

# Women, Culture and Society, Part 11: From the Renaissance to the French Revolution

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*Sixteenth article in the series*

## The Renaissance and Early Post-Renaissance Period

The visceral misogyny which had stamped the Catholic church and its clergy like stigmata, from the time of the early Church Fathers, continued to exercise its baneful influence on Christian societies in the Renaissance and the post-Renaissance period. The Mexican anthropologist, Fernando Benitez, recounts in his book, Demons in the Convent (1998), that the Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas (1680-1698) detested women so much that they were not allowed in his presence and, if, in a convent or monastery, a nun crossed his path, he would immediately cover his eyes with his hands. Only men were worthy of his sight – men and Christ. In his archbishopric, over zealous priests felt encouraged to give free rein to their misogyny. Thus, as Carlos Fuentes recounts, a certain Father Barcia decided to gather up all the women in Mexico City to send them to the Convent of Belén, so they would never again go out or be seen by any man. *"Not surprisingly, Father Barcia only managed to round up a great number of prostitutes, actresses, and circus performers. But once he had jailed them in the convent, their lovers tried to free them and murder Barcia. The men besieged the convent, and when the women fled, telling the good father that if this was heaven, they preferred hell, he went mad and tried to commit suicide by inserting suppositories containing holy water into his rectum."* (The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World, 1992, p.211).

In Europe also, convents were similarly used, with the full complicity of the church hierarchy, to "put away" young women for a variety of reasons. Noble and bourgeois families would make use of them to confine daughters who were either recalcitrant or too independent; those they could not marry off because they were unable to provide them with a dowry; and those they wished to get rid of so as to increase the heritage of their other children. Convents, in Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe, also provided a welcome refuge for women of the upper-classes who had lost the bloom of youth: *"The fashion of the period furnished a peaceful and dignified refuge for women, when their beauty waned and the "terrible forties" ended their illusions. To go into brief retreat for penitence and prayer was at all times a graceful thing to do, besides making for safety. It was only a step further to retire altogether from the scenes of pleasure which had begun to pall. The convent offered a haven of repose to the bruised heart, a fresh aim for drooping energies, a needed outlet for devouring emotions, and a comfortable sense of security, not only for this world, but for the next."* (Amelia Gere Mason, The Women of the French Salons , 1891).

Denis Diderot, the renowned French 18<sup>th</sup>-century writer, philosopher, and co-editor of the *Encyclopédie*, wrote a novel, *La Religieuse* (1760), whose central character was Suzanne Simonin, a young woman whose parents had cloistered her in a convent against her wishes so that she would not share in the heritage of their other three daughters. Diderot was inspired by the similar real-life experience of another young Frenchwoman, whose story had received much public attention at the time. After having been constrained to take her religious vows, Suzanne sued in the law courts to be released from her vows. When the law suit was dismissed for reasons that were totally unrelated to the strength of her legal case, Suzanne Simonin turned to suicide to obtain the release she had sought.

Not all women in the Renaissance and the early post Renaissance -period were helpless, powerless creatures totally at the mercy of their menfolk or the Church and its misogynous clergy. Two powerful women marked that epoch. Both were from Florence's ruling Medici family - Caterina de' Medici and Maria de' Medici, who were distant cousins. Caterina married Henry II, the future French king, in 1533 when both were only 14 years old. She was widowed at 40 when Henry was fatally wounded in a joust. Caterina ruled France as a powerful regent for sixteen years until 1589 when her third son, Henry III, deposed her shortly before her death. Her cousin Maria, married Henry of Navarre who assumed the throne as Henry IV, in 1572. Maria gave him an heir, the future Louis XIII, in 1601. After Henry's assassination in 1610, Maria became Regent and, like her cousin Caterina, she ruled as a strong regent until her son's supporters finally succeeded in driving her into exile so that her son Louis could accede to the throne. The two strong-willed Florentine Queens, who ruled with "balls", were the subject of an art exhibition in Florence, entitled Women in Power: Caterina and Maria de' Medici, which ended the first week of February 2009. The centre piece of the Florence exhibition was a 15-panel tapestry, illustrated by a Renaissance artist, Antoine Caron, the theme of which was inspired by an epic poem of Nicolas Houel, the Renaissance poet, recounting the legendary story of two ancient queens, both named Artemisa, which offered flattering comparisons with the two Florentine queens. Caron and Houel evidently knew the power of flattery.

Not all male Renaissance figures were misogynists. Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), England's Lord Chancellor in the reign of Henry VIII, was beheaded in 1535 when he refused to sign the Act of Supremacy declaring King Henry VIII Supreme Head of the Church of England. He was a lawyer, theologian, and leading Renaissance humanist scholar. Best known for his political and social essay, Utopia (a word he coined) which described an imaginary island nation with an ideal political system, Thomas More was perhaps the first Englishman to believe that girls were as capable as boys of mastering classical learning. He established a domestic academy, at his home in the village of Chelsea, where his three daughters, a son, and several minors who were wards of his were taught Latin, Greek, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, theology, and medicine. Margaret, the eldest of More's daughters, later developed into a scholar like her father, becoming the most learned Englishwoman of her day. Margaret More published an English translation of Erasmus' meditations on the Lord's prayer, A Devout Treatise of the Pater Noster, and she also wrote a treatise on the Four Last Things, which discussed heaven, hell, death, and judgment. Thomas More considered his daughter's treatise to be better than his own work on the subject. (John Guy, A Daughter's Love: Thomas and Margaret More, 2008).



Margaret's abilities as a scholar attracted the attention of other humanist scholars, two of the most renowned of whom, Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives, praised Margaret and her sisters for their accomplishments in the sphere of learning. Vives was so impressed by More's three daughters that when he published his Instruction of a Christian Woman (1523) he included them among a list of educated women who, in his opinion, had made a significant contribution to society. Henry VIII invited Margaret and her sisters to the court to discuss scholarly topics in his presence. Needless to say, Thomas More's ideas were well in advance of the time, a period when the typical education of young women of the upper-class was restricted to learning how to run a household so that they would make good housewives when they get married. Thomas More believed that husbands would benefit from having an educated wife because she would be pious, humble, and a good adviser to him, and that their children would benefit from the guidance and instruction which an educated mother could provide. Margaret followed her father's advice after her marriage in 1521 and not only continued to study but also provided a humanist

education for their three daughters and two sons.

Montaigne (1533-1592), the renowned French Renaissance philosopher and humanist whose principal work, Essays, is considered the first modern work of its kind, also believed in gender equality. He was convinced that true love meant a congruence of two individuals as equals, and felt that if a woman is as educated as a man and if she were to meet her male equal, it could be the perfect love. He also considered, as most women do in respect of men, that there are elements, other than physical beauty, which contribute equally to a woman's attractiveness and appeal. That was implied in a view he expressed: *"There is no such thing as an altogether ugly woman - nor altogether beautiful."* As the following comment shows, unlike virtually all men throughout history, right up to the the last decades of the 20th century, Montaigne had no illusions at all that any man could ever possess a woman, body and soul: *"A woman is no sooner ours than we are no longer hers."*

John Donne (1572-1631), the English poet, was also Anglican clergyman who was appointed Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral (London) in 1621. Donne's writings were notable for his erotic poetry. He wrote most of his love lyrics, erotic verse, and a few sacred poems, in the early part of his career, creating two major volumes of work: Satires, and Songs and Sonnets. Donne considered a love affair to be the most fundamental means of understanding the world, and he felt that two lovers in erotic bliss could overcome the constraints of their conventional upbringing, and what they had been taught they must do and feel, to be transformed into completely different human beings. He wrote poems and lyrics about true love and on the mystical union of lovers' souls and bodies. In his poem, A Valediction, Donne compares two lovers, who find themselves separated for a period of time, to the two "legs" of a compass. In another poem, The Canonization, he equated lovers with saints. John Donne is commemorated in the calendar of the Church of England and in the Calendar of Saints of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Donne truly believed in marriages based on love, despite the fact such marriages were totally against the mores of the time when marriages were normally arranged on the basis of other, much more mundane, considerations. The passionate poems Donne addressed to his wife, Anne, are evidence that he practised what he preached. Being a clergyman, Donne understandably did not publish his love poems, unlike his religious poems, but he did allow them to circulate widely in manuscript form. His love poems and erotic poetry were published posthumously. Donne's vivid erotic imagination assimilated the curves, the nooks, the crannies, the crevices, the furrows, and the grooves, in a loved one's body, to the indentations and protuberances found in nature. He loved to compare the geography of a woman's body with the features of physical geography. In Elegy XVIII, he compared the gap between his lover's breasts to the Hellespon (the ancient name for the Dardenelles, the narrow strait separating Anatolia from the continent of Europe). In Elegy XIX, To His Mistress Going to Bed, Donne "discovers" Anne's body ("*my new found land*") as he undresses her, while comparing his roving hands exploring ("*Before, behind, between, above, below*") its contours, its crevices, and its hidden treasures, to the discovery and exploration of America, which was the great European adventure of the epoch:

*"Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,  
 Until I labour, I in labour lie.  
 The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,  
 Is tired with standing though they never fight.  
 Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistening,  
 But a far fairer world encompassing.  
 Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,  
 That th' eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.  
 Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime  
 Tells me from you, that now 'tis your bed time.  
 Off with that happy busk, which I envy,  
 That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.  
 Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals,  
 As when from flowery meads th' hill's shadow steals.  
 Off with that wiry coronet and show  
 The hairy diadem which on you doth grow;  
 Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread  
 In this love's hallowed temple, this soft bed.*

*In such white robes heaven's angels used to be  
 Received by men; thou angel bring'st with thee  
 A heaven like Mahomet's paradise; and though  
 Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know  
 By this these angels from an evil sprite,  
 Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.  
 License my roving hands, and let them go  
 Before, behind, between, above, below.  
 O my America, my new found land,  
 My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,  
 My mine of precious stones, my empery,  
 How blessed am I in this discovering thee!  
 To enter in these bonds, is to be free;  
 Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.  
 Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee  
 As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be,  
 To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use  
 Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,  
 That when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,  
 His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.  
 Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made  
 For laymen, are all women thus arrayed;  
 Themselves are mystic books, which only we  
 Whom their imputed grace will dignify  
 Must see revealed. Then since I may know,  
 As liberally, as to a midwife, show  
 Thyself: cast all, yea, this white linen hence,*

*Here is no penance, much less innocence.*

*To teach thee, I am naked first, why then."*

There has been some debate as to whether the subject of that poem was Donne's wife, Anne, or a mistress. The term, "mistress", was regularly used for the lady of the house, whether married or not. Since the poem, like all of Donne's erotic poetry, was published posthumously it cannot be dated to before or after his marriage. But it is widely accepted that Donne's love poems were addressed to his wife, that his erotic poetry was written in the early part of his career, that his marriage to Anne (which took place in 1601 when he was only 29 years old) was delayed for some years because of her father's strong opposition to it which suggests that they had been in love since his early or mid-twenties, and that Donne wrote no love poems after Anne's death – all of which, taken together, would leave little doubt that Anne was the subject of that poem.

Moreover, the poem is unmistakably a love poem as well as an erotic one, and Donne was not known to have loved anyone before Anne. It is quite likely, as certain literary critics have suggested, that To His Mistress Going to Bed depicted the couple's wedding night and that the imagery of sexual exploration in the poem (on which a literary critic commented: "*the male literary psychology continually draws parallels between feminine sexuality and the conquering of other worlds*") was just that – the wondrous delight and exultation which Donne felt in discovering, for the very first time ("*How blessed am I in this discovering thee!*"), his "*mine of precious stones*", his "*emperey*"; and having both the freedom and the "*license*" to explore Anne's body to his heart's delight. the nooks, the crannies, the mounds, the curves, and the alcoves of Anne's body:

*"License my roving hands, and let them go."* Perhaps for Donne, like Madonna, it was also "the very first time."

Donne and his wife evidently had a strong physical relationship for they had twelve children (including three still born) in only sixteen years of marriage. Anne died five days after giving birth to their twelfth child. Donne mourned her death deeply and never remarried, which was most unusual for the time especially since he had a large family to bring up. The immense loss Donne felt at Anne's death inspired his Holy Sonnet 17, the first two lines of which read:

*"Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt*

*To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead..."*

Donne's compatriot and near contemporary, the poet, Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), like Donne, wrote a poem, Epithalamion, on the occasion of his wedding to his bride, Elizabeth Boyle - a poem which exudes deep love and explicit physical desire for Elizabeth. Epithalamion is widely admired as being perhaps the best of its genre in the English language.

