IN PRAISE OF MODEST MEN:
SELF-DISPLAY AND SELF-EFFACEMENT
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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Abstract—Nineteenth-century France underwent a process of individuation, or self-affirmation, that was at once political (elections), socio-economic (market forces and social promotion), and cultural (autobiographical writings). While some contemporaries embraced this evolution and others rejected it, numerous individuals sought to enjoy its benefits while shielding French society from the threat of ambition and dissolution. Many male elites, this article argues, did so through a prescriptive and self-referential language of modesty. Indebted to ancient Christian and secular vocabularies, modesty acquired a new resonance as compensation for aspirations and lifestyles that could prove both seductive and distressing. This article focuses on provincial learned societies, speeches given at school awards ceremonies, and the career of celebrated doctor Jean-Louis Alibert. At every juncture, it finds individuals who employed an idiom of modesty when speaking of themselves, fellow elites, or workers and peasants. Vis-à-vis themselves, they sought less to erase individuation than to make it socially innocuous and conceptually pleasing. Their twin aspirations to self-affirmation and self-effacement capture a broader effort to resolve contradictions between, on the one hand, individual merit, initiative and opportunity and, on the other, equality, duty and community.

‘Divine Modesty, so much is said about you [nowadays]!’¹ The long-forgotten writer who made this observation in 1814 grasped something pivotal about early nineteenth-century France. Every year, after all, countless schools held prize ceremonies for ‘modest and assiduous’ students.² Every year, members of provincial learned societies presented themselves as modest and patient during their public meetings. Every year, the Académie française rewarded virtuous individuals who invariably displayed ‘modest and selfless devotion’. Every year, finally, publishers released dozens of civility manuals, biographies, and other books conveying the message that modesty suited the present era.³ These

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¹ J. L. Richard de Rochelines, Epître à la modestie (1814), p. 6.
² E. Manuel, Discours prononcé, le 15 août 1849, à la distribution solennelle des prix du lycée de Tours (Tours, 1849), p. 3.
actors understood modesty in different ways, from deep-seated virtue to public
behaviour, but all equated it with self-effacement and discretion. And all —
Parisians and provincials, Catholics and Protestants, conservatives and radicals —
granted it unprecedented urgency during the first half of the century.

Why? The question perplexes because the image of modest and self-effacing
Frenchmen hardly coincides with the conventional picture of nineteenth-
century France — a picture that owes much to the era’s own representations.
By the Restoration, contemporaries insisted that what they termed individualism
or individuality had become the essence of ‘modern societies’.4 In its political
dimension, this individuation (or affirmation of the self) originated in doctrines
that affirmed both the inalienable rights of man and the citizen’s ability to con-
tract independent engagements.5 It also included such practices as voting, run-
ning for office and parliamentary oratory. In its socio-economic dimension, it
revolved around self-interest, acquisition and social mobility in an increasingly
capitalistic society. This society rewarded individual initiative, coupled merit
and success, and promoted such forms of behaviour as ambition and consump-
tion.6 Balzac’s narratives of yearning and comeuppance in a society where
everything seemed up for grabs still imprint our vision of the era. So do
Tocqueville’s reflections on a country that abolished the corporate order but
failed to erect an alternative social structure, thus leaving the ‘narrow individ-
ualism’ of particular interests as sole compass.7 In its cultural dimension, finally,
individuation affirmed the character, perceptions, and worldviews of particular
human beings.8 The romantic aesthetic glorified the genius and creative talents
of great artists; virtuosos sang their own talents and exemplified a ‘new self-
centred worldview’.9 In France as elsewhere, men and women cultivated their
distinctive selves via autobiographies, travel accounts, physiognomies and
tombstones. Historian Peter Gay accordingly speaks of a ‘triumph of inward-
ness’, Alain Corbin of a growing ‘awareness of individual identity’.10

These understandings of individuation shared not only a vision of self-
affirmation, but also an acute awareness of its potential dangers: unbound
ambition, excessive self-assertion, and social breakdown. Passions and moral
shortcomings were as threatening as behaviour; one’s own proclivities

4 C. Mallet, Discours prononcé à la distribution des prix du Collège royal de Rouen, le 20
août 1838 (Rouen, n.d. [1838?]), p. 6.
Brown and J. A. Miller, eds., Taking liberties: Problems of a new order from the French Revolu-
tion to Napoleonic society (Manchester, 2002), p. 125.
7 A. de Tocqueville, L’ancien régime et la Révolution (1967 [1856]), pp. 50-1. See also
K. Kete, ‘Stendhal and the trials of ambition in postrevolutionary France’, French Historical Stud-
ies, 28 (2005), 467-95.
8 R. Sennett, The fall of public man (New York, 1974) and J. Crary, Techniques of the
9 P. Metzner, Crescendo of the virtuoso: Spectacle, skill, and self-promotion in Paris during
the age of Revolution (Berkeley, CA, 1998), p. 2.
10 P. Gay, The bourgeois experience Victoria to Freud IV: The naked heart (New York, 1995),
required as much vigilance as those of others. Scholars have thus called attention to the forces that slowed or impeded individuation. Some have emphasized the persistence of community-centred forms of political action and social identity, especially though not exclusively in the countryside and among artisans. Others have argued that individuation imposed itself with difficulty among elites as well, be it in the economic realm or within social and political thought. Robert Nisbet claimed long ago that ‘what is distinctive and intellectually most fertile in nineteenth-century thought is not individualism but the reaction to individualism.’ His pioneering book showed how sociologists, political theorists, and others sought to stem this tide by propounding blueprints that revolved around community and authority. Recent studies likewise argue that leading French liberals sought to anchor individuals within a ‘disciplinary corporate spirit’.

