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Faith E. Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France: Mastering Memory*. Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Edited by Allyson Poska and Abby Zanger. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006. xii + 345 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.95 U.S./£47.50 U.K. (cl). ISBN 0-7546-5354-4.

Review by Katharine J. Hamerton, Columbia College, Chicago.

Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France is one of several recent books that take on the contentious topic of the nature of the French salon and women's role within it. Unlike Steven Kale and Antoine Lilti, the authors of other recent treatments, Faith Beasley is a literary scholar who approaches her project, which she describes as "a revisionist cultural history designed to interrogate the official shape of France's state-sanctioned cultural identity" (p. 13), from an avowedly feminist perspective. The result is an ambitious and passionate book that explores the ideological and power-laden "processes involved in the creation of a collective memory" (p. 15). The collective memory in question is nothing less than France's national myth of the *grand siècle*. Specifically, Beasley is concerned with revealing France's blinkered and gendered amnesia in its historical reconstruction of its seventeenth-century past. France, which is emphasized by Beasley as having a particularly intense grounding of identity and sense of *patrie* in its historical memories, is shown to suffer a national hallucination in its understanding of this past, caused by a long process of historical rewriting and mis-education. Beasley invokes Ernest Renan's 1882 comments from *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* on national myth-making in this light: "Forgetting, and I will even say historical error, are an essential factor in the formation of a nation...the essence of a nation is that all individuals have a lot of things in common, and also that all have forgotten a lot of things" (p. 315). What the French have forgotten, what they have, in fact, been taught to forget, by "nineteenth-century nation builders" (p. 318) and twentieth-century scholars and pedagogues, is the essential role in shaping French literature played by worldly women in the unique French institution of the seventeenth-century salon. The tremendous real literary influence of seventeenth-century salon women "was systematically and deliberately redefined or erased in a process designed to ensure that France's literary canon and its luminaries not bear the imprint of female influence" (p. 10). In Renan's terms, not all of France's "ancestors" could be acknowledged, as France's "national idea" became that of "a heroic past, great men, glory" (p. 314). With its women and their influence on the development of French literary culture written out of the nation's literary history, the French have long possessed a skewed understanding of their own *patrie* and its development--the whole process, as Beasley aptly comments, "a powerful illustration...of the subjective nature of historical memory and of the symbiotic relationship between this memory and power" (p. 315).

Beasley's jumping-off point is the 1981 admission to the French Academy of Marguerite Yourcenar, the first woman admitted in the three and a half centuries since the Academy's establishment. Yourcenar, in her reception speech, and Jean d'Ormesson, in his capacity as secretary welcoming her, downplayed this "monumental departure from historical precedent" in the election of a woman to "the bastion most identified with 'Frenchness.'" But Beasley finds revealing and deliberately unconvincing Yourcenar's attempt to justify the exclusion of the "invisible group of women...shadows" who had lived before her, disingenuously subverting her own affiliation to the official version of French literary history in which, she claimed, these women "didn't dream of crossing [the Academy's] threshold," possessing as they did their own "feminine sovereignty" as "queens of the salons, and...*ruelles*," an entirely separate literary realm (p. 1). The book that follows, one that evinces the influence of several decades of feminist literary scholarship and interest in historical memory and national identity, is Beasley's resurrection of these shadows and, more importantly, her rehabilitative integration of them and their salons back into a central--and no longer separate--position in French literary history.

The first half of the book convincingly demonstrates that in the seventeenth century, women in the salons were recognized by both critics and admirers as strong influences on the literary field, both because many of them were writers who influenced the formation of the new genres of the day such as portraits, maxims, and, above all, the novel, and because “women were seen as possessing an innate ability to judge the quality of artistic productions” (p. 4). Over fifty or sixty *salonnières* in seventeenth-century Paris were actively judging and forming literature, with *doctes* such as Chapelain attending both their salons and their verdicts in a far more serious, and far more seriously taken, project than has come down to us in the standard histories that mention only women’s light verse games and that mock their *préciosité*. Contemporaries, whether they found this situation beneficial or disturbing, universally acknowledged these women’s literary powers. As one critic put it in the mid-seventeenth century, “the easiest thing is to please the intellectuals... One must conform to women’s taste to succeed” (p. 31). This history has been trivialized and elided, however, in portraying only the salons’ well-known contributions in forming French politeness, galanterie, and sociability: “From salonnières who left indelible imprints on the literature and writers of the period, women and the salons they created and dominated were transformed into purveyors of politeness” (p. 10). Beasley presents ample evidence that women were sought out for much more than this, specifically for their literary approval of new works, with salons regularly described as tribunals and academies. “Women,” she claims, were “responsible for creating an alternative system of values for literary evaluation and production” to those of the *doctes* or scholars, the traditional literary arbiters (p. 21).

