defined not, as was the case with Agathocles, by reciprocal roughness, violence, and conflict but by softness and gentleness, seem to be practising a conventional form of commonplacing, identifying character models and compiling ethical *exempla* to didactic ends.

“Un grand monsieur de nostre ville”: bringing frank speech closer to home

Bouchet’s diners, however, seem not to be on board with this objective: “Ceux de la Serée se faschoient de ces rencontres tant de fois contez, quand quelqu’un s’avança de mettre en avant une rencontre moderne” (2.3r). As Bérengère Basset has argued, Bouchet distinguishes, elsewhere in his *Serées*, between novelty and newness: “les vieux contes,” he writes, “peuvent estre nouveaux à ceux qui ne les ont point ouïs, & les nouveaux vieux à ceux qui desja les sçavent” (2.28r–v). Basset notes how this “caractère ancien ou moderne” is not intrinsic to the tales themselves but is found in their reception.²⁷

Bouchet’s frame narrative is slight: his dining partners have little that characterizes them as individuals and the only names that emerge among references to “un de la Serée” and “un autre” are Rabelaisian ciphers: “une Fesse-tonduë” (“A bawdie companion, a notable whipster”) or “un plaisant Sybilot” (“an asse, doults, fop, ideot, ninnie”).²⁸ The *Serées* do not stage the sort

26. On memory and forgetting in the context of the Wars of Religion, and particularly the policy of “oubliance,” see Andrea Frisch, *Forgetting Differences: Tragedy, Historiography, and The French Wars of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748694396.001.0001.

27. Bérengère Basset, “Et nugae seria ducunt’: l’anecdote plutarquienne dans *Les Serées* de Guillaume Bouchet,” *Réforme, Humanisme, Renaissance* 74 (2012): 71–90, 77, doi.org/10.3406/rhren.2012.3163.

28. English definitions taken from Randle Cotgrave’s *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*. On anonymity and individuation in the *Serées*, see Neil Kenny, “Lesquels banquets ... ont esté nommez ... des Latins *Sodalitates*’: Discussing Dreams over Dinner in Guillaume Bouchet’s *Serées*,” *Sodalitas litteratorum: Etudes à la mémoire de/Studies in memory of Philip Ford*, ed. Ingrid A. R. De Smet and Paul White (Geneva: Droz, 2019), 259–74. Here, Kenny notes that “by making each *Serée* become gradually more anonymized, Bouchet also seems to be making the point that many other unknown interlocutors could potentially have had a *different* conversation about the topic in hand” (264). Kenny goes on to stress, however, that anonymity is not opposed to the social: “for Bouchet, the very conditions of knowledge are social and interpersonal in character” (265).

of dialogue scenes such as we find in Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron* in which distinct characters interact with clearly demarcated speech. And yet careful attention to these often brief depictions of the storytelling scene reveals significant frames for Bouchet’s recycled commonplaces and makes legible his own critical exploration of the ideas at hand; to take the image developed in the prefatory epistle to book 1, this is common stock, but it is delicately, subtly arranged in his boutique.

In this thirteenth *serée*, Bouchet’s companions are drawn to stories that are not simply new to them but that are also “modern,” contemporary. Their frustration or boredom with the old stories—which are doubly old, ancient and worn-out—is highlighted by Bouchet explicitly, expressing his own boredom perhaps but also directing and anticipating the response of the reader. In this context of friendly and convivial “franchise,” the reader is encouraged to want something more exciting than moral lessons of ideal *sophrosyne*.²⁹ This movement towards the modern is not, to begin with at least, a shift towards specific, contemporary figures: they tell tales of “un grand Seigneur Breton,” “[un] cuisinier,” “un Prince de France” and his “serviteurs.” The stories themselves are much the same as those taken from antiquity, detailing the gentleness of character with which *seigneur* after *seigneur* “ne se fascha point d’une poignante replique,” “ne se fascha nullement,” and “ne se fit que rire” (2.3r–v). Having turned closer to home, the boredom dissipates, “[c]hacun s’efforçant d’apporter sa rencontre,” and they turn back to antiquity only when they run out of stories to tell.³⁰

