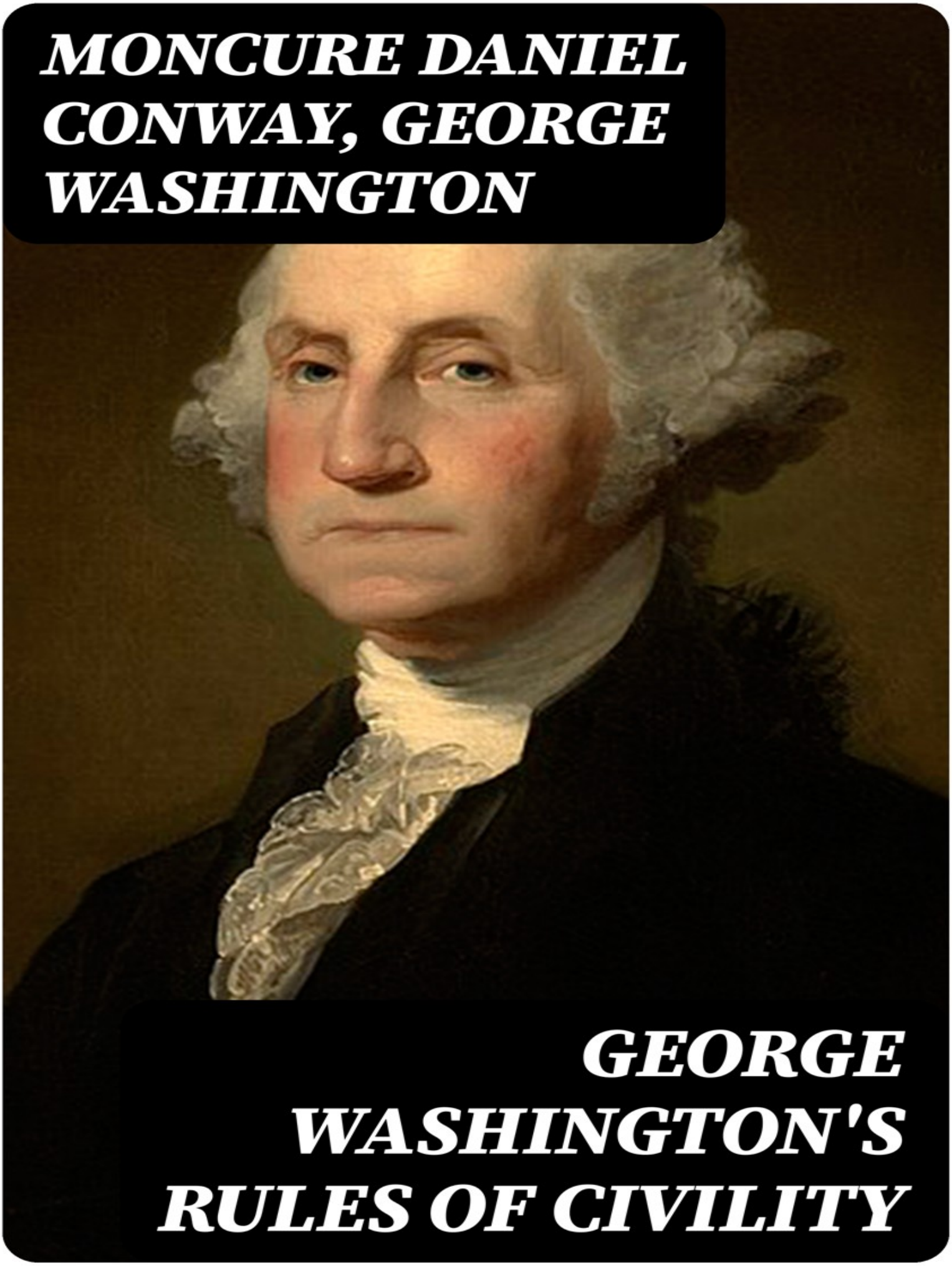
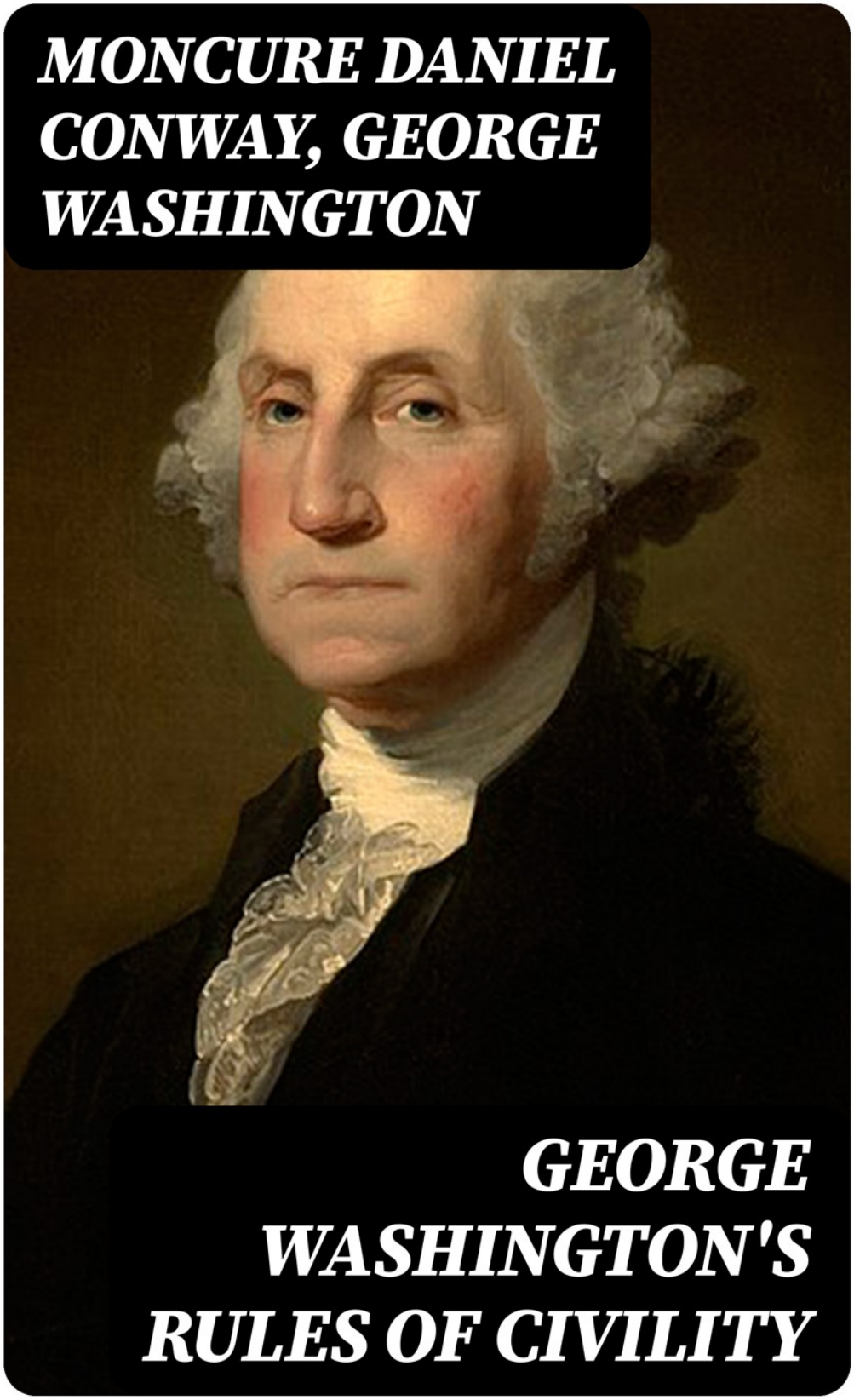
MONCURE DANIEL CONWAY, GEORGE WASHINGTON