Chapelain’s description of the salon of madame de Rambouillet expresses well the informal literary criteria women in the salons were seen to employ: “People there don’t speak with erudition, but with reason and there is nowhere else in the world with more good sense and less pedantry” (p. 25). These new criteria of literary value were worldly, based on group collaboration both for production and criticism: *bon sens* or *sens commun*, *bel usage*, *beau style*, *bon goût*, the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, pleasure, sentiment, *sensibilité* and a kind of worldly reason, all invoked in opposition to the classical rules to which such vague qualities could not be reduced. As subjective criteria that could not be pinned down but that were ideal to express a new *mondain* group aesthetic, these were fundamentally destabilizing and liberating to the literary scene: they released literature from its fetters to ancient aesthetic criteria and from the control of the *doctes*, valorizing individual judgment and creativity and above all, the pleasure of a worldly public in the process of empowering itself, and allowing for the emergence to power of the worldly critic within an aristocratic literary milieu in which women could dominate, despite their lack of formal learning (p. 38).

This worldly public’s taste was conceived of as being molded and developed by women, without whose refining influence it would be impossible to perfect. The whole business was threatening to many whom Beasley labels traditionalists, with women instead of learned men determining the most successful and popular works of French literature, altering the French language, and threatening the social order through the new characters, social roles, and values of their literary creations; the virulent attacks on the *précieuses* like those of Molière must be understood in this context. More was at stake, Beasley claims, than even the “elevation of a new public” and the “weakening of scholastic values,” as “the collaborative methods of the salons resulted in...new genres,...new methods for judging,...alternative models for behavior,...new ways of achieving knowledge,...a vision of a new society” and “ultimately a new literary culture at a time when literature played a political role in the shaping of an image of France...that found itself frequently at odds with that reflected in the politics of Louis XIV” (p. 317). Beasley bases this analysis on close textual readings and analyses of several well-known and lesser known sources: Marguerite Buffet’s *Nouvelles observations sur la langue française*, Dominique Bouhours’s *Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène*, reception speeches to the Académie Française from 1640 to 1715, the quarrels over *Le Cid* and *La Princesse de Clèves*, Lafayette’s *Zaïde*, and the works of Villedieu.

In the book’s second half, Beasley explores how this link between “seventeenth-century literary culture and the worldly milieu of the salons” has been erased (p. 5), arguing that the nineteenth century created a new representation of the seventeenth-century literary field “as part of a grandiose project to create a

national, collective memory” which was then disseminated through the centralized French education system (p. 294). Her argument that women’s literary role in the salons was elided, transformed after the fact by acknowledging only its acceptable influence in forming French politesse and *mondanité*, is elaborated in two ways (discussed below), first that this was a necessary part of the gendered process of national myth-making, and second, that it was caused by a historical shift in the role of the *salonnière*. Beasley’s sources for the book’s second half range widely, and include a few eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary histories and anthologies addressed to a non-scholarly public, the nineteenth-century scholarly works on salon women of Brunetière, Cousin, and Sainte-Beuve, representations of Rambouillet and Scudéry over four centuries, and a fascinating treatment of nineteenth- and twentieth-century pedagogy, the subject of her final chapter. There, she stresses the enormous power of the French centralized education system in terms of its ability to form and close both its literary canon and the minds of contemporary French scholars and the French public. Her analysis synthesizes a variety of secondary studies, including work on pedagogical manuals and anthologies, on the subject matter tested on the French agrégation exam (which tests future college-level and secondary teachers) from 1890 to 1980, and on Molière. Beasley examined modern student editions of the latter, who, she finds, is still presented more as accurate social historian than as literary satirist—an especially salient fact with regard to his depiction of the *précieuses*.

This approach yields rich results, not least of which is to cast light on the twisted fate of modern French feminism, which becomes less surprising in the context of the continued hegemonic deployment of ridicule against the ambitions of its state-examination-taking girls and women. [1] Beasley shows us how a highly one-sided vision of the salons continues to be propounded in France, with women who had anything to do with literary or intellectual production still portrayed as ridiculous (p. 281), how the novel (pioneered by women) was eliminated as a serious seventeenth-century genre, and how Boileau came to be canonized as the teacher of French taste, resulting in women’s literary marginalization. There are fascinating insights into contemporary French culture. Beasley argues that the consecrated role Molière has come to play as “the most ‘French’ of all authors” (with *Les Femmes savantes* seen, as one nineteenth-century critic put it, as “perhaps our most perfect literary work” [p. 273]) continues to be deployed to instruct French girls in appropriate femininity to the present day. She provides intriguing revelations of a continued French distaste for Scudéry’s supposedly bourgeois qualities, and a corresponding fetishization of a purified aristocratic cultural milieu supposedly typified by madame de Rambouillet—this in spite of the fact of the overlapping personnel and activities of both women’s salons!