Spencer's deep love and physical attraction for Elizabeth are very perceptible in the way he describes how radiantly beautiful she looked, dressed for the wedding ceremony:

"Tell me, ye merchants daughters, did ye see  
 So fayre a creature in your towne before;  
 So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,  
 Adorn'd with beautyes grace and vertues store?  
 Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,  
 Her forehead yvory white,  
 Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,  
 Her lips lyke cherryes charming men to byte,  
 Her brest like to a bowle of creame uncrudded,  
 Her paps lyke lyllies budded,  
 Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre;  
 And all her body like a pallace fayre,  
 Ascending up, with many a stately stayre,  
*To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre."*

As the wedding day drew to a close, a day that appeared interminably long to Spencer who was very impatient to be alone with his bride in the marital chamber, he anticipated the sexual delights awaiting them:

*"But let stil Silence trew night-watches keepe,  
 That sacred Peace may in assurance rayne,  
 And tymely Sleep, when it is tyme to sleepe,  
 May poure his limbs forth on your pleasant playne;  
 The whiles an hundred little winged loves,  
 Like divers-fethered doves,  
 Shall fly and flutter round about your bed,  
 And in the secret darke, that none reproves,  
 Their prety stealthes shal worke, and snares shal spread  
 To filch away sweet snatches of delight,*

*Conceald through covert night."*

The English cleric and poet, Robert Herrick (1591 –1674), was vicar of Dean Prior in Devonshire. His principal work is Hesperides, also called The Works Both Human and Divine (1648). Swinburne, the Victorian poet, called him "*the greatest song writer...ever born of English race.*" Herrick wrote love poems as well as religious poems and epistles, seeing absolutely no contradiction between both genres. Indeed, Herrick is known for the sensuality in his love poems and the frequent references to lovemaking and the female body, qualities clearly manifested in his poem, Upon Julia's Breasts:

*DISPLAY thy breasts, my Julia—there let me*

*Behold that circummortal purity,*

*Between whose glories there my lips I'll lay,*

*Ravish'd in that fair via lactea.*

The first stanza of one of Herrick's more famous poems, To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time, urges them to:

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,*

*Old Time is still a-flying;*

*And this same flower that smiles today,*

*Tomorrow will be dying.*

In Elizabethan slang, "dying" could refer both to mortality and to orgasm (the French still call the latter, "*la petite morte*" – "the little death"). Thus, far from considering that women had a divine duty to preserve their virginity so as not to pass on, to future generations, the contamination of original sin, as the Early Church Fathers and their ecclesiastical successors strongly advised, Herrick urged women not to hang on to their virginity because time was "*a-flying*", implying that they should not waste any time in sampling the delights of sex, delights that he explicitly evoked in his poem, To Sylvia, To Wed:

*Let us, though late, at last, my Silvia, wed;*

*And loving lie in one devoted bed.*

*Thy watch may stand, my minutes fly post haste;*

*No sound calls back the year that once is past.*

*Then, sweetest Silvia, let's no longer stay;*

*True love, we know, precipitates delay.*

*Away with doubts, all scruples hence remove!*

*No man, at one time, can be wise, and love.*

Thus, Montaigne, More, Donne, Spencer, and Herrick - five of the most eminent of Renaissance personalities - signalled, by their views, their attitudes, their actions, and their writings, the dawn of a new era of male thinking about women, their relations with men, and the role they merited in society. Four of them - Montaigne, Donne, Herrick, and Spencer – considered women to be sexually equal partners, and recreational sex an activity which serves to cement the relationship between a man and a woman. Their writings helped consign to oblivion the age of courtly love that, admittedly, heralded a marked improvement in women's image but which, by transforming her into an idealized figure to be placed on a pedestal and worshipped from a safe distance, had deprived her of the right to complete fulfilment as a woman - someone with normal human needs, desires, and yearnings.

More, Donne, and Herrick, the first a Roman Catholic theologian and the latter two, Anglican clergymen, made a more radical break with the virulent misogyny of the Christian Church, nonetheless, both More and Donne were sanctified in their respective religious traditions. Unlike Tertullian, none of the three considered woman the devil's gateway; none of them condemned her as Eve the temptress or questioned the necessity of her existence, except for childbearing, or her suitability as a companion for man, as St. Augustine had done; unlike St. Thomas Aquinas, none of the three considered her a mutilated male – a defective creature; none considered her deceitful - a sinner who should remain silent, not permitted to teach, or to have authority over a man, as St Paul had written; none considered woman an inferior creature who should occupy "*the second rank*" or that men are ordained to rule over women, as St. John Chrysostom had preached in his Homily on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

Unlike all the early Church Fathers, without a single exception, none of the above three clerics considered woman to be the nemesis of man - someone whose alleged sexual power and evil intentions would bring about his downfall. Firmly turning their back on that deeply-entrenched, obscurantist, misogynous Christian tradition, More, Donne, and Herrick considered woman to be an equal and worthy life-partner of man, someone whose quintessentially feminine qualities would both complement and enhance his own male qualities, a partner without whom man would be unable to find complete fulfilment in life. However, the three clerics represented only a small chink, not a fault line or an Achilles heel, in the hitherto invulnerable armour-plate of the Christian Church's innate distrust of, and hostility towards, women which have largely endured to the present day, particularly within the Catholic tradition.

There are two early post-Renaissance Spanish women whose writings were either openly erotic or full of sexual symbolism. What appear to distinguish their writings from those of their male contemporaries described above is that the eroticism is expressed with religious symbolism. Luisa Carvajal y Mendoza (1566–1614), a Spanish noblewoman,

wrote intensely erotic mystical poetry which appear to be inspired by the teachings of the early and medieval Christian church which openly suggested, or strongly implied, that women should preserve their virginity for Christ. In the Catholic tradition, that notion is still reflected in the term, "Brides of Christ", applied to young women taking religious vows, and is still illustrated in the bridal dress they wear at the ceremony initiating them into the order:

*"Repose in the sacred and flowery marriage bed  
and burn yourself in such scorching love,  
since until that strong knot has been tightened  
it will be impossible to remain satisfied."*

The phrases *"sacred and flowery marriage bed"* and *"until that strong knot has been tightened"* leave little doubt that Luisa Mendoza was referring to a wedding night. *"Burn yourself in such scorching love"* and *"it will be impossible to remain satisfied"* do not need to be more explicit. Like St. Theresa (see below), Mendoza evoked the image/vision of her body being pierced by a phallic-like instrument wielded by a Divine creature as she clearly suggests by her use of the capital H in "His". The last phrase; *"an arrow dipped in His love which took you to the edge"* looks suspiciously like a metaphor for an orgasmic experience.

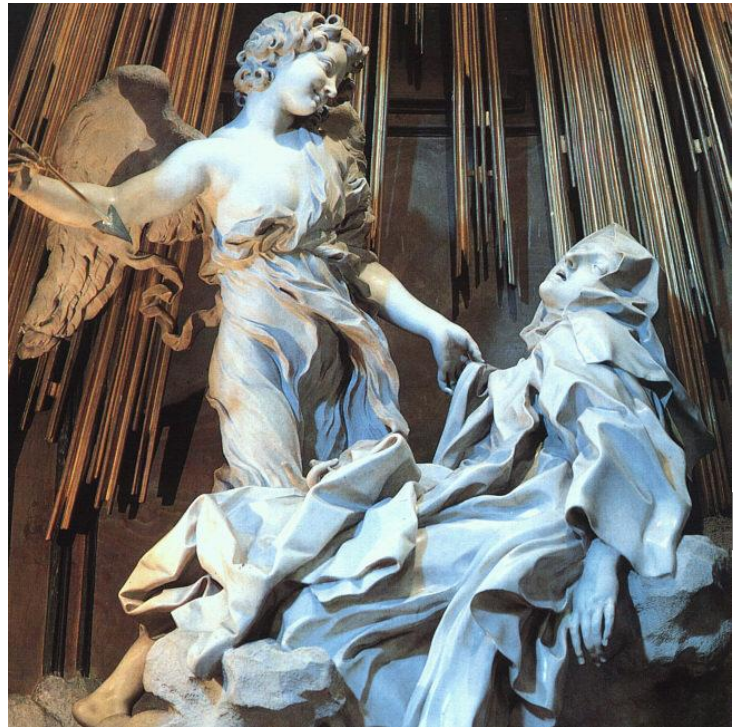
*"Strange beauty  
you noticed one day  
in He who robbed you of your soul  
and shot you with an arrow  
dipped in His love  
which took you to the edge."*

Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), a prominent Spanish mystic, counter-reformation writer, and Carmelite nun was canonized because of her spiritual visions which she described in several books. St Theresa's visions were remarkable for the very physical, often sexual, terms in which she described them. In her autobiography, The Life of Teresa of Jesus, she describes a vision in which she saw a male angel standing over her:

*"I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with*

*nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying."*

Anyone reading that passage would immediately recognize the sexual ecstasy of an intense orgasmic experience. It is so graphic and realistic a description (as a man, I am not in a position to say whether it is an accurate one) that no one who is unacquainted with St Theresa's personal history could possibly imagine that she was not describing a real life experience. Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), one of the most gifted Italian artists of the period, captured that sexual ecstasy, perfectly, in his famous sculpture, The Ecstasy of St. Teresa di Avila, (shown at right) in which his portrayal of St. Theresa's undergoing her mystical experience is also, seemingly, one of a woman in the throes of orgasm. Bernini's sculptural masterpiece, which has a very unlikely home - the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome - depicts the swooning St Theresa, lying limp in a semi-reclining pose as if the intensity of the mystical experience she had just



experienced had drained all the strength from her body. Her head is slightly tilted back, her eyes are closed, her mouth partly open, her legs apparently spread apart under her voluminous flowing robe, and she has an expression of intense pleasure on her face. Apart from her face, only her naked foot which protrudes from under her robe is uncovered. The young, handsome, smiling angel with curly hair, standing over (almost bestride) St Theresa, is holding a fold of St Theresa's robe in his left hand. In his right hand he holds the spear pointed at, but not touching, her body. No one who has seen Bernini's magnificent white marble sculpture, in its beautiful setting in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, would be left unmoved by its expressive power and its aesthetic force.

The strong sexual overtones of the writings of both St Theresa and Luisa Mendoza are thought provoking. Unlike the erotic poetry of Donne, Spencer, and Herrick, whose sexual fantasies were directed towards flesh and blood women who were often named, the object of the sexual fantasies of the two female Spanish writers was divine, not human. While St Theresa had taken a vow of chastity on joining the Carmelite Order, Luisa Mendoza was not a church woman and was thus bound by no vow of chastity. The mores of her time did oblige her to remain a virgin until marriage, on penalty of losing her honour, but that obligation did not extend to excluding men totally from her imagination, her thoughts, and her desires. It did not prevent her from dreaming of being held in a man's arms and wondering what it was like to be caressed by someone made of flesh and blood - someone she had actually met or glimpsed in passing. It was the cumulative effect of fifteen centuries of virulent church denunciation of all physical desire directed towards the opposite sex, as the Devil's work, and church teachings that only a virgin could find favour in God's eyes, which made that impossible. When the two Spanish writers felt the physical desire which all normal human beings experience, however much one might try to suppress it, they channelled it in a divine direction. The vows of celibacy

and chastity, which the Catholic Church still insist on imposing on its priests and nuns, were largely responsible for that type of psychosis as well as several others.

Eugen Drewermann, a Roman Catholic theologian and psychiatrist, has psychoanalysed and provided psychotherapy for a considerable number of priests and nuns suffering from a variety of psychoses brought on by suppressed sexual desire and by the deep feelings of guilt on the part of those priests and nuns who broke their vows by succumbing to their sexual desires. In a book published twenty years ago, Drewermann described and analyzed the terrible trauma of his patients, illustrating his description and analysis with a number of case studies. On the basis of his considerable experience providing psychotherapy for Catholic clergy, he concluded that it was absolutely necessary for the Catholic Church to abolish vows of celibacy and chastity, if only to preserve the mental and psychological health of its clergy. (*Fonctionnaires de Dieu* ("Servants of God"), 1989). Not only is the mental and psychological health of its clergy put at great risk by such a draconian rule, but also its moral authority and its material wealth. Both in Ireland and in the United States, the Catholic Church has had to pay out huge sums of money to Church members (more often, ex-church members), in out-of-court settlements, for having been sexually abused as children by "Servants of God." Such abuse is often hushed up in other European countries, without the Church having to pay any "hush money", but some European priests are serving lengthy jail sentences for having abused youths placed in their moral charge.

The Royal Convention in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century France was that the King's mistresses were always a married member of one of the great noble families. If the King desired an unmarried woman or one from the lesser nobility, a suitable noble husband would be found for her. The husband or father of the King's mistress never objected to the arrangement. If a nobleman's wife is lucky enough to catch the King's roving eye and become a mistress of the king, he could gain much influence, riches, and a higher title of nobility. Moreover, the conventions of the period permitted a woman, once she is married, the liberty to sleep with whosoever she wanted and to do so with as many men as she wished. A husband who protested was considered a bad sport and unfit for polite society. Thus, French wives from the aristocracy enjoyed sexual equality and all the sexual liberty they desired. In that particular respect, there were absolutely no double standards in French society of the period.



