
H-France Review Vol. 15 (May 2015), No. 72

Tuomas Tikanoja, *Transgressing Boundaries: Worldly Conversation, Politeness and Sociability in Ancien Régime France, 1660-1789*. Helsinki: Tuomas Tikanoja, 2013. 277 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-952-93-2685-3.

Review by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, Boston University.

In Tuomas Tikanoja's view, discussions of Enlightenment sociability that have prevailed in historical analysis over the last couple of decades remain overly focused on the role of Enlightenment salons as unique forums of public opinion and free exchange that constitute a historical turning point. *Transgressing Boundaries* proposes to give closer attention to links with Renaissance and seventeenth-century discussions of politeness, courtly behavior, and conversation, as well as Christian and Renaissance ethics and aesthetics. Tikanoja critiques the continued dominance of a historiography modeled on the work of Norbert Elias in studies of eighteenth-century worldly discourse, which view it as directly connected to a civilizing process that emerged from court society, one that was fundamentally hierarchical. He argues that these studies have not given due recognition to the depth of the social and political critique that had been fostered in social circles outside of the court from the end of the sixteenth century onward. The book is encyclopedic in scope, despite its relatively short length, and touches on the work of a large number of writers from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.

Tikanoja's introduction, "Société' and the Scene of Politeness," provides a detailed inventory of the social circles that constituted salon society in seventeenth-century Paris and situates within these circles the work of some of the principal writers who theorized sociability from that period: Méré, Morvan de Bellegarde, and La Bruyère. In the first chapter he discusses the different forms of sociability in seventeenth-century high society, emphasizing the variety of forms and social configurations that conversation and interaction could inhabit: letters, conduct manuals, literary portraits, novels, and memoirs. He provides interesting details about the social networks linking important figures such as Méré, Sévigné, Scudéry, La Bruyère, and La Rochefoucauld, emphasizing the principle of egalitarian exchange that these networks cultivated, and the progressively open stance that they took toward membership.

Chapter two, "The Culture of Representation," looks at the Renaissance origins of the notion of politeness, tracing how it developed into the French Classical period within a Christian system of values emphasizing self-control, self-restraint, and modesty. He surveys a number of the principal courtesy manuals produced in these two periods, from Castiglione and Gracian to Courtin, Faret, Bouhours, Lasalle, Méré, and Bellegarde. This discussion links with that of *honnêteté* in chapter three, in which he focuses on the principal of virtue in interaction and traces its natural adaptation to an egalitarian model of sociability.

A chapter on *amour-propre* and sociability takes a closer look at seventeenth-century condemnations of self-love, primarily in the works of Scudéry, La Rochefoucauld, and La Bruyère. The author argues here that the principle of social utility or humanitarianism as later advocated by the philosophes needs to be understood as emerging from these moralist critiques. The chapter "On Polite and Impolite

Conversation” looks more closely at fictional representations of conversation and how they functioned as guides to interaction, with particular attention to the conversations in Scudéry’s novels and in her books of collected conversations. In his chapter on “Politeness and the Space of Sociability,” Tikanoja reviews the importance of the circulation of printed texts and manuscripts within specific social circles, in particular the eighteenth-century salons of Madame de Lambert, Madame de Tencin, Madame du Duffand, and others, and points out how these practices grew out of similar ones in the seventeenth century. The multiple ways of “performing” one’s self and one’s social role in public that were cultivated by the eighteenth-century philosophes grew from models that had been established in the previous century.

A chapter titled “The Worldly and Educational Aspect of Cultivated Conversation” looks at how discussions of conversation as a practice increasingly came to be absorbed in and applied to pedagogical contexts. Conversation was promoted as a way of learning and a means of developing moral character and social consciousness, and was important in the formation of the modern idea of the intellectual. In the final chapter, “The Claim for Authentic Sociability,” Tikanoja examines eighteenth-century debates about the extent to which honesty and outspoken truthfulness could be productively fostered in social conversation. Debates about what constituted “true” and “false” became more important. The figure of the “libertin galant” embodied these tensions.

This book covers a lot of territory. One of its strengths is in its synthesis of a large number of primary works, and in the author’s decision to define broadly the texts that served as guides to interaction and sociability, including not only the books that designated themselves as guides, but also letters, memoirs, essays, and novels. In general, Tikanoja’s reference to secondary material is to works that have focused on eighteenth-century culture, many of which he says have not taken adequate account of the emphasis on creating a model of sociability that was an alternative to the court that already existed in seventeenth-century discussions of ideal interaction. But he ignores a number of book-length studies by scholars of the seventeenth century that have argued precisely that: Carolyn Lougee’s book *Le Paradis des femmes*, which studied the social status of members of seventeenth century salon society and established the notion of the salon as an alternative space to the court, my own book *Exclusive Conversations*, which drew on the social theories of Erving Goffmann and Georg Simmel (as does Tikanoja) in studying the practice of sociability and the problem of authentic communication in seventeenth-century literature and letters, Erica Harth’s book *Cartesian Women*, which examined the space of the seventeenth-century salon as an alternative to both court and academy, or Alain Viala’s book *La France galante*, which has argued for reading writings on *honnêteté* and *galanterie* as forerunners of modern, democratic ideas of sociability.[1]

When he does discuss a particular critical study at some length, he provides a good summary. In this respect the book can serve as a useful tool for students of early modern theories of sociability. He aligns himself with the work of Daniel Gordon, Dena Goodman, and Elena Russo, who are extensively cited, and his assessments of the work of Jürgen Habermas and Norbert Elias provide detailed points of reference at different moments in the book.[2]

In its argumentation and textual interpretation, then, much of this has been done before, but some of the specific source materials that Tikanoja inventories have not, to my knowledge, received critical attention by scholars of Enlightenment sociability. *Transgressing Boundaries* serves as a useful and very readable survey of the abundant literature of civility as it developed over more than two centuries, and argues convincingly for the strong ties between Enlightenment debates on civil society and the worldly model of sociability as cultivated in France since the Renaissance.

NOTES

[1] Carolyn Lougee, *'Le Paradis des femmes': Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); Alain Viala, *La France galante: Essai historique sur une catégorie culturelle, de ses origines jusqu'à la révolution* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

[2] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

Elizabeth C. Goldsmith
Boston University
ecg@bu.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172