

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 108

Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848*. Baltimore Md. and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. x + 308 pp. Biographical appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$48.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-7729-6.

Review by Denise Z. Davidson, Georgia State University.

Despite receiving a great deal of scholarly attention, salons are a poorly understood institution. Providing a wealth of information about salons, *salonnières*, and high society in France from the eighteenth century to 1848, Steven Kale's *French Salons* helps to correct many misconceptions. The study makes use of an interesting concept, "political sociability," to analyze the changing role of salons (and thus *salonnières*) in politics. Kale's argument appears quite straightforward: salons did not end with the Revolution, as some scholarship might lead us to believe.[1] On the contrary, they reached their high point of political influence during the years of the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy, 1815-1848. Kale traces an evolution from apolitical eighteenth-century salons to more politicized ones during the 1780s and into the revolutionary decade, but argues that a "wall" separated salons from any direct influence in government before 1815 (p. 230). After 1848, universal suffrage and the expansion of alternative political and social institutions caused salons to become politically irrelevant, though salons continued to exist throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Even during their most influential period, however, *salonnières*, the women who hosted these regular gatherings in their homes, never exercised anything more than indirect influence on politics or affairs of state.

French Salons is organized chronologically, a sensible approach considering that the author's goal is to explore how salons changed over time. The book begins with an introduction that goes to considerable effort to define the subject matter--the connection between salons and politics--and to explore the historiographical terrain. Seven chapters follow, first a chapter on the period before 1789, then one on the revolutionary decade, and one on the Napoleonic period. Kale's organization shifts at that point, with two chapters on the period 1815-1848 followed by one called "The Decline of Salons" that treats the period 1830-1848. A final chapter, "Nostalgia, or The Limits of Aristocratic Feminism," examines the portrayal of salons after 1848, even discussing present-day uses of the term "salon." Kale's decision to include three chapters on the period 1815-1848 reflects his conviction that this was the high point of salon political influence and thus the period most deserving of attention. Yet the choice leads to some redundancy and confusion as one chapter entitled "Le Pays féminin" depicts *salonnières'* great influence during these years, while the "Decline" chapter covers the same period and suggests that salons were losing ground to other institutions. Kale seems to be arguing that salons reached their high point between 1815 and 1848, even as they began to decline between 1830 and 1848, a chronology I found confusing.

Kale's bibliography appears exhaustive with regard to memoirs by *salonnières* and salon attendees as well as literary discussions of salons. These sources provide a great deal of information, but they could have been supplemented with research in manuscript collections. We all know that texts, especially those prepared with publication in mind, often reflect goals other than simply describing a lived reality. Kale himself expresses skepticism toward literary depictions of salon life by writers like Balzac and Stendhal. Had Kale dug around for letters not created or pruned for publication, he might have uncovered conflicting representations of salon life. It would have been interesting, for example, to have a clearer sense of what *salonnières* believed were their roles and functions in relation to politics. Kale also leaves out some examples that might have strengthened his argument. The one absence that came to my mind is Constance de Salm, a writer and *salonnière* of the very early nineteenth century who has been studied by Elizabeth Colwill, among others.[2] Still, Kale provides a service to scholars interested in salons, elite politics, and women's history, as he has mined an enormous amount of published material. The most important contribution of this study is its systematic analysis of the changing relationship between salons and politics over a long period.

Kale takes great care in defining the term "salon." He explains that salons could be "marginal or mainstream, bourgeois or aristocratic, courtly or enlightened, hierarchical or democratic, mixed or exclusive, public or private, feminist or masculinist, leisurely or 'work-like,' frivolous or serious, literary or political, or both. In all this

confusion, one thing seems clear:...salons always filled some sort of institutional vacuum at the intersection between public and private life..." (p. 4). Kale then gives a more specific, functional definition: "Salons were a historically specific expression of the aristocracy's determination to regulate and control the transition from a hereditary to an open elite.... The genius of salons ... lay in their ability to maintain a delicate balance between exclusivity and openness ...so that the aristocracy could have both a means of producing social cohesion and a vehicle for the dissemination of traits meant to characterize a wider society of elites undergoing redefinition" (p. 9). In harnessing aristocratic gender conventions, salons "gave *salonnières* privileged access to politics," and "put women in the role of configuring the social world around aristocratic power" (p. 14). Kale's efforts to define and characterize an ever-changing and flexible institution such as the salon are laudable and persuasive.