But what about those contemporaries who sought to enjoy the benefits of individuation while shielding French society from the threat of dissolution — a dissolution for which they would share responsibility? Many, I will suggest, addressed this conundrum through a prescriptive and self-referential language of modesty that sometimes intersected idioms of emulation and honour but had its own, particular contours. These contemporaries granted new inflections to ancient Christian and secular vocabularies — in new settings and before new audiences, via institutions and genres that provided, paradoxically, new stages for self-display. Modesty acquired a novel resonance as compensation for aspirations and patterns of behaviour that could prove both seductive and distressing. It was at once a private question and a matter of public necessity.

To grasp how French citizens responded to a transformation they both welcomed and feared during the first half of the nineteenth century, it is thus necessary to venture beyond romantic cénacles and political treatises. This article (which focuses above all on men) follows three routes. The first is social and geographical: the middling elites who joined provincial learned societies, these male associations that studied all things local. The second route is

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13 Benjamin Constant is an exception, but his strand of liberalism remained marginal in France. See L. Jaume, L’individu effacé, ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français (1997), quotation on p. 11; as well as X. Martin, ‘L’individualisme libéral en France autour de 1800: Essai de spectroscopie,’ Revue d’histoire des Facultés de droit et de la science juridique, 4 (1987), 87-144.
institutional: the speeches that teachers, political figures, and others gave during the annual prize ceremonies of boys’ schools, both public and religious. This national corpus furnishes a direct conduit into the era’s social anxieties, aspirations, and normative expectations. The final route is biographical: the illustrious doctor and self-made celebrity Jean-Louis Alibert displays the era’s meteoric social promotion as well as its unease before its own behaviour.15 The discrepancy between what Alibert and others said and what they did displays the contradictions of a society that aspired at once to self-affirmation and to self-effacement. These individuals were modest in many respects but one: on this plane, they believed they could have it all.

I

In order to grasp the nineteenth century’s modesty in its complexity and novelty, one must first canvass the pre-revolutionary landscape. Two ancient traditions shaped the virtue of modestia and both presented deportment (control of one’s body, gestures, and speech) as a reflection of inner being. Antiquity bequeathed a triple conception of modesty: a Stoic equation of virtue and happiness with moderation; the plenitude found in accepting one’s present social position (Horace’s ‘golden mediocrity’); and a rhetorical self-presentation that, while strategic, could also reflect an aptitude for civic and social intercourse (the captatio benevolentiae).16 The Christian tradition added another moral component. Christian humility led the faithful to recognize their sinful nature and submit themselves before God. Modesty came to denote an apposite ‘external virtue’, a mode of deportment that was restrained, austere, simple in dress and expression, if not ascetic in some orders.17 During the Reformation, Protestant theologians responded to rampant ‘pride and vanity’ and to positive conceptions of human nature by calling for renewed humility and modesty.

15 Two quick remarks about this corpus. The earliest of these sources dates from the immediate post-revolutionary years, the latest from the early Second Empire. There were significant evolutions during these decades, including an early reactionary aversion to rationalist hubris, the July Monarchy’s outreach to middling provincials, an expanding marketplace and growing ‘social question,’ and the 1848 Revolution, which exacerbated anxieties about social movement and ambition. Worries about individuation and ambition in an increasingly urban and industrialized society intensified after 1830. I consider these changes below, but focus above all on the coherence of this corpus and period: the reactions to political revolution and rapid social change, the inequities between Paris and the provinces, the admonitions and self-representations, and the contradictions between discourse and practices that occurred throughout these years. I also focus on elites, most of them bourgeois. A broader project, beyond the scope of this article, would encompass other social groups, including those artisans who learned as apprentices that modesty was one of their duties. See P. Barret and J.-N. Gurgand, Ils voyageaient la France: Vie et traditions des compagnons du tour de France au XIXe siècle (1980), p. 188.


'Let us learn (. . . ) to be small', commanded Calvin. The Reformation also galvanized some Catholics, from Jesuits to Jansenists, to live their faith more intensely and embrace an ideal of modesty and restrained passions. Throughout the Ancien Régime, devotional texts and pedagogical manuals accordingly praised those Christians who tended toward 'humility, modesty and submission'. Some authors emphasized female modesty (understood as decency), either to curb the irrepressible desire of women to show off or because female bodies symbolized temptation. But pride afflicted men as well as women and this literature counselled modesty to both sexes alike.

The early sixteenth century also witnessed the emergence of a secular literature on civility and courtly behaviour that presented modesty as a mainstay of harmonious social intercourse. Whereas Erasmus outlined a model of composed behaviour in which comportment reflected character, Castiglione explained that the ideal courtesan displayed the classical traits that, from temperance to modest self-presentation, yielded social equilibrium. These models made their way to France, notably through the *bonnéteté* model of civility and politeness, which encompassed modesty. Responding to the nobility of the sword’s bellicose ethic and the royal court’s ostentation and exclusiveness, Parisian nobles of the robe and non-nobles based their claim to primacy on their manners rather than birth. *Honnêteté* became the foundation of a social hierarchy that the French monarchy seized for itself and turned into a tool of government, an 'increasingly humiliating courtesy code' from the 1620s onwards.

As a component of *bonnéteté*, modest behaviour was now contrasted with pride, lack of control, and arrogance — all of which endangered social concord. Some civility manuals invited the *bonnête homme* to guide his action according to Christian civility. Humility and charity generated modesty, which in turn produced respect, a source of propriety and civility. Indebted to Cicero, Erasmus, and Saint-François de Sales, this modesty was at once moral and

20 Saint-François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote* [1609], in *Oeuvres de Saint-François de Sales*, ed. B. Mackey, 17 vols. (Annecy, 1892-1911), iii. 141.
24 The anonymous courtesan who, in 1697, sent Louis XIV a poem in his honour thus took care to underline the King’s modesty. See O. Ranum, ‘Courtesy, absolutism and the rise of the French State, 1630-1660’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 52 (1980), 426-51, quotation p. 436 and Bibliothèque Nationale de France, manuscripts division, ms. fr. 20863 (fol. 6), Loxxx (pseudonym) to Louis XIV, 6 September 1697.
indispensable to the complex games of polite society. Other manuals counselled, overtly or not, a mere mien of sincere modesty. This modesty reflected internal qualities, to be sure, but virtue mattered less than the polite dissimulation that dimmed the ‘sheen’ of the bonnête homme’s qualities. The same could hold true at the court. Downplaying his talents, praising others, ‘modest and respectful’ before the prince: the successful courtesan dissipated ill will and earned a ‘high reputation’. Sober, self-controlled men — whose modesty of dress and bearing denoted masculinity — could lay claim to preeminence. At the same time, all manuals concerned themselves especially with upstarts whose social aspirations and thirst for conquests threatened the communities that allowed them in. From bourgeois to writers and young members of the Republic of Letters, these upstarts learned to efface themselves before their equals and individuals of superior status and authority. Modesty bolstered social hierarchies that were unstable because they did not rest on birth alone.

