

The Kingdom of Politesse:

SALONS AND THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PARIS

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HISTORIANS USUALLY CONSIDER the eighteenth century as the apogee of the cosmopolitan European Republic of Letters, with a French—or even Parisian—center. The “Republic of Letters” was not, however, a phrase central to the Enlightenment lexicon, especially in France. Eighteenth-century French writers sometimes referred to what we now call the Republic of Letters, but most often they speak about the *philosophes*, *hommes de lettres*, and *gens du monde*. The “Republic of Letters” was mostly associated with the world of erudite scholarship that had constituted the *Respublica literaria* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, toward which Enlightenment thinkers were ambivalent. The *philosophes* were, in many aspects, the heirs of the republicans of letters, but they were also critical of the ideal of erudite scholarship and were prompt to denounce the risks of pedantism inherent to it. They acknowledged the achievements of the republicans of letters of the classical age, but to most of them, the Republic of Letters as a normative ideal regulating intellectual life belonged to the past. They did not think of themselves as mere *savants*, but rather as *gens de lettres*, or *philosophes*, and this meant a desire to reach a broader audience than fellow scholars, mostly in social elites. The main social institution by means of which they tried to associate themselves with these elites were Parisian salons.

Paradoxically, in an influential book, Dena Goodman had strongly argued that, in the eighteenth century, these salons were the central institutions of the Republic of Letters, ruled by women and devoted to the critical project of the Enlightenment.¹ This book inspired historians to reevaluate the historical importance of the salons as a cultural institution, to study seriously the women who received writers in their homes, and to take into account philosophical and

¹ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).



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moral thought on the subjects of sociability and *politesse* (politeness). Using the notion of the Republic of Letters, however, to think about the salons is misguided because it leads us to misinterpret both the historical significance of the salons and the social history of the Enlightenment. It induces us to consider salons as literary or intellectual venues, whereas they were, above all, the social spaces of elite leisure. Moreover, it entails odd consequences: that eighteenth-century salons had nothing to do with their predecessors of the age of Louis XIII and Louis XIV or with their nineteenth-century successors; that they stood totally apart from the royal court; that women who received guests in their homes were moved by the desire to contribute to an intellectual endeavor. The aim of this paper is to show that it is much more effective to think about the *salons* as the main institution of cultural sociability for social elites, and then to understand why the *philosophes* spent so much time there.

The bibliography on the Republic of Letters is long, but most scholars would agree the notion has a double meaning: on the one hand, the Republic of Letters is a historiographical tool to refer to networks of scholars organized around academic institutions, learned journals, informal gatherings and epistolary exchanges; on the other hand, it is the normative ideal of a community of scholars and writers who have egalitarian and personal relationships, autonomous from political power, from religious solidarities and from national identities. In Anne Goldgar's words, the Republic of Letters is a "reflexive event."²

I would like to suggest that Parisian salons did not fit any of these definitions. As a site for sociability, they were, above all, venues of entertainment for polite elites, and were deeply rooted in court society. The ideal which guided the writers who attended these salons—Morellet, Thomas, Marmontel, and many others—was not the Republic of Letters, but Parisian high society (*le monde*), where some men of letters, polite and successful, were welcomed because they conformed to aristocratic norms. In other words, they were dreaming about the kingdom of *politesse* rather than the Republic of Letters.³

ELITE SOCIABILITY

Salons are too often considered as literary institutions, whose function was to bring together writers and to allow them to meet, discuss literature, and debate their ideas. They are indeed often referred to as "literary salons" and this has played a huge part in confusing salons with the Republic of Letters. In fact, this image is entirely anachronistic, originating at the beginning of the twentieth century, as I have shown elsewhere.⁴ Actually, what are known as *salons*—and what were designated during the eighteenth century by the terms "houses," "circles," and above all "societies"—was an institution of sociability for *le monde*, the *beau monde*. *Le monde* was at once a social group, defined by its practices of sociability, and a system of values which affirmed and proclaimed the virtues of these practices. It was a central institution in the life of Parisian

² Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 7. Many authors have endeavored to define the Republic of Letters: see Françoise Waquet, "Qu'est-ce que la République des lettres? Essai de sémantique historique," *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes* 147 (1989): 473–502; Lorraine Daston, "The Ideal and Reality of the Republic of Letters," *Science in Context* 4 (1991): 367–86; Hans Bots et Françoise Waquet, *La République des Lettres* (Paris: Belin, 1997); Krzysztof Pomian, "République des lettres: idée utopique et réalité vécue," *Le Débat* 130 (2004): 154–70.