# GEORGE WASHINGTON'S RULES OF CIVILITY


MONCURE DANIEL CONWAY, GEORGE WASHINGTON
GEORGE WASHINGTON'S RULES OF CIVILITY

**Moncure Daniel Conway, George Washington**

# George Washington's Rules of Civility

## Traced to their Sources and Restored by Moncure D. Conway

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Among the manuscript books of George Washington, preserved in the State Archives at Washington City, the earliest bears the date, written in it by himself, 1745. Washington was born February 11, 1731 O.S., so that while writing in this book he was either near the close of his fourteenth, or in his fifteenth, year. It is entitled "Forms of Writing," has thirty folio pages, and the contents, all in his boyish handwriting, are sufficiently curious. Amid copied forms of exchange, bonds, receipts, sales, and similar exercises, occasionally, in ornate penmanship, there are poetic selections, among them lines of a religious tone on "True Happiness." But the great interest of the book centres in the pages headed: "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation." The book had been gnawed at the bottom by Mount Vernon mice, before it reached the State Archives, and nine of the 110 Rules have thus suffered, the sense of several being lost.

The Rules possess so much historic interest that it seems surprising that none of Washington's biographers or editors should have given them to the world. Washington Irving, in his "Life of Washington," excites interest in them by a tribute, but does not quote even one. Sparks quotes 57, but inexactly, and with his usual literary manipulation; these were reprinted (1886, 16°) by W.O. Stoddard, at Denver, Colorado; and in Hale's "Washington" (1888). I suspect that the old biographers, more eulogistic than critical, feared it would be an ill service to Washington's fame to print all of the Rules. There might be a scandal in the discovery that the military and political deity of America had, even in

boyhood, written so gravely of the hat-in-hand deference due to lords, and other "Persons of Quality," or had concerned himself with things so trivial as the proper use of the fork, napkin, and toothpick. Something is said too about "inferiours," before whom one must not "Act ag'tt y'e Rules Moral." But in 1888 the Rules were subjected to careful and literal treatment by Dr. J.M. Toner, of Washington City, in the course of his magnanimous task of preserving, in the Library of Congress, by exact copies, the early and perishing note-books and journals of Washington. This able literary antiquarian has printed his transcript of the Rules (W.H. Morrison: Washington, D.C. 1888), and the pamphlet, though little known to the general public, is much valued by students of American history. With the exception of one word, to which he called my attention, Dr. Toner has given as exact a reproduction of the Rules, in their present damaged condition, as can be made in print. The illegible parts are precisely indicated, without any conjectural insertions, and young Washington's spelling and punctuation subjected to no literary tampering.

Concerning the source of these remarkable Rules there have been several guesses. Washington Irving suggests that it was probably his intercourse with the Fairfax family, and his ambition to acquit himself well in their society, that set him upon "compiling a code of morals and manners." (Knickerbocker Ed. i. p. 30.) Sparks, more cautiously, says: "The most remarkable part of the book is that in which is compiled a system of maxims and regulations of conduct, drawn from miscellaneous sources." (i. p. 7.) Dr. Toner says: "Having searched in vain to find these rules in print, I feel

justified, considering all the circumstances, in assuming that they were compiled by George Washington himself when a schoolboy. But while making this claim it is proper to state, that nearly all the principles incorporated and injunctions, given in these 110 maxims had been enunciated over and over again in the various works on good behaviour and manners prior to this compilation and for centuries observed in polite society. It will be noticed that, while the spirit of these maxims is drawn chiefly from the social, life of Europe, yet, as formulated here, they are as broad as civilization itself, though a few of them are especially applicable to Society as it then existed in America, and, also, that but few refer to women."

Except for the word "parents," which occurs twice, Dr. Toner might have said that the Rules contain no allusion whatever to the female sex. This alone proved, to my own mind, that Washington was in nowise responsible for these Rules. In the school he was attending when they were written there were girls; and, as he was rather precocious in his admirations, a compilation of his own could hardly omit all consideration of conduct towards ladies, or in their presence. There were other reasons also which led me to dissent from my friend Dr. Toner, in this instance, and to institute a search, which has proved successful, for the source of the Rules of Civility.

While gathering materials for a personal and domestic biography of Washington,[1] I discovered that in 1745 he was attending school in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The first church (St. George's) of the infant town was just then finished, and the clergyman was the Rev. James Marye, a

native of France. It is also stated in the municipal records of the town that its first school was taught by French people, and it is tolerably certain that Mr. Marye founded the school soon after his settlement there as Rector, which was in 1735, eight years after the foundation of Fredericksburg. I was thus led to suspect a French origin of the Rules of Civility. This conjecture I mentioned to my friend Dr. Garnett, of the British Museum, and, on his suggestion, explored an old work in French and Latin in which ninety-two of the Rules were found. This interesting discovery, and others to which it led, enable me to restore the damaged manuscript to completeness.

[Footnote 1: George Washington and Mount Vernon. A collection of
Washington's unpublished agricultural and personal letters. Edited, with
historical and genealogical Introduction, by Moncure Daniel Conway.
Published by the L.I. Historical Society: Brooklyn, New York, 1889.]

The various intrinsic interest of these Rules is much enhanced by the curious story of their migration from an old Jesuit College in France to the copy-book of George Washington. In Backer's Jesuit Bibliography it is related that the "pensionnaires" of the College of La Flèche sent to those of the College at Pont-à-Mousson, in 1595, a treatise entitled: "Bienseance de la Conversation entre les Hommes." The great Mussipontane father at that time was Léonard Périn (b. at Stenai 1567, d. at Besançon 1658), who had been a Professor of the Humanities at Paris. By order of

Nicolas François, Bishop of Toul, Father Périn translated the La Flèche treatise into Latin, adding a chapter of his own on behaviour at table. The book, dedicated to the Bishop of Toul, was first printed (16°) at Pont-à-Mousson in 1617, (by Car. Marchand). It was printed at Paris in 1638, and at Rouen in 1631; it was translated into Spanish, German, and Bohemian. In 1629 one Nitzmann printed the Latin, German, and Bohemian translations in parallel columns, the German title being "Wolstand taglicher Gemainschafft mit dem Menschen." A comparison of this with the French edition of 1663 in the British Museum, on which I have had to depend, shows that there had been no alteration in Father Périn's Latin, though it is newly translated. This copy in the library of the British Museum was printed in Paris for the College of Clermont, and issued by Pierre de Bresche, "auec privilege du Roy." It is entitled: "Les Maximes de la Gentillesse et de l'Honnesteté en la Conversation entre les Hommes. Communis Vitæ inter homines scita urbanitas. Par un Père de la Compagnie de Jesus."