Criticism of a false modesty that disguised ‘ambitious designs’ did not prevent some eighteenth-century philosophes from putting modesty to new uses. While the confident, talented individual’s self-assertion lay at the heart of the Enlightenment, many thinkers sought to reconcile ‘individual pursuit of happiness and interest with the common good’. This was a pressing question during a century of growing consumerism and social movement. Philosophes accordingly counselled emulation, the impulse to imitate or surpass others in virtue or merit, devote oneself to social utility, and thereby attain glory. Some of them also spoke of modesty — be it a modesty of the heart and deportment which pacified society or a modesty of aspirations that shunned luxury and ‘personal advantages’. This modesty sprang from a secular, rather than religious, wellspring: personal happiness and a well-governed social order predicated on merit.

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26 See, for instance, de Chalesme, L’homme de qualité, ou les moyens de vivre en homme de bien, & en homme du monde (1685 [1671]), p. 57.

27 N. Faret, L’bonnest homme ou l’art de plaire à la cour (1631 [1630]), pp. 85 and 96. In England as well, argues David Kuchta, court culture began to define aristocratic behaviour and masculinity around modest dress and renunciation — a means of distinction from the rising middle class. See D. Kuchta, The three-piece suit and modern masculinity: England, 1550-1850 (Berkeley, CA, 2002).


29 See, for instance, A. Rousseau, Nouvelles maximes ou réflexions morales (1679), pp. 57 and 88.


The Enlightenment marked a sociological shift as well, from upstarts toward the ‘public modesty’ of individual of stature. Helvétius insisted that modest deportment would enable elites of ‘genius and talent’ to reconcile eminence and equity. The marquis de Mirabeau extolled the modesty of the ‘grands’ (such as magistrates) to denounce an administrative monarchy that perverted the economic and social order by promoting commerce, ‘consumption’, and venal ambition over agricultural toil and noble virtues. By following this example, the petits would likewise resist the ‘familiarity of mores that confuses ranks and estates’. Other philosophes granted modesty a new political resonance in the midst of intense debates on distinction and social organization. Some marshalled ‘simple and modest piety’ in their critiques of royal and clerical excess; others renewed with Horace to propound an ethos of frugality that disparaged a proud and corrupt aristocracy. The baron d’Holbach argued that republican governments alone embraced justice, probity, and modesty — understood here as self-presentation but also sensitivity to the plight of others. This modesty found its place among classical republican values, alongside austerity and subordination of the self before the public good. Rousseau hence asserted that the citizens of Geneva, all of them equally devoted to their laws, displayed the ‘modesty, respectful resolve, [and] certain gravity’ of individuals secure in their rights and duties.

This move towards a modesty of the heart, the conviction that republican mores ‘inspire equality and hence modesty’ resurfaced during the French Revolution. But not at once, for the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the abolition of corporations and the sale of ecclesiastical and feudal property inaugurated a period of newfound individuation in 1789. While some revolutionaries contrasted the Third Estate’s modesty with aristocratic inequity, it was only in 1792 — with the Jacobin backlash against individuation — that modesty became the order of the day. ‘Education in France must teach modesty, politics, and war’, declared Saint-Just. Jacobin modesty was a moral quality, part of a ‘simplicity of mores’ that renewed with Roman stoicism. Virtuous male citizens

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endured patiently the swift and general reform of the nation’ and limited their ambitions to serving the patrie.  

We will learn to become modest, we will seek the solid glory and the solid good that are obscure probity’, Saint-Just told the Convention. With immortality as their sole horizon, virtuous revolutionaries would choose anonymity over suspect honours. The Enlightenment’s concern with glory and its rewards hence underwent a significant modification. The moral modesty of Jacobins intersected the sociological modesty of ordinary citizens who ‘fitted their modest sense of self into the social whole’. Coupled with sincere devotion to the public good, the ‘modest ignorance’ of mediocre men prevailed over exceptional but self-centred talent. Such modulations of modesty were deeply gendered. Men and women alike were expected to act modestly, but for women, this meant sartorial decency. Modest character, stoic self-control, and civic devotion, in contrast, coalesced within an ideal of manhood that Jacobins opposed to ‘effeminate’ egoism. This coupling of modesty and masculinity resonated as strongly during the following decades as the Revolution’s obscure probity and mediocrity.

II

By 1800, modesty thus had a long history in France as a model of behaviour, a religious precept, a moral standard, a gendered quality, a political weapon, and a civic ideal. Geared towards men and to women, towards the grands and later the petits, it resonated all the more during periods of social change and unstable boundaries, when it promised to build cohesion and community. Some nineteenth-century actors thus perpetuated old usages while speaking of modesty. Pedagogical manuals and books on manners continued to teach elites old and new that modesty instilled ‘desirable reciprocity’ and underlay the polite deportment that would earn them high regard. Servants of the state were expected to carry out their duties with diligence and a modest demeanour. Clergymen and preachers furthermore insisted that an epoch enamored of profit and ‘applause’ required ‘the most amiable and beloved’ virtue of

42 E. Bias-Parent, Catéchisme français, républicain (n.p., Year II), p. 36.
43 Anon., Le moraliste de la jeunesse, ou les ornemens de la mémoire ( . . .) (Year VII), p. 102 and Outram, The body and the French Revolution, p. 84.
modesty. Modesty governs ‘our internal life through gentleness and humility, and our external life through decency and honesty’, declared the archbishop of Reims. The true Christian remained in the background, even (or especially) when he had accomplished something. Lille’s Conférence de Saint-François Régis hence defined itself as a ‘humble and small association’ whose ‘modest’ meetings and ‘obscure’ activities contributed to the ‘moral regeneration of society’.