³ This article draws on my own work: Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

⁴ Lilti, *Monde des salons*, chap. 1: "L'invention du salon," 1–58.

elites from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, and its height (around 1750–1850) coincided with a period of crisis and redefinition of aristocratic prestige, during which the court nobility reinterpreted its criteria for honor and included within polite society those who conformed to its standards of behavior and acknowledged its preeminence. Long associated with military valor, and subsequently with noble birth, aristocratic prestige rested increasingly on the manners of the man of the world (*l'homme du monde*) and on the cultural practices of polite society, like reading, theater, or poetry.

Sociability was an instrument of this redefinition, thanks to the writers who participated in it and celebrated it. This process took place over a long period and definitively made salons a commonplace in the French cultural imaginary. Already under Louis XIII, writers like Guez de Balzac and Jean Chapelain attended the salons of polite society and contributed to publicizing their reputation.⁵ Almost three centuries later, Marcel Proust wrote worldly chronicles in the *Figaro*, and deployed the Parisian salons as the backdrop for *The Remembrance of Things Past*.⁶ In the cultural history of France, *mondanité* and literature are intimately linked, and the second half of the eighteenth century is a crucial moment in this process, during which the literary elite was devoted to *mondanité* and its values.

In the eighteenth century, despite a widely-held, but nonetheless false belief, salons were not open spaces nor specifically intellectual venues. To the contrary, they were aristocratic bastions. The groups who attended Mme du Deffand's salon, for example, can be studied because she kept a precise list of her guests over one year.⁷ Among the hundred or so people who attended her salon in 1779, they counted almost exclusively members of the highest nobility, like the ducs de Praslin, de Choiseul, and de Broglie, the duchesse de Luxembourg, and the prince de Beauvau. Only one academician of sciences and three men of letters are mentioned at all. One of them was the duchesse de Choiseul's secretary, who was close to the marquise du Deffand; the two others, Marmontel and La Harpe, who were celebrities of the literary world, came once each to read to the marquise's guests from one of their works. One might expect that the situation would be very different in the salons of Mme Geoffrin and Mme Necker, but it was not. Both certainly hosted more writers, but they also welcomed a very large number of aristocrats, indeed the very same ones who attended Mme du Deffand's home and who dominated the polite society of the capital. Mme Geoffrin was very close to the duchesse de La Vallière, the duchesse de Luxembourg, the duc de Montmorency, the comtesse d'Egmont, and the duc de Rohan. Far from claiming to work towards the goals of the Enlightenment, Mme Geoffrin vigorously avoided any learned pretensions and aspired above all to be acknowledged by polite society and to conform to the norms of female *honnêteté*. For her, just as for Mme Necker for example, to receive well-known writers constituted one step in the process of entering high society: her salon thus became a fashionable place, a necessary destination for the aristocrats who wished to ac-

⁵ Christian Jouhaud, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature: histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Nicolas Schapira, *Un professionnel des lettres au XVIIIe siècle: Valentin Conrart, une histoire sociale* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2003).

⁶ An important demonstration of the persistence of salon life as aristocratic sociability in the nineteenth century has been made by Steven D. Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). For a more literary analysis of Parisian *mondanité* in this period, see Guillaume Pinson, *Fiction du monde: De la presse mondaine à Marcel Proust* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2008).

