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Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Fayard, 2005. 568 pp. Notes and index. €30 E.U. (pb). ISBN 35-2492-3.

Review by Steven Kale, Washington State University.

Literature, sociability, and the art of conversation have always been closely bound to the French sense of identity in the modern period. That is why the history of salons has always run the risk of alternating easily between reality and myth. In *Le monde des salons*, Antoine Lilti tries to rewrite that history, but only after an extensive work of excavation in which he seeks to remove layers of sediment accumulated for over 200 years. For Lilti, that sediment consists of thousands of memoirs, histories, portraits, eulogies, anecdotes, personal letters, anonymous testimonies, and apocryphal stories that still form “the documentary foundation of the history of salons” (p. 8), a body of sources that Lilti finds biased, impressionistic, fantastic, and often carefully selected.

Repeated and recycled from book to book, along with the prejudices, assumptions, and polemics they embody, these fragments have acquired the status of evidence from which historians have failed to take a critical distance, even though they were often written by salon *habitués* nostalgic for an idealized past. Indeed, Lilti goes to great lengths to avoid the bias of posterity and the lure of filiation by treating the voluminous commentary on eighteenth-century mondaine sociability as texts designed to legitimize social practices and identities.^[1] He also makes extensive use of previously neglected sources such as the files of the *Contrôle des étrangers*, consisting of reports addressed each week to the *Secrétariat d'Etat aux Affaires étrangères* by the *Lieutenant Générale de Paris* on the movement of diplomats posted in the capital and on the activities taking place in the salons they visited. According to Lilti, such sources make it possible to overcome previous obstacles of “the application of the methods of sociocultural history” (p. 12) to salons by offering an exterior view of a world that was largely self regarding and by placing it under daily scrutiny for roughly fifty years.

Before reconstructing the eighteenth-century salon as a historical object, Lilti traces its historiographical invention over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The memorialization of prerevolutionary salons began almost immediately, in the first decades following 1789, when the term *salon* itself entered the lexicon, when a vast number of aristocratic memoirs began to recall the sweetness of life under the Old Regime, and when the aestheticization of aristocratic conduct joined the critique of post-revolutionary society in the novels of Stendhal, Balzac, and Barby d'Aurevilly. At the same time, the literary polemics undertaken by the liberal critics of Napoleon tended to associate eighteenth-century salons with Enlightenment philosophy and the art of conversation just as Madame de Staël was making the *esprit de société* a central element of the French national character.

The myths surrounding the eighteenth-century salon were consolidated in the nineteenth century, most notably in the work of Pierre Louis Roederer, who rehabilitated the Hôtel de Rambouillet and separated polite society from the court, and Saint-Beuve, who made the salon into an institution of literary life, cut it off from politics, the aristocracy, and *mondanité*, and created a durable canon of famous *maîtresses de maison*. During the Second Empire, the Goncourt brothers made the enduring distinction between aristocratic salons, reputed to be both elegant and frivolous, and the more serious *bureaux d'esprit of the philosophes*, where imperious hostesses presided over gatherings of artists and men of letters who helped pave the way for 1789. By linking salons to the causes of the Revolution, the Goncourts helped inaugurate the long tradition of identifying salons with intellectual debate, the diffusion of the political

philosophy of the Enlightenment, and the advent of public opinion. Refined sociability became an essential aspect of literary life, rather than a feature of the life of the aristocracy. It was represented as distinct from court, hostile to absolutism, and disdainful of the opponent of *des Lumières*. In this form, the memory of the salons could be appropriated by the republicans of the Belle Époque, anxious to reconcile their love of Enlightenment philosophy and their taste for the pleasures of high society, as well as by opponents of Vichy, who saw in the salons of the eighteenth century a manifestation of social and national consensus, and who constructed an image of them as socially mixed, egalitarian, and democratic.

The critical point for Lilti is not that the historiography of the salon is fundamentally mythical, but that the idealization of the salon has become inscribed in more recent works written by philosophers, literary scholars, and university historians, whose arguments signal “the tenacious perpetuity of certain interpretations” (p. 58). Daniel Gordon, François Furet, Marc Fumaroli, Jürgen Habermas, and Dena Goodman have all to one extent or another “returned to certain traditional theses on *politesse* and salon conversation” (p. 56), whether the question concerns the salons’s “democratic sociability” and its noncorporate egalitarianism (Gordon and Furet), its reinscription as pure conversation (Fumaroli), or its role in the constitution of the “bourgeois public sphere” (Habermas).^[2] In the feminist version of what Lilti calls the Habermasian paradigm, in which salonnières were excluded from the public sphere by Enlightenment thought and the Revolution, Lilti sees a synthesis of all these themes: the salon as an Enlightenment institution; the Enlightenment salons as “serious” and consensual; the role of salons and salonnières in the emergence of an enlightened public opinion.