Despite such continuities, this period marked a rupture in several ways. One was the sheer number of references to modesty, higher than in decades past. Another was the legacy of revolution. In the wake of the French Revolution, Joseph de Maistre and other reactionaries equated national renewal with the epistemological modesty of a populace that refrained from reinventing the socio-political order. Subordinating the individual to society or history, they extolled the modest men who placed experience and precedent before ‘wild theories’ and the arrogance of reason gone amok. Seeking to contain the Revolution’s politicization of society, provincial learned societies likewise promised to abandon the ‘outrageous pretensions of their predecessors’ and favour the ‘modest circle of local interests’ over ‘vast theories of the impossible’. The events of 1848 merely reinforced preexisting fears. France must choose between ‘the modesty of obedience’ to God and a proud ‘rationalism [that] seeks in vain to prove the world’s eternity’, declared the preacher Henri Lacordaire.

Epistemological modesty seduced liberals as well. ‘We live closer to the truth of things than our fathers did’, wrote François Guizot in 1838. ‘We are more reasonable and more modest.’ But one could take this too far. ‘Our pride was excessive’ in the eighteenth century, declared Tocqueville. ‘Now we have fallen into a humility no less exaggerated.’ Guizot, too, castigated the professional elites who ‘had experienced so intensely the ills of disorder and unfettered pride that they became [too] timid and humble’ to fulfil their civic duties and help govern the nation. Guizot and other liberals sought to surround themselves with men who were modest in their origins, their epistemological ambitions, their personal aspirations, and sometimes their talents — but not in their civic sentiments. In doing so, they embraced two socio-political conceptions of modesty that grew prevalent under the July Monarchy.

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47 Bibliothèque municipale de Lille, Fonds Godefroy 16293: proceedings of the annual meeting of the conférence de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul de Lille, 6 December 1840.
The first conception originated in eighteenth-century anti-aristocratic and patriotic rhetoric. It held that the newly emancipated nation, freed at last from the yoke of privilege, would henceforth rest upon the civic contributions of all citizens. Only in the past fifty years, explained Roubaix’s historian in 1844, had French history shifted its attention from ‘the high lineage, the illustrious alliances contracted by the powerful’ to the ‘humble commune’. Modesty now denoted citizenship and equality. This political vision explains why historians of French literature began to praise ‘obscure’ writers who had served the patrie and why the Second Republic commemorated the achievements of ‘the most modest names’ alongside those of celebrities. The second conception of modesty ensued from the Enlightenment’s elevation of service and utility as heroic qualities, but it added a new sociological precision. The philosophes had much to say about talented individuals, but less so regarding ‘mediocre men’ who partook in ‘commonplace errors’. Nineteenth-century liberals, in contrast, granted a political role to those educated, experienced, prudent men who, as conduits of an underlying reason, embodied the nation. Not unlike the revolutionaries, they believed that mediocre abilities, if put to proper uses, could suffice. In 1833, Lille’s Société des Sciences accordingly claimed to fulfil ‘one of the most precious promises’ of the French Revolution by ‘promoting modest merit’. Officials of the July Monarchy likewise equated merit with class membership. They reached out to men who would serve the regime and the nation within the limits of their abilities. In the provinces, they invited these men to join agricultural or learned societies that would ‘attend modestly to what surrounds them’. A prefect captured this conception of modest service before his department’s main learned society in 1844. ‘There is a kind of glory, domestic as it were, that is neither weaker nor softer in man’s heart than the glory that resounds across the globe’, he explained. ‘Did I speak of glory? The word is too ambitious; it is rather this high and affectionate consideration whose soft and modest gleam shines on a department alone.’ Citizens of middling origins and aspirations would prove dutiful and loyal. Their modesty was perfectly suited to France’s new political order.

52 L.-E. Marissal, Recherches pour servir à l’histoire de la ville de Roubaix, de 1400 à nos jours (Roubaix, 1844), p. 6.
53 L. Halévy, Histoire résumée de la littérature française, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (1838), i. vii and Archives Nationales F17 2831, Minister of Public Instruction (A. Freslon) to prefects, circular of 1 December 1848.
55 Helvétius, De l’esprit, pp. 304 and 589.
56 Mémoires de la Société des Sciences, de l’Agriculture et des Arts de Lille (1833), 471.
58 Grass politics came into play at well. The Ministry of Public Instruction used a language of modesty as it directed provincial correspondents toward erudite investigations that would quell ambition and political agitation. See S. Gerson, The pride of place: Local memories and political culture in nineteenth-century France (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 164-71.
Modest self-presentation constituted another, equally significant post-revolutionary rupture. Growing numbers of individuals proudly stated that they had made ‘the most modest function’ a lifelong mission.\(^{59}\) Prior to the nineteenth century, one entertained modest visions of oneself, one behaved modestly, or one urged others to behave modestly. But one rarely went around parading one’s modesty.\(^{60}\) To understand why contemporaries now did so requires, first, an appreciation for the changes transforming the French intellectual realm. As scientific expectations grew more prevalent, as Paris consolidated its status as the nation’s centre of thought (leaving but anemic universities in the provinces), as the gulf between amateurs and professionals widened, the relationship between ‘vast and high-minded’ intellects and ‘patient and studious’ ones, between those who could grasp increasingly complex knowledge and those best suited to erudite tasks grew increasingly uneven.\(^{61}\) Modest self-presentation was, it is true, rooted in Benedictine erudition and ancient rhetorical conventions.\(^{62}\) It furthermore sustained professional norms that, since the late eighteenth century, equated modesty with gravity, honour, and duty. Modesty denoted professional aptitude as both a private virtue and a quality of public men, ready to serve their fellow citizens.\(^{63}\) But it also conferred a narrow yet indispensable function to those amateurs who contributed ‘small stones’ to the ‘gigantic edifice’ of science and society. Critic Désiré Nisard thus singled out those individuals who accepted a ‘modest reputation’ within the century’s vast collective and national projects.\(^{64}\) If members of provincial learned societies emphasized their limitations, it was because they accepted this distribution of talent and authority. They rarely presented themselves as modest alone, however. Instead, they were modest and conscientious, modest and scrupulous, modest and industrious [laborieux].\(^{65}\) Regardless of their talents, this self-description enabled them to carve out a public persona and secure status as persons of patience, constancy, and dedication, ready to devote themselves to useful endeavours without expecting rewards or formal recognition.

