
Response by Faith Beasley, Dartmouth College.

Many of the critiques Hamerton makes derive from a difference in opinion regarding precisely what I was trying to examine in my study. The purpose of my book is not to explore the historical legacy of the seventeenth-century French salon as a social institution, nor is my “entire book premised on the argument that women’s literary role in the eighteenth-century salons was radically less important and independent than it had been.” Indeed, that premise has little relevance to my study, the purpose of which is to investigate the seventeenth-century institution of the salon as a determining force on the literary milieu of what would eventually become France’s “classical literary canon.” No historian or literature specialist would disagree that when late nineteenth-century scholars, critics, and pedagogues were called upon to select a canon of literary works most representative of France’s literary achievement, the texts they chose were 1) primarily from the seventeenth century, and 2) authored by men. This canon, once in place, became so intricately intertwined with the construction of the French national identity that even at the turn of the twenty-first century, students of French literature who were asked to name the “greatest works” of the French tradition would list Corneille, Racine, Molière, and Boileau—omitting their influential female contemporaries, Scudéry and Lafayette. The goal of my project was to fathom why this would have been the case, especially given the degree to which this projection is at odds with the vision of the seventeenth-century literary landscape defined by late twentieth-century specialists of women’s and gender studies, historians and literary critics such as Carolyn Lougee, Natalie Zemon Davis, Joan DeJean, Madelyn Gutwirth, Domna Stanton, Nancy K. Miller, Erica Harth, and Gabrielle Verdier, to name just a few.

Hamerton’s critique of my view of the eighteenth-century salon, and of my supposed reliance on Elena Russo’s interpretation of it, curiously fails to include pivotal scholarship about the eighteenth-century salon in this discussion—namely Dena Goodman’s corroborating scholarship on the eighteenth-century republic of letters or the work of Alain Viala, who straddles the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By contrast, Hamerton’s claim that Antoine Lilti’s very recent work now offers the definitive “accepted”
view of women’s roles in the eighteenth-century salon and the influence of the salon in general would seem precipitous. Lilti’s book, which appeared only a few months before mine and with which I was unable to construct a dialogue given that my own book was already in press, is only now beginning to become part of the discussion.[1] Certainly in seventeenth-century studies there is no consensus that Lithi or indeed anyone else has put any questions to rest, as Hamerton implies, primarily because few scholars have focused on the seventeenth-century salons first before turning to the institution’s eighteenth-century manifestations. In Mastering Memory I argued that when one looks first at the seventeenth, and then at the eighteenth-century salon, one sees fundamental differences in the way women participated in literary and philosophical endeavors and were viewed by their peers. Chapelain and Scudéry or La Fontaine and La Sablière do not find their equivalents in Graffigny and Voltaire or d’Epinay and Rousseau, for example, nor do these pairs have similar interactions in the salons of their respective periods. Women such as Lambert, Graffigny, d’Epinay, and later Genlis, among others, themselves lamented the changes they perceived in women’s influence and the roles they were assigned by their contemporaries, especially with respect to intellectual activities.

Despite Hammerton’s claims to the contrary, I do not categorically state that 1700 marked an abrupt shift in the cultural history of the salon. Rather, my discussion of the shift that occurred between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is based on a figure who straddled both: Anne-Thérèse de Marguerat-de-Courcelles, marquise de Lambert (1647-1753). Relying on the works that Lambert published during the 1720s, I trace how women’s roles were being reformulated, particularly with respect to their cultural and literary participation in the intellectual realm, demonstrating how Lambert’s observations can be substantiated by the gradual elimination of women writers, most of whom were active salonnières, from literary anthologies throughout the eighteenth century. In stating this observation, I am in no way trying to make a definitive claim about the evolution of the eighteenth-century salon, although there is ample evidence to support my argument that women’s influence on the evolution of literature in the salons changes from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. Women’s development of the novel in the seventeenth-century does not have its equivalent in the eighteenth.

Finally Hamerton finds “lacunae” in my bibliography, something that most scholars would agree is virtually unavoidable when writing a book of any kind, let alone one that spans more than four centuries. In an effort to incorporate an array of primary and secondary sources, it was impossible to cite everything, especially when one is working with a number of different disciplines as I was. I do not agree with Hamerton, however, that there are any major lacunae that would be considered “significant limitations.”[2] In my research over the course of the ten years that I was writing Mastering Memory, I was very careful to consult the work of all the major scholars with the sole exception, of course, of works that appeared after my own work was already in press. I intentionally adopted the strategy of doing close readings of case studies as opposed to constructing a vast and most likely oversimplified version of four centuries of intellectual history. I would add that my bibliography consists of the works I found the most relevant and useful, but certainly does not include everything I read for this project.

I am gratified that Hamerton ends her review stating that my work “points towards a fruitful interdisciplinary partnership of historical, literary and feminist studies” and that my “argument will surely inspire…further research.” That was precisely my hope for this book.

NOTES

[1] It is interesting to note that Lilti’s article, “La Femme du Monde est-elle une intellectuelle” which appeared in 2005, again too late for me to incorporate it into my book, makes the same point that I do:
the eighteenth-century *salonnière* embraced a subordinate role. This is the only point that I emphasize with respect to the eighteenth century salon, the focus of my study being on the seventeenth-century manifestation of the salon, in which women are clearly not subordinate. [2] I wonder if perhaps Hamerton was referring to her own dissertation, which I did not consult. I did limit myself to critical works that had been published.

Faith Beasley Dartmouth College faith.e.beasley@dartmouth.edu

Copyright © 2007 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.