"Le goût de la nation": the influence of women in forming French and foreign taste

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In the eighteenth century there was not the slightest doubt in the minds of the French that they were the trendsetters in the arts and in manners for the rest of the civilised world. In a letter to Lord John Hervey, published at the front of his *Siècle de Louis XIV*,[1] Voltaire, the *chef des philosophes* and the voice of France for the French and foreigners alike, wrote "dans l'éloquence, dans la poésie, dans la littérature, dans les livres de morale et d'agrément, les Français furent les législateurs d'Europe."[2] He was referring to the time of Louis XIV, from which period the French sense of "nation", or national sentiment, may be dated. The century of Louis XIV was, from its beneficent influence on other nations, through its writers, moralists, artists, and to a lesser degree, musical composers, the greatest that had ever existed, Voltaire argued, and constituted "la véritable gloire de notre patrie".[3] It was the court of Louis XIV which had created *l'esprit de société* and set the tone of polite society for the rest of Europe, including the use of French which, of all the languages, was the most suited to polite intercourse.[4] As Marc Fumaroli shows in his *Quand l'Europe parlait français*, a knowledge of French was *de rigueur* if one wanted to circulate in good company, a fact of which all the aristocrats of Europe were aware.[5] French was spoken at court in Berlin, Saint Petersburg, Stockholm, and Warsaw, and could be found in houses of the educated upper classes in Vienna, Naples, Madrid and even Rome. Voltaire's proposition was that all the giants of the seventeenth century—in their writings, in their pictures, in their architecture, in their music, in their very thinking—helped the distillation process of that intangible French phenomenon, *le goût*, or good taste.

According to Voltaire, "le goût de la nation" developed slowly, over a number of generations.[6] He cited two examples of seventeenth-century writing as the most influential in forming national taste and giving it a spirit of "justesse

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[1] Voltaire to John Hervey, *c*.1 June 1740 (D1372), in Theodore Besterman (ed.), *Correspondance de Voltaire*, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1977–1988), vol. 2, pp. 351–354. This was one of several versions of the same letter (see p. 351n1).

[2] Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Garnier, s.d.), p. 400.

[3] Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, p. 2.

[4] "celle qui exprime avec le plus de facilité, de netteté & de délicatesse, tous les objets de la conversation des honnêtes gens" (Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, p. 416).

[5] See Marc Fumaroli, *Quand l'Europe parlait français* (Paris: Fallois, 2001).

[6] "chez les peuples qui cultivent les beaux-arts, il faut beaucoup d'années pour épurer la langue et le goût" (*Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, p. 414).

et précision": La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* and Mme de Sévigné's letters to her daughter. The hallmark of both authors was succinctness, simplicity, grace and a natural style.[7] This subtle and elusive style became known as *le naturel* and was something the well-bred aspired to, something to be mastered at all costs. It gradually permeated French society, where all the niceties of polite social intercourse were learned: in the art of conversation, in letter-writing, and even in the carriage of the body *le naturel* was promoted as the epitome of taste. The greatest compliment that could be paid to anyone was to say that the person possessed *du naturel*. Not only was it sought in the domain of social intercourse, but it was embraced by eighteenth-century French writers, educators, artists and musicians to such an extent that it came to define the very essence of good taste in the eyes of the rest of Europe. Ironically, the person who was responsible for imprinting the idea of *le naturel* firmly on the French consciousness, and turning it into a veritable vogue in spite of himself was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in his 1762 education novel *Emile*, which was read by all of literate France, as well as by other nations, declared: "Tout ce qui gêne et contraint la nature est de mauvais goût."[8]

But even before Rousseau's seminal work was published the taste of the nation was being moulded in that archetypically French forum, the salon.[9] The salon, in whatever form it took—*société, assemblée*, *cercle*, *dîner*, *souper*, or *soirée musicale*—was the centre of French sociability. It was a peculiarly Parisian institution, begun in the middle of the reign of Louis XIV, when society overflowed from the stultifying atmosphere of the Versailles court into the more vibrant *hôtels* of the capital. The most distinguished *salonnières* were discerning women who selected their company with care, set the tone, guided the conversation, and could influence the fortunes of those appearing there. These women considered themselves the purveyors, the disseminators, the nurturers, the very guardians of taste in the *belles lettres*, in the fine arts, and in music. Their own peculiar art consisted in pleasing. Some of their assemblies favoured one or other of the arts or sciences, but often they were a melting pot of all

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[7] Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, pp. 402, 410.

[8] Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes (IV): Emile ou de l'éducation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 706.

[9] The term "salon" will be used here, even though it was not in common use in the eighteenth century. In his essay which serves as the Preface to Jacqueline Hellegourc'h's *L'Esprit de société* (Paris: Garnier, 2000) Marc Fumaroli takes issue with the widespread indiscriminate use of the term. However Marmontel did use the term in his *Mémoires*, vol. 1, p. 289 (full citation note 15).

facets of intellectual endeavour, although, as Horace Walpole wittily remarked, every French hostess had planted in her house two authors, whom she watered with care.[10] Not only did the Paris salon mould the taste of the French, it was also such a magnet to foreigners that, notwithstanding Rousseau's dislike of "civilized" society, and his belief that to discover the soul and the habits of a nation one had to go into the countryside, it was probably the single most influential French institution in projecting abroad an image of the manners and customs of France, making Paris the European capital of culture, and elevating the city to nation status in its own right. And if Paris was a mini nation, then the salon was a nano nation, where what was important was not size but that this *Ersatznation* was taken seriously by the rest of Europe.