Here again we see Bouchet’s emphasis not on the proper practice of *parrhesia* but on how to respond to it. But where the diners started with exemplars of political prudence and pragmatism, patiently enduring excessive frankness so as to avoid conflict and strife, this energetic confluence of contemporary tales turns increasingly away from the didactic and towards the comic—away also from a military context, in which lessons might be learned and applied to warring France, in favour of one that is more mundane. This culminates in a joke that underscores not only its modernity but also its proximity, geographically and socially, to the group of diners:

29. On Bouchet’s “propos de table” as a crisis in banquet literature, struggling with the weight of commonplacing and exemplarity, see Butterworth, *The Unbridled Tongue*, 25–29 and Jeanneret, 175–80.

30. “Ayans achevé ces nouvelles rencontres, par faulte d’autres, on se met encores sur les anciennes” (2.5r–v).

Un des contes de ce temps, de ceux lesquels estans grands seigneurs endurent patiemment la replique de ceux qu'ils veulent piquer & moquer, est d'un grand monsieur de nostre ville, qui voulant rire, va demander à un sien proche voisin, lequel travailloit en sa boutique: Vien-ça, dy moy, pour la pareille, combien vous estes de cocus en vostre ruë. Ce voisin voyant que ce monsieur l'attaquoit, luy va respondre: Nous pouvons bien estre une douzaine, monsieur, & si je ne vous conte point. (2.8v)

This tale serves as a further exemplary model of how to avoid violence and direct confrontation with an appropriate response, relying on wit and ingenuity rather than aggression. In contrast to the stories that precede it, though, Bouchet extracts this joke from the world of exemplary fiction and bookish history and instead places it firmly within the society inhabited by himself, his diners, and perhaps his imagined reader. “Juge-consul des marchands de Poitiers,” Bouchet sites this moment of tension between two neighbours—neighbours to each other but also, it would seem, to the storytellers—within a “boutique” in “nostre ville.”³¹

Bouchet considers the frank response to a frank insult by again taking up this social aspect: “Ce fut à monsieur de s'oster de là, & à regarder si personne les avoit ouïs” (2.8v–9r). The neighbour's concern is not that he has been made a fool of, but that someone might have been there to hear it. This frank reply, then, leads not, as Plutarch would have argued, to self-knowledge but to self-awareness, a feeling of social anxiety. In aligning frank speech with this self-conscious emotion, with a sense of feeling seen (or heard) rather than a philosophical knowledge of oneself, Bouchet's tale of the anonymous neighbour echoes a classical concern for an emotion that is itself aligned, if somewhat obscurely, with *parrhesia* and frank speech: *verecundia*. In a phrase that is difficult to interpret, Cicero discusses the appropriate form in which true friends ought to speak to one another: “Amo verecundiam vel potius libertatem loquendi” (I love modesty or rather freedom of speech; *Epistulae ad familiares*,

31. Here, as elsewhere in this *serée* dedicated to “responses des Seigneurs à leurs subjects, & des subjects à leurs Seigneurs,” we might see witty “responses” disturbing hierarchies of social status albeit in a way that is less pronounced: the “grand monsieur” tries to mock a neighbour who is perhaps of subordinate rank (“lequel travailloit en sa boutique”) only to find himself the butt of the joke. Principally, however, Bouchet stresses their proximity (“un sien proche voisin”).

9.22).³² *Verecundia* describes “feelings of modesty, knowing what is required of oneself, due respect, and politeness”—qualities that Bouchet’s neighbour clearly lacks.³³ Noting its roots in *vereri* (to fear), Robert Kaster suggests that the term sits somewhere between the English words “wary” and “worry,” a social worry in which one cultivates “ignorability”: “not being invisible, quite, but being seen to claim the minimum amount of social space needed.”³⁴ It is, notably, a social disposition that is studied by Plutarch in the guise of immoderate social anxiety and “effeminate” meekness in his opuscule “De la mauvaise honte,” translated into Latin by Erasmus as *De vitiosa verecundia* in 1526.