⁷ Mme du Deffand, "Journal (1er juin 1779–10 septembre 1780)," in *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. Edwine M. Martz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 4:421–61.

quire a reputation as men of wit. As Talleyrand recalled, salon readings were social obligations for the young men of the nobility:

Les lectures étaient alors la mode; elles faisaient l'importance de quelques maisons. On ne dînait guère chez M. de Vaudreuil, chez M. de Liancourt, chez Mme de Vaines, chez M. d'Anzely, sans être obligé d'entendre ou *Le Mariage de Figaro* ou le poème des *Jardins*, ou le *Connétable de Bourbon*, ou quelques contes de Chamfort, ou ce qu'on appelait alors *la Révolution de Russie*. C'était une charge imposée avec assez de rigueur à toutes les personnes invitées; mais aussi, on était classé parmi les hommes distingués du temps. Je pourrais dire que beaucoup de gens disaient du bien de moi, uniquement parce qu'ils m'avaient rencontré dans quelques-unes de ces chambres auxquelles on avait accordé le droit de donner de la réputation. J'étais à cet égard comme un homme dont parlait le chevalier de Chastellux: il a sûrement beaucoup d'esprit, disait-il, je ne le connais pas, mais il va chez Mme Geoffrin.⁸

SALON CONVERSATION

As an important consequence, learned conversation was not the main activity of a salon. For one thing, polite conversations were very different from the model of scholarly discussion. One had to be seductive and witty, and one was not allowed to contradict others. The goal of the conversation was not to join in a cooperative enterprise aimed at advancing the progress of learning, as in the Republic of Letters, but rather to participate in a collective entertainment. Ferdinando Galiani, for instance, during his stay in Paris, attended the most famous salons. Dena Goodman has told us much about his intellectual debates in print with other writers like André Morellet, especially concerning economic matters. But when he was in a salon, Galiani was above all a skilled actor, appreciated for his joyful and exuberant conversation, which was accompanied by gestures, jokes, and imitations. His conversation, as described by his friends Diderot or Marmontel, was an unforgettable show: “le fond est miserable en lui-même mais il prend entre ses mains la couleur la plus forte et la plus gaie et devient une source inépuisable de bonne plaisanterie.”⁹ Galiani's conversation skills were not limited to his ability to tell little stories (*contes*) and to defend paradoxical ideas with compelling and witty arguments, but these were the two bases of success in salon conversation. For example, Julie de Lespinasse was strongly impressed by Mme de Boufflers, during a dinner at Mme Geoffrin's salon: “elle fut charmante; elle ne dit pas un mot qui ne fut un paradoxe. Elle fut attaquée, et elle se défendit avec tant d'esprit que ses erreurs valaient presque autant que la vérité.”¹⁰ Truth was not so important in such a conversation; people gathering there were looking for entertainment and were eager to display their social skills, rather than their knowledge.

Secondly, conversation was only one of the many activities that took place in a salon, which also included music, theatrical performances, eating, gambling, and so on. Salons, then, were not so much literary circles as leisure venues where literature played an important role: providing high society with a justification for its social and cultural dominance. The main “literary” activities in Parisian salons were poetry, witty games (*jeux d'esprit*), and theatrical performances known as “theatre de société.” Men of letters were welcomed for their abilities to improvise

⁸ Talleyrand, *Mémoires*, ed. de Broglie (Paris: C. Lévy, 1891), 1:46–48.

⁹ Diderot to Sophie Volland, September 30, 1760, in *Correspondance de Diderot*, ed. G. Roth (Paris: Minuit, 1957), 3:104. On salon conversation as different from learned conversation, see Lilti, *Monde des salons*, 274–87.

¹⁰ Julie de Lespinasse to the comte de Guibert, October 21, 1774, in Lespinasse, *Lettres* (Paris: La Table ronde, 1998), 168.

verses, write comedies and tell humorous anecdotes. These entertainments displayed the social distinction of “polite” elite and the refinement of their sociability.

Moreover, social relations between people in the salons were far more unequal than what we often care to imagine. Let us remember this anecdote recorded by Chamfort, who offers a very surprising image of the place that d’Alembert held in the salons.