France’s nationalist and emotional investment in its classical authors (Molière, Racine, Corneille, Boileau, La Fontaine, Bossuet, La Bruyère, Pascal) and its resistance to canon revision and incorporation of its seventeenth-century women writers and their salons into general literary history (salons, she points out, were not even the subject of their own article in Pierre Nora’s celebrated *Les lieux de mémoire*) can be viewed more clearly, thanks to Beasley, as products of a long centralized indoctrination. A glance at its website reveals that the Academy today boasts four women out of the forty immortals, and that it currently does highlight under the “*grandes dates*” of its history, the election of Yourcenar and the appointment of its first female perpetual secretary in 1999. Nevertheless, Beasley would claim, France still clings to the now traditional vision of its *patrimoine*, citing recent “virulent” debates over pedagogy in which French critics have attacked American university French departments’ broadening of the canon to include women writers and Francophone texts (p. 316). Beasley ends with a spirited call for research and pedagogical agendas that would not only resurrect women’s forgotten works, but more importantly, read men’s in light of them, and thus fully revisit the seventeenth-century literary field in which women were so influential. As she points out, though, this type of program continues to threaten the guardians of France’s national tradition. French protectionism, well evinced by the continuing rhetorical utility in France of casting scorn upon “American influence” (whether feminist or literary) makes better sense in this light.

Beasley's account of women's seventeenth-century literary role and its later erasure from memory is timely, important, and replete with valuable insights and often very sensitive textual readings and analyses. Her depiction of the significance of this role is convincing and has been supported by much other scholarship.^[2] However, her explanations for the discursive and cultural shift charted here, in which this history has been obliterated, are problematic, and in many places the process traced is thinly supported with evidence.

As an explanatory mechanism, a generalized misogyny is premised when Beasley claims that French women had to be eliminated from national literary history if the nation were to develop a heroic literary self-identity, a resorting to assumption-as-explanation that is revealed by her recourse to the passive tense: "If the seventeenth century and its literature were to serve as a model literary milieu for the creation of a concept of 'Frenchness,' not only female literary production but female influence in any form needed to be eliminated, or reconfigured to conform to a more traditional, stereotypical, and gendered ideology" (p. 265). The seventeenth century thus had to be "reconceptualiz[ed]...to make its literature worthy of being the centerpiece of a French educational system and a model for Frenchness. The very quality often touted as unique to France, that is, the particular status of women in the cultural arena, was eliminated from this model for the nation" (p. 265).

Arguing in this way is to explain a historical shift by resorting to a transhistorical misogyny, and obscures our understanding of the historical process that was in play. It can account for neither the seventeenth-century emergence nor the continuing existence of the powerful and competing national discourse of women's positive influence on French national taste, and of their interventions as central to French cultural superiority. No accounting of different and conflicting interest groups and of what was at stake for them is attempted. But how did specific class or status identities play into this debate? What about divisions between Ancients and Moderns, supporters of the developing public, supporters of the absolutist state, etc.? Historical change remains unexplained: What caused the "backlash" that Beasley sees beginning in the late seventeenth century? Why was the alternative view of women as essential in forming France's literary superiority "thinkable" and popular in the seventeenth century, but apparently intolerable later, if misogyny is the explanation? How can Beasley assert that marginalizing women from the literary field had to occur for seventeenth-century French literature to be seen as foundational to French identity, when nationalist Moderns and many salon-goers in the seventeenth century believed that women's cultural centrality was, as she herself acknowledges, the basis for the new French cultural superiority of which they felt themselves witnesses? Again, for *whom* did this marginalization "have" to occur? For whom did women's cultural centrality become impossible?

Beasley does, however, also offer a historical explanation for the discursive obliteration of the seventeenth-century *salonnière* from serious French literary history. This is that there was a transformation in the eighteenth-century salon in which women's literary roles became effaced; because the eighteenth-century *salonnière's* role then came to be more in accord with "traditional" gender-role expectations, the image of the eighteenth-century salon came to "usurp...in France's national memory" that of its more subversive seventeenth-century ancestor (p. 182). Ca. 1700, she claims, the nature of the salon "changed dramatically," with women becoming "mediators and facilitators of male discourse...listener and hostess as opposed to speaker and creator" who "rarely sought to exhibit any creativity or genius of their own," their voices "muted, if not totally suppressed" (pp. 182-83). This historical shift resulted in the memory of the seventeenth-century *salonnière* being eclipsed, we are told. This explanation too is problematic, however, for several reasons. First of all, there is no consensus that there was such a historical shift in the nature of the salon or of the eighteenth-century *salonnière*; this position has most recently and convincingly been dismissed by Antoine Lilti.^[3] Beasley downplays important similarities between the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *salonnières* (p. 182), ignores the continuity of the centrality of the ideology of *honnêteté* both to the *salonnière* and to the discourse of taste, and exaggerates the culturally unthreatening quality of the eighteenth-century *salonnière* (e.g., p. 183); the absence of any attention to Rousseau is presumably well considered on the author's part. Beasley finds evidence for this shift in