Between friends and neighbours, it is often unclear where *verecundia* stops and *libertas loquendi* begins, and these different forms of speech are appropriate in different circumstances. Bouchet’s tale encapsulates a scene in which the neighbour oversteps this mark, speaking with excessive “franchise” and insufficient self-aware modesty and it is this transgression that produces a feeling of being highly “visible”—the neighbour’s relationship with himself is one centred not on knowledge but on feeling; not on overcoming self-ignorance but on finding oneself no longer to be “ignorable.”

We have seen, then, how Bouchet stages a scene in which tales about responses to frank speech exemplify a certain understanding of oneself—a knowledge of oneself that leads to political and militaristic prudence. In the frame narrative, though, these tales have prompted feelings either of boredom, on account of their “ancienneté,” or of conviviality and laughter. This is, after all, not an “academie” but a friendly gathering, in which neighbours trade stories with “franchise” and the lesson for the reader has hitherto pointed towards a possible return to the “bon vieux temps de nos peres” and an escape from the conflict that had dominated the preceding decades.

32. The English translation is from Sean McConnell, *Philosophical Life in Cicero’s Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 163, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139629379. Cicero’s apparently contradictory comment has frequently been read as corrupt, with possible solutions including “alii” in place of “vel” (“others prefer freedom of speech”) or reading the second half of the phrase as a gloss imported from the margin. On this, see McConnell, who argues against the notion that the phrase is corrupt, noting that “there are numerous examples of Cicero using the phrase *vel potius* to clarify exactly what he means, or to change the emphasis of what he is saying” (163).

33. McConnell, 164.

34. Robert Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13–27, 16–17, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195140781.001.0001.

But the story about the neighbour, an account of social awkwardness in a familiar, local context, elicits from Bouchet's diners not another story but a moment of reflection:

Voilà, adjousta un de la Seree, comme il semble qu'Apollon n'adresse à personne tant cestuy sien commandement, Cognoi toi toi-mesme, qu'à celuy qui veut blasmer ou injurier autruy: de peur qu'il ne leur advienne qu'en disant à autruy ce qu'ils veulent, ils oyent qu'autruy leur die ce qu'ils ne veulent pas: à ceste cause qui veut aller les pieds nuds, ne doit semer des espines. (2.9r)

The words of this anonymous diner belong to Plutarch; we encountered them earlier in their original context, "Comment on pourra recevoir utilité de ses ennemis," and even were we not to recognize this as the source, the shift to a discussion of Apollo and his gnomic commandment effects a jarring, perhaps comic shift in register.³⁵ In the original context, Plutarch was arguing for a particular relationship between frankness of speech and self-knowledge in which even an enemy's insults ought to be taken as opportunity for self-reflection, self-study, self-knowledge, and, ultimately, self-improvement. In the lines borrowed by Bouchet, the argument becomes more complex: without self-knowledge, he argues, we risk injuring ourselves in reproaching or speaking freely to another. The point, for Plutarch at least, is that we must use self-knowledge (and its concomitant self-improvement) to avoid hypocrisy. "A ceste cause," says Bouchet's diner, epitomizing Plutarch in a proverb (a banal mirror of "Cognoi toi toi-mesme"), "qui veut aller les pieds nuds, ne doit semer des espines."