Ninon de L'Enclos (left) (1616-1705) was the prototype of the independent, sexually liberated woman who emerged at a much later period. She was a writer, an intellectual of great learning, and a *femme d'esprit*. She was fluent in both Spanish and Italian, she was versed in the sciences, and she quoted Montaigne and the great classical writers without effort. She was a close friend of Molière for whom, at his request, she corrected the first draft of *Tartuffe*, one of the writer's most famous comedies. Ninon de L'Enclos collected a constellation of lovers, for which she was so famous that Horace Walpole later nicknamed her "*Notre Dame de Amours*". For Ninon de L'Enclos, age – either her own or that of her lovers - was never a barrier. She began an affair with the Abbé de Châteuneuf on her 77th birthday, at the very same time she was having one with another cleric, Nicolas Géodin. She met the young Voltaire (13 years old and a schoolboy at the time) a few months before her 90th birthday and she was so taken by him that she left

him a small legacy in her will to enable purchase books for himself.

Ninon de L'Enclos was the very personification of the social freedom and the sexual equality that French aristocratic women enjoyed in the 17th century and, also, a perfect illustration of the total absence of (sexual) double standards in the society of the period. A woman's body was her own to what she wanted with it, without risk of social or moral condemnation. It is a situation, and an achievement, which, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, does not exist for women in any society or any culture, whatever their social class and whatever their marital status. Social and political freedoms are never permanently acquired. Once acquired, they need to be constantly defended against the forces of reaction and obscurantism. The persistent attempts by those forces in the Christian United States, in the Muslim Middle East, and in Muslim Central Asia, to roll back the hard-won freedoms which women achieved with such great difficulty, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is very sobering testimony to the enormous obstacle such forces present to human progress.

Despite Robert Herrick's advice to women in his poem, To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time, not to cling to their virginity because time was "*a-flying*", and their "flower" will be in bloom for only a brief time, in that early post-Renaissance virginity remained a highly valued virtue. Elizabeth I (1533 –1603), Queen of England, became famous for her virginity. As she grew older, a cult grew up around her and her virgin status, for which she was celebrated in portraits, pageants, and the literature of the day. After Elizabeth's death, she was celebrated as the ruler of a golden age. One wonders to what extent that popular notion was influenced by Christian teachings that virginity would be rewarded when the golden Millennium arrived. Historians have been less fascinated by Elizabeth's personality. Some have described as short-tempered, a character failing which, when it occurs in a spinster, has often been attributed (mainly by men, admittedly) to the frustrations caused by (self-)imposed sexual abstinence. The French ambassador reportedly remarked in 1593: "*When I see her enraged against any person whatever, I wish myself in Calcutta, fearing her anger like death itself*". (Anne Somerset, Elizabeth I, 1991, pp.731-732). The French have a graphic expression, "*mal baisée*", to describe an ageing spinster who displays that type of behaviour. Although the expression is, apparently, freely used by French people at all levels of society, the English language has no polite equivalent. I shall refrain from attempting an approximate translation.

In the post-Renaissance period, there continued a steady, albeit slow, improvement in the image of women. In the first edition (1694), of its dictionary the Académie Française had the following definition of a woman: "*la femelle de l'homme*" ("the female of man"). That definition remained unchanged until its 6<sup>th</sup> edition (1835) when a woman graduated to become "*la compagne de l'homme*" ("man's companion"). It was only with the dictionary's 8<sup>th</sup> edition (1935) that a woman was defined in her own terms, not as a mere appendage of man - an individual who possessed an identity of her very own: "*un être humain de sexe féminin*" ("a human being of the feminine sex").

## The Paris Salon to the French Revolution

The French salon, which emerged in Paris at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and maintained its influence for two centuries, was a remarkable institution that put an indelible intellectual stamp on French society. It is in the French salon that the art of intelligent conversation, one of the defining features of French society, first developed. The salon ushered in two centuries of enlightened discourse that influenced the Enlightenment movement and it had a determining influence on the style and codes of civilized behaviour throughout Europe. It became the principal venue for writers, artists, philosophers, and other intellectuals for the exchange of ideas, as well as an important rendezvous for French social, political, and cultural elites. The French salon was so influential that it is claimed to have changed the course of intellectual history:

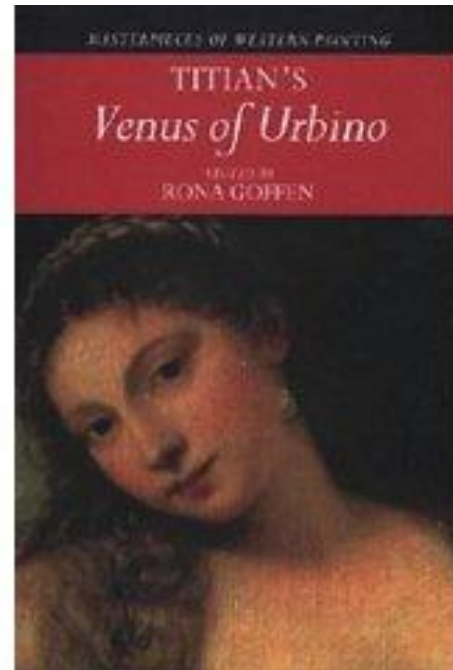
*"These salons were closely interwoven with the best intellectual life of more than two hundred years. Differing in tone according to the rank, taste, or character of their leaders, they were rallying points for the most famous men and women of their time. In these brilliant centers, a new literature had its birth. Here was found the fine critical sense that put its stamp on a new poem or a new play. Here ministers were created and deposed, authors and artists were brought into vogue, and vacant chairs in the Acaémie Francaise were filled. Here the great philosophy of the eighteenth century was cradled. Here sat the arbiters of manners, the makers of social success. To these high tribunals came, at last, every aspirant for fame."* (Amelia Gere Mason, The Women of the French Salons, 2001, p.9. first published in 1891).

The salon was actually an Italian invention of the 16th century. The term *salon*, which first appeared in France in 1664, traces its origin to the Italian word *salone* which derived from *sala*, the large reception hall in Italian mansions. The *salone* was the institution which provided the social context for the dialogue of the Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance dialogue represented a new model of thinking, one that rejected the dialectical monologue of the medieval scholastic tradition. *"The new scientific model of the Humanists was that of the consensus, constructed around a rhetorical argument with a dialogue in which each person participated equally. At the same time, the model of the discussion group was valid only to the extent that it had been established through the harmony of a balanced conversation."* (Annick Paternoster, La Politesse Positive dans le Dialogue de la Renaissance Italienne in M. Wauthon & A.C. Simon (eds), Politesse et Idéologie: Rencontres de pragmatique et de rhétorique conversationnelles, p.304, 2000).

The Italian *salone*, an embryonic version of the later French salon, flowered around two very cultured, erudite Italian women - Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino (1471-1526), and her friend and lady in waiting, Emilia Pia de Montefeltro. Gonzaga's great intelligence and learning brought her into regular contact with some of the outstanding minds of late fifteenth-century Italy. Her court at Urbino attracted writers, artists, and scholars, among whom was the writer and diplomat, Baldassare Castiglione, Count of Novellata, who immortalized her in his celebrated work, The Book of the Courtier (1528) - a manual of social and intellectual refinement which also sought to depict the ideal courtier. Castiglione based his book on his own conversations and interactions with Elizabetta Gonzaga. (Paula Findlen, The Italian Renaissance: The Essential Readings, 2002). Referring to Emilia Pia, Castiglione observed in his book that

she "was endowed with such lively wit and judgment that, as you know, it seemed....as if everyone gained wisdom and worth from her." Not only Castiglione, but also his intellectual peers, esteemed Emilia as a source of wisdom and wit.

Elizabetta of Urbino, who stood on an equal intellectual footing with the learned men in her discussion circle, was a *prima donna* in temperament. She was physically unattractive, so much so that Pietrop Aretino, a contemporary Italian writer and satirist, ungenerously called her "dishonestly ugly". Aretino most certainly merited John Burckhardt's scathing description of him: "to the coarsest as well as the most refined malice he added a grotesque wit so brilliant that in some cases it does not fall short of that of Rabelais." (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, 1860). The Duchess of Urbino was, quite understandably, very sensitive about her looks but she was sufficiently vain to require artists not to portray her the way she really looked. When she was well into her fifties, she compelled the great Italian Renaissance artist, Titian, to paint a second portrait of her, after rejecting the first one. "Only the second painting, portraying her as a comely fifteen year old, met with her satisfaction." (Caroline P. Murphy, The Pope's Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice della Rovere, p.69, 2005).



One of the many paradoxes of life, which give it so much of its piquancy, is that beautiful women often wish to be complimented on their brains while brainy women often want to be complimented on their beauty. In wanting Titian to portray her as a teenager although she would never see fifty again, Gonzaga exemplified another paradox – one of human nature: the fact that the process of aging has different implications, and disparate consequences, for women and for men. For reasons that have no logical basis, physical beauty or attractiveness (one of the very first casualties of the aging process) is, most unfairly, a considerably more important factor in a woman's self-esteem than it is in a man's. A similar asymmetry exists in respect of the way in which society evaluates individuals of either sex. Unless advances in medical science permit the removal of all technical limitations on the possibilities of creative cosmetic surgery, or produce an effective solution for the problem of human aging and cell deterioration, gender equality might well prove to be as elusive as the Holy Grail, at least in that particular respect.

The Book of the Courtier had an immediate, spectacular success. It went through some forty editions in Italy alone in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and there were no less than 100 editions of Castiglione's book in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It served as a manual of courtly conduct and *savoir faire* in the royal courts of Europe. The book had such an enormous impact in France that it was translated twice into French during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1537 and 1580) and a third time in the 17<sup>th</sup> (1690). Castiglione's book inspired the French salon which, in turn, became the model for the salons that mushroomed throughout Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, for the very same reason why the salon became an institution and a tradition in France and not in Italy where it originated, none of its European imitators

attained the intellectual prominence and the social renown of the French salon. The French salon was, essentially, the creation of a number of aristocratic women, who not only presided over it but also determined the style, the standards, the subject matter, and the manner of its functioning. Indeed, it would be impossible to evaluate the role and the influence of the salon in French society independently of the gifted women who hosted them. The *salonnière*, the salon's hostess, decided who was to be invited as well as the topic to be discussed on any particular evening, a topic she chose from a very broad field - politics, philosophy, literature, art, fashion, or business.

Italy and other European countries, where women and men of that period remained traditionally separated in social life, did not engender the *complicité* or *connivence* (empathetic understanding) between the sexes that developed in France. Elisabeth Badinter, the French feminist, has commented on the uniqueness of that particular feature of French society and attributed to it the relative absence, in France, of male fear of women which is, allegedly, the principal cause of misogyny. It was that uniquely French social feature which gave aristocratic French women the confidence, the self-possession, and the easy convivability in mixed company that enabled them to host salons which not only attracted the best minds in the society but also provided a venue and an opportunity for social interaction of all kinds. "[T]hey had an abundance of that delicate combination of intellect and wit which the French call ESPRIT. They had also, in superlative measure, the social gifts which women of genius reared in the library or apart from the world, are apt to lack. The close study of books leads to a knowledge of man rather than of men. It tends toward habits of introspection which are fatal to the clear and swift vision required for successful leadership of any sort. Social talent is distinct, and implies a happy poise of character and intellect; the delicate blending of many gifts, not the supremacy of one. It implies taste and versatility, with fine discrimination, and the tact to sink one's personality as well as to call out the best in others. It was this flexibility of mind, this active intelligence tempered with sensibility and the native instinct of pleasing, that distinguished the French women who have left such enduring traces upon their time." (Mason, 2001, p.8).

As Steven Kale aptly observed, the "[French] salon encouraged socializing between the sexes [and] brought nobles and bourgeois together" (French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the revolution of 1848, p.2, 2004). Dena Goodman has also noted an absence of social hierarchy and a mixing of different social ranks, orders, and occupations in the French salons. (Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions, **Eighteenth-Century Studies**, Vol. 22. No.3, 1989). Artists, musicians, scientists, philosophers, politicians, writers, and journalists were among the wide range of people who frequented the salons. The *salonnières* were arbiters of taste who were able to control the tone and the content of the conversation. They possessed the tact, the discretion, and the authority to act as an intermediary if the discussion became heated. They also mediated the discussion to ensure that no single individual monopolized the conversation and that it was conducted in an atmosphere of politeness and mutual respect. The *salonnières* also ensured that the topics were discussed in common and not in private asides, so that all present could participate in every discussion.

Originally, the salon provided opportunities for the exchange of literary and philosophical ideas among French aristocrats. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the run-up to the French Revolution, they also became venues where the upper classes could air their political opinions, ideas, and concerns and, subsequently, during the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they provided opportunities for the cultivation of political capital and the exchange of political ideas. Thus, a number of highly intelligent, socially prominent French women who, though denied

an active role in politics which was reserved for men, found, in the salon, a powerful way to exercise behind-the-scenes influence in French political life.

In view of the fact that it was in Italy where the European salon first appeared in embryonic form, it is perhaps not without significance that the Marquise de Rambouillet (1558-1665), who established, in 1607, the first French salon of any note, was born in Rome and was part Italian on her mother's side. Although no writer on the subject of the European Renaissance or the post-Renaissance salon appears to have made the connection, another cultural influence might well have inspired both the embryonic Italian *salone* and its more famous progeny, the French salon. The medieval Arab concept, *Adab*, which epitomized classical Arab humanist principles originally concerned the "rules of conduct" and "customs" inherited from one's ancestors and venerated as models of behaviour. From around the eighth century, the *Adab* concept came to represent the "*ethical and practical rules of proper conduct*". The term *Adab* also connoted a genre of Arab *belles-lettres* which explicitly aimed at educating the "honourable man" while, at the same time, providing entertainment for the reader. The *Adab* concept also embodied the qualities of courtesy, etiquette, refined manners, aristocratic learning, and urbanity – all qualities that later came to characterize the French salon.