None of these studies offer a satisfying account of salons because they reduce the salon’s complexity, invest them with a false ideological coherence, and remove them from the world of *mondaine* sociability. Instead, Lilti proposes to study the salon as a form of sociability both in terms of its social practices and the representations those practices generated, representations that must be treated as discourses in order to avoid replaying the literary debates of the nineteenth century. Lilti’s approach, therefore, entails a sociological analysis of the conviviality of urban elites, an anthropological analysis of the mechanisms of *mondanité*, and a literary analysis of the representations and discourses by which its practices were legitimized and denounced.

From there, Lilti sets out to reconstitute his historical object, defining its criteria, detailing its practices, describing its frontiers, and assessing the material conditions that made *mondaine* sociability possible. Much of what he finds recapitulates the work of other scholars who have also shown that the salon was a hybrid social space that provided weekly meals in private domiciles to a diverse collection of *habitués*. Salons received invited guests and visitors on a regular basis who were expected to respect the rules of civility and *politesse*. Whether salons were held by women or men, they always offered a “mixed sociability” and were therefore distinct from academies and clubs. Lilti insists that the principal aim of salons was *divertissement* and that its practices were grounded in aristocratic traditions of hospitality. Since the salon inhabited the same social circuit as the Comédie française, the Opéra, and the court, it operated firmly within the framework of “the *mondanité* of the ancien régime” (p. 70) and the practices associated with it “were not necessarily perceived in their specificity” (p. 87). The requisite food, decor, heating, and furniture made salons very expensive to maintain, placing them beyond the means of all but the court nobility, the Parisian aristocracy, and rich financiers. Access to salons involved social recognition and the “curial selection” (p. 109) of those who already belonged to high society. Men of letters who were regarded as *honnêtes hommes* were invited or recommended by virtue of their prior acceptance of the norms of *politesse*.

The role of the salon’s *maîtresse de maison*—usually an older woman, often widowed or separated—was to engage regularly in the practices of *mondaine* hospitality, which were associated with the aristocratic

social norms that identified *le monde* as a distinctive arena of feminine action, separated from both the domestic interior and the public realm. The salon hostess was expected to gain consideration for the hospitality of her salon and create “a space of distinction and amusement” for her *société* (pp. 112-13). Eulogized for her talents as a hostess and for the reputation of her salon, she was hardly ever praised for her intellectual qualities and never published her writings. In the eyes of high society, a *femme du monde* was not compatible with a *femme de lettres* and the distinction was enforced by satire and ridicule, so that success devolved to those salons that offered pleasure and entertainment, whether or not they were frequented by men of letters. [3]

Lilti sees the “espace mondain” enclosing these salons as both topographical and metaphorical: it could be mapped and traversed, but it could also redefine the social encounters it made possible. In geographical terms, the world of the salons was crisscrossed by rivalries, family ties, political solidarities, and ideological polarities; it stretched out from its heart in the aristocratic *faubourgs* of Paris and into the spa towns and *châteaux* of the provinces to encompass the major urban centers of Europe, where a cosmopolitan elite affiliated itself with the quintessential customs of the French aristocracy.

Within that space, the court aristocracy was predominant; it used ridicule to police its territory, drawing its authority from the power to judge. Social status was never a matter of indifference and men of letters never entered this world on an equal footing; instead, aristocrats used the rules of *politesse* to suspend hierarchical norms in order to permit reciprocity in verbal exchange. Unequal relations were thereby managed in an egalitarian mode without erasing either the reality or the consciousness of the social hierarchy. The formal equality of conversation was made possible by rituals that everyone knew were designed to hide social distinctions, so that salons were able to perform a bit of alchemy by transforming social hierarchies into distinctions that pertained specifically to *le monde*. Polite sociability created a symbolic, non-material basis for cohesion among a social elite bound together by a common sense of the superiority of its shared manners. Distinctions of honor, prestige, reputation circulated as symbolic currency, creating *mondaine* hierarchies based on the judgment of others.