Among the famous salons of the early eighteenth century were those of the marquise de Lambert (1647–1733), author of the much-consulted manual of manners *Avis d'une mère à un fils*, whose salon ran for the first 30 years of the eighteenth century; of the highly intelligent but scandal-tinged Mme de Tencin, mother of d'Alembert, whose salon in the rue Saint-Honoré was active in the 1730s and 1740s; of the wily Mme du Deffand (1697–1780), ex-mistress of the Regent (Philippe, duc d'Orléans), whose mind was so sharp even Voltaire stood in awe of it, and whose 30-year salon in the convent Saint-Joseph was full of all the tall poppies of the Enlightenment as well as fashionable foreigners; of Julie de Lespinasse (1732–1776), Mme du Deffand's engaging young niece, who enticed many of her aunt's *habitués* to her own salon by following the latter's advice about allowing herself to be natural in order to be charming;[11] of Mme de Rochefort (d.1782) in the palais du Luxembourg, which had its English and Danish followers; of the highly immoral maréchale de Luxembourg (1707–1787), who, with the help of a great name, a fine home, and sheer audacity, purported to teach morals to the young in her salon of 1764. The most influential *salonnière* was perhaps Mme Geoffrin of the rue Saint-Honoré, who managed to attract the largest number of distinguished foreigners to her home. On a slightly lower rung of the social ladder were the lavish assemblies of the great financiers, especially La Popelinière, who, emulating the wealthiest princes and dukes, kept his own orchestra.

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[10] Cited in Janine Bouissounouse, *Julie: the Life of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse*, transl. P. de Fontnouvelle (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), pp. 88–89.

[11] Janet Aldis, *Madame Geoffrin: her Salon and her Times, 1750–1777* (London: Methuen, 1905), p. 167.

In all of these one could see, in the Goncourts' words, "cette France si fière d'elle-même […] la France polie du dix-huitième siècle."[12] The word "polie" is significant, sharing as it does its roots with *politesse* and *policé* (civilized), for the *politesse* of French high society—that code of behaviour which respected *les bienséances*, and which anyone frequenting society was expected to observe—became in the eighteenth century synonymous with the idea of French civilization itself. *La politesse* was seen as a national trait, emulated by all civilized nations (see Mme de Genlis's "nations policées", below), and what began in the seventeenth century as a model of behaviour for the French aristocracy in the end represented the spirit of an entire nation.[13] Eloquence, both written and spoken, was elevated to an art form. Letters of both men and women were penned with careful attention to style, knowing that the wittiest, or most graceful, would be passed around the salon for all to admire. There were after-dinner readings, recitations, musical recitals and full-blown performances (of plays, poetry, fables, proverbs, romances), in which a youthful author, hoping for a favourable reception, was able to test the waters, practise his speaking skills, and perhaps in the long run, establish a literary reputation. There were never-ending reams of *vers de circonstance*, those couplets celebrating birthdays, feast days, arrivals and leave-takings, betrothals, marriages and so on, demonstrating a self-conscious society "that never stopped observing or talking about itself".[14] From the moment the salons became part of French life they were identified with the French nation, and their hostesses were conscious of their influence and aware of the attraction they held for foreigners—none more so than Mme Geoffrin.

Whether it was Mme Geoffrin's design to attract all the most eminent foreigners to her salon, thereby spreading the reputation of her home throughout Europe, Marmontel wrote, or whether this was the natural consequence of the presence of so many *philosophes* and *encyclopédistes*, it was a fact that no prince, no foreign minister, no man or woman of note who arrived in Paris failed to call on Mme Geoffrin in the hope of being invited to one of her select dinners. When foreign dignitaries were expected Mme Geoffrin would say to her regular guests "Soyons aimables", and they, happy to promote their own brilliant

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[12] Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *La Femme au dix-huitième siècle*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Charpentier, 1912), p. 63.

[13] Benedetta Craveri, *The Age of Conversation*, transl. Teresa Waugh (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), p. 232.

[14] Craveri, p. 327.

reputation, would keep up a flow of animated and witty conversation.[15] She even confided to her friend the British historian David Hume: "We women have quick and keen feelings concerning the impression that we make on other people!"[16] It was as though the French, having heeded the pronouncements of Voltaire, felt it their duty to uphold their national image before the rest of the world.

Like Mme Geoffrin, the maréchale de Luxembourg opened her salon after the death of her husband[17] when she had already attained *un certain âge* and with it a certain respectability. Indeed, with a superb sleight of hand she managed to reverse her reputation for promiscuity, and in the words of her contemporary the duc de Lévis, succeeded in establishing herself as the "arbitre souveraine des bienséances, du bon ton et de ces formes qui composent le fonds de la politesse." She also exerted absolute influence over the youth of both sexes, he said, and reasserted the ascendancy of French manners over English ones at a time, immediately preceding the Revolution, when they threatened to engulf French society. No testimony to the certainty the French had of the superiority of their own customs could be more unequivocal, no evidence of the salon as an *Ersatznation* more compelling:

> […] elle entretenait le feu sacré de l'urbanité française; c'était chez elle que se conservait intacte la tradition des manières nobles et aisées que l'Europe entière venait admirer à Paris et tâchait en vain d'imiter. Jamais censeur romain n'a été plus utile aux mœurs de la république que la maréchale du Luxembourg l'a été à l'agrément de la société pendant les dernières années qui ont précédé la Révolution. On avait d'autant plus besoin alors d'une pareille censure que l'anglomanie, avec ses clubs, ses fracs et sa rudesse, envahissait déjà la bonne compagnie.[18]

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[15] Jean-François Marmontel, *Mémoires*, John Renwick (ed.), 2 vols (Clermont-Ferrand: De Bussac, 1972), vol. 1, p. 165.