In dedicating this new translation (1663) to the youth of Clermont, Pierre de Bresche is severe on the French of the La Flèche pensionnaires. "It is a novelty surprising enough to find a very unpolished French book translated into the most elegant Latin ever met with." M. de Bresche declares that he was no longer able to leave so beautiful a work in such "abjection," and had added a translation which preserves the purity of the French tongue, and is proportioned to the merit of the exquisite Latin expressions. We can hardly suppose that Pierre de Bresche was eulogising his own work, but there is no other name in the

book. Possibly his criticism on the French of the original edition was only that of an *editeur* desiring to supplant it. At any rate, as Father Périn wrote the elegant Latin we cannot doubt that the chapter he added to the book was in scholarly French.

The old book of the Jesuit "pensionnaires,"—which, had they not ignored woman, might be called the mother of all works on Civility,—is charming as well as curious. It duly opens with a chapter of religious proprieties, at mass, sacrament, sermon, and grace at meat. The Maxims of secular civility open with the second chapter, and it will be seen that they are for the gentry. They are mainly for youths whose environments are portrayed in the interesting frontispiece of the work, where they are seen in compartments,—at church, in college, in conversation, at the fireside, in promenade, and at table. We have already seen, from Backer's Jesuit bibliography, that Father Léonard Périn added a chapter on "bienséance" at table; but after this there is another chapter—a wonderful chapter—and it would be interesting to learn whether we owe this also to Périn. This last chapter is exquisitely epicurean, dealing with table-setting, table-service, and the proper order of entrees, roasts, salads, and dessert. It closes—and the book closes—with a sort of sugarplum paean, the sweets and spices being in the end gracefully spiritualised. But this concluding passage of Chapter XI. ("Des Services & honneurs de la Table") must be quoted:—

> "Sugar-plums complete the pleasantness and enjoyment of the dessert, and serve, as it were, to satisfy pleasure. They are brought, while the table is

still laid, in a handsome box on a salver, like those given by the ancients to be carried home.[1] Sometimes, also, they are handed round after the hands have been washed in rose water, and the table covered with a Turkey cloth.

"These are riches which we possess in abundance, and your feasts cannot terminate more agreeably in your quarters than with our Verdun sugar-plums. Besides the exquisite delicacy of their sugar, cinnamon and aniseed, they possess a sweet, fragrant odour like the breeze of the Canaries,—that is to say, like our sincerest attachment for you, of which you will also receive proof. Thus you see, then, the courteous advice we have undertaken to give you to serve for a profitable entertainment, If you please, then, we will bring it to a close, in order to devote ourselves more zealously to other duties which will contribute to your satisfaction, and prove agreeable to all those who truly esteem good-breeding and decent general conversation, as we ardently hope.

"Praise be to God and to the glorious Virgin!"[2]

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[Footnote 1: This is not unknown at some of the civic banquets in
London.]

[Footnote 2: "Les dragées acheuent la douceur de la resjoüissance du dessert & font comme l'assouuissement du plaisir. Elles sont portées dans vne belle boêtte posées sur vn plat, les tables restans encore dressées à la façon de

celles que les Anciens donnoient à emporter en la maison. Quelquefois aussi les mains estants desia lauées auec l'eau-rose, & la table couuerte de son tapis de Turquie, elle sont presentées.

"Ce sont des richesses que nous possedons en abondance & vos festins ne se peuuent pas termíner plus agreablement que par nos dragées de Verdun en vos quartiers. Elles ont parmy les charmantes delicatesses de leur succre, de leur canelle, & de leur anis, vne douce & suaue odeur qui égale celles de l'air de nos Canaries, c'est à dire de nos plus sinceres inclinations en vostre endroit dont vous receuerez de mesme les tesmoignages. Vous voyez donc icy les advis de la ciuilité que nous auons entrepris de vous donner, pour vous servir d'vn fructueux divertissement. Nous les finissons donc si vous le trouuiez agreable, pour nous porter auec plus de zele aux autres deuoirs qui contribuëront à vostre satisfaction, & qui seront agreables à touts les veritables estimateurs de la bien-seance & de l'honnesteté de la conuersation commune, comme nous le soutraitions auec passion.

"Loüange à Dieu & à la glorieuse Vierge."]

The earlier editions of the book do not appear to have been published for the outer world, but were printed in the various colleges where they were used. Another French work on the same subject, but including much about ladies, published about the year 1773, plagiarises largely from the Jesuit manual, but does not mention it. It is probable therefore that the Périn volume was not then known to the general public. The anonymous book just mentioned was translated into English.[1] Some of the phraseology of the