Having invoked Apollo's commandment, though, the conversation in Bouchet's dining room takes a number of peculiar turns. First, one of the diners announces his intention to tell two more stories but in a way that is hesitant, less assured than in the previous section in which everyone was seen "s'efforçant d'apporter sa rencontre," and which, in addressing the other diners directly, points to a hitherto absent care for their desires and interest. It is also an

35. "Comment on pourra recevoir utilité de ses ennemis" (110v). Bouchet's unattributed quotation continues: "pource qu'il advient ordinairement, ce dit Sophoclés, que: Qui laisse aller sa langue injurieuse | A reprocher qualité vicieuse, | De son bon gré vainement à autruy, | Le mesme il oit puis apres mal-gré luy."

introduction in which the speaker tells us that he is changing the subject: “J’ay envie de vous dire, commença un autre, deux bonnes responses & rencontres de quelques Juges superieurs faites à des Magistrats leurs inferieurs, encores qu’elles ne soient pas du seigneur à son subject” (2.9r). He tells his first story about a “Conseillier Presidial” being tested on his knowledge of the law by the “Messieurs du Parlement de Paris.”³⁶ He is asked whether a wife is liable for her husband (“Si [...] la femme [...] pouvoit [...] respondre pour son mary”). He answers “yes,” incorrectly, so the president of the Paris *parlement* says, “Faites donc venir vostre femme, & elle respondra pour vous” (2.9v). This story lacks the ethical lessons of gentleness and accommodation in the face of criticism or insult—in fact, we do not hear the response of the junior lawyer at all—and it approaches the subject matter, as the speaker noted, from a different angle, but it is Bouchet’s link to the second story, another joke punning on the legal sense of “répondre,” that makes it apparent that something unusual has happened: “Ceux de la Seree avoient trouvé ceste rencontre si bonne, qu’ayans envie de sçavoir l’autre, ils n’oserent rire, de peur de la faire oublier” (2.9v).³⁷ His first story, then, is met with an unusual silence: one that the diners hope will prevent a more problematic silence should the storyteller forget his tale.

That second story, though, points—obliquely—to a sustained pattern of thinking about self-knowledge and its relationship both to the classical, philosophical tradition and the social arena of feeling that Bouchet’s frame narrative has been exploring. It is a joke about another young “Conseillier Presidial [...] mais non pas de mesme Province” under interrogation by his professional superiors “[en] ceste mesme Cour de Parlement.” The son of a rich merchant—reason, perhaps, for his relocation to a distant province—this “conseiller” expects to be well-received. He is asked a series of questions but

36. The presidial courts, established by Henri II in 1552, were subordinate to the *parlements* but above the *sénéchaussée* courts. Under the jurisdiction of the *parlement* of Paris, sixteenth-century Poitiers was a major legal centre with significant presidial and *sénéchaussée* courts. On legal structures in Poitiers, see Hilary Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), particularly 7–10.

37. In a legal context, “respondre” has the meaning of being liable for a debt or, as Cotgrave puts it in his *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, “to undertake, or be suretie for,” with one meaning of “response” being given as “also, a suretiship.” Robert Estienne quotes from and translates book 46 of the *Digesta Justiniani*, “de fideiussoribus et mandatoribus” (“on sureties and mandates”) in his entry for “fides”: “Quantam pecuniam Titio credidero, fide tua esse iubes? Paulus. *De tout l’argent que je presteray à Titius, m’ en veuls tu respondre? Prens tu sur ta foy que j’ en seray bien payé? En respons tu?*”

remains mute, until one of the magistrates announces, to laughter from his colleagues, “Ce jeune homme a appris de son pere, que qui respond paye” (2.10r). Underscoring the polysemy, along with the interaction, of “rencontre” and “response,” the two key terms of Bouchet’s title, this is a joke that picks up the thread of frank speech by inverting it—the lawyer has misunderstood his father’s advice and makes himself “seen” and no longer ignorable, not by speaking too much or too freely but by not speaking at all.³⁸