[16] Cited in Aldis, p. 218.

[17] It could be argued that the most influential women were the independent ones, whose husbands, for one reason or another, were not present at their receptions. Of all the *salonnières* mentioned in this article the only one whose husband was present at her gatherings was Mme Necker, and according to witnesses he contributed nothing to the *esprit de société*.

[18] *Souvenirs-Portraits de Gaston de Lévis (1764–1830)*, Jacques Dupâquier (ed.) (Paris: Mercure de France, 1993), p. 101.

The salon, with its firmly grounded principles of civility and good taste, ensured that anglomania was never a real threat to the French sense of superiority. Gaston de Lévis commented that although other nations may have produced strong and wise female rulers, French women had ascendancy over them all by their amiability and their abilty to please. "Plaire", he opined, "c'est aussi régner."[19]

This is precisely the thesis proposed in the Goncourts' work *La Femme au dix-huitième siècle*. If we are to believe the Goncourt brothers, writing from the distance of the middle of the following century, the eighteenth-century Frenchwoman was "l'âme de ce temps, le centre de ce monde, le point d'où tout rayonne, le sommet d'où tout descend, l'image sur laquelle tout se modèle" […] "le principe qui gouverne, la raison qui dirige, la voix qui commande."[20] The Goncourt brothers were prone to hyperbole and sensationalism, but their book on the eighteenth-century Frenchwoman did contain one basic truth, namely that women were a powerful influence in many fields of French life.

If we wish to view the eighteenth-century French through their own eyes memoirs are an enlightening source.[21]. It is the very subjectivity of memoirs which allows us to delve into the French imagination of the time, both male and female. The *Mémoires* of Jean-François Marmontel, author of the popular *Contes moraux* and a *habitué* of all the most famous salons of the eighteenth century, are not only a prime example of French self-belief, they also reveal just how important the support of women was to an author's reputation. Marmontel cites the example of one of Mme Geoffrin's protégés,[22] the Abbé Antoine-Léonard Thomas, a man of unpolished manners who paid scant heed to social niceties. By not cultivating the graces, Marmontel said, he alienated women, and as a result his literary reputation was diminished.[23] Since Marmontel himself *had* cultivated the graces and reaped the rewards, he was in a good position to comment. Arriving in Paris with nothing but his native talent and ambition, he

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[19] *Souvenirs-Portraits de Gaston de Lévis*, p. 240.

[20] Goncourt, p. 371.

[21] Here I shall draw principally on the memoirs of women, but shall include those of two male contemporaries, Jean-François Marmontel, 1723–1799 (see above, note 15); and the government official and diplomat Jaques Marquet de Norvins, baron de Montbreton, 1769–1854: *Mémorial de J. de Norvins*, 3 vols (Paris: Plon, 1896).

[22] Mme Geoffrin settled pensions on Thomas, the Abbé Morellet and D'Alembert so that their livelihood did not depend on a precarious income from literary work.

[23] Marmontel, vol. 1, pp. 164, 311.

ended up conquering the *Académie française* as well as the *salonnières*, who, viewing him as an author of good taste and a man of good manners, contributed in no small way to his success.

An observer from across the Channel, John Andrews, who categorised what he perceived as national traits in his *Remarks on the French and English Ladies*, noticed this female influence. Assemblies of French ladies, he said after visiting France, issue verdicts of approbation or censure on what, in literature, constitutes "ouvrages de goût".[24] Indeed, Andrews added, "Women […] if you will believe a Frenchman, are the *primum mobile* of all that is planned or executed in that kingdom, relative to its government and politics, as well as to internal concerns of inferior moment."[25]

It was the women who also fostered sociability, a fact which Andrews noticed when he compared English and French assemblies, remarking that whereas English assemblies could be quite subdued affairs, the French ones were always jolly, owing mainly to the French women's "native eloquence", to their natural charm, their gaiety, their *air dégagé*. Andrews could have had any number of salons in mind when he wrote, "After having paid their tribute at the shrine of literature and ingenuity, Comus never fails to be called in to conclude and heighten their festivity. This is a scene wherein the French act their parts in a manner very different from us."[26] This comment supports Mme Vigée-Lebrun's testimony, when she wrote in her *Souvenirs* of the "aisance" and the "douce gaieté" of the small, late evening Parisian suppers, and of the singing during dessert at the larger dinners. It was above all in the intimate suppers, she said, where a fashionable hostess received no more than twelve or fifteen guests, that French society showed itself to be superior to any in Europe.[27]

The Comtesse de Boigne (1781–1814), who spent the early years of her marriage in London, was conscious of national differences when she remarked in her memoirs that although the English nation was distinguished by its noble character and public spirit, and was greatly superior to France in material life, "social life was much better understood in France."[28] She even confessed that as

