Maxims are barbed, witty, often cynical sayings that expose man's outrageous vanity and deceit. The writing of maxims was extremely popular in European court circles of the seventeenth century, but by no means began and ended with that gaudy period. We have maxims from the earliest Chinese and Greek civilizations and today's gossip columns are filled with biting quips from famous politicians, writers, and actors that pretend to follow in the grand tradition.

Perhaps the canniest maxim-maker of all time was the Frenchman François, Duc de La Rochefoucauld. Born to the purple, he was educated to be a soldier and gentleman in the seventeenth-century court of Louis XIII. He never considered himself a writer but did boast:

"I write good prose, I compose good verse; and, if I desired the glory that comes with such things, I believe that with little work I could acquire for myself a sufficient reputation."

Oddly enough, La Rochefoucauld did acquire a permanent reputation as a writer but only severe wounds and humiliating defeat in his military and political ventures.

He stands out among maxim makers because he was a brilliant psychologist, probing human nature and stating his discoveries in tight, polished phrases. Although his experience was limited to the sophisticated court society of Louis XIII where self-interest and deceit were the chief "virtues", his maxims have universal appeal and are still delightful reading.

Random House recently brought out a new edition of The Maxims of La Rochefoucauld with translation and an introduction by Louis Kronenberger. Drama critic for Time magazine since 1938, Kronenberger is also a noted editor of the works of George Bernard Shaw, Johnson, and Boswell.

Self-love is the greatest of all flatterers.
Whatever discoveries one has made in the realm of self-esteem many uncharted regions still remain there.
Philosophy triumphs with ease over misfortunes past and to come, but present misfortunes triumph over it.

If we had no faults, we should not take such pleasure in calling attention to other people's.

We make promise to the extent that we hope-and keep them to the extent that we fear.

To establish oneself in the word, one does all one can to seem established there already.

It is more shameful to distrust our friends than to be deceived by them.

The vastest ambition quite vanishes when it finds itself completely balked of its purpose.

Illustrious names degrade rather than ennoble those who cannot live up to them.

The proof of great merit is to see those who envy it most compelled to acknowledge it.

Taste change in youth from high spirits; in age they congeal out of habit.

There is no more subtle maneuver than to pretend to fall into the snares that other people set for us; one is never so easily fooled as when one thinks one is fooling others.

Very clever men pretend all their lives to condemn trickery so that, at a crucial moment and for a large stake, they may indulge in it.

One reason why so few people are intelligent and attractive in conversation is that almost everybody thinks of what he wants to say instead of how to answer properly what has been said to him. Even the cleverest and most tactful people think it enough to wear an attentive expression, while revealing no real interest in what is being said, and a show of haste to get back to what they want to say. To strive hard to please yourself is a poor way of pleasing or persuading others, and to listen and answer well is one of the greatest achievement you can boast in conversation.

A man of wit would often be at a disadvantage without an audience of dolts.

We often boast of being bored by solitude because we are too conceited to want to find ourselves poor company.

Some people revolt us in spite of their virtues while others please us in spite of their faults.

The word oftener rewards the appearance of merit than merit itself.

Hope, utter charlatan though she be, at least lures us to life's end along a pretty road.

There are various kinds of curiosity: one that springs from selfishness, urging us to discover what will be useful to us and one that springs from pride, urging us to know what our neighbor is ignorant of.

What often prevents our being enslaved by a single vice is that we have a number of others.

The man who thinks he can do without the world is indeed mistaken; but the man who thinks the world cannot do without him is mistaken even worse.

There are simpletons who know themselves and turn their simple-mindedness to profit.

Gratitude is like business credit: it keeps trade brisk, and we pay up, not because it is the honorable thing to do but because it makes it easier to borrow again.

What causes the discrepancy between the gratitude we receive and that which we expect is that the pride of the giver and the pride of the taker cannot agree as to the value of the gift.

Pride does not wish to owe and vanity does not wish to pay.

It is oftener through pride than through lack of understanding that we so militantly object to prevailing opinions; we find the front seats already in other hands, and we do not want the rear ones.

Most young people fancy they are being natural when they are only being lowbred and rude.

You may outwit this man or that; you cannot outwit all the world.

We lack the courage to say flatly that we have no faults and our enemies have no virtues; but tallying their traits and ours one by one, we are not far from thinking so.

Young women who would not be talked of as flirts and old men who would not be taken for fools should never speak of love as anything that personally concerns them.
It is easier to know mankind in general than any particular man.

There are all kinds of cures for love, but none that is infallible.

It means nothing to be young without beauty, or beautiful without youth.

Hope and fear go arm in arm: there is no fear without hope, nor hoping without fear.

We should not be offended that other people conceal the truth from us, seeing how often we conceal it from ourselves.

Patched-up friendships call for greater care than never torn ones.

A man whom no one pleases is much worse off than a man who pleases no one.

Youth is a perpetual intoxication, a fever of the brain.

The vast pleasure we get from talking about ourselves should warn us that we are giving almost no pleasure to those who are listening.

We confess to small faults to create the impression that we have no great ones.

The hotheadedness of youth causes no more damage than the apathy of old age.

What makes us so resentful of people who outwit us is that they think themselves cleverer than we are.

The cleverest way for uncever people to act is to turn to their betters for guidance.

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