D’Alembert, who already enjoyed the best of reputations, was at Madame du Deffand’s home, along with M. the president Hénault and M. de Pont de Veyle. A doctor named Fournier arrives, and as he enters he says to Madame du Deffand, “Madame, I am honored to present you my most humble respect,” to M. the president Hénault, “Monsieur, I am honored to greet you,” to M. Pont de Veyle, “Monsieur I am your most humble servant,” and to d’Alembert, “Hello, Monsieur.”¹¹

This is just an anecdote, but it illustrates that social differences remained sensitive issues, even in a salon where d’Alembert was accustomed to being welcomed and where he was appreciated. The anecdote rests on the opposition between, on the one hand, d’Alembert’s intellectual “reputation,” which earned him the right to be present at Mme du Deffand’s salon, and on the other hand, his social status, which was made manifest by the absence of a courteous greeting. The anecdote shows that d’Alembert, in a salon, was never safe from being reminded of his true social status. Doctor Fournier’s tactlessness recalls in a brutal way differences in social status and reveals that equality in high society is a fiction and reputation does not necessarily earn respect. Whether or not this anecdote is true, d’Alembert was not spared such humiliations, and he betrayed a strong sentiment of bitterness in some of his own texts with regards to “the low opinion of the condition of men of letters that most in the *monde* hold” and the “type of welcome that they ordinarily receive.”¹² The game of reciprocal esteem, he himself affirms, is only valid if nobles accept it: “This is what one realizes above all during conversations when one does not share their opinion. It appears that as the man of wit withdraws, the man of quality asserts himself and appears to demand the deference that the man of wit had begun by giving out.”¹³

In the salons, social hierarchies were conspicuous and the art of conversation was also the art of praise. When Stanislas Poniatowski, a young Polish gentleman who was to be elected king some years later, first came in Paris, he attended Mme Geoffrin’s salon and she had to advise him to give up his bad habit of straight-talking, since he was expected to pay compliments. For example, when the Maréchal de Noailles asked him what foreigners thought of French policy, he answered tactlessly by praising several French aristocrats, rather than only Noailles. That was an obvious mistake, and Noailles went out without a word. When Poniatowski arrived some days later at Mme Geoffrin’s, he was welcomed with harsh reproaches.¹⁴ In this case, salon conversation did not take place to exchange information and arguments; rather, it was a social parade, whose codes had to be precisely respected. Salons belonged to court society in the extensive sense that Norbert Elias gave to the phrase: a society strongly shaped by the values and the practices of the court. Salons were not venues cut off and isolated from the constraints of court society, but on the contrary they were part of it.¹⁵

¹¹ Sébastien-Roch-Nicolas Chamfort, *Maximes, Pensées, Caractères* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), 193.

¹² D’Alembert, “Essai sur la société des gens de lettres et des grands, sur la réputation, sur les mécènes, et sur les récompenses littéraires” (1752), in *Œuvres* (Paris, 1822), 4:337–73, quote 360.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 357–58.

¹⁴ S.-A. Poniatowski, *Mémoires* (St-Petersburg: Imprimerie de l’Académie impériale des sciences, 1914), 84.

¹⁵ Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

All this should encourage us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the idea, widely believed today, that the *politesse* of salons represented egalitarian progress.¹⁶ Far from being indifferent to social hierarchies, *politesse* and the usages of the *monde* demanded that great attention be paid to the social status of one's interlocutor. In a letter to Mme Favart, the maréchal de Richelieu recalled with insistence that "the most important skill for anyone in society is to be sociable; and when this society encompasses superiors, not to stray from the laws of subordination."¹⁷ This is quite different from the ethos of reciprocity, even of the unequal kind, that is supposed to rule the Republic of Letters.

PROTECTION

It is therefore possible to question once again the role writers played within high society. Indeed, one of the specificities of Parisian worldliness in the eighteenth century is, to a large extent, that it opened the doors of salons to writers and made literature an essential activity and an important mark of social distinction. Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into account the asymmetrical relationship upon which the presence of writers in salons depended. They participated in the leisure of elites by writing verse and plays, as well as by taking part in discussions of the latest in literary and theatrical life. At Mme Geoffrin's salon, for example, Montesquieu composed and sang a song in honor of the duchesse de la Vallière, one of the most noteworthy women at court.¹⁸ By their presence, writers also contributed to the appeal and reputation of the salons they attended. As La Harpe put it, "Mme Geoffrin is a very striking example of the consideration which society can accord to men of letters, and which they rarely attain on their own, because the most important foundation for consideration in this country is the independence that stems from a fortune and which men of letters possess very rarely."¹⁹ In return, these men of letters acquired the material and symbolic resources of elites, as Robert Darnton argued three decades ago.²⁰ Mme Geoffrin showered them with gifts, offered them money, and even set up annuities for the most assiduous participants, like d'Alembert, Morellet, and Thomas. More generally, salons were important stepping-stones in authors' careers, not as literary institutions, but rather because they made it possible for men of letters to gain access to the resources of aristocratic and royal patronage.²¹ Women played the role that had traditionally always been theirs in court society: to protect and intervene in favor of particular people and to mobilize ministers and courtiers. When he began to attend Parisian salons, Marmontel explained his goals in the following terms: "protectors and some means towards a fortune."²² In practice, authors without considerable personal fortunes and their own social status faced considerable dangers, and it was indispensable for them to be firmly integrated within the networks of Parisian elites. Most of the sources of revenue to which writers could aspire (pensions,