The father’s advice, though, is itself taken, like “Cognoi toi toi-mesme,” from Apollo’s temple in Delphi: “ἐγγύα πάρα δ’ ἄτα,” translated into Latin by Ausonius (*Masque of the Seven Sages*, 7.180–81) and included in Erasmus’s *Adages* as “sponde, noxa praesto est.”³⁹ This is the third and least well-known of the three Delphic inscriptions (the other two being “know thyself” and “nothing too much”): a commandment not to pledge oneself as surety, for disaster will follow—a piece of legal and financial advice but also, on the temple in Delphi, an instruction not to make promises to the gods that cannot be kept.⁴⁰ This phrase was more well-known in early modernity than it is today, though Bouchet’s rendering points to a particular source, Amyot’s Plutarch, in which we find the translation “qui respond paye” at three key points, each concerned with the questions of self-knowledge and appropriate speech that preoccupy Bouchet’s *serée*: at the very end of the “Bancquet des Sept Sages” (160v), his essay on the virtues of not speaking too much (“Du trop parler,” 95r), and in the opuscle on excessive modesty and self-aware *verecundia* (“De la mauuaise honte,” 77v).⁴¹ In the context of the *Serées*, this phrase is the punchline in a

38. On being seen not to be speaking and on silence as a positive “signe,” see Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre. Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)*, ed. Thomas Clerc (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 51–58.

39. For survey of classical uses of this phrase, see Eliza G. Wilkins, “Ἐγγύα πάρα δ’ ἄτη in Literature,” *Classical Philology* 22.2 (1927): 121–35. For Erasmus’s commentary on this phrase, see *Adagia*, 597, *LB* II, 260 E.

40. See Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet*, 5.

41. Amyot’s French phrase is referred to as proverbial in the seventeenth century (“comme on dit que qui répond paye,” *Les Œuvres de Monsieur de Voiture* [Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1650], 499). While Amyot may have translated a Greek proverb with a French one, the association between the two phrases seems specific to Amyot. Compare translations into French of this phrase, attributed to Thales, in Alciato’s *Emblemata liber: Emblèmes*, trans. Barthélemy Aneau (Lyon: Macé Bonhomme, 1549), 230 (“Plege ne sois (dict Thales)”); and *Les Emblèmes*, trans. Jean Lefevre and Jean II de Tournes (Geneva: Jean II de Tournes, 1615), 219 (“Ne pleige point, disoit Thales”). We might also compare contemporary French translations of *Proverbs* 6.1, which echoes the Greek maxim: “Mon fils, si tu as pleigé *quelcun* envers

joke about someone misunderstanding advice to keep quiet. Recognizing this classical context reveals a thinking through of how and when to speak but one in which these old maxims are repurposed: at stake in this *serée* is not knowledge of an essential self but an affective and emotional self-consciousness—one that is felt most noticeably not in the story but in the silence that surrounds it, in the responses not of the “conseiller” but of the storytellers.

Plutarch underpins Bouchet’s thinking about frank speech and self-knowledge in this combination of tales and sayings. But this is not simply a collection of commonplaces extracted from the *Moralia*—the stories, along with the staging of their reception around the dinner table, are particular to the *Serées*, as is the work these anecdotes perform in the exploration of appropriate speech and proper awareness of oneself. The shift to these tales from the law courts is underlined as an explicit departure from that which came before (“J’ay envie de vous dire, commença un autre, deux bonnes responses [...] encores qu’elles ne soient pas du seigneur à son subject,” 2.9r) though this changing of the subject is structured by a seemingly unavoidable confrontation with maxims grounded in Apollonian self-knowledge; the diners turn away from the world of *parrhesia* and philosophical introspection only to find this reworked as a social feeling of self-consciousness.

In the wake of facing themselves in the story about the hypocrite from Poitiers, Bouchet’s companions become conscious of each other while they work (clumsily, gracelessly) to keep the conversation from falling back on themselves. Having told these two stories, the silence is filled by someone asking what happened to these two counsellors, “lequel luy respond, qu’il n’en sçavoit rien, & qu’il n’y estoit pas,” before the storytelling grinds to a halt entirely: these two stories were “si bonne, que personne n’osoit en dire ne de nouvelles ne de vieilles” (2.10v).⁴²

Our diners encounter a problem, though, and the silence is filled by someone asking the diner what happened to these two counsellors. The night

ton intime ami, ou si tu as frappé en la paume a l’estrange,” *La Bible ... reveu & conferé sur les textes Hebreux & Grecs par les Pasteurs & Professeurs de l’Eglise de Genève* (Geneva: [n.pub.], 1588), 284r.