This became a political strategy when citizens promised officials to make ‘modest but useful’ contributions to governmental and national ventures.\(^{66}\) It underlay

\(^{59}\) *Revue Agricole, Industrielle et Litteraire du Nord*, 3 (1851), 115.

\(^{60}\) The French Revolution may have signalled a shift in this regard: more research is needed on this question.


\(^{65}\) Z. Piérart, *Recherches historiques sur Maubeuge, son canton* (.), (Maubeuge, 1851), pp. iiii.

\(^{66}\) See, for instance, AN F17 3028, Vice-president Société d’émulation de Brest to Ministry of Public Instruction, 16 January 1851.
class identities as well. Scholars have argued that the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie articulated ‘a moral ideology of good taste, good manners, distinction, modesty, respectability, and “self-control”’. What Robert Nye calls ‘middle-class asceticism’ expressed itself through bodily and emotional control, austere clothing, and selfless matrimonial and reproductive strategies that boosted the prospects of one’s descendents.67 Middling French men delineated a public identity around a modesty that was at once sociological and moral. ‘Humble in rank and fortune’ they nonetheless dedicated themselves to their town and the public good.68 ‘Let us applaud ( . . . ) the modesty of our regretted fellow citizen’, declared a Cambrai lawyer in his eulogy of a local substitute judge, a man who had imparted his practical experience to his ‘beloved native city’. (Auto)biographical narratives lauded both men of comfortable origins, who had always been ‘simple and modest’, and men ‘of obscure origins, without fortune or patrons’, who had attained respectable positions but never lost their ‘simple and modest habits’.69 These narratives distinguished what historian Prosper de Barante called ‘intrinsically bourgeois modesty’ from, on the one hand, the ‘popular immodesty’ of a populace that could not control its passions and, on the other, the flaunting and entitlement of privileged aristocratic and notabiliar families.70

The middling bourgeois thus came ‘into [their] own far from the peuple and the grands’. Like their British counterparts, they contested the aristocracy’s moral and political leadership by seizing, and transforming, an earlier ideal of modest deportment. But many of these bourgeois also came into their own within their ‘modest [provincial] retreat’.71 It was not only the intellectual divide between Paris and the provinces that widened in the nineteenth century, but the economic and symbolic ones as well — in inverse proportion to travel time. Marginalized from the country’s cultural and political centres, on the losing end of market forces, derided in Parisian plays and periodicals, some of these provincials felt compelled to articulate a collective identity as provincial bourgeois, as ‘modest investigator[s]’ of ‘modest localit[ies]’ – these towns of uncertain prospects in which, by choice or not, they were ensconced.72

Emile Boulanger, a ‘simple judge’ marooned in Valenciennes in the 1840s, contrasted the professional ‘promotions’ that lay outside his reach with the dear sentiments he had found in his locality and in a modest association in which ‘no one seeks to shine’. This modus operandi was equally pertinent under the Second Empire. To a society that valued ‘great success’ alone, provincials opposed the figure of the ‘self-sufficient [man] in a mediocre position’, fulfilled by his ‘modest life’ and ‘family happiness’. Modesty compensated for lack of capital. Transforming handicaps into assets, this discourse turned an unfortunate physical and social location into a legitimating virtue. Was there a more ‘moralizing spectacle’, after all, than a ‘simple life’ in a region where ‘life flows modestly’, far from the capital’s ‘scandalous scramble for reputations’?

This social identity hinged on gender as much it did on class and territory. Modesty remained, in one respect, a feminine quality. Moralists returned all too eagerly to images of women whose simple modesty erased the shame of original sin and reflected an inclination towards domestic duties rather than marketplace temptations. Whether French women eagerly presented themselves as modest is another question, which this article cannot address. But there is no doubt that countless men did so, at a time in which feminists and others questioned traditional gender roles. In France as elsewhere in Europe, two competing models of masculinity were firmed up during the century’s early decades. One, imbued with aristocratic sentiments, emphasized physical prowess, will, courage and heroism. Some French teachers contrasted the ‘modest virtues’ and ‘gentle sensibility’ of women with the resolve and ‘male exercises’ of boys who, like Olympic athletes, had ‘fought’ and achieved ‘virile triumphs’ in the classroom.

A second model refused, in contrast, to consider modesty an ‘effeminate habit.’ Without necessarily speaking the languages of republicanism or neo-stoicism, it nonetheless linked masculinity with modesty, cordiality, self-control, and other components of the middle-class ethos, scientific practice, and male honour. ‘May a young man be modest’ and thereby find his

75 One would have to analyze a wide corpus of autobiographies, essays, and letters. Some female authors apologized for talking about themselves and belittled the quality of their work (‘as light and futile perhaps as our sex’); others, such as Germaine de Staël, felt no such compulsion. See G. Ducrest, Paris en province et la province à Paris (1831), p. viii.
place in a ‘middling class (. . .) that enjoys this honest contentment that Horace calls golden mediocrity’, proclaimed a civility manual in 1821.78 Other educators likewise lauded the ‘modest and timid man’ who never drew attention to himself and spoke with ‘male simplicity’ rather than ‘grandiloquence’.79 Composed, upright, and self-effacing, such men would enable France to safely traverse these turbulent times.