¹⁶ Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought (1670–1789)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Maréchal de Richelieu to Mme Favart, 30 August 1768, in Charles-Simon Favart, *Mémoires et correspondance littéraire* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), 3:91.

¹⁸ Poniatowski, *Mémoires*, 88.

¹⁹ Jean-François La Harpe, *Letters to the Shuvalovs*, ed. C. Todd (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1973), 58.

²⁰ Robert Darnton, "The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Prerevolutionary France," *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 51 (1971): 81–115; and *Gens de lettres, gens du livre* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1991).

²¹ Antoine Lilti, "Sociabilité et mondanité: les hommes de lettres dans les salons parisiens au XVIIIe siècle," *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005): 415–45.

²² Jean-François Marmontel, *Mémoires* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1999), 135.

a post as private tutor, a position as a secretary or a reader, etc.) could only be acquired if they were recommended and protected by powerful people with connections at court and in the high circles of power. Elections to the Academy mobilized networks of protection and the most active salon hostesses applied pressure both on the academicians who attended their salons and on the courtiers who had a role in the election.

These relationships of protection, however, must be distinguished from the traditional forms of patronage or clientelism that had prevailed in the seventeenth century, and were still widespread in the eighteenth century. The bond of clientelism institutionalized a relationship of domestic service between a great noble and an author, based on a model of political fidelity and literary service. Patronage, on the other hand, made it possible to reward authors for their works.²³ It thus implied a specific form of acknowledgement of the value of cultural works. Under the patronage system, the prestige that writers confer on those who protect them is sanctioned by the dedicatory epistle, which displays not only the generosity of the patron, but also the huge gap between the respective positions of the patron and the writer. The situation is different within the context of the salon because there gifts do not reward a specific work or literary favor, nor do they demand public praise. The gift presents itself as a form of friendly generosity inscribed within a relationship of sociability. Morellet writes, for example, that the “good deeds” of Mme Geoffrin were received with “a gratitude as noble as the goodwill to which friendship yielded.”²⁴ Thus, protection made the writer a man of the world, capable of submitting to the codes of polite society.

MEN OF LETTERS

These codes of polite society, and not those of the Republic of Letters, were the normative ideal that shaped the behavior of men of letters in the salons. The language of friendship, so present within the social relationships of polite society, does not constitute evidence of a truly egalitarian relationship, but neither should it be characterized as a fiction with which men of letters sought to mask the self-interested calculus that drew them into the salons. And it is in this that my position differs from Darnton’s. In fact, the language of friendship is precisely what makes the relationship of protection possible by endowing it with new meaning, different from patronage, and all the more so from forms of literary domesticity: the man of letters is present within it not only as a writer, but also as *un homme du monde*. A great number of eighteenth-century men of letters imagined *l’homme du monde* precisely as the social horizon for the writer. One of the most influential promoters of this ideal of the writer was Voltaire. In his famous Encyclopedia article, “Men of Letters,” he acknowledges the legacy of the humanists, but stresses the differences between their achievements on the one hand and the qualities of eighteenth-century men of letters on the other:

Autrefois dans le seizième siècle, et bien avant dans le dix-septième, les littérateurs s’occupaient beaucoup de la critique grammaticale des auteurs grecs et latins; et c’est à leurs travaux que nous devons les dictionnaires, les éditions correctes, les commentaires des chefs—d’oeuvres de l’antiquité; aujourd’hui cette critique est moins nécessaire, et l’esprit

²³ Alain Viala, *Naissance de l’écrivain* (Paris: Minuit, 1985); Daniel Roche, “Les modèles économiques du mécénat,” in *Les républicains des lettres: gens de culture et Lumières au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 51–84; Christian Jouhaud et Hélène Merlin, “Mécènes, patrons et clients: Les médiations textuelles comme pratiques clientélares au XVIIIe siècle,” *Terrain* 21 (1993): 47–62.