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[24] John Andrews, *Remarks on the French and English Ladies, in a series of letters interspersed with various anecdotes* (London: Longman and Robinson, 1783), pp. 17–18.
[25] Andrews, p. 138.
[26] Andrews, pp. 34–35.
[27] Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, C. Hermann (ed.), 2 vols (Paris: Des Femmes, 1984), vol. 1, p. 82.
[28] *Memoirs of the comtesse de Boigne, 1781–1814*, Charles Nicoullaud (ed.), 4 vols, (London:

a Frenchwoman her social instincts were irritated by the snobbish English system of social gradation.[29]

According to Andrews, French women lacked the softness and modesty of their English counterparts, but made up for it with their "innumerable graces", their vivacity of manner and the liveliness of their physionomy.[30] Confirmation of this comes from an unlikely source, Chonderlos Laclos, who, in his essay *Des Femmes et leur éducation*, also describes feminine beauty according to national stereotypes, saying that whereas the English idea of beauty was a gentle, modest physionomy, "en France nous recherchons plus volontiers l'expression de la vivacité et du plaisir", adding that an attentive observer could judge better of the customs of a nation through its ladies' countenances than through the reading of history books.[31]

As Andrews noted, "the rage of being noticed in the world, is more prevalent in the females of this country than in those of any other."[32] In fact the French ladies of the upper classes were so acutely aware of what was expected of them in the social arena, that many of the more intelligent women made a determined effort to prepare themselves for their "showing" in the salons or at court. Mme de Genlis, for example, admitted in her *Mémoires* that as a young girl she attached great importance to those polite female accomplishments which could lead to celebrity, the most important for her being the practice of music: "J'aimois véritablement la musique et la harpe; mais je n'aurois jamais fait des études aussi longues et aussi constantes, sur un instrument, sans le plaisir secret que je trouvois à être citée comme un prodige, et à voir les artistes les plus célèbres venir m'entendre et m'écouter avec admiration."[33]

In describing the demeanour of the ladies, Andrews seems to have put his finger on the pulse of that French hallmark of grace, *le naturel*. French ladies' address, he wrote, "is quite easy and unaffected. Though one may perceive it is the effect of education, yet art has been so well worn away by the habits

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Heinemann, 1907–1913), p. 145.

[29] *Memoirs of the comtesse de Boigne*, p. 147.

[30] Andrews, p. 3.

[31] Chonderlos Laclos, *Œuvres complètes*, Laurent Versini (ed.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 428.

[32] Andrews, p. 50.

[33] Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, *Mémoires inédits de madame la comtesse de Genlis sur le dix-huitième siècle et la Révolution française depuis 1756 jusqu'à nos jours*, 10 vols, (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825), vol. 1, pp. 104–105.

contracted through continual exercise, that politeness in them may be truly called second nature."[34] Perhaps what Andrews did not realise was that this apparent *naturel* could be feigned. Marmontel lets us into the secret that *le naturel*, as the term is applied, in tones of admiration, to French women, is almost always assumed. The character Mme Geoffrin affected to welcome her guests, he said, was admirably cultivated: "dans l'air aisé, naturel, demi-respectueux et demi-familier dont ils étoient reçus, je croyois voir une adresse extrême."[35] In describing the exemplary character of his future wife (the abbé Morellet's niece), Marmontel wrote of the dangers of first impressions regarding a French lady's *naturel*:

> Je savois bien que de flatteuses apparences pouvoient rendre trompeur l'attrait d'une première liaison; je savois quelle illusion pouvoit faire la grâce unie à la beauté: deux ou trois mois de connoissance et de société étoient bien peu pour s'assurer du caractère d'une jeune personne. J'en avois vu plus d'une dans le monde que l'on n'avoit instruit qu'à feindre et à dissimuler: mais on m'avoit dit tant de bien du naturel de celle-ci, et ce naturel me sembloit si naïf, si pur et si vrai, si éloigné de toute espèce de dissimulation, de feinte et d'artifice […] que je me sentois invinciblement porté à le croire tel qu'il s'annonçoit.[36]

The French educationists such as Rousseau, Mme de Genlis, Mme d'Epinay and Marmontel all advocated fostering *le naturel* in young children by cultivating the innocence they were born with. Just what effort was expended in order to obtain the desired result if one *hadn't* had the benefit of such an upbringing can be shown by the example of the Swiss wife of Louis XVI's *contrôleur-général*, Mme Necker. Mme Necker was a highly intelligent, proper, former governess from Geneva, and although she subsequently became a distinguished *salonnière*, she had to adapt quickly to French taste when she married and decided to open her house to a select circle of *littérateurs*. Her main problem, according to Marmontel, was one of nationality:

> Etrangère aux mœurs de Paris, madame Necker n'avoit aucun des agrémens d'une jeune Française. Dans ses manières, dans son langage, ce n'étoit ni

[34] Andrews, p. 3.
[35] Marmontel, vol. 1, pp. 160–161.
[36] Marmontel, vol. 1, p. 285.