the *salonnière's* role in her reading of contemporary sources which attest to it, but she reads these eighteenth-century sources as reflectively factual in a way she elsewhere avoids.[4] Right, for example, to criticize the assumption that Molière was an objective social historian, she commits the same lapse in portraying the eighteenth-century *salonnière* as entirely self-sacrificing, based on uncritical readings of limited contemporary testimony.[5] But surely we need to consider that eighteenth-century depictions of women that focused on their role as purveyors of politeness and sociability might be idealized, deployed, or normative, the statements of particular interested parties, that such depictions might, in fact, be indicative of a contested discursive *process* of marginalizing women, rather than transparent evidence of a radical, thorough, and entirely unexplained alteration in the Old Regime salon and in its *salonnières'* behaviors that for no stated reason took place around 1700.[6] Even if we should come to accept the latter interpretation, it remains to be shown how this historical shift would then automatically “erase” the memory of the earlier “type” of *salonnière*.

I also found troubling Beasley's tendency to reify a monolithic “seventeenth-century,” “eighteenth-century,” and “nineteenth-century” view of women and of salons. At times, she seems to be trying to force her sources into a predetermined framework, and her treatment of an era's influence on a writer's thought, or on readers' reception of texts, can be extremely deterministic (for example, see her comments on Sainte-Beuve's views on women, p. 222, or her tendentious description, while not untrue, of Ernest Lavisse's *Histoire de France* as “a history that would form the minds of generations of French citizens,” p. 262). This lack of attention to the reception and appropriation of texts or ideas is problematic in this type of cultural history, and again is part of a larger tendency to over-simplify a complex cultural debate. Beasley also makes fine-grained--yet frequently contradictory--arguments about change over time that are often not fully supported by the dates--or contents--of the sources then invoked. The book is marred by a number of typographical and editing errors, a shame given its price, and there are numerous lacunae in the bibliography.

These are, indeed, significant limitations (at least to this historian), but I nevertheless remained convinced that Beasley has cast light on a major historical shift in an original and valuable way. She has drawn our attention to women's literary and aesthetic centrality in seventeenth-century French society and has raised the question of how this centrality was later undermined. Her scholarly background leads her to highlight the importance of literary production and new literary values to the history of salons, which has not been well understood by historians, and her focus on the gendered process of creating historical memory casts new light on the issue of canon formation as well as on the institutional history of the salon. *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France* will interest cultural, literary and gender historians and scholars interested in issues of history, memory and national identity. Building on the work of literary and feminist scholars, spirited, clearly written, and with many original insights, it points towards a fruitful interdisciplinary partnership of historical, literary and feminist studies that will hopefully, as Beasley does here, continue to span the traditional--and obscuring--divides of early modern and modern studies. Her argument will surely inspire the further research for which Beasley herself calls.

NOTES

[1] For example, the editorial comment in Molière, *Les Précieuses ridicules*, ed. Brigitte Diaz (Paris: Larousse, 1998) that “Henriette portrays the reasonable ideal of a balanced femininity, in which the concern for education and knowledge does not take precedence over the blossoming of emotions and love” (p. 111; cited Beasley p. 309, n. 57).

[2] See, for example, the series “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe,” edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press).

[3] Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). In contrast, see Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p.18, who agrees with Beasley on a shift in the nature of the salon after 1700.

[4] See Lilti's comments on this type of approach in Antoine Lilti, "Sociabilité et mondanité: Les hommes de lettres dans les salons parisiens au XVIIIe siècle," *French Historical Studies* 28:3 (Summer 2005):415-46.

[5] Beasley's portrait of the eighteenth-century *salonnière* also seems largely to depend on Elena Russo, *La cour et la ville dans la littérature classique aux Lumières* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002); see especially pp. 181-83. Russo herself lays much weight on the testimony of Marivaux.

[6] Beasley does once, in a note very near the end of her book, refer to this possibility (p. 324, n. 10), but her entire book is premised on the argument that women's literary role in the eighteenth-century salons was radically less important and independent than it had been.

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See also Faith Beasley's response to this review.

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