²⁴ André Morellet, “Portrait de Mme Geoffrin” (1777), republished in *Éloges de Mme Geoffrin, suivis de lettres et d’un Essai sur la conversation par l’abbé Morellet* (Paris: Nicolle, 1812), 32.

philosophique lui a succédé. C'est cet esprit philosophique qui semble constituer le caractère de gens de lettres; et quand il se joint au bon goût, il forme un littérateur accompli.²⁵

The man of letters is no longer defined by specific knowledge, nor on the basis of scholarship or writing, but instead by the association of the “philosophic spirit”—that is, the critical task of denouncing superstitions and irrational beliefs—and of “good taste”—the eighteenth-century name for the aristocratic *habitus*. According to Voltaire, the great success of writers, and their main source of pride, is to have gained access to polite society: “The spirit of the century has for the most part made them as adapted for the *monde* as for the *cabinet* and it is this that makes them far superior to those of preceding centuries” (“l'esprit du siècle les a rendus pour la plupart aussi propres pour le monde que pour le cabinet; & c'est en quoi ils sont fort supérieurs à ceux des siècles précédents”).

Voltaire's entire article thus seeks to associate the Enlightenment philosophical spirit with the integration of writers into Parisian *mondanité*, far from the classical ideal of the Republic of Letters as an egalitarian network of scholars. By consequence, “l'homme du monde” appears as the social ideal of the *philosophe*, as well as the privileged public for philosophical discourse. Voltaire expressed his understanding of this idea to Mme du Deffand: “It is more important to be a man of the world than a man of letters” (“Il est plus important d'être un homme du monde qu'un homme de lettres”). This view of the man of letters, which makes the philosophical enterprise the heir of the preceding century's ethos of gallantry, was vigorously taken up by authors like Suard, Morellet, Grimm, and even d'Holbach. It was accompanied by an intense defense of *politesse* as a linguistic value (a way of speaking which held up the court as its model) and as a social value (a *habitus* forged in the company of the *monde*). It thus becomes clear that for writers the frequentation of the salons of polite society promoted not only material but also symbolic imperatives: to affirm that one had assimilated the dominant norms of the man of letters and of social success through writing. This figure of the man of letters was accompanied by ferocious attacks on writers who made a living from their pens, who according to Voltaire were “the objects of contempt and loathing among even the rabble.” If the man of letters defines himself first through his frequentation of the *monde*, inversely, Voltaire continues, “An author who is merely an author is commonly scorned.”²⁶ We can see that the unity of *le monde* was far more important for Voltaire than that of the Republic of Letters.

As we have seen, the Enlightenment “homme de lettres” was very different from the citizen of the Republic of Letters. Of course, in the seventeenth century, scholars were deeply concerned with the rules of interpersonal conduct; several recent insightful works in the social history of science have stressed the importance of civility in learned communities, and even in the very language of scholarship.²⁷ But, with salon life, the situation was very different: there, writers had to behave, for the most part, as courtiers. As Anne Goldgar has convincingly argued, in the mid-eighteenth century, the classical ideal of the Republic of Letters was sharply attacked by the philosophes, the very same ones who attended the Parisian salons and had nothing but scorn for

²⁵ Voltaire, “Gens de lettres,” in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des arts, des sciences et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson, 1751–72).

²⁶ *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770), in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier, 1878), 1:496–501.