His definition of "politics," however, seemed less convincing to this reader. Kale explains in his introduction: "it is one thing to establish that salons were political; it is another ... to account for their role in politics.... The assertion that salons and *salonnières* had an influence on political decisions and events, as opposed to a less tangible and ill-defined role, is almost always based ... on the assumption that the presence of women in places where important matters were discussed implied that they played an integral part in the decision-making process" (pp. 7-8). Does political influence always have to be "tangible?" The problems with Kale's use of terms become most visible in the chapter on salons and politics during the Restoration and the July Monarchy. After emphasizing the important political roles played by salons in the previous chapter, Kale begins the chapter with a series of two-part sentences: "Salons were able to organize political sociability because they were institutions of elite society, although the practices they embodied and the circumstances that gave them a political role did not necessarily make them centers of political power. Salons were ... structures for getting things done, but the political functions they performed did not give *salonnières* significant political influence" (p. 132). These sentences left me wondering where Kale was going. After being prepared for an argument about the important political role of salons and *salonnières* between 1815-1848, I found Kale arguing the reverse: that salons were not "centers of political power" and that *salonnières* did not have "significant political influence." Kale argues that "women's ability to influence policy and events from behind the scenes" was "largely a fiction" and that "proximity to power is not the same as its possession" (p. 146). He then explains that contemporaries "confused [nineteenth-century] *salonnières* with the femmes politiques of the Old Regime." However, earlier chapters had argued that old regime salons were less political than those of the period 1815-1848. Then Kale refers to *salonnières* who "might on occasion use their good offices to help friends or relatives secure positions and favors, but these were the acts of private individuals and were not undertaken in salons" (p. 147). Is this not splitting hairs? If *salonnières* could shape access to political office, is that not political? He goes on to argue that "the power of *salonnières*, in short, was merely a rhetorical phantom.... In reality, *salonnières* were rendered politically impotent" (p. 152). *Salonnières* "powers of observation were valued ... but that did not constitute political influence in any but the most ephemeral sense" (p. 159). Kale's insistence that salons were venues for "political sociability" but that they did not give *salonnières* any "real" political power seems rather convoluted. How should one define "real politics?" I would argue that discussing politics and helping build political careers should be deemed "political" and that Kale is too narrow in identifying the kinds of behavior and influence that deserves to be labeled "political."

Kale rightly connects his study to larger arguments about French social life and the nature of feminism: "insofar as Frenchwomen aspired to be *salonnières*, they rarely became suffragettes" (p. 223). In an essay first published in 1995, Mona Ozouf argued that the French tradition of mixed-sexed sociability explains what she views as the more moderate form of feminism that emerged in France in comparison to the Anglo-American world where "separate spheres" encouraged clashes between the sexes. For others, however, French *galanterie* reinforced male domination of society and politics as it forced women to play into heterosexual norms.[3] Kale seems to agree, arguing that salons built upon conceptions of "feminine" attributes that helped political opponents find ways to communicate in this female-dominated world separate from the realm of true politics. Salons and *salonnières* never questioned the male-dominated nature of politics; further, the existence of salons meant that women "had few places on their own in which to form relationships of friendship and solidarity" with other women (p. 222). Although they were female-run spaces for political sociability, salons were essentially conservative institutions that reinforced the masculine and aristocratic political status quo.