> l'air, ni le ton d'une femme élevée à l'école du monde. Sans goût dans sa parure, sans aisance dans son maintien, sans attrait dans sa politesse, son esprit, comme sa contenance, étoit trop ajusté pour avoir de la grâce.[37]

Mme Necker was only too aware of her own deficiencies, and took as her model Mme Geoffrin. Writing in 1771 to a Swiss friend she confessed that since arriving in Paris she had been obliged to change her thinking completely "pour les caractères, pour les circonstances, pour la conversation."[38] She knew she lacked *du naturel,* that not even the French pretended was easily acquired: as La Bruyère had remarked in the seventeeth century, "Combien d'art pour rentrer dans la nature!"[39] In her journal Mme Necker took herself to task for her stilted manner of making conversation: "Let us try therefore to let ourselves go a little more, this fault stems from inattention, from dealing with other things and not following the conversation properly, so that when I get back to the subject I say things which I've prepared, I lack that spontaneity which is a part of graceful manners and which no amount of finesse can remedy. I am not naturally graceful, but deliberately so."[40] A guest who had arrived early at one of her salons even found a notebook lying under a chair—which she quickly retrieved—containing topics of conversation that she intended applying to each of her guests in turn. He had the secret pleasure of seeing the evening's conversation unfold exactly as she had written.[41]

Mme Necker's famous daughter Mme de Staël was notorious for deliberately *not* conforming to many of French society's rules, but her talent for brilliant conversation came easily, and she had such a visceral need for French sociability, which could not be found in any other country, that she wrote, after being banished from France by Napoleon, "Je sens que je ne peux vivre hors de cette France: quel charme dans la conversation! comme on s'entend! comme on

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[37] Marmontel, vol. 1, p. 288.

[38] Sainte-Beuve, *Les Causeries du lundi*, 15 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1851–1862), vol. 4, pp. 191–192.

[39] La Bruyère, *Les Caractères* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), p. 363. Remarque no. 34 of "Des Jugements" goes on to illustrate the time and effort involved in acquiring the other graces considered part and parcel of *la politesse*: "combien de temps, de règles, d'attention et de travail pour danser avec la même liberté et la même grâce que l'on sait marcher; pour chanter comme on parle; parler et s'exprimer comme l'on pense […]"

[40] Mme Necker's papers, Coppet archives, cited in Maria Fairweather, *Madame de Staël* (London: Constable, 2005), p. 18.

[41] Genlis, vol. 3, pp. 320–321.

se répond!"[42], even exclaiming with genuine regret that, "tout ce qui est né sur le sol fortuné de la France ne peut supporter la vie ailleurs."[43]

These salon conversations were not just contests of wit, as many foreigners supposed. As Chesterfield says to his son in his letter of 1 November 1750, "Conversation in France, if you have the address and dexterity to turn it upon useful subjects, will exceedingly improve your historical knowledge […]"[44] Even the women, he condescendingly concedes, have read their nation's history. He comes back to the subject later, saying that polite conversation at Paris "turns at least upon some subject, something of taste, some point of history, criticism, and even philosophy,"[45] to which all contribute in equal measure. He illustrates his point using the salon-as-nation metaphor: "Company is a republic too jealous of its liberties to suffer a dictator even for a quarter of an hour."[46]

The memoirs of the didactic authors Mme de Genlis and Mme d'Epinay, of the portraitist Mme Vigée-Lebrun, and of the wealthy *salonnières* Mmes de Boigne and de La Briche[47] not only offer interesting insights into the way the French viewed themselves vis-à-vis the rest of Europe, but also support Chesterfield's observation that the assemblies, the dinners, the suppers and the private concerts did in fact serve a more serious educational purpose. Mme de Genlis and Mme d'Epinay both stated unequivocally that attending these assemblies in their youth provided them with an education which they would not otherwise have had.[48] It is evident, although they do not say so themselves, that Julie de Lespinasse, Mme Geoffrin and Mme Vigée-Lebrun also improved themselves in their own salons, and that Mme de La Briche, through her patronage of one of the greatest violin virtuosos of the eighteenth century, the

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[42] Mme de Staël, *Correspondance générale*, Béatrice Jasinski (ed.), 6 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1982), vol. 5, pt 1, p. 68.

[43] Mme de Staël, vol. 4, pt 2, pp. 596–597.

[44] *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his Son*, new edn (London: Dent, 1929), p. 191.

[45] Chesterfield, p. 228.

[46] Chesterfield, p. 191.

[47] Adélaïde-Edmée Prévost de La Live de La Briche (1755–1844). Although the memoirs of Mme de La Briche have never been published, they are extensively cited by Pierre de Zurich in his book *Une Femme heureuse: Mme de La Briche, 1755–1844, sa famille, son salon, le château du Marais* (Paris: Boccard, 1934).

[48] Genlis, vol. 1, pp. 63–66, 81, 87–89, 96–97, 102; Louise-Florence Pétronille de La Live d'Epinay, *Mémoires et correspondence de Mme d'Epinay*, 3 vols (Paris: Brunet, 1818), vol. 1, p. 215.

violinist-composer G.B. Viotti, greatly improved her skill in music in the same way.[49]