42. On interruption and disruption in the *Serées*, see Kenny, “Lesquels banquets,” 269–70. Kenny notes how a tale in the sixteenth *serée* about loss of control “interrupts the flow of discussion and commonplaces” (269). He suggests that this interruption in a “tough going” book lacking “alphabetical indices or margin-headings” is a “welcome break” (269) for the reader, a reader who will tire of commonplaces “and not necessarily at the same point as the diners” (269–70).

is still young: “Le maistre de la maison fasché qu'on s'en alloit plustost que de coustume, revenant à l'antiquité, nous remit en mémoire ceux qui aux vieux temps avoient parlé à leur Seigneurs plus librement qu'il n'estoit decent à un subject” (2.10v). At this point and until the end of the chapter, the diners submit to social pressure, exerted by their host and by convention, telling tales more remote from their lived experiences, cushioned and insulated by time and space.

**“Et nugae seria ducunt”:
rethinking self-knowledge and feeling frank speech**

What, then, are we to make of this episode in the evening's discussion, a discussion that began with a story that couldn't be told—or rather retold—and which, at this point, stages a very different sort of storytelling incapacity? The storytelling hitherto had been structured almost dialectically, oscillating between affective states of boredom and *gaudisserie*, between the old and the new, between the exemplary and the comic. At the point when the storytellers come face-to-face with their stories, when they are most directly reflected in the stories they tell, Bouchet's study of their responses reveals a thinking through of how, to borrow Terence Cave's expression, one “thinks with commonplaces.”⁴³ With the turn from nobles and military figures to local tales about merchants and junior lawyers, the model of storytelling as a mode of doing or practising philosophy, studying the *mœurs* and morals of exemplary figures, is supplanted by the enjoyable “passe-temps” of relating jokes without relating to lessons. In noting repeatedly how “ces vieux contes commença[ient] à fascher” (2.12r), Bouchet underscores the appeal of novelty in contrast to the utility of the content. He presents the reader with a way of thinking with commonplaces that is unthinking—unstudied but also lacking in self-awareness, unconscious of the ethical and didactic import of the tales—while also pointing towards the reader's own negligence: we, along with the diners and Bouchet too, perhaps, have been reading these tales not for action or utility but for pleasure. As the

43. Terence Cave, “Thinking with Commonplaces: The Example of Rabelais,” *Retrospectives: Essays in Literature, Poetics, and Cultural History*, ed. Neil Kenny and Wes Williams (London: Legenda, 2009), 38–47.

Latin epigraph printed on the title page makes clear, though, “et nugae seria ducunt”—trifles lead to serious matters.⁴⁴

In pursuing novelty and bringing their storytelling ever closer to home, suddenly they find themselves reflected in “monsieur de nostre ville” who, “voulant rire,” mocks his neighbour. For the diners, the problem is not, in Montaigne’s phrase, that “tout exemple cloche” but rather that this last example is not lame enough; it touches them almost directly.⁴⁵ In ventriloquizing Plutarch and Apollo’s commandment, they directly address the ethical relationship between frank speech and self-knowledge but in a way that inverts the moral lesson, an inversion seen most clearly in the proverbial epitome: Bouchet’s diner reads this commandment as an injunction to keep quiet; to control one’s tongue rather than to improve one’s character. While it may be true that, for Plutarch, we shouldn’t scatter thorns, his principal point might be that we should fashion ourselves some shoes, or develop calluses; a stark contrast to Bouchet’s proverbial figure “qui veut aller les pieds nus,” preferring not to reflect on or remedy his vulnerabilities but instead to ignore them and make them ignorable.