Thus, *Adab* came to stand for an *ensemble* of learning, good manners, and courtliness which produced a distinctive Arabic cultural figure, the *Adib*, an erudite, "honourable" man whose graceful manners, elegant language, and urbane qualities represented a certain ideal, one that was also implicitly Muslim. The *adib*, who is often described as *zarif* (derived from the Arabic word *zarf* which means a code of good manners) bears no little resemblance to Castiglione's "Courtier", written several centuries later. The *adib* was an essential feature of the medieval Arab salon, the epitome of good taste and social grace who held forth with ease on all branches of learning. No medieval Arab salon gathering was complete without him. A typical product of the *adib* was the *risala*, the epistle or essay that dealt with a particular theme and which would be addressed to a patron.

In a Times Literary Supplement review of Robert Irwin's book, *Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (1999), the distinguished Arab scholar, Tarif Khalidi, Professor of Arabic and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, captured in the following description the essence of the persona of the *Adib* and his emblematic role in medieval Arab society:

*"Central to the understanding of Arabic literature in the pre-modern period is the concept of Adab, a curriculum of learning and good manners, of courtliness, leading to the formation of the Adib, the gentleman-scholar, a cultural type of many guises, recognizable over a broad swath of time and from Greece to China. Adab presupposes that there can be no true erudition without the polished character that goes with it. The Adib was an ornament to any salon, holding forth with ease on all branches of learning but careful to keep himself aloof from the plebs and the contamination of the mauvais goût. He peddled his graces to his own ilk but often under the patronage of the rich and powerful, who were very fond of staging debates between prominent Adibs. His scholarly accoutrements would typically have consisted of quite a formidable array of arts and sciences of his age: poetry, the network of religious sciences, history, philology, critical theory, medicine, as well as a pretty solid acquaintance with the natural sciences, from arithmetic to zoology. Almost by definition, Adab militated against specialization, opting instead for breadth of cultivation.....the Adib felt free to pursue his subject across a wide expanse of the scholarship he commanded. Almost any subject was fit*

*for lively scrutiny, for the often iconoclastic, the self-assured, the marshaling of argument". (TLS, March 31, 2000, p. 8).*

The similarities between the medieval Arab *adib*, Castiglione's "courtier" and, particularly, the later French salon and the literary/social milieu in which the latter flourished, appear so striking that it is most astonishing that no writer, to my knowledge (even Tarif Khalidi apparently), has noticed the probable connection. I am all the more persuaded of such a connection in view of the fact that medieval France had borrowed the contemporary Perso-Arab genre of courtly love - lock, stock, and barrel. The discovery of gold, precious stones, or any other precious metal in a given area inevitably sets off a search for similar precious deposits in the same or in adjoining areas. Medieval France discovered gold in Perso-Arab tales of courtly love, which they mined and polished into a literary genre of their own. Thus, the 11th-century Persian romance of Vis and Ramin became the 12<sup>th</sup>-century European romances "*Lancelot and Guinevere*" and "*Tristan and Isolde*", and the Arab treatise on courtly love, Ring of the Dove, became an indispensable handbook in medieval French and European aristocratic society. Mining the same cultural area in search of other treasures, Renaissance Europe most probably discovered the Arab salon with its central, emblematic figure, the *adib*. First, Italy and then France adapted the Arab salon to their individual social context. Adopted, and adapted to the socio-cultural context in Europe, the male *adib* was transformed into the female *salonnière* by a group of aristocratic women in Renaissance Italy and France, who saw an opportunity to create a new social role for themselves – one that would permit them to expand the narrow, claustrophobic space within which contemporary society had enclosed them. They seized that opportunity and exploited it brilliantly.

## The Literary Salon



Mme. de Rambouillet (left) held a salon for nearly thirty years (1607-1645) in her home, the Hôtel de Rambouillet. Her salon greatly influenced French 17th century literature and it is considered to have had a fundamental influence on the genesis of the modern French novel. Her salon attained the height of its fame and its social and literary power at the period when Cardinal de Richelieu, who was one of its habitués, was "Prime Minister" of France. Mme. de Rambouillet's salon was frequented by some of the greatest literary names of the period – Corneille, Malherbe, La Fontaine, Bossuet, La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Sévigné, among others. The salon's habitués also included the founder members of the Académie Française, none of whose literary reputations appear to have survived the 17th century intact. However, their presence at the salon did prove very useful because the critical reforms of the French language that were begun in salon were pursued by the Academicians, after her death. The Académie Française, which is the official guardian of the French language, is charged with preserving the language's purity and overseeing its development. The discussions that took place in Madame de Rambouillet's salon, and in those of other 17th century *salonnières*, greatly influenced the development and evolution of French vocabulary - an influence reflected in the Academy's Dictionary.

In Madame de Rambouillet's salon, pride of place was given to learning, wit, and good manners, rather than to rank –

an ordering of priorities which came to characterize the French salon. Unlike most other salons, whose guests were predominantly male, Mme. de Rambouillet's salon was also frequented by a number of educated, intellectually gifted women with a love of literature. The word *Précieuse*, which came into use as a designation for the type of French woman who frequented her salon, signified a very accomplished woman of personal distinction whose intelligence, good taste, and good manners were in perfect accord. A contemporary literary critic made the following comment on the salon gatherings: "*The learned and the lettered formed the dominant element. They dined at noon, and the rest of the day was passed in conversations, in readings, in literary and scientific discussions. No card tables; it was in ready wit that each one paid his contribution.*" The witty conversations and clever word games of the *précieuses* (a term they never applied to themselves) launched a new literary style, called *préciosité* ("preciousness"). Discussing the influence of the *précieuses*, Patricia Howard observed: "*For if in French theatre in the second half of the century, women's roles are preeminent, it was the précieux movement which made them so.*" (The Influence of the Précieuses on Content and Structure in Quinault's and Lully's Tragédies Lyriques, *Acta Musicologica*, Vol.63, No.1, January 1991).

*Preciosité* was the subject, or rather the target, of several contemporary satires, of which Molière's comedy, *Les Précieuses ridicules* ("Affected Young Ladies"), published in 1659, is the best-known. Those quite devastating parodies of *préciosité*, which associated that literary genre with linguistic excess, were so successful that they eclipsed its accomplishments and those of the talented women who created it. Despite the pejorative connotation given to their literary movement, the *précieuses* did play a key role in the development of the French language, its structure, and its vocabulary. They discussed linguistic problems and invented new metaphorical expressions which are still widely used. Their passion for correct usage and linguistic purity invested them with an authority that was recognized and acknowledged by Claude Favre de Vaugelas (1585-1650), the eminent French grammarian who was a frequent visitor to the salons of the period. His experience moved him to observe: "*in cases of doubt about language, it is ordinarily best to consult women*". (Vaugelas, *Remarques sur la langue française* (1647).

Vaugelas played a major role in standardizing the French language. His *Remarques sur la langue française*, which contained his observations on good French usage, became an authoritative guide to the French language. It formed the basis for the rules for pure and elegant French, which were subsequently promulgated by the Académie Française, of which he was one of the original members. From 1639 until his death in 1650, Vaugelas also helped to compile the first edition of the Academy's dictionary. Thus, the language which he codified and made the standard against which good French usage would be measured for generations was partly, or even largely, based on the French that was spoken, discussed, and developed in the salons of the *précieuses*.

Apart from the great influence Madame de Rambouillet's salon had on the development of French language and literature, it is also credited with giving birth to the art of conversation, for which French society has become renowned: "*It was in this salon, too, that the modern art of conversation, which has played so conspicuous a part in French life, may be said to have had its birth....Conversation gave point to thought, clearness to expression, simplicity to language. Women of rank and recognized ability imposed the laws of good taste, and their vivid imaginations changed lifeless abstractions into something concrete and artistic. Men of letters, who had held an inferior and dependent position, were penetrated with the spirit of a refined society, while men of the world, in a circle where wit and literary skill were distinctions, began to aspire to the role of a bel esprit, to pride themselves upon some intellectual gift and the power to write without labor and without pedantry, as became their rank....A neatly turned epigram or a*

*clever letter made a social success". (Mason, 2001, p.26).*

Jean de La Bruyère (1645-1696), to whose illuminating observations on social manners and literary life in 17th-century France we owe so much of our knowledge of French society of that period, summed up in one pithy phrase the quintessential quality of the conversational art that was born in Madame de Rambouillet's salon: *"The esprit of conversation consists much less in displaying itself than in drawing out the wit of others"*. (*Les caractères ou Les Moeurs de ce Siècle* (1688). La Bruyère was no minor literary figure. He developed a literary style which influenced many writers, contemporary ones like Marivaux and more modern writers like Balzac, Proust, and Gide.

The torch that Madame de Rambouillet's salon lit and which so illuminated literary and social life in the first half of the 17th century, and the traditions she established during the three decades or so her salon functioned, were taken up, after her death by a number of gifted women, some of whom had frequented her salon. Prominent among them, was Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701) who launched her own literary salon in 1652, which met on Saturdays. Like Madame de Rambouillet's salon, it soon became the centre of Parisian literary and social life, attracting the most brilliant minds of the time. Madeleine de Scudéry, who was one of the more distinguished *précieuses* in Madame de Rambouillet's coterie, subsequently became a literary luminary herself. Her literary *oeuvre* includes the longest novel in French literature, *Artamène ou Le Grand Cyrus*, 10 vols. (1649-1653). Some literary critics consider it to be very first modern novel, while others attribute that distinction to *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), the work of Madame La Fayette who was another habituée of Madame de Rambouillet's salon.

Among those who frequented Madeleine de Scudéry 's salon were La Rochefoucauld, Mme. de Sévigné, Mme. de Sablé, Mme. de La Fayette, and the Duc de Montausier. Montausier was one of the most famous personalities of Louis XIV's court and the reputed model for the central character in Molière's play, *The Misanthrope*. Madeleine de Scudéry (right) wrote dismissively about the *"light and coquettish women whose only occupation is to adorn their persons and pass their lives in fêtes and amusements--women who think that scrupulous virtue requires them to know nothing but to be the wife of a husband, the mother of children, and the mistress of a family; and men who regard women as upper servants, and forbid their daughters to read anything but their prayer books."* With such uncompromising views, Madeleine de Scudéry would probably be unable to get elected to political office in today's politically-correct America. One recalls, with some sympathy, Hillary Clinton, during her campaign for a seat in the U.S. Senate, feeling an urgent electoral need to prove that she could bake a pie as well as any American housewife. Madeleine de Scudéry would have been horrified.



The *habitués* of Madeleine de Scudéry 's salon conversed on all the topics of the day, which ranged from "lighter" ones

like fashion to more "serious" topics - politics, literature, and the arts. They would circulate their work in manuscript form to be read aloud, discussed, and criticized, and they also competed with one another in improvising verses. One of the salon's habitués, the writer and historian, Paul Pellisson (1624-1693), whom Voltaire depicted as "*a mediocre poet, to be frank, but a very learned, eloquent man*" (*Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, p.1090, 1817), has left us a description of the good-natured atmosphere that reigned in the salon: "*Here one recites four verses; there, one writes a dozen. All this is done gaily and without effort. No one bites his nails, or stops laughing and talking. There are challenges, responses, repetitions, attacks, repartées. The pen passes from hand to hand, and the hand does not keep pace with the mind.*"

Madeline de Scudery attached great importance to conversation as "*the bond of society, the greatest pleasure of well-bred people, and the best means of introducing, not only politeness into the world, but a purer morality.*" Her own conversation was so remarkable and enjoyed such great success that she was persuaded to transcribe some of it for publication. Mme. de Sévigné (1626-1696), an habituée of the salon, was one of the most eminent literary women of the century. Her posthumously published Letters (1386 were published in two volumes), which were addressed to family and friends, paint an extraordinarily vivid picture of French society in the reign of Louis XIV. The work, with its beautifully penned, witty letters is considered a masterpiece of the epistolary genre. In one of the letters Mme. de Sévigné addressed to her daughter, we learn how impressed she was by Madeline de Scudery's conversation.

In her novel, the Grand Cyrus, Madeleine de Scudery trenchantly criticized the type of education contemporary French society reserved for women; "*One does not wish women to be coquettes but permits them to learn carefully all that fits them for gallantry, without teaching them anything which can fortify their virtue or occupy their minds. They devote ten or a dozen years to learning to appear well, to dress in good style, to dance and sing, for five or six; but this same person, who requires judgment all her life and must talk until her last sigh, learns nothing which can make her converse more agreeably, or act with more wisdom.*" The importance she accords to intelligent, well-informed conversation comes through clearly. Madeleine de Scudery was as modern in her views on marriage as any 21st-century feminist. She never married because she had no wish to lose her liberty, as she lucidly explained in one of her writings: "*I know that there are many estimable men who merit all my esteem and who can retain a part of my friendship, but as soon as I regard them as husbands, I regard them as masters, and so apt to become tyrants that I must hate them from that moment; and I thank the gods for giving me an inclination very much averse to marriage.*" That thought, so beautifully expressed, would no doubt be echoed by a number of 21st-century feminists.