But what the salon mainly provided, for Frenchmen and foreigners alike, was an education in manners and in taste. According to Jacques de Norvins, Mme de La Briche's cousin who attended all her assemblies, both in Paris and in her country *château du Marais* in the Seine-et-Oise, socialising in *le grand monde* offered young men "une haute éducation", which supplemented and ennobled their formal education. By this he meant that the salons were finishing schools in *la politesse*, especially in Paris, "où l'on se forme ou l'on se déforme bien vite".[50] It was only by frequenting *le grand monde* that one learned the *bienséances*, which could so easily and inadvertently be contravened. As a young man entering society in 1787, he said, he was aided by the benevolent guidance of his female mentors, Mme de Damas, Mme de Chastellux, la comtesse d'Houdetot, Mme d'Epinay, and his beloved cousin herself.[51] This system of tutelage, he lamented, was lost after the Revolution. By 1787 conversation in the salons turned as much upon politics as on literature, especially at Mme de La Briche's, who counted among her closest friends a military commander responsible for security in Paris in 1789. At that time, Norvins wrote, "Chaque salon était un véritable microcosme social et politique", but his cousin's, he said, demonstrating a subliminal identification of the salon with the nation, was truly "une seconde patrie politique au complet, selon le temps."[52]

Marmontel made a point of mentioning the education in manners he had received from the salons, where, as an impecunious new arrival in Paris from the provinces, he had benefited from the support of the *salonnières* more than most. After the success of his first play *Denis le tyran* he was swept into Paris society, where, he was told, he would be given an education in taste and manners: "Vous avez besoin de connoitre les mœurs, les goûts, le ton, les usages du monde: ce n'est qu'en le voyant de près que l'on peut bien l'étudier".[53] The superiority of

[49] Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824) composed twenty-nine violin concertos of which half were written in Paris between 1782 and 1792. See also the unpublished *Mémoires* of Mme de La Briche, cited in Zurich, p. 232.

[50] Norvins, vol. 1, p. 29.

[51] Aglaé de Langeron, comtesse de Damas d'Antigny (1759–1827). Angélique-Victoire de Durfort-Civrac, comtesse de Chastellux (1752–1816). Elisabeth de La Live de Bellegarde, comtesse d'Houdetot (1730–1813), sister-in-law of Mme de La Briche.

[52] Norvins, vol. 1, pp. 63–64, 72.

[53] Marmontel, vol. 1, p. 80.

French manners and the ensuing benefits the French thereby enjoyed in an international forum was freely allowed by Chesterfield, who admitted that 'a French minister will get the better of an English one, at any third Court in Europe.'[54]

Mme de La Briche's salon was famous inside and outside France for the staging of plays, especially those typically French society playlets known as the *proverbes dramatiques*, a form of entertainment made popular by Mme de Genlis earlier in the century. During a visit to le Valais in Switzerland at the beginning of the nineteenth century Mme de La Briche noticed the same proverbs being performed in Swiss society. But they were, she asserted in a proprietorial manner, "bien français […] quoique les Suisses s'en mêlent aussi."[55] The Swiss, it would appear, did emulate French customs, even though one Swiss traveller sounds as though he might have wished to resist the temptation. Béat Louis de Muralt, who, like Andrews, wrote down his impressions of France during his travels there, noted: "In every way the French seem made for society […] What they want us to admire in them, above all, is their wit, their vivacity, courtesy, and manners."[56] Foreigners visiting France were no dupes: it was obvious to them that the French *wanted* to be imitated.

Mme de Genlis's sphere of influence extended to two domains – music and the *belles lettres*, the latter being the more important. Her style of writing was tasteful, and while it can in no way be compared to Mme de Sévigné's, it exhibited a sufficient amount of *clarté* and *naturel* to please her countrymen and to make her an exceptionally popular novelist.[57] Like Voltaire, she was a great admirer of the French poets, playwrights, essayists and other artists protected by the court of Louis XIV. The preface of her historical novel *La Duchesse de La Vallière* consists almost entirely of a panegyric of this court, and similar praise is to be found in many of her works, including her *Mémoires*.[58] Very conscious, like Voltaire, of the civilizing effect of French culture on other nations, she writes to her English friend Margaret Chinnery of the pleasure she takes in describing the most brilliant court in French history: "il est beau d'avoir à

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[54] *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his Son*, new edn (London: Dent, 1929), p. 225.
[55] Unpublished *Mémoires* of Mme de La Briche, cited in Zurich, p. 504.
[56] Béat Louis de Muralt, *Lettres sur les Anglais et les Français et sur les voyages* (Genève, 1725), pp. 176–177, cited in Craveri, p. 231.
[57] See the comments of journalist Jean-François Barrière (1786–1868) in *Souvenirs-Portraits de Gaston de Lévis*, p. 46.
[58] Genlis, vol. 6, p. 22.

peindre cette cour brillante qui rappelle un siècle qui fait époque non seulement parmi nous mais chés toutes les nations policées".[59] As an influential author she felt it her duty to the French nation to carry the torch for what she saw as the high moral standards of the seventeeth century. Her writings were all educational, and all had a moral intention, for she believed, like Voltaire, that it was through education and reading that the taste of a nation was formed.