Bouchet’s diners encounter a moment of social awkwardness as a product of frank speech and respond by invoking Plutarchan *parrhesia* and its association with self-knowledge, but the product of this confrontation—with the story and with themselves—is not self-knowledge as a step towards self-improvement but a feeling of self-consciousness, a feeling that mirrors that of the neighbour anxious “que personne les avoit ouïs.” They change the subject, they clam up; they no longer dare to laugh, aware not only of themselves but also of their social role and their presence in the thoughts of their companions (“de peur de la faire oublier”), all of which is glossed with the repeated assurance that the two stories that emerge in the wake of Apollo’s “cognoi toi toi-mesme” are “bonne,” “si bonne” in fact that it must surely be time to put the subject, and themselves, to bed. It is a scene that pulls at the relationships not just between friends but between two related but distinct forms of self-knowledge: one, epitomized by Apollo’s “know thyself,” as a care for one’s character and

44. Bouchet’s epigram is adapted from Horace, *Ars poetica*, 2.450–52: “cur ego amicum| offendam in nugis? hae nugae ducunt| in mala derisum semel” (“Why should I give offense to a friend about trifles? These trifles will bring that friend into serious trouble, if once he has been laughed down,” trans. H. Rushton Fairclough [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926]).

45. Montaigne, 3.13.1070.

ethical make-up in which an inner self is the object of philosophical attention; another, a sort of self-consciousness or social self-awareness that is occupied with one's outer self—with reputation, social performance, and outward manifestations not of ethical disposition but of emotion. This is a distinction between philosophical self-knowledge as the goal of deliberate ethical work and an uncomfortable self-consciousness or self-awareness as an unwelcome stimulus that prompts a socially informed response, managing or suppressing feelings of embarrassment or social visibility. At Bouchet's dining table, frank speech produces not a free *conférence* between friends nor a true knowledge of and confrontation with oneself but a self-conscious silence reaching for the "ignorability" of *verecundia*, that close relation of *parrhesia* identified by Cicero as appropriate between friends.

And yet this model of friends encountering themselves and responding with silence to their sense of feeling seen is developed through a sustained reworking not of Cicero but of Plutarch. In speaking Plutarch's words, they propose an ethics of silence, an ethics for people in glass houses which emerges, counterintuitively, from a discussion of exemplary responses to frank speech. In tracing these responses to stories about responding gently to insults and reproach, responding "doucement" and with "modestie," Bouchet seems to be thinking through a translation of Plutarchan *parrhesia* for his own "corrupted" age, one in which the problem is centred not on how best to enter into a frank exchange but on how to get out of one.

This is a transformation effected in part by a generic shift. Bouchet's intimate conversation, recycling old stock and telling seemingly trifling jokes, tends not towards a didactic treatise but to an exploratory way of rethinking established ideas, engaging with classical, textual interlocutors as his diners engage with one another. This is not to say that the *serée* draws on commonplaces to establish an ethics of "doux et modeste" responses to "franchise," using exemplars to make a case counter to that maintained by Plutarch to be fit for a context of violence and conflict. Such a way of thinking was certainly evident in those opening tales about Philip, Alexander, and Agathocles, but it is in the frame narrative that we see a thinking through, with Plutarchan models of *parrhesia*, and not only a thinking against. Attuned to what Cave calls an early modern "commonplace lexis," Bouchet's exploratory rethinking of Plutarchan *parrhesia* is made visible as he traces the circulation of common tales and

borrowed words, witnessing their reception and the responses they elicit.⁴⁶ It is in the gap between the stories told and their telling that Bouchet depicts his diners encountering themselves, struggling to learn the lessons that ought to be extracted from their tales.