Madeleine de Scudery, who was often described as the tenth Muse, counted among her personal friends the greatest men and women of the century, including Leibnitz, who was keen to correspond with her. In one of his many studies on women and society in 17<sup>th</sup>-century France, Victor Cousin (1792-1867) writer, philosopher, and member of the Académie Française, described Mlle. de Scudery as the "*creator of the psychological romance*" and "*a sort of French sister of Addison.*" Joseph Addison (1672–1719), the English essayist, poet, and politician, co-founded The Spectator magazine, in 1711, together with Richard Steele, the Irish writer and politician. The Spectator's stated goal was "*to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality...to bring philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffeehouses.*" One of its functions was to provide readers with educated, topical talking points, and advice on how to carry on conversations and social interactions in a polite manner. The influence of the French salon is unmistakable. It was no doubt, misplaced male pride which

prevented Cousin from calling Addison "a sort of English brother of Mlle. de Scudery" rather than the other way around. Moreover, given the fact that Mlle. de Scudery was 65 years older than Addison, that she had established her renowned literary salon twenty years before Addison was even born, and that a philosopher of Leibnitz's towering stature was keen to correspond with her, Cousin's reference to Addison should have been in the following terms: "a sort of junior, less talented, English brother of Mlle. de Scudery." Women are absolutely right. They need to be not twice as good, but many times as good as men to receive the same consideration.

L'Abbé Michel de Pure (1620-1680), the French Royal Chaplain, writer, and historiographer, frequented the salons of the *précieuses* assiduously. His principal work, *la Précieuse ou le mystère des ruelles* (1656-1658), is a four-volume *roman à clef* which sought to define *préciosité*. It contained pen portraits of all the great *salonnières* of the period, provided a detailed description of salon customs, manners, and habits, and reproduced many of the conversations that took place in them. Abbé de Pure, who was by no means uncritical of the *précieuses*, wrote glowingly of Madeleine de Scudery: "One may call Mlle. de Scudery the muse of our age and the prodigy of her sex. It is not only her goodness and her sweetness, but her intellect shines with so much modesty, her sentiments are expressed with so much reserve, she speaks with so much discretion, and all that she says is so fit and reasonable, that one cannot help both admiring and loving her. Comparing what one sees of her, and what one owes to her personally, with what she writes, one prefers, without hesitation, her conversation to her works. Although she has a wonderful mind, her heart outweighs it. It is in the heart of this illustrious woman that one finds true and pure generosity, an immovable constancy, a sincere and solid friendship." Coming from a man and a priest whose religion had demonized women to such an outrageous extent, from the very beginning of the Christian era, and which, throughout the centuries, had fomented great distrust and even hatred of them in legions of men, that was high praise indeed. In view of the fact that it was the *salonnières* who perfected the art of conversation, taking it to the highest levels it ever reached, the following opinion St Augustine expressed in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, appears utterly ludicrous: "If it was good company and conversation that Adam needed, it would have been much better arranged to have two men together as friends."



The studies Victor Cousin wrote about women and society in 17th-century France included one on Madeleine de Souvré, the Marquise de Sablé (left) (1599-1678), (*Madame de Sablé, nouvelles études sur les femmes illustres et la société du xviiie siècle*, 1863). She was one of the most famous *salonnières* of the period. Cousin is also the author of a four-volume work on Madame de Longueville, a regular attendant at Madame de Sablé's salon. Taken together, those two books by Cousin provide a vivid, comprehensive picture of French 17<sup>th</sup>-century society. La Rochefoucauld (François, Duc de la Rochefoucauld, 1630-1680), another habitué of Madame de Sablé's salon, was a writer of such great distinction that, it was said, he could easily have been elected a member of the prestigious Académie Française if he had wished. La Rochefoucauld's literary masterpiece his *Maxims* which, like Madame de Sévigné's *Letters*, is a model of its genre. (*La Rochefoucauld, Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes morales*, 1665).

However, it was not La Rochefoucauld but Mme. de Sablé who set the fashion of condensing the thoughts and experiences of life into maxims and epigrams. Her maxims, which were conceived before those of La Rochefoucauld, were posthumously published the same year she died. (*Maximes de Mme la Marquise de Sablé*, 1678). Her maxims were a substantial contribution to moral philosophy. Although they focus primarily on questions of virtue and vice, through them, also examined epistemological questions, especially those concerning the relationship between power and knowledge. The extraordinary quality of Mme. de Sablé's thought cannot be better illustrated than the fact that, as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, she perceived the crucial importance of the nexus between power and knowledge. More than three centuries later, that nexus is regarded by scholars in the South as one of the crucial problems the Global South must confront, a nexus which Norman Girvan explored in his paper, [Global Power Imbalances and Development Knowledge](#) (September, 2007). It is said that behind every successful man there is always a woman. Far from playing a supporting role "behind" a man, Madame de Sablé was way ahead of all of them.

Both La Rochefoucauld's "Maxims" and Pascal's *Pensées* were polished and perfected in Mme. de Sablé's salon. The following comment comes from Victor Cousin's book on Mme. de Sablé: "*When La Rochefoucauld had composed his sentences, he talked them over before or after dinner, or he sent them at the end of a letter. They were discussed, examined, and observations were made, by which he profited.*"

After profiting from the oral comments in the salon and before committing himself to publication, La Rochefoucauld submitted the manuscript containing his collected maxims to Mme. de Sablé who, in turn, forwarded them to her friends, requesting their written opinion. Those opinions, like many others expressed in the various salons, have been preserved for posterity. They not only reveal the subtle critical minds of the *salonnières* and their lack of hesitation in using them to devastating effect but also the delicacy of language in which their critical observations were usually couched. The image which comes to mind is that of a finely-honed rapier, sheathed in velvet, whose thrust is so swift and dexterous that the victim is aware that he is *touché* only in retrospect. Reading Madame de Rohan's comment (reproduced below, in part), it is difficult to restrain one's admiration for the subtlety of her criticism of male self-importance; of men's general ignorance of, and lack of esteem for, women; and of the difficulty many men have in dealing with women whose abilities make them stand out from the crowd - all contained in three very polished, exquisitely phrased sentences.

Eléonore de Rohan, author of *La Morale du Sage* (1669), concluded her observations on La Rochefoucauld's collection of maxims with the following paragraph: "*The maxim upon humility appears to me perfectly beautiful; but I have been so surprised to find it there, that I had the greatest difficulty in recognizing it in the midst of all that precedes and follows it. It is assuredly to make this virtue practiced among your own sex, that you have written maxims in which their self-love is so little flattered. I should be very much humiliated on my own part, if I did not say to myself what I have already said to you in this note, that you judge better the hearts of men than those of women, and that perhaps you do not know yourself the true motive which makes you esteem them less. If you had always met those whose temperament had been submitted to virtue, and in whom the senses were less strong than reason, you would think better of a certain number who distinguish themselves always from the multitude; and it seems to me that Mme. de La Fayette and myself deserve that you should have a better opinion of the sex in general.*"

Despite Madame de Rohan's rebuke to La Rochefoucauld that his maxims revealed an insufficient esteem for women, in the pen portrait he published of himself, he actually expressed having a greater esteem for cultivated women than for men: "*Where their intellect is cultivated, I prefer their society to that of men. One finds there a gentleness one does not meet with among ourselves; and it seems to me, beyond this, that they express themselves with more neatness, and give a more agreeable turn to the things they talk about.*" I have expressed similar sentiments in my own (unpublished) maxims. Perhaps, in the maxims to which Madame de Rohan referred, La Rochefoucauld had decided to sacrifice his true sentiments at the altar of a clever turn of phrase.

At La Rochefoucauld's request, Mme. de Sablé wrote a review of his maxims for publication in the "*Journal des Savants*", the oldest literary journal in Europe. The review, which was based on her own views as well as the comments submitted by her friends, appears to have struck a judicious balance between the critical and the eulogistic. La Rochefoucauld considered the review too severe when Mme. de Sablé submitted it to him for his approval, so she gave him permission to make whichever changes he wished. Taking her literally at her word, he removed all the adverse criticisms, retained the eulogistic ones, and had the amended review published in the literary journal. Mme. de Sablé did not criticize La Rochefoucauld for his very reproachable conduct. With her instinctive feminine knowledge of male susceptibilities, she tactfully decided to keep her silence and, with it, her friend. By purposefully removing all the adverse criticisms from the review which Mme. de Sablé had so carefully drafted, La Rochefoucauld transformed a balanced review into a panegyric. In maintaining her silence, despite the great mortification she must have felt on seeing her name attached to that unethically truncated review, Mme. de Sablé acted exactly as countless women have done in modern times, when faced with the dilemma of either biting their lip and swallowing their pride or talking out and risk breaking up the relationship. Men being who they are and women being who they are, it is quite likely that no satisfactory solution will ever be found for that particular dilemma.

We find the following comment by Amelia Gere Mason in her pen portrait of Madame de Sablé: "*Perhaps no one better represents the true precieuse of the seventeenth century, the happy blending of social savoir-faire with an amiable temper and a cultivated intellect.*" (2001, p.46). Madame de Sablé's salon was frequented by some of the most prominent men and women of the period, including the eminent jurist Jean Domat, whose three-volume work, Civil Laws in their Natural Environment (1689) was the principal inspiration for Montesquieu's De L'Esprit des Lois; Blaise Pascal, the renowned philosopher, theologian, and mathematician, whose work, Pensées de Pascal, (1670), is considered one of the masterpieces of French literature; and the distinguished Jansenist philosophers and theologians, Pierre Nicole and Antoine Arnauld. Many of Pascal's pensees are to be found among records of the conversations that took place in Madame de Sablé's salon, where they had been discussed, commented on, criticized, and evaluated. There is little doubt that Pascal must have published only those thoughts of his which, having survived what must have been a very exacting ordeal of fire, he felt had passed muster. Indeed, Victor Cousin is convinced that the ideas encapsulated by Pascal's Pensées germinated during discussions at Madame de Sablé's salon, with many if not most suggested by other participants. Cousin also considers it possible, if not probable, that Pascal's Discours sur les Passions de L'Amour (1652-1653) had its origins in discussions that took place at the salon. (Victor Cousin, Des Pensées de Pascal, 1842).

Since it was Madame de Sablé, not La Rochefoucauld, who created the new literary genre of the maxim, although the term has become virtually synonymous with his name, I present below a selection of her maxims to illustrate, for the reader, the quality of her thought. I find myself in total agreement with every single one:

*"Instead of taking care to acquaint ourselves with others, we only think of making ourselves known to them. It would be better to listen to other people in order to become enlightened rather than to speak so as to shine in front of them."*

*"Mean-spirited mediocrities, especially those with a smattering of learning, are the most likely to be opinionated. Only strong minds know how to correct their opinions and abandon a bad position."*

*"There are petty-minded people who cannot endure to be reminded of their ignorance because, since they are usually quite blind to all things, quite foolish, and quite ignorant, they never question anything, and are persuaded that they see clearly what in fact they never see at all, save through the darkness of their own dispositions."*

*"If we took as much trouble to be what we should be as we take to deceive others by disguising what we are, we could appear as we really are without having the trouble of disguising ourselves."*

*"It is such a great fault to talk too much that, in business and conversation, if what is good is also brief, it is doubly good, and one gains by brevity what one often loses by an excess of words."*

*"Often the desire to appear competent impedes our ability to become competent, because we are more anxious to display our knowledge than to learn what we do not know."*

*"One factor that makes it rare for us to find so few people who can carry on an agreeable and rational conversation is that there are practically no people who do not think first of all about what they want to say, rather than responding precisely to what others are saying to them. The politest people are content merely to show an attentive mien, while all the time we see that their eyes and their minds are wandering, and that they are in a rush to return to what they want to say. They should consider that this insistent search for self-satisfaction is a poor way of giving pleasure, and that it is a greater accomplishment to listen well and reply justly than to speak well and often without responding to what others are saying to us."*

There were other illustrious *salonnières* in 17<sup>th</sup> century-France, who wielded enormous social influence and whose salons were also centers of creative thought. The constraints of space permit only a few cursory comments on three of the most outstanding -- Madame de Longueville, Madame de la Fayette, and (Mlle) Julie d'Angennes who was Mme. de Rambouillet's eldest daughter. Julie d'Angennes was famed for her penetrating intellect and the subtlety of her

mind. In his life of Madame de Sablé, Victor Cousin called her the most accomplished of the group of women who frequented her mother's salon. (Madame De Sablé, 1854). Madame de la Fayette's novel, *Princesse de Clèves*, considered the first modern novel by some, stamped the seal on her literary reputation. It came to be regarded as an important development of the novel. Voltaire evidently shared that view: "Before M<sup>me</sup>. de La Fayette, people wrote in a stilted style of improbable things." (Le siècle de Louis XIV, Catalogue de la plupart des écrivains français qui ont paru dans le Siècle de Louis XIV, pour servir à l'histoire littéraire de ce temps, 1751). Like all the women who formed part of Madame de Rambouillet's circle, Madame de la Fayette also wrote maxims. The following is one of my favourites: "He who puts himself above others, whatever talent he may possess, puts himself below his talent."