In eloquence, too, Mme de Genlis enjoyed a high reputation. She must have learned well from all the salons of her youth, where, Chesterfield noticed, "conversations, even among the women, frequently turn upon the elegancies, and minutest delicacies of the French language",[60] for Mme Vigée-Lebrun extols Genlis's conversation skills even above her writings. Since eloquence was one of the most highly prized arts in the salons, this explains the enormous success that Mme de Genlis enjoyed in society, and made of her one of the most powerful female models of taste. Vigée-Lebrun pays her the ultimate compliment, that of wishing to imitate her:

> […] lorsqu'elle causait, son langage avait un certain abandon, et sur plusieurs points une certaine franchise, qui manquent souvent à ses écrits. Elle racontait d'une manière ravissante, et pouvait raconter beaucoup; car nul, je crois, n'avait vu, soit à la cour, soit à la ville, plus de personnes et plus de choses qu'ell n'en avait vues. Ses moindres discours avaient un charme dont il est difficile de donner l'idée. Ses expressions avaient tant de grâce, le choix de tous ses mots était de si bon goût, qu'on aurait voulu pouvoir écrire tout ce qu'elle disait.[61]

The French sense of superiority over other nations in matters of taste even extended to the realm of music. Voltaire may well have written that French music was to the taste of no other nation,[62] but that did not prevent the French from setting themselves up as the arbiters of taste in European music, as shown by the *Mercure de France* reviews of the *Concert spirituel*, a series of concerts in Paris that ran from 1725 to 1790. If the French had a sense of nationhood in

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[59] Mme de Genlis to Margaret Chinnery, 16 April 1803 (L27), in *The Unpublished Correspondence of Mme de Genlis and Margaret Chinnery*, Denise Yim (ed.) (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2003 [*SVEC* 2003:02]), pp. 88–89.
[60] Chesterfield, p. 184.
[61] Vigée-Lebrun, vol. 2, p. 260.
[62] *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, p. 412.

music it was in this forum that it found its expression. A 1778 music reviewer in the *Mercure de France*, in a statement concerning the honing of the national taste that was expressed in almost identical terms to Voltaire's, praised the Portuguese vocalist Mme Todi for managing to combine all the qualities that appealed to French taste, noting that none before her had managed to conform "au goût naissant de la nation".[63] The *Concert spirituel* attracted ambitious young musicians from all over Europe, who knew that once they had conquered the hard-to-please Parisian critics their career was launched. French audiences passed judgement and musical reputations, especially those of vocalists and violinists, were made or lost. Here too women exerted their influence, for it was they who cultivated their favourite artists in their private assemblies.

Mme Vigée-Lebrun was one of them. She held *soirées musicales*, to which she invited prominent musicians, professional and *amateurs*, including many foreigners and, like Mme de La Briche, she included in her gatherings the popular Italian violinist Viotti, then residing in Paris. She also invited the French female pianist Mme de Montgéroult, who is praised by Mme de Genlis in her *Mémoires* for being a model for young French women in the performing arts.[64] Montgéroult was renowned for her powers of improvisation, and helped shape French society's taste for a simpler style of piano playing. A soulmate of Viotti, she applied to her piano playing the same principles he advocated for violin playing, and when they improvised together their playing was described as revealing "le goût le plus pur".[65] She would later write in her piano treatise that taste, which was applied to everything, was most rarely of all found in music and, in describing the art of improvisation, she advises that good taste, as well as genius, must be brought into play. Above all she advocates simplicity. To achieve this, she says, one must follow the laws of nature: "La variété qu'on peut y mettre ne doit être autre que celle dont la nature elle même nous donne le modèle".[66]

Having made the journey to Paris, gained the acceptance of French audiences, and overcome the initial jealousy of his French colleagues, Viotti managed to impose his own taste and style of playing, and, eventually, to be

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[63] *Mercure de France*, 14 June 1783, p. 91.
[64] Genlis, vol. 6, p. 20.
[65] Ange-Marie d'Eymar, *Anecdotes sur Viotti*, extrait de la *Décade philosophique* (Genève: Luc Sestié, 1800), p. 38.
[66] Hélène de Montgeroult, *Cours complet pour l'enseignement du forté piano*, 3 vols (Paris: Janet et Cotelle, ca 1825).

accepted into the French fold, but not before a reviewer had written that his playing was so good that the French artists had almost forgiven him for not having been born in France![67] Indeed his technique, characterised by its sentiment, simplicity and freedom from affectation, became known, famously, as the "French" school of violin playing, and was practised throughout Europe for much of the nineteenth century. Thus the French appropriated for themselves a style of violin playing that was originally Italian. An article in a nineteenth-century English music journal confirms that the eighteenth-century Parisian musical artists had indeed earned themselves a reputation among "all other countries" for being disdainful of "the productions of other nations."[68]

Even the proud English, who considered themselves superior to all other nations in most things, were forced to give way to the French in matters of taste. Although Andrews wrote that "the greatest advantage a sensible Englishman derives from seeing foreign countries, is the knowledge he thereby acquires of the incomparable superiority of his own", and warned his fellow Englishmen of being "imposed upon by the specious pretences of a rival nation [France],"[69] the English remained in thrall to French manners and taste, and were fascinated by French society. Lord Bolingbroke regularly attended Mme de Tencin's salon when he was the secretary of state for foreign affairs, as did the British ambassador in Paris, and Lord Chesterfield was also made welcome there. Mme du Deffand entertained Walpole, Gibbon, Gray, Chesterfield and Hume. Hume, Walpole and William Beckford also frequented the salons of Mme Necker and Mme Geoffrin. Lord Chesterfield mastered French to the point where a letter of his was passed admiringly round Mme Tencin's salon, and he was informed teasingly that he had beaten the French at their own game. But at the same time he was warned off: let him be the most elegant phrase-turner in his own country if he wished, but let him not usurp from the French what was rightfully theirs.[70]

Chesterfield was that rarest of beings, an Englishman of such exquisite manners that he could rival the most successful French *galant*, the most eloquent

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[67] *Mercure de France*, 19 April 1783, p. 129.