²⁷ Mario Baggioni, *Galileo Courtier, The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Paula Findlen, “Controlling the Experiment: Rhetoric, Court Patronage and the Experimental Method of Francesco Redi,” *History of Science* 31 (1993): 35–64; Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

the tradition of scholarship and erudition which was the constitutional base of the Republic of Letters. This was a real conflict of values about the regulation of literary life.²⁸

In some areas of intellectual life, especially in antiquarianism, but also in natural history, the practices and ideals of the Republic of Letters remained vital and they organized networks of knowledge. All around Europe, academies were the underpinnings of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, and they encouraged the circulation of knowledge.²⁹ In France, provincial academies were essential venues where local elites could join scholars in order to improve collective knowledge and add to the king's glory.³⁰ But personal relations, either through letters or journeys, still played a key role in the formation of the networks devoted to knowledge that some refer to as the Republic of Letters. The case of Esprit Calvet, well studied by Laurence Brockliss, illustrates the persistence of such networks.³¹ But Calvet's web was very different from the Parisian salons attended by the *philosophes* and was scarcely connected to the main foyers of the Enlightenment. If one wants to understand why so many writers in the eighteenth century, and especially many encyclopedists, sought eagerly to be received in the salons, the Republic of Letters is not a helpful notion.

Certainly, not every writer claimed to follow the ideal of the Voltairian *homme de lettres*, nor did every writer conform to the practices of high society. As Elena Russo has recently shown, the mistrust of worldliness or the criticism of *bel esprit* was an internal current of the Enlightenment, most obviously in Rousseau and the patriotic writers of the late Enlightenment, but also, for example, in Diderot's writings.³² Nonetheless, the figure of the man of letters as a man of the world—which emphasized notions of *honnêteté* and *politesse*, and praised *le monde* and its sociability, so fundamentally at odds with the ideal of the Republic of Letters—constituted a powerful representation of the writer and his ties to social elites at the apogee of the Enlightenment.³³

A GENDERED REPUBLIC OF LETTERS?

Finally, we have to examine one last argument in favor of equating the salons with the Republic of Letters. According to Dena Goodman, salons were the center of the Republic of Letters and the principal tool of its feminization. They were governed by women who provided the Republic of Letters with order and “shape[d] the discursive project that was the French Enlightenment through the application of a distinctively republican form of government.”³⁴ This argument seems deeply misleading. The presence of the women in the salons was not the clue of the fem-

²⁸ Goldgar, *Impolite Learning*.

²⁹ James MacLellan, “L'Europe des académies,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 25 (1993): 153–65.

³⁰ Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des Lumières en Province: académies et académiciens provinciaux (1680–1789)* (Paris: Mouton, 1978), 2 vols.; by the same author, *Les républicains des lettres: gens de culture et Lumières au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 51–84.

³¹ Laurence Brockliss, *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³² Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On Rousseau's attacks upon salon sociability, see Lilti, *Monde des salons*, chap. 5.

³³ In the same way, in his work on playwrights, Gregory Brown has demonstrated that their adherence to the practices and values of the elites of polite society constitutes an essential element for understanding their behavior as regards the Comédie Française and the public, as well as for understanding the ways in which they imagined their social identity. See Gregory Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), also available online at <http://www.gutenberg-e.org>.

³⁴ Goodman, *Republic of Letters*, 91.

inization of the Republic of Letters, but was simply due to the fact that salon sociability was deeply rooted in the tradition of aristocratic hospitality, where women, as “*maîtresses de maison*,” had an important role to play. Salon women were never praised for their knowledge and their intellectual achievements but for their social skills, their ability to maintain *politesse* and harmony, and this was their traditional role in high society. The prominent role of women in the salons was not specific to the eighteenth century but was a *longue durée* feature of elite sociability in France.³⁵ Most importantly, this role was quite incompatible, in the eighteenth century, with public intellectual ambitions. Women who tried to publish books, or were eager to be recognized as authors, scholars, or poets, were disqualified in the field of salon sociability and mocked as “*femmes savantes*.”³⁶ On the contrary, the best-known *maîtresses de maison*, as Mme Geoffrin, Mme Du Deffand, Mme Necker, Julie de Lespinasse, were extremely conscious of presenting themselves as women with no ambitions in the intellectual field. Mme Geoffrin, for instance, always insisted that she had no formal education, and no desire to read the books that people sent to her. When asked what she thought of the books by Richard Glover, an Englishman “without *politesse*” and Francesco Algarotti, who had “a nice face and good manners,” she answered: “I will never read their books, but I guess that M. Algarotti’s are better.”³⁷ It is therefore peculiar to argue that her goal was to contribute to the good of humanity by joining the Enlightenment Republic of Letters and furthering its work.³⁸ Actually, if one wants to see the integration of women into the Republic of Letters, one has to look at other venues: book publication, the circuit of academic *concours*, or epistolary networks.³⁹ But surely women were scarcely present in these fields, and the Republic of Letters was still a masculine country.