III

Most alarmingly, these were times of intense ambition, a fever that seemed to afflict all social classes as the century progressed. Although ambition could benefit the nation, it often generated ‘presumption’, egoism, a thirst for domination, and ‘illusions regarding one’s talents’.80 It produced a society of perpetual competition, in which everyone granted oneself importance and belittled others. While there were precedents for such crises, many French citizens grew convinced early in the century — and increasingly so from the Restoration on — that, given the possibilities for social mobility unleashed by the Revolution, the growth of the market and urbanization, the present crisis was unparalleled. Commentators explained that ambition, ‘the scourge of our century’, had ‘weakened the columns of the social order’, undermined respect for public institutions, and turned society into a ‘chaos in which no one is in his place’.81 Modesty accordingly acquired a profound urgency in prescriptive and self-referential discourse.

It did so, first, with respect to the peuple, this mix of peasants and urban workers that grew increasingly worrisome under the Restoration. ‘Everyone now wants to abandon the modest occupations of private life to race after public responsibilities and honours’, complained one doctor from Lille in 1845.82 He and others worried about social confusion and the destruction of a natural social order, as had Ancien Régime moralists and philosophes, but also about disillusionment and resentment, rural depopulation, a dearth of farmers and manual workers, urban indigence, moral decay and crime. By the 1820s, elites were responding by inculcating a modesty of aspirations, the satisfaction of

82 A. Le Glay, Discours prononcé en séance publique de la Société des Sciences, de l’Agriculture et des Arts de Lille, le 27 juillet 1845 (Lille, 1845), p. 5.
people who lead obscure lives, but remain calm, without regrets, resigned to the fate Providence had assigned to them." The Académie française's Montyon prizes, for one, rewarded heroic actions, unsung devotion and 'modest virtue' in order to, first, imbue workers and indigents with lofty values and, second, discourage them from abandoning their village or occupation. The Académie's biographical sketches of prize-winners traced a collective portrait of daily heroism and selflessness by self-effacing individuals who had rescued someone or tended the sick without expecting recognition. Modesty alone did not suffice to win a prize, but this 'necessary prerogative of virtue' distinguished all recipients. Rather than presenting the grands as a model for the petits, as Mirabeau had done, the Montyon prizes portrayed chosen petits as exemplary models for all. At once 'modest and touching', the annual prize ceremonies would keep the peuple in its place and provide elites with a pleasing tableau of resignation and altruism.

Calls for modest behaviour targeted the bourgeoisie as well. The goal here was not to inculcate submissiveness, but to embrace social mobility while warding off the dangers that such a race posed to its participants and to French society. The speeches given during the prize ceremonies of boys' schools responded to this challenge. Some, it is true, anticipated or parroted Guizot's famed 'Enrich yourselves' by inviting students to seek out a 'glorious career' and climb the social ladder through their achievements. Others substituted emulation for 'worried ambition'. But emulation itself could imbue the hearts with 'seeds of ambition, anxiety and hatred'. Couching prize competitions in the language of emulation did not offset the 'distinctions' and bitterness that these competitions — modern and desirable as they were — invariably engendered. Neither did it disguise the sad social reality that liberal theorist Théodore Jouffroy described in 1840. Much as the present epoch expanded 'access to the pleasures of life', he explained, 'some careers will be brilliant, others

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84 These annual prizes were created in 1782, interrupted in 1790, and resumed in 1820. See count Daru, speech of 24 August 1819, in F. Lock and J. Couly (eds), Les prix de vertu fondés par M. de Montyon. Discours prononcés à l'Académie française, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (1863-64), ii. 2; E. de Jouy, speech of 9 August 1833, in ibid., i. 277; and S. Rappaport, 'Les silences de la vertu', Revue d'Histoire du XIXe siècle, 10 (1994), 23.
85 Baron Cuvier, speech of 25 August, in Lock and Couly (eds), Prix de vertu, i. 122; Récit des prix Montyon, depuis la fondation jusqu'à 1838. Première partie (1838), p. 45; Brefaut, speech of 9 August 1832, in Lock and Couly (eds), Prix de vertu, i. 245; and Rappaport, 'Silences de la vertu', 34.
86 Pupils invariably came from the middle and upper classes. Such prizes appeared as early as the sixteenth century, but they grew more numerous in the early nineteenth century. The claims below rest on an analysis of over 400 speeches. See F. Morvan, La distribution des prix: Les lauriers de l'école du XVIIe siècle à nos jours (2002), pp. 10-13.
88 Discours sur l'influence de l'amour de la gloire, prononcé à la distribution des prix du collège d'Issoire, le 24 août 1829, par M. Frédéric Duché, régent de rhétorique (Clermont-Ferrand, 1829), p. 6; and Institution Paradis. Ernest Meunier à ses anciens camarades (Lille, n.d. [1836?]), p. 7.
obscure and hidden’. Losers would outnumber winners in a society that promised victory to many but could only deliver it to few. The capital’s large numbers of unemployed lawyers, writers, and doctors proved the point all too glaringly.

It was essential, therefore, to attenuate the individual suffering and social costs associated with endemic failure. ‘Never before have we felt a greater need to console the defeated’, declared a school director from Strasbourg in 1828. Adapting an instruction formerly directed at the grands, he and other speakers accordingly asked prize winners to behave modestly. May ‘the battle from which you have emerged victorious fill you with satisfaction but also with deep modesty.’ Speakers furthermore promised the other students that these winners would treat them with empathy: ‘Too wise to be proud, too learned to forget that modesty is the mark of talent (.), they will do everything to earn your forgiveness for their triumph.’ More pointedly, speakers told all students that these prizes rewarded modest and painstaking work alone. They then urged students to entertain modest aspirations. Mediocrity, they explained, need not entail misery. Their arguments rested on either a traditional vision of divine Providence and hierarchy or on a conception of the socio-economic order in which success hinged on the social and financial standing of one’s family. ‘Those whose lot in life is modest should not protest’, Jouffroy told students at the collège Charlemagne. ‘May all of you derive satisfaction from the lot that is yours’, small as it may be.