In this chapter, then, Bouchet inverts the Plutarchan relationship between frank speech and self-knowledge as he asks how and in what ways “la liberté de parler” can be maintained between friends. It is in the context of openness, *gaudisserie*, and conviviality that something like self-knowledge becomes an impediment not only to frank discussion but to the discussion of “franchise.” In staging this moment of sudden self-consciousness, Bouchet challenges the easy association of friendship with *parrhesia*, suggesting, perhaps, that this friendship depends as much on tact—on the ability to redirect the discussion, working collectively to skirt around a point of tension—as it does on the unstudied free-flow of storytelling. Where Plutarch’s “vraie amitié” is characterized by “franchise,” Bouchet’s attention to how his interlocutors respond to these tales of plain-speaking gestures towards the precarity of this “banquet d’amis,” a precarity that echoes his opening speechlessness as he is unable to tell us, in writing, the tale his diners told in private.

Bouchet’s dialogue pulls against the model of philosophical study outlined by Plutarch, all the while being structured by a series of Plutarchan borrowings. What emerges is an idiosyncratic afterlife for *parrhesia*: a rewriting of classical and humanist models of friendship, characterized by rough and ready engagement, that reimagines the epistemological structures that underpin knowledge of oneself and of one another. This is a reworking that challenges and interrogates the values associated with confronting oneself: social self-consciousness structures interaction and mitigates moments of conflict but in ways that are felt to be unwelcome or uncomfortable and that lack the positive attributes associated with philosophical self-knowledge. Surrounded by violence, though, there is something to be valued in this impoverished mirror of openness and self-knowledge, characterized by “ignorability,” feelings of social self-awareness, and watching one’s words.

In contrast to Plutarch’s complex arguments on the interlocking scrutiny of one’s interlocutor and our obedience to Apollo, studying “nostre nature, nostre institution, & nostre nourriture” (“Comment on pourra discerner le

46. Cave, 39.

flatteur,” 50r), self-awareness in the *Serées* is encountered accidentally and fortuitously in the telling of jokes. As he writes in his prefatory “Discours,” “Et est une prudence de philosophe, & ne sembler pas philosophe, & en jouant faire tous office de ceux qui font à bon escient” (1.a8v). In telling jokes, Bouchet tests the limits of friendship and “franchise”; philosophizing without seeming to, he rewrites Plutarch’s instructions for frank speech for an age of uncertainty, pointing towards an ethics not of self-knowledge but of self-consciousness. This rewriting of self-knowledge is not developed in terms of “sentiment” and Bouchet’s account does not offer us an interior perspective, telling us how these individuals feel. Rather, we read their feelings, dispositions, and affect through their actions: like the diners themselves, the reader comes to know these almost-anonymous sketches not through frank and open profession of an interior consciousness but through occasional, fleeting signs of their response. To read Bouchet’s rewriting of Plutarch and his rewriting of self-knowledge and frank speech, we must attend closely not only to the trace of textual reception but also to the trace of social emotions in Bouchet’s understated staging.

When he introduced his work as a collection of “discours libres [qui] ressentent encore de l’ancienne preud’homie du bon vieux temps de nos peres,” Bouchet framed his discussions as emerging from a community which was, at best, not as sick as it might have been: the wars, he says, “ont chassé par leur division l’amitié, concorde & privauté, qui ne peut estre sans la fiance mutuelle entre les hommes. Laquelle contagion j’ose dire avoir moins pénétré en nostre endroit” (1.a2v). Bouchet’s refraction of Plutarch, then, is one wherein self-knowledge is replaced by feelings of self-consciousness and in which friendship is sustained by tact in responding to free speech rather than by skill in delivering it. His is not a return to the ways of living practised in a utopian “bon vieux temps,” nor a model for the future, but a study of how these relationships, or an echo of them, might be replicated in this least-sick corner of society. His is a reflection on friendship and “franchise” in the present; one grounded in an account of storytelling and a thinking through of how to think with commonplaces. In adapting Plutarch in this way, then, Bouchet’s *serée* rewrites frank speech, rethinking the injunction to “know thyself” by instead asking how that makes us feel.