The most surprising argument in Goodman’s interpretation is that women gave the salons a republican form of government. In fact, salon sociability was at odds with republican principles and republican values as they were defined in the eighteenth century. Salons were mostly organized as little courts, revolving around the hostess, and ruled by the ideals of *politesse*, witty conversation, social distinction and *galanterie*. No wonder republicans like Rousseau were so eager to denounce the salons and the role women played there on behalf of republican virtues.⁴⁰ In truth, every thinker of the eighteenth century, from Montesquieu to Hume, agreed that French salons were a piece with the monarchical system, based on *politesse*, social imitation, and

³⁵ Jolanta T. Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition in Pre-revolutionary France: Parisian Salon Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Steven D. Kale, “Women, the Public Sphere and the Persistence of Salons,” *French Historical Studies* 25, no. 1 (2002): 115–48.

³⁶ See the case of Mme Du Boccage in Lilti, *Le monde des salons*, 119–20.

³⁷ Morellet, “Portrait de Mme Geoffrin,” 14. See also “Note autobiographique de Mme Geoffrin sur son éducation,” Archives nationales (Paris), 508 AP 38.

³⁸ Goodman, *Republic of Letters*, 54.

³⁹ Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); John R. Iverson and Marie-Pascale Pieretti, “‘Toutes personnes [...] seront admises à concourir’: La participation des femmes aux concours académiques,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 36 (2004): 313–18; Jeremy Cardonna, “The Enlightenment in Question: Prize Contests (Concours Académiques) and the Francophone Republic of Letters, 1670–1794” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2007).

⁴⁰ Rousseau’s criticism of the emollient effects of female sociability was not so much misogynist as political, based on the opposition between the republican model of politics and sociability, and the monarchical one. See Helena Rosenblatt, “On the ‘Misogyny’ of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Letter to d’Alembert in Historical Context,” *French Historical Studies* 25 (2002): 91–114.

women's role in sociability, and that they had nothing to do with a republican tradition, nor even with republican metaphors.⁴¹

I have tried to demonstrate that the Republic of Letters is not an appropriate notion with which to think about the salons. Worldliness, or the French phrase “sociabilité mondaine,” is far more accurate because it allows us to understand a social and cultural institution that was, over a long period, a kind of interface between court society, elite networks, and the literary sphere.

What about the Republic of Letters itself, then, in the context of the Enlightenment? Certainly, as a network of learned communication and exchange, the Republic of Letters still existed even if it declined as a normative ideal of communication. And there is still a lot to learn by studying European networks of scholars and writers in the eighteenth century, with their institutions (academies, universities, libraries, learned journals), their sense of forming a community or communities, and their practices of sociability. But we have to acknowledge that the Republic of Letters faced two important challenges. First, the transformation of cultural communication, with the raise of literacy, the book market, newspapers—what has been called, since Habermas, “the public sphere”—entailed a redefinition of the legitimate uses of knowledge. It was no longer possible to avoid the question of the public utility of scholarship. There were, therefore, critical tensions between the principle of peer communication that ruled the Republic of Letters, on the one hand, and the dynamics of publication that was consubstantial to the Enlightenment, on the other. The second challenge was the dynamics of nationalization, by which I mean the fact that intellectual innovations and their circulation were promoted and controlled more and more by national institutions, but also the temptation for political social elites to manipulate culture on behalf of national projects. Consider, for example, the conscious nation-building which lay behind Prussian attempts to reconfigure the intellectual and cultural geography of Europe, from the 1740s onward.⁴² One of the most crucial tasks for new research on the Enlightenment Republic of Letters may be to stress the ambivalence between the transnational tradition of these networks and the dynamics of nationalization that transformed the world of learning during the eighteenth century. A

⁴¹ Cf. David Hume, “On the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” (1742), in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

⁴² Tim Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.)