Cardinal Mazarin who became France's Prime Minister and the most powerful person in France after Cardinal Richelieu's death, said of Madame de Longueville that she was one of the three women he knew, who were "capable of governing and overturning three kingdoms." Napoleon made a remarkably similar comment about another, very distinguished *salonnière*, as we shall later see. Several of the *salonnières* of 17<sup>th</sup>-century France were writers of distinction. They created two new literary genres – the maxim and letter-writing; they created a new art form - the art of conversation – and developed it to near perfection; not one, but two of them, is credited with writing the first modern novel; they improved and perfected the French language in their salons: and, under their impetus, French society was transformed from the relatively rough, unrefined society that one finds in countries where women are either sequestered (as in Muslim countries) or not permitted an active social role (as was the case in pre-17<sup>th</sup> century Europe), to a highly refined one in which civility, politeness, good manners, and consideration for others are highly prized.

The invention of the art of conversation was perhaps the most significant achievement of the French literary salon, the importance of which extended far beyond the social sphere. Marc Fumaroli has examined the equalizing role conversation played under France's *ancien régime*. He informs us that, in that pre-democratic era, the art of conversation, as it was practised in Parisian private circles on the fringe of the Court and its institutions, was a veritable institution with its own rules, ethic, rites, and style. It was a counterpoint to the rigidly-hierarchical, autocratic power structure of the time. It was also the principal medium for conveying knowledge, for expressing new ideas, for developing new philosophical concepts, for testing and fine-tuning new theories, and for refining new art forms. After paying a brief visit to Paris in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Samuel Johnson, the English lexicographer, declared that he had heard more conversation worth remembering during his short stay there than he had heard in an entire (winter) season in London.

The "institution" of the conversation was egalitarian, in the sense that rank, titles, fortune, or power counted for little. Personal merit, as displayed in that competitive intellectual game of words, wit, and wisdom, was the sole criterion for establishing each person's social credentials as well as the pecking order. (Marc Fumaroli, Preface to *L'Art de La Conversation*, edited by J. Hellegouarc'h, 1997). That uniquely French social institution was also egalitarian in terms of gender. To paraphrase Orwell, in that particular respect, the women of the French salon were more equal than the men, for it was they who ruled the roost. Intelligent conversation remains the preferred form of socialization in modern French society. It was, no doubt, that particularly French social feature which led Jorge Luis Borges (no mean conversationalist himself) to declare that "the French are an intellectual people", and J. K Galbraith to call Paris "the intellectual salon of Europe" - a reputation it has enjoyed for more than 200 years. In a way, the institution of the

conversation presaged a modern institutionalized mechanism – the *concours* (a competitive examination) – as a universal method for establishing the pecking order in modern France's meritocracy. In France, to obtain employment of any kind, to enter an educational establishment or to be selected for any new task, one has to sit a *concours*. Even postmen, must do so. Perhaps, in France, "even bees do it" (to quote Eartha Kitt's famous song "*Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love*"). They certainly have a pecking order which places the Queen Bee at the very top. *Vive la méritocratie!* If our own countries in the South had chosen meritocracy instead of mediocrity, we would not be in the sorry pass most countries in the South currently find themselves.

Perhaps no writer has captured the quintessential quality and the extraordinary achievement of the 17th-century *salonnières* as Amelia Mason has done:

*"In considering the great centers in which the fashionable, artistic, literary, and scientific Paris of the seventeenth century found its meeting ground, one is struck with the practical training given to its versatile, flexible feminine minds. Women entered intelligently and sympathetically into the interests of men, who, in turn, did not reserve their best thoughts for the club or an after-dinner talk among themselves. There was stimulus as well as diversity in the two modes of thinking and being. Men became more courteous and refined, women more comprehensive and clear. But conversation is the spontaneous overflow of full minds, and the light play of the intellect is only possible on a high level, when the current thought has become a part of the daily life, so that a word suggests infinite perspectives to the swift intelligence. It is not what we know, but the flavor of what we know, that adds "sweetness and light" to social intercourse. With their rapid intuition and instinctive love of pleasing, these French women were quick to see the value of a ready comprehension of the subjects in which clever men are most interested. It was this keen understanding, added to the habit of utilizing what they thought and read, their ready facility in grasping the salient points presented to them, a natural gift of graceful expression, with a delicacy of taste and an exquisite politeness which prevented them from being aggressive, that gave them their unquestioned supremacy in the salons which made Paris for so long a period the social capital of Europe. It was impossible that intellects so plastic should not expand in such an atmosphere, and the result is not difficult to divine. From Mme. de Rambouillet to Mme. de La Fayette and Mme. de Sévigné, from these to Mme. de Staël and George Sand, there is a logical sequence."* (Mason, 2001, pp.83-84).

### The Enlightenment Salon

Under the guidance and management of Mme. du Deffand, Madame de Tencin, Madame Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse, and , and other *salonnières* in the 18th century, the French salon became an institution for promoting the ideas and principles of the Enlightenment, which was the most important intellectual movement in the Western world since the Renaissance. The Enlightenment salon brought together the *philosophes*, intellectuals, writers, artists, and leading figures in French political and social life.

Many, if not most, of the *philosophes* who frequented the salons in the 1760s and 1770s were contributors to the *Encyclopédie* (28 vols., 1751–1775), co-edited by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, the objective of which was to overcome ignorance and superstition and help advance humankind by means of rational thought and

knowledge. The salons facilitated meetings and discussions between the *encyclopédistes*, whose ideas were debated by the *philosophes* and others who attended the various salons which were held between two and four evenings a week, depending on the particular *salonnière*. The topics discussed ranged from science, philosophy, politics, and economics to literature, art, and music, the discussions directly linked to the written output of the Enlightenment. Prominent in the minds of the *philosophes* participating in the salon discussions, was a desire to bring about changes in society, to challenge the authority of both the church and the monarchy, and to reform the government.

The salons provided the *philosophes* and other writers who frequented them, with the opportunity to read their latest manuscripts to a discerning, influential group of persons who had the means to bring them to the notice of publishers. Plays were performed privately in the salon theaters, away from the censor's sharp eye and in the presence of receptive audiences who would offer constructive criticism. Musical and operatic recitals were also performed in the salons. The salon of the talented painter Mme. Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842), considered one of the greatest portraitists of her time, gained renown for its discussions on art, music, and literature. So many artists and celebrities reportedly flocked to attend it that, for lack of available seats, even army Field Marshals occasionally had to sit on the floor. Such outstanding success, especially in the case of a woman, always has its downside. Unflattering rumours were circulated about her by envious contemporaries, depicting Mme Vigée-Lebrun as a very debauched woman who slept with every man in Paris and also participated in orgies. The "*disreputable tales*", which the Chorus in Euripides' play, *Medea*, had mistakenly thought, more than two thousand years before, would no longer be told by men about women, were now being told (mainly) by women about one of their own.

Because of its salons, Paris came to be called the "*café de l'Europe*". The city became the intellectual center of Europe, a powerful magnet attracting writers, thinkers, and men and women of distinction from other countries, all eager to attend the celebrated Parisian salons, the renown of which had spread throughout the Western world. Among the more illustrious visitors were the English historian, Edward Gibbon and writers, Horace Walpole and Lord Chesterfield; the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who went on to become one of the most prominent figures of the Scottish Enlightenment; the Italian economist, Abbé Galiani; the German philosopher, Baron Friedrich von Grimm; and the American politicians, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (the American Minister to France, 1785-1789). Those and other foreign visitors were instrumental in spreading the ideas of the Enlightenment throughout the Western world. Baron Grimm's bimonthly newsletter, *La Correspondance littéraire*, to which, Catherine II, the Russian Empress, the King of Poland, and many princes from the smaller German States subscribed, kept European royalty and nobility abreast of Enlightenment ideas, thus further helping their diffusion. The ideas and principles generated by the Enlightenment are credited with having motivated and influenced, the drafters of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, the American Declaration of Independence, and the United States Bill of Rights. Here is Amelia Mason's description of the central role the Enlightenment salon played in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France.

*"During the latter half of the eighteenth century the center of social life was no longer the court, but the salons. They had multiplied indefinitely, and, representing every shade of taste and thought, had reached the climax of their power as schools of public opinion, as well as their highest perfection in the arts and amenities of a brilliant and complex society....Affairs in France had taken too serious an aspect to be ignored, and the theories of the philosophers were among the staple topics of conversation; indeed, it was the great vogue of the philosophers that gave many of the most noted social centers their prestige and their fame. It is not the salons of the high nobility that suggest themselves*

*as the typical ones of this age. It is those which were animated by the habitual presence of the radical leaders of French thought. Economic questions and the rights of man were discussed as earnestly in these brilliant coteries as matters of faith and sentiment, of etiquette and morals, had been a hundred years before....If the drawing rooms of the seventeenth century were the cradles of refined manners and a new literature, those of the eighteenth were literally the cradles of a new philosophy." (Mason, 2001, page 120).*

Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675-1755), who became an *éminence grise* at Court when his childhood friend, the Duc d'Orléans, was appointed regent following the death of Louis XIV, was a political thinker and writer whose style was much admired by subsequent French writers, including Proust. In his multi-volume *Mémoires*, Saint-Simon commented on the great distinction of the French salon and its *habitués*, drawing particular attention to the considerable influence it exercised in social and public affairs: *"It was a sort of academy of beaux esprits, of gallantry, of virtue, and of science, for these things accorded marvelously. It was a rendezvous of all that was most distinguished in condition and in merit; a tribunal with which it was necessary to count, and whose decisions upon the conduct and reputation of people of the court and the world, had great weight."*

The salon of the Marquise de Lambert (1647-1753), which was established in 1710, was a transition between the seventeenth-century literary style that was perfected in Mme. de Rambouillet's salon and the philosophical style of the eighteenth century. Until her death in 1733, Mme. de Lambert, a distinguished writer herself, held a weekly salon for intellectuals, artists, and writers, where some of the best minds of the period met and engaged in serious discussion of literature, science, and philosophy. Mme. de Lambert's influence was so considerable and her salon so prestigious that it had the reputation of being one of the best springboards for election to the Académie Française. Montesquieu, the celebrated philosopher and author of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) was one of several *habitués* of her salon whose election to the Académie she was credited with having obtained. *"For more than two decades, after it began in 1710, Lambert's salon retained its pre-eminence in Parisian society. She realized in it long-held desires for good discussion....In retrospect, Lambert's salon takes its place as the first of the great Enlightenment salons....Lambert's salon seemed also an "antechamber" to a renaissant Académie Française."* (Katharina Wilson (ed), *An Encyclopaedia of Continental Women Writers*, Volume II, p.693. 1991).

Mme. de Lambert was one of the earliest writers to explore "feminist" issues. *New Reflections on Women* (1728) was one of the three books she published in her lifetime. In one of her six posthumously published books, *Treatise on Old Age* (1747), she compared men's lot in life with the less advantageous one reserved for women: *"Men have been provided with all the help they need to perfect their minds and acquire the knowledge to achieve self-fulfilment throughout their lives. Cicero wrote his Treatise on Old Age to help men derive maximum profit from a stage in life when we seem to have lost everything. Everything is done for men; but women, at every stage of their life, must rely solely on their own resources: their education is neglected in their youth; they are deprived of any support or assistance in their old age; most women also live without self-examination or soul-searching; in their youth, they are vain and spend their time idling away their lives; in their old age, when they are feeble, they are deserted."*

Baroness Claudine de Tencin (1682-1749), who was a very talented novelist, established another transition salon that became a renowned rendezvous for the French literary, artistic, and intellectual elite of the period. *"The influence of*

*Mme. de Tencin was felt, not only in the social and intellectual, but in the political life of the century" (Mason, 2001).* Among the distinguished personalities who frequented her salon were the encyclopedist, Denis Diderot; the philosophers, Rousseau and Helvétius; the writer, Bernard de Fontenelle (a nephew of Corneille); and Marivaux, novelist and dramatist. A former nun who had been released from her vows in 1749, Claudine de Tencin took full advantage of the socially accepted sexual freedom which the French and English upper classes enjoyed at the time. As if to make up for the time lost as a nun, her lovers were legion. Among them were the Duc de Richieieu, a French marshal and grandnephew of Cardinal Richelieu; the French prime minister, Cardinal Guillaume Dubois; and Louis-Camus Destouches, a French artillery officer with whom she had an illegitimate son - d'Alembert, the philosopher and encyclopedist. Madame de Tencin's salon was the first to admit foreigners. Among the English visitors to her salon were Lord Chesterfield, diplomat, writer, and noted wit; and Viscount Bolingbroke, the philosopher and politician.