Reconciliation with one’s modest fate would avert the sorrow of punctured aspirations and ensure that individuals with adequate skills occupied all social functions. By downgrading personal expectations and removing those ‘conceits that society can neither accept nor withstand’, such modesty became the cornerstone of a social world in which heroic resilience constituted an acceptable alternative to stirring victory and, more commonly, public failure. ‘True heroism’, explained the Revue de Provence, resides in a ‘forgetting of the self’.

IV

Few of the people who spoke this language renounced, however, the competitive worlds of professional advancement or commerce. Fewer yet rejected the cultural practices that, like diaries, were transforming French society. Indeed, many of them were seizing new public roles, seeking new responsibilities, and joining associations that provided platforms from which to showcase their

91 E. Pérès, Discours prononcé le 14 Fructidor an XII, jour de la distribution des prix à l’Ecole secondaire de la ville de Namur (Namur, n.d. [Year XII]), p. 3 and Jouffroy, ‘Discours’, pp. 343-5.
92 Discours prononcé à la distribution des prix du collège royal de Saint-Louis, le 17 août 1843, par M. C. Mallet, professeur de philosophie (n.d. [1843?]), 7-8 and Revue de Provence, 1 (1835), 241.
achievements. They shunned dreams of ‘grandeur’, but not of distinctiveness or social recognition. Their predicament was the following: how to retain one’s individuality, better one’s position, and reward merit without succumbing to dishonourable self-interest and destructive egoism?

The language of modesty promised to solve this conundrum — and no one better illustrates how than Jean-Louis Alibert (1768-1837). The son of a small-town magistrate, Alibert embarked on a glorious medical career during the early 1790s. His timing was good. The French Revolution and the Consulate created new professional opportunities for young doctors by destroying the corporate structure, establishing new medical institutions, and laying the foundations for hospital-based medical research. Medical societies and periodicals multiplied during the following decades. Carving out a public role at the intersection of surgery, therapeutics, hygiene, and public health, doctors gained considerable prestige from their public battles against superstition and cholera epidemics. Thousands of French students and foreign doctors gravitated towards the capital’s professors and hospitals. Alibert thrived in this environment. He studied with the greatest teachers, obtained his medical degree with honours, and voiced high hopes for medicine as the true science of man. A pioneer in dermatology, he turned the Saint-Louis hospital into the country’s first dermatological clinic, a ‘most salubrious establishment’ that was also a leading teaching institution. Named personal physician to the King and appointed to a chair at the Faculty of Medicine, the newly ennobled Alibert reached the pinnacle of his profession by the 1820s. Medical students travelled from England and elsewhere to listen to this ‘most original genius’ lecture. His private practice became a who’s who of Parisian society.

Alibert published essays, medical studies, and a widely read treatise on morals and medicine: the *Physiology of Passions* (1825). Modesty suffused his writings so that the Larousse dictionary later illustrated the word with one of his aphorisms. Alibert’s essays on medicine instructed doctors to remain ‘modest in [their] successes’ and sacrifice everything, including their reputation, on behalf of their vocation and patients. His eulogies of eminent

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96 On its success, see *Mémoires inédits de Madame la comtesse de Genlis, sur le dix-huitième siècle et la Révolution française* (1825), pp. 42-3.
colleagues likewise underlined the ‘precious modesty’ and virtue of demure men who discounted social and material rewards. Young doctors were to follow this example and ‘forget themselves’. As for the *Physiology of Passions*, it presented modesty as the necessary palliative to passions that, while innate, were exacerbated in contemporary France. The root problem was individuation, which manifested itself as egoism, pride, vanity, a yearning for ‘singularity’, and acute ambition. ‘The horrible moi is heard everywhere.’ Given the ‘discrepancy between our desires and our means’, such passions produced personal as well as social ills: on the one hand, failure, despair, psychological disorders and apoplectic fits; on the other hand, endemic competition and fragmentation. Modesty — which Alibert equated with unassuming deportment, a realistic understanding of one’s talents, moderate ambitions, and ‘peaceful obscurity’ — would preserve individuals from themselves and ‘reconcile winners and losers’. 

Alibert thus furnished standards of professional behaviour and harmonious community to medical practitioners who had to manage unprecedented opportunities, mercantile temptations and competition. Like other doctors, he outlined a model of modest, devoted, and industrious conduct that sustained the profession’s claims to social and political leadership, its patriotism, and its egalitarian ethos. When recommending protégés for appointments, he extolled their ‘talent’ and ‘modesty’; when mentoring young colleagues, he explained that if ‘one belongs to a corporate body, one must not seek to stand out.’ Alibert was also one of many doctors who marshalled moral and scientific idioms to reconstruct a compromised social hierarchy. Shaken by a Revolution whose passions had ‘undermined the foundations of public morals’, this devout Catholic and social conservative insisted that, because ‘the minds are born unequal’, few ambitions would be fulfilled.

As importantly, Alibert’s preoccupation with modesty responded to his biography. His success owed as much, after all, to his drive and self-promotion as to his intellectual and oratorical talents. Consumed by ‘the pursuit of academic titles’ and a high ‘reputation’ (as he acknowledged privately), Alibert played the

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99 Ibid., i. 52 and 238.
games of social advancement with skill and tenacity. He dedicated his publications to the King, sent his works to high-placed recipients, and arranged for acquaintances to review his books favourably. A relentless lobbyist, he applied three times for one teaching position and sent an eminent professor arguments in favour of his own candidacy. Every Sunday Alibert’s left-bank home became a highly coveted salon where ‘writers, poets, musicians’ mingled with upper-crust Parisian society. Everything became an opportunity for stagings of the self, from the lithographed portraits of Alibert to the birthday celebrations during which guests publicly expressed their gratitude to the ‘benefactor of humanity’. Alibert’s popular lectures in the Saint-Louis hospital’s inner garden were theatrical events in which patients became live props, each one called upon to illustrate a different affliction on a stage. Alibert meticulously proof-read the posters advertizing these lectures. In his medical texts, he portrayed himself as a humane doctor, an exacting scientist, and a groundbreaking investigator.