In the book’s pivotal chapter on the place of men of letters in high society, Lilti develops this concept in order to address what he sees as the key questions surrounding the historical significance of eighteenth-century *mondaine* sociability: why do the representations of salon life contrast so sharply with its practices; why did the *philosophes* appropriate the language of *politesse*; and why did the aristocracy embrace the Enlightenment? Lilti’s response to these questions is compelling, not least because he addresses them in a number of analytical registers (social history, political philosophy, literary history) in order to connect contemporary theories of sociability and literary polemics to the conditions of eighteenth-century *mondanité*. In a nutshell, Lilti thinks that the polemics surrounding polite sociability stemmed from the need for writers to justify their involvement in high society. Writers were constrained to frequent *le monde* for patronage and protection, which meant that they were dependent financially on the generosity of social elites, whose connections helped advance their careers and whose opinions imparted the recognition necessary for access to the literary institutions of the monarchy. In exchange, writers helped society vanquish ennui and their celebrity—derived from the recognition of society—added to the prestige of the salons they frequented. But the materially and socially asymmetrical nature of this relationship was hidden at every turn, by patronage offered as a gift, by eulogies praising benefactors in the language of friendship, and by discretion on all sides.

It is clear that Lilti’s reading of this transaction was inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the gift that permits the unconscious transformation of an interested exchange into a disinterested one. But Lilti insists that the material and symbolic exchanges that took place in *le monde* were conscious, out in the open, exposed to the clear light of day, so that men of letters were forced to legitimize their actions by theorizing about them. As a result, the themes developed by the *philosophes* around the protection they

received in salons constituted a discourse on the social identity of writers whose polemical nature gave rise to a variety of representations of *mondaine* sociability, the same ones that later found their way into the historiography. The dominant position was that the writer ought to be an *honnête homme* and adhere to the values of polite society. These values—courtesy in discussion, the avoidance of personal attack—came to be associated with the Republic of Letters as well as the *mondaine* redefinition of aristocratic honor, helping to seal the alliance between the *philosophes* and a part of the social elite.

Writers who took this position justified their participation in high society by arguing that it was a strategy for spreading enlightenment and invented a philosophy of sociability that elaborated upon the rules of *politesse* as the basis of a harmonious social order. The alternative, adopted by the adversaries of the *philosophes* and by Rousseau, criticized the hypocrisy inherent in the justification of dependency and demanded that writers forge a new identity based on autonomy, originality, and authenticity. The latter went hand in hand with a patriotic critique of the aristocracy and the constitution of a new public of citizens with which writers must ally to combat monarchical despotism and the domination of the rich.

If salons provided writers with the symbolic resources they needed to carry out this debate, salons themselves were not sites of literary production or ethereal philosophizing. Instead, people frequented salons for amusement in order to escape the boredom of idleness. Conversation was a principal activity, but it was always associated with others, like gambling, eating, and amorous intrigue, a feature of salon culture that gave rise to a literature of libertinage that Lilti sees as instructive with regard to many of the rules and paradoxes of society life. In addition to discussing the place of theatre and music in high society, Lilti uses the exposition of scientific experiments in salons to drive home the point that *mondanité* was concerned with entertainment rather than with the advancement of knowledge, and that even science was subjected to the norms of *mondaine* civility, making salons the perfect venue for the protracted interest in scientifically dubious spectacles such as hypnosis and animal magnetism. Since salon conversation cannot be reconstructed on the basis of direct evidence, Lilti tries to explicate the salon's "literary practices" (conversation, letter writing, poetry) by breaking them down into their individual elements (*bon mots*, word plays, puns, jests, mockery, banter, storytelling, eulogies) in order to show how such practices had little to do with the rules of publicity because they were *mondaine* activities subject to the exigencies of *divertissement* and the quest for recognition.

Lilti's discussion of the relationship between salons and the public sphere expands on this notion of *le monde* as distinct from the places in which published works circulated and public opinion was formed. News of public affairs and judgments made about literary works were common currency in salons but they were not subjected to critical scrutiny. Instead, news and ideas were absorbed into the "economy of *divertissement*" (p. 320) and were therefore appreciated primarily for their interest or novelty. A wide variety of subjects were discussed in salons, but in a rather whimsical and disorganized fashion, with the conversation moving arbitrarily from one thing to the next without much concern for veracity or importance. The aim of such conversation was not enlightenment or a deeper understanding of events but the reinforcement of a sense of belonging to the "in crowd," which is why *mondaine* society was most interested in news about itself. On the one hand, salons were embedded within a larger communications network that included Paris, its gazettes, and its cafés, so that it was not closed off from the public sphere. On the other hand, the court was its primary horizon, so the "opinion *mondaine*" (p. 329) that was formulated in salons had mostly to do with court politics and court fashion.