Madame de Tencin was neither reticent in utilizing her charms to obtain what she wanted or reluctant in admitting it. She declared in a letter to the Duc de Richieieu; *"A clever woman knows how to combine pleasure with self-interest and how to achieve her ends without alienating her lover."* (Letter dated 1st August 1743). Madame de Tencin's religious scepticism and her feminist views were revealed by her remark: *"It is evident, from the way he has treated us, that God is a man"*, It was her influence that propelled Montesquieu's masterpiece, *De l'Esprit des Lois* (1749) to success, and it was also her influence which helped secure Marivaux's election to the Académie Française. Of Madame de Tencin and her salon, Marmontel wrote: *"I saw assembled there Montesquieu, Fontenelle, Mairan, Marivaux, the young Helvetius, Astruc, and others, all men of science or letters, and, in the midst of them, a woman of brilliant intellect and profound judgment, who, with her kind and simple exterior, had rather the appearance of the housekeeper than the mistress. This was Mme. de Tencin. . ."*

Unlike the other *salonnières* who were almost all aristocrats, Marie Thérèse Geoffrin was of humble origins. Her father was a nobleman's valet and her mother, the daughter of a middle-class banker. Her marriage to a rich manufacturer provided her with the means to establish a salon in 1748. It is a tribute to the possibilities that were open to women with determination and personality, despite the rigid, hierarchically-structured society of pre-revolutionary France, that Madame Geoffrin's salon attracted some of the most famous writers, artists, and intellectuals of the Enlightenment period. They included Edward Gibbon (author of the landmark work, the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire), David Hume, and Horace Walpole. A future King of Poland, Stanislas Poniatowski, was among the distinguished personalities who frequented her salon. Mme. Geoffrin corresponded regularly with European royalty, among whom were Empress Marie Thérèse of Austria, Catherine the Great of Russia, and King Stanislas of Poland. Mme de Geoffrin had a most puzzling character trait. She held a view that is normally associated with male chauvinists, namely, she believed that women were apt to distract the conversation, as a result of which she invited only one woman, Julie de Lespinasse, to her salon gatherings.

Mlle. Julie de Lespinasse (1732-1776), *"The Muse of the Encyclopedia"*, as she was called, hosted perhaps the most renowned salon of the Enlightenment period, over which she presided during the last twelve years of her life. Among the intellectual luminaries who frequented it, were the philosophers, Montesquieu, Helvetius, and Condillac; the novelists and playwrights, Marivaux and Abbé Raynal; the Marquis de Condorcet, philosopher, politician and mathematician (calculus, probability theory); D'Alembert, philosopher, mathematician (differential equations) and co-director of the Encyclopédie; Jacques Turgot, the influential politician and economist; and Jean-Jacques de Mairan,

academician, physicist, philosopher, and astronomer, after whom a crater on the moon is named. (Dena Goodman *Julie de Lespinasse: A Mirror for the Enlightenment* in *Eighteenth-Century Women and the Arts*, F. Keener and S. Lorsch (eds), 1988.) *"Hume, Gibbon, Walpole, indeed every foreigner of distinction who visited Paris, lent to this salon the éclat of their fame, the charm of their wit, or the prestige of their rank. It was such men as these who gave it so rare a fascination and so lasting a fame."* (Mason, 2001). She loved both life and love with equal passion: *"I love in order to live, and I live to love."* It was, seemingly, the motto of her life.

Julie de Lespinasse was considered the intellectual peer of the brilliant personalities who frequented her salon, which was described as one of *"the institutions of the eighteenth century."* Her intellectual influence was such that she was called the *"foster-mother of philosophers"*. *"Nowhere was conversation more lively, more brilliant, or better regulated,"* was Marmontel's comment. Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799), historian, poet, playwright, philosopher, Academician, encyclopedist – collaborator of Diderot and d'Alembert, and a man whose fame had spread throughout the whole of Europe, greatly contributed to the ideas which laid the groundwork for the French Revolution. The influential literary critic, Sainte-Beuve, called Mlle. de Lespinasse the Fontenelle of women. It was high praise indeed. Bernard de Fontenelle (1657-1757), was an Academician and distinguished writer who, in his youth, earned the reputation of being *"a young man, who was perfect in every respect."* Voltaire wrote glowingly of Fontenelle's brilliance in his book, *Temple du Goût* (Temple of Taste, 1733).

The salon of Madame du Deffand (1697-1780) was famous for its witty conversation and the high intellectual level of the discussions. Her superior intellect elicited from Horace Walpole, a distinguished habitué of her salon, a compliment on the *"prodigious quickness"* of her mind. Sainte Beuve ranks her next to Voltaire as a writer of the purest classic prose. Although she did not generally agree with the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Madame du Deffand nevertheless welcomed them to her salon.

Madame du Chatelet (right) (1706-1749), who was not a *salonnière*, was celebrated for her brilliance by the male intellectual elite of the period. Voltaire had a profound respect for her scientific work (physics and mathematics). Madame du Chatelet loved the exact sciences. She published an analysis of Leibniz's philosophy, translated Isaac Newton's epoch-making work, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, into French, wrote a scientific dissertation on the combustion of fire, and a philosophical work that critically examined the existence of God. She also helped Voltaire introduce English intellectual thought into France – all in her very short life. Smitten by her charm and impressed by her dedication to her intellectual work, Voltaire remarked: *"I confess that she is tyrannical, one must talk about metaphysics, when the temptation is to talk of love. Ovid was formerly my*



*master; it is now the turn of Locke.*" How many women would derive equal pleasure from passionate lovemaking and discussing mathematics, metaphysics, and Locke's philosophy, alternating or punctuating one with the other? How many women would be able to captivate the most outstanding intellectual of the century, both with her mind and with her body, leaving him hungry for more of both?

Sleeping three or four hours a night at most, Madame du Chatelet lived a life of excesses – excess for her intellectual work, for her gambling passion, for her divers pleasures and amusements, and for her loves and famous lovers, of whom Voltaire was the principal one. She met him in 1734 when he was thirty-nine and she, seventeen. They were lovers for the last fifteen years of her short life. She died at forty-two. Like a bright meteor brightening a dark sky for a fleeting moment, Madame du Chatelet illuminated the Parisian intellectual world, and the Enlightenment itself, for a brief period – all too brief for Voltaire, who declared at her death: *"I have lost a friend of twenty-five years, a great man who had only fault, that of being a woman....."*(Elisabeth Badinter et Danielle Muzerelle (eds), Madame du Châtelet, La Femme Des Lumières, 2006).

Susan Necker (1737–1794, the wife of the Swiss financier, Jacques Necker, who was appointed Louis XVI's finance minister in 1776, hosted the last great salon of France's *Ancien Régime*, and one of the most celebrated of all French salons. Necker owed much of his success to his wife, whose salon, which she used to help break down social barriers, was frequented by the leading writers and philosophers of the time. Every Friday, Madame Necker brought together French political and economic theorists, philosophers, encyclopedists as well as a number of foreign luminaries. Madame Necker's salon also became an important venue for writers because she realized the great influence they exercised on public opinion, an influence which does not appear to have waned more than three centuries later. Her salon activities, her activities in support of her husband, and the time she devoted to giving her daughter Germaine (the future Madame Staël) the best education possible, left Madame Necker little time to devote to her own writing. As a result, she published only three works, in one of which, *Réflexions sur le Divorce* (1794), one notes the following perceptive observation: *"Clever is the husband who guards his silence, for such silence is the source of much anguish to women."* She compared certain women to *"light layers of cotton wool in a box packed with porcelain; we do not pay much attention to them, but if they were taken away everything would be broken."*

Among the intellectual luminaries who frequented Madame Necker's salon were Edward Gibbon; Marmontel; Georges-Louis de Buffon, writer, biologist, and naturalist whose scientific theories influenced many scientists, including Darwin and Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck; the French biologist and naturalist. The latter is credited with having developed *"the first truly cohesive theory of evolution"*; Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, writer and botanist; Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, philosopher, prolific writer, and a leading precursor of socially utopian ideas; and Guillaume-Thomas François Raynal (*l'Abbé Raynal*), socialist thinker who fell foul of the Jacobins for denouncing their excesses but who enjoyed such great national prestige and popularity that they dared not send him to the guillotine. The Jacobins had to content themselves with disparaging Raynal and his opinions.

Among the more renowned salons that bridged the French revolution and the Napoleonic period were those hosted by Madame de Condorcet (the wife of the politician, mathematician, and philosopher), Madame de Staël (Madame Necker's daughter), and Madame Roland. Sophie de Condorcet was reputed for her beauty and her indifference to

class and social origins. She was a writer and translator who was completely fluent in English and Italian and she produced influential translations of Thomas Paine and Adam Smith.

Madame Roland (1754-1793), writer and historian, had a lively wit and an engaging personality. Like Madame Geoffrin, she was of humble origins. Her father was a master engraver. As a young girl, her enormous intellectual curiosity drove her to read books on virtually every subject, including history, philosophy, poetry, mathematics, and religion. Writing about her insatiable quest for knowledge, she once observed: *"I need study as I need food."* Madame Roland discovered Plutarch's Parallel Lives, at the tender age of nine. It made an indelible impression on her, later declaring that it was that Plutarch's book which convinced her that the best form of government was a republican one. In her Memoirs (1795), Madame Roland discussed the considerable impact that reading Plutarch and Rousseau had made on her: *"Rousseau...made the same impression on me as had Plutarch when I was nine... Plutarch had predisposed me to become a republican; he had inspired in me the true enthusiasm for public virtues and liberty. Rousseau showed me the domestic happiness to which I had a right to aspire and the ineffable delights I was capable of tasting."* In effect, those two writers seem to have liberated her both as a woman and as a politically-aware citizen.

Being a woman, Madame Roland was unable to play an active role in politics but through her husband, Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, an economist and an influential member of the Girondist political faction over whom she held great sway, Madame Roland greatly influenced the Girondist political movement. She was one of the rare women to have been accepted in the political world of the epoch, albeit remaining on its fringe. Her salon attracted some of the most influential politicians of that turbulent revolutionary period. They included, Robespierre (arguably the emblematic figure of the French Revolution), Jacques Pierre Brissot, Camille Desmoulins, Petion de Villeneuve, Francois Nicholas Buzot and Condorcet, the first four of whom, like Madame Roland herself, were subsequently guillotined. The last two were condemned to death for treason. Both escaped, but Condorcet was recaptured and died in prison in obscure circumstances.

Despite her intellectual abilities and her avant-garde opinions, Madame Roland was far from being a feminist. She had a surprisingly traditionalist view of women and the relationship they should have with men. Most surprising also was that, unlike other salon hostesses, Madame Roland never invited any women to her salons, not even the single token female invitee that Madame Geoffrin would restrict herself to because she considered that women distracted from the conversation. Marilyn Monroe once quipped: *"I don't mind living in a man's world as long as I can be a woman in it."* Madame Roland (re)created a man's world in her salon and made sure that she was the only woman in it. In a letter addressed to one of her male admirers, the botanist, Louis Bosc, she confessed: *"I believe...in the superiority of your sex in every respect. In the first place, you have strength, and everything that goes with it results from it: courage, perseverance, wide horizons and great talents....But without us you would not be virtuous loving, loved, or happy. Keep therefore all your glory and authority. As for us, we have and wish no other supremacy than that over your morals, no other rule than that over your hearts ....It often angers me to see women disputing privileges which ill them.... [Women] should never show their learning or talents in public."* If any woman were to express such views today, she would probably be burnt in effigy at the next feminist conference.

Madame Roland was tried on trumped up charges of harbouring royalist sympathies and was condemned to death. In

actual fact, she was a victim of the political conflict between the Girondins and the more radical Jacobins which ended in a bloody purge of the former. During the ensuing Reign of Terror (September 1793 – July 1794) some 20,000 to 40,000 Frenchmen and women were executed on charges of being "*enemies of the revolution.*" Her husband, whom they both assumed was in greater danger from the Jacobins than she was, herself, fled to Rouen with her help to escape the murderous fury of the Jacobins. The Rolands underestimated the Jacobins who arrested Madame Roland. She spent her time in prison writing her *Memoirs*, and her autobiography which she entitled *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity*. At the trial's conclusion, the Revolutionary Tribunal pronounced Madame Roland guilty of a "*horrible conspiracy against the unity and indivisibility of the Republic, and the liberty and safety of the French people*", and ordered her execution to take place the very same afternoon. Before she placed her head on the execution block, Madame Roland bowed dramatically before the clay Statue of Liberty in the *Place de la Revolution*, declaring: "*Oh Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name.*" Similar sentiments must have been expressed by a number of zealous Soviet and Chinese revolutionaries when they found themselves astonished victims of Stalin's purges Mao Tse Tung's Cultural Revolution. Monsieur Roland committed suicide when he learnt of his wife's execution.