The eighteenth century had deemed it normal for eminent individuals to seek public recognition. The yearning for glory remained acceptable a century later, but its public expression had grown increasingly problematic. Much as he participated in, and benefited from the social and economic changes transforming France, Alibert also grasped the inherent dangers of his own behaviour. Alibert’s temperament and social aspirations made it impossible for him not to display his own self. But the public self he came to delineate was reassuringly modest, self-effacing, and mindful of ‘the debts he had contracted before society’. The language of modesty and self-effacement responded here to self-representations that proved at once indispensable (or, at the very least, unavoidable) and disquieting. Modesty constituted a form of compensation for Alibert as it did for provincial lawyers or writers. In his case, however, it compensated for success and visibility rather than for failure and obscurity. It compensated for his own behaviour rather than for that of others alone (see Figure 1). Alibert told fellow doctors and other members of French society to do as he said and not as he did. The more their everyday life included self-representation, the more Alibert and others were drawn toward a soothing self-image that told them that their actions did not threaten society. Psychological solace was at least as alluring as politics or ideology.
Rather than searching for mere patterns of approval or rejection, a cultural history of individuation in nineteenth-century France might begin, as I have sought to show, with the contradictory aspirations of what sociologist Norbert Elias called ‘highly differentiated societies’. These societies display a ‘high level of individualization, or personal independence’, Elias argued, but they also contain tightly-knit networks that link the individual ‘with a growing number of others, largely through his own socially inculcated needs’. Considerable tension ensues, for ‘the need to stand alone goes hand in hand with the need to belong’. To analyze the resonance of modesty does not only illuminate, therefore, French social relations, the formation of social and territorial identities, the history of sentiments (from ambition to failure), or constructions of masculinity. It also enables us to understand the ways in which an increasingly ‘differentiated’ society, in rapid flux, resolves contradictions between, on the one hand, individual merit, initiative, and opportunity and, on the other, equality, duty and community.

Members of provincial learned societies, speakers at school award ceremonies and Jean-Louis Alibert all spoke equally of their own modesty and of the modesty of others. All considered modesty a public and private necessity that revolved first and foremost around compensation. As a tale told to and about workers or peasants, tributes to the modest life compensated for aspirations


Figure 1  Constant Desbordes, Dr. Alibert taking serum from a servant’s baby to vaccinate the child of Mme Desbordes-Valmore (oil painting?, 1822). Courtesy of the Assistance Publique de Paris (© AP-HP/Photothèque). The artist modified a well-established genre — the courageous doctor risking his life — to depict Alibert as a healer and a great man of science, surrounded by women and children. Alibert occupies the centre of the composition, but his dark clothing, stooped shoulders, and downcast eyes depict a modest and dutiful doctor, governed by virtue alone. Alibert both welcomes the attention and seeks to escape it.
and lifestyles that were stretching the social fabric thin. As an instruction to middle-class students, calls for ‘modest triumphs’ compensated for the striving, ambition, and aggressiveness of the new society of talents. As a story about and for oneself, finally, modest self-depiction buttressed one’s sociopolitical position while compensating for one’s aspirations and behaviour. Some contemporaries hoped to eradicate individuation, but most sought to maintain a necessary dosage while protecting French society from itself. They sought less to repudiate modernity than to domesticate it; that is, to derive some of its benefits while neutralizing its ominous dimensions. As distant from Christian self-deprecation as it was from Jacobin self-abnegation, the language of modesty did not erase individuation, but it made it socially acceptable and conceptually pleasing. This ‘symbolic ordering of events’ encompassed one’s social world and personal identity. Presenting oneself as modest was a form of distinction, but a most innocuous one at a time in which dandies were expressing what Baudelaire called ‘personal originality’ through their speech, allure, and clothing. Not unlike the acknowledgments pages of present-day academic monographs, this recourse to modesty moderated ‘individualistic (…) motives’ and delineated a ‘wishful fantasy’ about oneself and one’s community.

It is not surprising, therefore, that modesty remained omnipresent at century’s end, a period marked by political upheaval, the definitive institution of universal manhood suffrage, the growing centrality of Paris and further expansion of the market. Modesty appeared in the self-referential writings of middling provincials and the rhetoric of positivistic historians and sociologists who, like Emile Durkheim, associated it with scientific method. It surfaced in depictions of peasants and workers who, in this era of solidarity between ‘grands et petits’ deserved gratitude for their dutiful toil, ‘modest as it may be’. And it suffused republican discourse, with its pedagogical cult of citizen-heroes and its rejection of inegalitarian preeminence and presidential

109 Discours prononcé par M. Lefort, principal du collège d’Auxonne, le 27 août 1845, à la distribution des prix (Auxonne, 1845), p. 3.
This discursive abundance does not mean that the French were growing more modest throughout the century. The writer who noted in 1814 that so much was being said about modesty also remarked that ‘behaviour differs so from discourse’. Chateaubriand and other commentators agreed that modesty was ‘so rare (….) now that the best path to success is to get oneself noticed’.116 Even polite society encouraged a deportment that was ‘neither simple nor natural nor modest’, stated the writer Charles Nisard in 1854.117 Some individuals did more than simply talk about modesty, no doubt, but discourse and deportment seldom coincided. Alibert and others hence convinced themselves that, as far as they were concerned, discursive self-effacement could suffice. By mid-century, the president of the Académie française could thus concede publicly that the Ancients ‘held admiration of human beings in too high an esteem to counsel the affectation of modesty. We think otherwise today, or at the very least we speak another language.’118

118 C. de Rémusat, speech of 23 July 1860, in Lock and Couly, Prix de vertu, ii. 493.