As a consequence, salons were ill-suited to the exercise of critical reason for public purposes and writers were well aware of the difference between what was required to influence polite society and what it took to influence public opinion. With regard to the former, writers sought and expected the sort of praise, patronage, and protection that flowed from the social collusion that characterized *mondaine* encounters. From the latter, they expected to undergo a more risky form of appraisal as the written word was

detached from the interpersonal relations of the salons and sent out into the public in search of universal significance. Since success in society seldom went hand in hand with public success, authors were well aware that it was more difficult to control the public reception of their work and regarded with some trepidation the growing and undifferentiated public of readers that was fast creating a new sphere of legitimate intellectual judgment that was increasingly separate from *le monde*.

Lilti finds that the *habitués* of eighteenth-century salons spent a lot of time discussing politics, but he again emphasizes that they did not do so in a detached critical spirit. Salons were fixated on the traditional politics of the Old Regime, with its rumors, coteries, and intrigues. Political news often circulated in salons in the form of songs, jokes, *bon mots*, and anecdotes. Nevertheless, salon politics was serious business because salons occupied a strategic position at the intersection between Parisian society, the public, and the court and were politically important enough to attract hordes of diplomats and numerous spies from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Proximity to court and courtiers gave certain salons privileged access to political news and those who frequented salons were often participants in factional disputes. By going to salons or by holding one's own, members of society could make connections, advance careers, find protection, or gain support for certain policies.

According to Lilti, this was the significance of the salon of Madame Necker, who identified fully with her husband's political work and whose salon permitted him, the Swiss Protestant banker, to be integrated into high society and gain a reputation as an enlightened protector of men of letters. Lilti takes issue with Keith Baker's claim that Necker based his political action on a theory of public opinion that defined the latter as a rational tribunal that was able to hold the government to account. Instead, Lilti argues that Necker defined public opinion in terms associated with *mondaine* sociability and aimed to address himself to high society in order to exploit its genius for cultivating and circulating reputations so that his ideas would receive a positive hearing at court.^[4] Convinced that France could only be governed by winning the confidence of the social elite, Necker translated an abstract notion of public opinion into the language of old regime politics and created a bridge between a "virtual" public and the conventional play of factions.

The picture Lilti paints of the eighteenth-century salon stands in stark contrast to the one drawn by those who have tried to write its history in the light of Habermas's theory of the bourgeois public sphere. His rendering is the product of two acts of destruction, one aimed at the invented salon of the nineteenth century, and the other at the whole Habermasian paradigm. Lilti sees no grounds for characterizing the salon as a public space that contributed to the formation of an enlightened opinion hostile to the institutions of the Old Regime; he makes a sharp distinction between *mondaine* practices and the affirmation of public reason, concluding that salons were badly suited to the exercise of rational judgment. He sees no reason to conclude that there was a radical difference between the aristocratic salons of the seventeenth century and the philosophical salons of the eighteenth, and he asserts that the latter were fully immersed in the traditional politics of the time.

Lilti makes an even more emphatic case against the work of Dena Goodman, who largely neglected the *mondaine* dimension of salons and portrayed them as pedantic or serious institutions of the Republic of Letters governed by women who used the traditions of *politesse* to bring order and harmony to the conversation of male writers. Lilti contests this portrait on every count, explaining that salons were not necessarily "governed" by women; that their *habitués* rarely engaged in collective literary production; that there was no real difference between feminine salons and male coteries; and that the distinction between salons devoted to frivolous amusement and salons devoted to philosophical conversation is a fiction. Salons did not oversee the fusion of elites and the confusion of ranks but were often scenes of vicious ridicule, more like fraternities than academies. They did not harmonize every dispute and sweeten all bitterness but were frequently torn by jealousies and rivalries. And they did not disappear in

the last years of the Old Regime but rather survived the “political ebullition” of the 1780s along side a growing number of male-dominated clubs.