Madame de Staël (left) (1776-1817), a distinguished novelist and essayist, grew up in the intellectual atmosphere of her mother's salon, rubbing shoulders with some of the most renowned intellectuals of the day. A number of eminent persons unsuccessfully sought her hand in marriage, among whom was William Pitt, who subsequently became Britain's first prime minister. After the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, Madame de Staël became involved in power struggles and soon found herself, in 1793, having to flee France so as to avoid becoming yet another victim of the Reign of Terror. She established a salon at the family chateau in Coppet, Switzerland, which soon became an important meeting place for leading European intellectuals of the time. Returning to Paris when the Reign of Terror ended, Madame de Staël fell foul of Napoléon who forced exiled her in 1795. Refusing to remain in exile, she returned to the capital in 1797 where she established her Parisian salon. She had married Baron Staël-Holstein, the Swedish Ambassador to France, in 1794, but they separated three years later. The Baron died in 1802. Madame de Staël married Albert de Roca, a former French army officer almost half her own age, in 1811

Parisian salon became a venue for writers, artists, intellectuals and, particularly, for those politicians who, like her, opposed the *Directoire* - the body of five directors who governed France from 1795, when the Convention (the revolutionary legislature) was dissolved, to 1799, when Napoleon replaced the *Directoire* with the Consulate, after overthrowing it in a *coup d'état*. He subsequently embarked on a three-stage plan for seizing power. The first phase was to have himself appointed one of the three Consuls in charge of the Consulate; the second phase was to have a constitution adopted which invested the First Consul with greater power than the other two; Napoleon's subsequent nomination as First consul completed the *coup d'état*. The path was thus paved for establishing an Empire (monarchy having been thoroughly discredited by the *Ancien Régime*), with Napoleon as Emperor. When Napoleon became the first consul and *de facto* ruler of France, Mme de Staël's lover, Benjamin Constant, a member of the Tribunate, the council which debated proposed laws, joined the opposition. Constant, with whom Madame de Staël was living at

the time, made several political speeches attacking Napoleon – speeches which the latter thought Mme de Staël had written for Constant. It was evidence of how greatly Napoleon esteemed (or rather feared) her political skills and writing abilities, because Benjamin Constant was, himself, a distinguished writer. Mme de Staël, in whose salon new ideas developed and propagated for public consumption, soon became a centre of political opposition to the régime, forcing Napoleon to banish her from the capital, with firm instructions to remain at least 150 miles away.

Madame de Staël ardently believed in a republican form of government ever since she discovered Rousseau's work as a young girl and, despite her involuntary removal from Paris, she launched a determined opposition to thwart Napoleon's imperialistic ambitions. Her influence was so great and she proved so much a thorn in Napoleon's side that he forced her into exile once again, in 1803. Madame de Staël returned to Switzerland where she re-established her Swiss salon at the family Château in Coppet. From there, she continued to be an outspoken political opponent of Napoleon, receiving, at her salon, French writers, intellectuals, and political dissidents who, like her, were staunch opponents of Napoleon. Madame de Staël returned to Paris when Napoleon, himself, was exiled to the island of Elba, in 1814, by the victorious Coalition Powers. Despite her poor health she did not hesitate to join the political fray once more, this time around to oppose the reactionary tendencies of the Bourbon monarchy and to militate for the abolition of the slave trade.

Notwithstanding his undisguised hostility towards Madame de Staël, Napoleon could not help but recognize her great qualities. He wrote of her: *"One must recognize after all that she is a very distinguished woman who is endowed with great intelligence and talent; she will always remain that way."* During his exile in St. Helena, to which he had been banished after his defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon openly acknowledged her immense power and importance: *"There are only three powers left in Europe – Russia, England, and Madame de Staël."* No greater tribute could be made to that most remarkable woman, her stellar personality, and her outstanding achievements, than those two spontaneous, extraordinary compliments by a man who was not only an implacable political enemy of hers but also someone who, for many years, was the most powerful person in the world – an outstanding leader of men who had changed the face of Europe and left a political, military, and legal legacy which no other ruler in modern times has been able to rival. Napoleon evidently considered Madame de Staël a more redoubtable foe than any of the enemy generals (perhaps with the sole exception of Wellington) whom he had faced during his victorious career. Moreover, the enormous influence Madame de Staël exercised on the opinion of the leading French personalities and political actors of the time, and the fact that Napoleon was very preoccupied by the effect of that influence, is revealed in the following plaintive comment he made when he was still the world's most powerful man: *"They say that she does not speak of politics or me; but how does it happen that all who speak to her come to like me less?"* Which man could have humbled the Great Napoleon to such an extent that he would begin to talk and act like a victim? None. But one woman accomplished that amazing feat – Madame Staël.

Madame de Staël's book on Germany, *De l'Allemagne* (1810), which is generally considered her *chez d'œuvre*, received great critical acclaim. She wrote it after paying a visit to Germany, which had left her fascinated by the blossoming and renewed vitality of German cultural life, at the turn of the century. The observations Madame de Staël made in her book, on Germany's cultural awakening, became a reference for the nascent Romantic Movement. Among her many works of fiction were the novels, *Mirza*, *Adélaïde et Théodore*, *Pauline*, *Delphine* (1802), *Corinne or Italy* (1807), and a verse drama, *Sophie* (1790). In *Corinne*, we find a new word coined by Madame de Staël - "*nationality*", a term which

has since become such an important one in the modern political lexicon that it would be difficult for anyone, born around or after the mid-19th century, to envisage a time when the term did not exist. That neologism is perhaps no better illustration that politics was integral to Madame de Staël's life and work. Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution, Madame de Staël's last work, was published posthumously in 1818, the year after her death. The political philosopher and writer, Jean-Jacques, Rousseau, one of the Enlightenment's most illustrious figures, was Madame de Staël's initial and principal inspiration. In her first serious work, Letters on the Works and the Character of J.-J. Rousseau (1788), written when she only 22 years of age, she expressed her deep admiration for Rousseau. Goethe, Schiller, and Chateaubriand were but three of the famous writers with whom she was associated in her lifetime.

Madame de Staël was an avant-garde, liberated woman in many respects, not least of all in her private life. She supported Rousseau's idea that passionate love is natural to human beings, and that to yield oneself to love does not necessarily mean having to abandon virtue. She published A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations in 1796. Apart from Benjamin Constant, the father of her daughter, Albertine, Madame de Staël had many lovers, among whom were Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, the Bishop of Autun; Count Louis de Narbonne, an illegitimate son of Louis XV who became an army general and minister of war under the *Ancien Régime*, with whom she had two sons and whom she helped escape to England in 1791; and Count Adolphe-Louis Ribbing, who masterminded the assassination of King Gustavus III of Sweden-Finland. She had a daughter, Gustavine, with her first husband and a son with her second one. Madame de Staël appeared to have found the solution for one of the crucial problems confronting the modern professional woman – how to combine an effective, fulfilling professional career with a satisfying private or family life. She found the time to produce a number of important literary and political works, to run one of the most brilliant of all French salons, to exercise considerable behind-the-scenes influence on French politics, to bring up several children, and to have a series of love affairs with some of the most important men of the period – all movers and shakers – a feat which might, in itself, have proven to be a full-time activity for the average woman. Madame de Staël might well have been the woman who invented multitasking.

Madame de Staël was not in love with her first husband from whom she was formally separated in 1797, two years before his death, but she did respect him: *"Of all the men I do not love, my husband is, without any doubt, the one I prefer."* It is quite interesting that where a woman who has lived a very passionate life would normally reminisce about *"all the men I have loved"* (Jeanne Moreau once said *"I love the lines in my face. They remind me of the men who put them there"*), Madame de Staël reminisced about the men she did not love. Perhaps, quite wisely, she made love to many but fell in love with none. Despite the fact that she was obviously very attracted to men – to their bodies as well as to their minds - she was not at all starry-eyed about them.

In her book, On Literature Considered in Its Relationship to Social Institutions (1800): she had the following observation: *"Men of wit are so astounded by the existence of women rivals that they cannot judge them with either an adversary's generosity or protector's indulgence. This is a new kind of combat, in which men follow the laws of neither kindness nor honor."* Most feminists would say "amen" to that remark. Madame de Staël identified one of the fundamental differences women have always perceived between men and women: *"It is in a woman's character to always think in terms of two while it is in a man's to think only in terms of one - himself."* (That is my approximate translation of the French original, which is not easy to render faithfully into English: *"La personnalité des femmes est*

*toujours à deux, tandis que celle de l'homme n'a que lui même pour but*"). Madame de Staël identified another characteristic difference between the sexes, one on which most women would most likely agree: *"Love is the whole history of a woman's life, but it is an episode in man's."*

Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798), the Venetian adventurer and author, was not only a renowned seducer of women but also a man of far-ranging intellect and curiosity, whose autobiography is considered a very accurate portrayal of social life in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. One of his many love affairs was with a Frenchwoman whom he called "Henriette" in his published memoirs. It is not known whether that is her real name or one Casanova employed to hide her real identity. Henriette was, apparently, the love of his life—a woman who combined beauty, intelligence, and culture. In Casanova's own words: *"They who believe that a woman is incapable of making a man equally happy all the twenty-four hours of the day have never known an Henriette. The joy which flooded my soul was far greater when I conversed with her during the day than when I held her in my arms at night. Having read a great deal and having natural taste, Henriette judged rightly of everything."* (Giacomo Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie jusqu'à l'an 1797*, (*History of my Life until the year 1797*. (2006), p. 29.

Although Casanova met Henriette in Italy, she was undoubtedly a product of French society. No other society, then or now, appears capable of producing women like Casanova's Henriette and Voltaire's Madame du Châtelet - women whose outstanding qualities (intellectual, physical, emotional) not only do not threaten, or instill the slightest fear in, men but who also captivate them to such an extent that men become almost enslaved by them, and willingly so. Those two women were products of a society which the *salonnières* had shaped, moulded, and conditioned to accept women at the value they place on themselves, not on the "value" which others might attribute to them; a society where men were "schooled" by the *salonnières* to respect and love women without fearing them. That very healthy relationship between the sexes, which 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century *salonnières* were instrumental in creating in France, has survived up to the present day. It may be the only country where that kind of male-female relationship exists, as Elizabeth Badinter, the prominent French feminist writer, implied when she noted that that type of relationship was to be found neither in the Anglo-Saxon countries or in Northern Europe. One very much doubts whether such a healthy male-female relationship exists in Southern or Eastern Europe. It certainly does not exist in Middle Eastern, Asian, African, or Latin American countries. If, as the American feminist, Camille Paglia, declared, it is not male hatred but male fear of women which fuels misogyny, then France might have found the solution to that thorny universal problem, although finding a solution is one thing, applying it is quite another matter.

The achievement of the 17th- and 18th-century French *salonnières* is one of the most outstanding in the entire history of mankind. At the beginning of the 17th century, upper-class women in Europe lived a cloistered life, remaining mere appendages of their husbands, imprisoned in their domestic roles, excluded from playing even the smallest role in social or public affairs, and forced to bear mute witness to their menfolk setting the (boisterous, masculine) tone, laying down the gender-differentiated moral rules, and determining the canons, for society. Making full use of their immense talent, their great determination, and their creative imagination, a group of aristocratic French women transformed the perceived inabilities of their sex into a powerful force which, eventually, broke down the barriers which the society had erected around them, and seized the freedom that had been denied to them for so long. Where no opportunities had existed before, those talented women succeeded in creating new, hitherto unimagined, opportunities which they used to create a new social institution - the salon - where intellectuals, artists, and politicians

gathered to exchange ideas, and where new philosophical concepts were hatched and nurtured. They used those created opportunities to set the social and the political agenda of the period, determine the parameters of the debate on public issues, help develop a new language with which to clothe the ideas generated by that debate, mould and structure the content of the debate, and create a new form of discourse for discussing public issues. The conclusion by some that the salon changed the course of intellectual history appears to be well founded.

When they began their epoch-making endeavour, the famous playwright, Molière, ridiculed them in his play, *Les Précieuses ridicules* ("Affected Young Ladies"), or "Silly Young Things" as a modern-day male chauvinist might call them. When the power, which they had so skillfully seized for themselves by their own efforts was at its apogee, the great Napoleon considered one of those "silly young things", Madame de Staël, so powerful a figure that he equated her power with that of the two greatest European powers of the time – Russia and England. The outstanding achievements of the French *salonnières* provide an inspiring example, not only for 21<sup>st</sup>-century women who complain of gender inequality, although they possess incomparably greater possibilities for transforming their own situation than the *salonnières* did, but also one for the disempowered and the powerless peoples of the South. Indeed, it is an example, *par excellence*, for the intellectuals, the elites, and the political leaders of the entire South.

The achievement of the *salonnières* demonstrated beyond any doubt that powerlessness and disempowerment are mental conditions which manifest themselves in socio-economic form. We are not doomed to forever hold out our begging bowls to the North for their Aid; we are not doomed to continually pay intellectual fealty to all the concepts that emerge from the North; we are not doomed to accept the parameters of the development debate the North has set; we are not doomed to remain helpless, with our arms crossed and our heads bowed, bemoaning our fate. To do any or all of those things is an act of choice. When we, in the South, wake up and recognize that essential fact, then and only then will we be able to discard the "ready-made" development model we borrowed from the North, and design, for our individual countries/regions, an appropriate, "made-to-measure" model of development which will be sustainable both in ecological and in economically productive terms.