The book comes at its topic from a particular perspective, as an example of aristocratic political sociability. "Bourgeois" salons, for example, do not count as "salons" by Kale's definition, though there is no doubt that bourgeois women organized such gatherings and bourgeois men attended both kinds.[4] In the chapter on the

"decline of salons" Kale argues that "the diminishing importance of salons was an episode in the battle of the sexes occasioned by modernity....The emergence of politics as a vocation for upper-class men undermined the shared idleness that had made the life experiences of aristocratic men and women more similar than was the case in other social categories, where inherited gender distinctions joined with material needs to place the sexes in radically different circumstances" (p. 175). Here I would argue with Kale's depiction of "other social categories." Which categories did he have in mind? Historians of women have demonstrated repeatedly that both sexes contributed to the working-class and even bourgeois family economy through their work, whether in goods production inside or outside the home, on farms, or in family businesses. Though there certainly was a sexual division of labor, "separate spheres" only took root in French society much later in the nineteenth century.[5] Kale's background as a historian of aristocratic politics perhaps explains his misconceptions about gender norms among other social classes.[6]

Now, to address some pickier issues that are not necessarily the fault of the author. The book needed better copy editing; several typographical errors appear throughout the text, including a reference to the historian Claude-Isabelle Brelot as "he" (p. 265, n. 5). I also found the grouping together of numerous citations in each note confusing. Clearly, this editorial decision reflected a desire to limit the number of notes, both to reduce interruptions in the text and for matters of space, but for readers wishing to trace particular quotations or ideas, a long list of seven or eight primary sources cited at the end of a paragraph is far from ideal.

This book will be a valuable tool for scholars, both for its contribution to debates about the relationship between French women and politics, and for the biographical and bibliographical material it brings together. (The biographical annex will no doubt prove particularly useful.) But this study is far from the last word on salons. Kale repeatedly cites unpublished material by Jolanta Pekacz--work that will surely contribute to our understanding of the political role of salons and *salonnières*. [7] In addition, many untapped resources exist in manuscript collections all over France, as I myself found by chance while researching another topic in provincial libraries. Kale's contention that salons remained an important institution in early nineteenth-century politics is uncontested; his study will hopefully inspire further research into this venue for "political sociability" that brought together both sexes and, to an extent, diverse social groups long beyond the supposed "reign" of aristocratic women during the old regime. Kale's book provides an important corrective to prevailing views of salons, and his argument about the ways in which aristocratic women did and did not involve themselves in politics deserves our attention.

NOTES

[1] Work that has tended to reinforce this view of salons as old regime institutions that faded with the Revolution include Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994) and Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[2] Colwill's publications on de Salm include "Epistolary Passions: Friendship and the Literary Public of Constance de Salm, 1767-1845," *Journal of Women's History* 12 (Fall 2000): 39-68. Geneviève Fraisse also discusses de Salm at length in *Muse de la raison: La démocratie exclusive et la différence des sexes* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinea, 1989) translated as *Reason's Muse: Sexual Difference and the Birth of Democracy*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[3] Mona Ozouf, *Women's Words: Essay on French Singularity*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Early responses to Ozouf's study can be found in "Femmes: Une singularité française?" *Le Débat* 87(Nov.-Dec. 1995) with contributions by Bronislaw Baczko, Elisabeth Badinter, Lynn Hunt, Michelle Perrot, and Joan Walloch Scott, as well as a reaction by Ozouf. See also Eric Fassin, "The Purloined Gender: American Feminism in a French Mirror," *French Historical Studies* 22(Winter 1999):113-138.

[4] Adeline Daumard, "La Vie de salon en France dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle" in *Sociabilité et société bourgeoise en France, en Allemagne et en Suisse, 1750-1850*, ed. Etienne François (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1986), pp. 81-92.

[5] Some classic works of women's history make this clear: Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978) and Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[6] Kales's first book was a study of later nineteenth-century aristocratic politics: *Legitimism and the Reconstruction of French Society, 1852-1883* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

[7] Pekacz has already published one book on salons: *Conservative Tradition in Pre-Revolutionary France: Parisian Salon Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

Denise Z. Davidson
Georgia State University
hisdzd@langate.gsu.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 108

ISSN 1553-9172