Lilti is no more convinced by the arguments of Daniel Gordon. He denies that salons were irenic enclaves separated from the social tensions of the Old Regime and the political machinations of absolute power. He rejects the idea that they were regulated by egalitarian civility, animated by the search for conviviality, opposed to the hierarchical etiquette of the court, and devoted to philosophical speculation, collective harmony, and the effacement of rank. While Lilti insists that the sources contradict most efforts to get at salons theoretically, he finds in Norbert Elias’s study of court society and the civilizing process a number of “very efficacious tools for understanding *mondanité*” (p. 53) and the roles writers played in salons, especially, and not surprisingly, with regards to the symbolic maintenance of group cohesion.[5]

At the very least, Lilti has done a great deal to undermine the Habermasian model on empirical grounds. But the strength of his analysis depends not on his fidelity to the sources but on the veracity of the metaphors he uses to describe and explain the one thing that the evidence does not reveal: what happened in salons? Like his mentor, Daniel Roche, Lilti takes an anthropological approach to the study of social practices in order to reveal the codes, define the stakes, expose the logic, and describe the tacit rules that governed salon sociability. Lilti’s salon functioned as a social mechanism operating in the larger context of mondaine sociability according to an internal economy of norms that had the power to transform everything and everyone who entered. It socialized all opinions, subjected all ideas and actions to its own internal dynamic, and forced everyone who participated into a self-reinforcing collusion, legitimizing its own values and generating its own legitimizing representations.

Stéphane Van Damme wrote recently that the salon has become a “veritable fetish of the historiography of the Enlightenment,” suggesting that too much attention has been lavished on the subject.[6] In some ways, Lilti’s book may reverse that trend by evoking a salon that may be of less interests to scholars of eighteenth-century intellectual history. In Lilti’s hands, the salon seems diminished in stature, faded in comparison to the salons that just a few years ago were regarded as the social base of the Enlightenment Republic of Letters. The salons that Lilti has portrayed can no longer shoulder the aspirations that have previously been invested in them: they were neither liberal nor harmonious; they did not contain the elements of an ideal society; their conversation did not irrigate the public sphere, challenge absolutism, or contribute to the cultural origins of the French Revolution. On the contrary, they were self-referential, narcissistic, and sometimes a bit vicious; their habitués were frivolous and vain, and their sociability reflected the dominant values of the time. Their *maîtresses de maison*—Lilti points out that the term *salonnière* was invented in the late nineteenth century—did not calm passions and reconcile disputes. In short, they are likely to be a disappointment to feminist historians who will have difficulty seeing them as central to the history of women or the evolution of gender relations in the era of the French Revolution.

A number of the broader claims made by this dense and rewarding book, however, suggest that salons matter more than we have previously thought. Not only has Lilti reaffirmed that the subject will remain a vital element in a number of on going historical debates—concerning the roles of writers, the dimensions of the public sphere, the formation of public opinion, and the nature of Old Regime politics—but he has opened up new lines of inquiry by exploring such themes as the construction of social identities, the links between *mondanité* and literature, and the constitution of national stereotypes. Finally, Lilti has demonstrated that mondaine sociability was a key matrix of French identity, in which writers and foreigners alike found the distinctive traits of the French character and a privileged field of social and psychological observation.

NOTES

[1] The adjective *mondain(e)* is used to identify that which pertains to *le monde* or anything that touches “la vie de société.” The term *mondanité(s)* is usually rendered in English as “society life,” with the connotation that it involves polite conversation. In French usage, it normally encompasses the obligations and enthusiasms that draw people to *société*, the time spent there, and the activities involved in frequenting *le monde*. According to the *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, Proust used the term to suggest “un goût de la vie mondaine” and Simone de Beauvoir used it to refer to “les occupations et relations sociales superficielles propres à la vie mondaine.”

[2] Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Marc Fumaroli, “La Conversation,” in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-86) vol. 3.2: 679-743; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[3] According to Lilti, salon women limited themselves “aux pratiques d’écriture légitime dans la sphère mondaine: la correspondance, et parfois, quelques pièces de société.... À l’inverse, quelque femmes essayèrent de conjuguer sociabilité et publication, d’être à la fois femme du monde et femme de lettres. Elle furent la cible de satire très violentes, jusqu’à la fin de siècle” (p. 118).

[4] Keith Baker, “Public Opinion as Political Invention,” in Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 167-99.

[5] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994) and *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

[6] Stéphane Van Damme, “Farewell Habermas? Deux décennies d’étude sur l’espace public,” <http://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/W3/espacepublic/vandamme.pdf>, May 15, 2006.

Steven D. Kale
Washington State University
kale@wsu.edu

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