[68] It is a review of a treatise on the French school of violin playing, authored by three French violinists of the Paris Conservatoire in 1803. "Rode, Baillot, and Kreutzer's Method of Instruction for the Violin", *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 6:24 (1824), 529. The article in fact sets out to dispel this long-held view, but nevertheless this was the *perception* that other nations had of eighteenth-century French musical artists.

[69] Andrews, pp. 224, 226.

[70] Mme de Tencin to Lord Chesterfield, 22 October 1742, cited in Craveri, p. 289.

déclameur. He was well aware of what was needed to please the French, telling his son that the Parisians "are particularly kind to all strangers, who will be civil to them, and show a desire of pleasing. But they must be flattered a little, not only by words, but by a seeming preference given to their country, their manners, and their customs".[71] During his own 1714–1715 stay in the capital it was a woman who gave him the most useful guidance, who shepherded him through the pitfalls of society, while at the same time, he gives us to understand, extending other favours to him. Therefore his son must approach the most fashionable and well-bred ladies in Paris to be his mentors, for "it is of no little help in the *beau monde*, to be puffed there by a fashionable woman."[72] Like Norvins', Chesterfield's advice is to "attend carefully to the manners, the diction, the motions, of people of the first fashion, and form your own upon them."[73] In this study perseverance was of the utmost importance, for *la politesse* could be learned only by constant observation and imitation, until, by a sort of subconscious osmosis, that elusive *bon ton* was absorbed and digested, and finally manifested in a seemingly effortless display of *le naturel*.

On his first visit to Mme Geoffrin's salon in 1765 Walpole struggled with the French language, but there was no question of any French person coming to his aid in English, for, as Mme de Genlis remarked in her *Mémoires*, almost no one in France—not even the learned Frenchmen who wrote about English literature—knew English in the eighteenth century.[74] And however much English moralists such as Hannah More, Catharine Macaulay and Maria Edgeworth railed against French levity of manners and laxness of morals, and against the slavish following of French fashion, English mothers persisted in importing French governesses for their children, not only that they might learn the French language, but also in the hope that some of the French graces would rub off on them.

A good example of British admiration for the French social graces is to be found in the (unpublished) education journal of Mrs Margaret Chinnery.[75]

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[71] Chesterfield, p. 181.

[72] Chesterfield, p. 187.

[73] Chesterfield, p. 200.

[74] Genlis, vol. 1, p. 367, vol. 5, p. 125. There were of course some notable exceptions such as Voltaire and Louis XV.

[75] Margaret Chinnery's Journal, 1801–1808, Sydney, Powerhouse Museum, 94/143/1 – 3 (henceforward MC's Journal). Margaret Chinnery (1766–1840), wife of William Bassett Chinnery (1766–1827), a Chief Clerk in the British Treasury, was a cultured woman of refined tastes, with a particular interest in music.

Modelled on the one Mme de Genlis used to educate the children of the duc d'Orléans, and largely written in French, the journal reveals much about Mrs Chinnery, including the fact that she was a francophile. She was also the niece of the fashionable French-influenced English architect Henry Holland, who may have taken her to France with him in 1785. In 1802 she visited Paris with her husband and children and struck up a close friendship with Mme de Genlis. Whether she ever attended any pre-Revolutionary salons is not known, but she certainly went into the best French society in 1802, accompanied sometimes by Mme de Genlis.[76]

There is much evidence in Margaret Chinnery's Journal to show that she admired French manners, and encouraged her children to emulate them. Her 12-year-old son was exhorted to try to acquire "a little of what in french is called *aisance*" ("la grâce ne va point sans l'aisance", Rousseau had written[77]). This, she explained, "must arise from a happy mixture of ease, and the most refined politeness. To be polite, we must always appear to be perfectly natural."[78] When her son was 15 she complained that he was "serious and cold in his address to every body", and that having "often read and heard of the charms of what the french call "le naturel", he should endeavour to be "as *natural* as possible in all he says and does,—to be less *cautious* and less *guarded* […]"[79] What is even more telling is the list of instructions, in point form, Mrs Chinnery issued to the French governess she employed. Point number four stipulated that the governess should encourage the children to converse freely, "mais avec politesse et bon sens", with that effortless, but polite *abandon* that the well-bred French were renowned for. And, she continued, "comme Mamselle Virginie possède ce talent, et qu'il n'en est point de plus agréable et de plus élégant, j'espere qu'elle pourra leur en inspirer le gout."[80] When her son was at Oxford she instructed him on the art of letter-writing, saying that the words must flow freely and naturally, and not sound forced. He could have no better model than Madame de Sévigné, she advised.[81] Although these comments were made in the early

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[76] See Yim (ed.), *The Unpublished Correspondence of Mme de Genlis*, pp. 29–42 and *passim*.
[77] Rousseau, p. 706.
[78] MC's Journal, 21 November 1803, p. 31.
[79] MC's Journal, 28 July 1807, p. 114.
[80] MC's Journal, 27 June 1804, p. 135.
[81] MC to George Robert Chinnery, 22 January 1811, Chinnery letters, Oxford, Christ Church, MS xlviii a52, fo 11.

nineteenth century, they were based on the recommendations of Mme de Genlis to be found in her 1782 education novel *Adèle et Théodore*.[82]

In eighteenth-century France the aesthetic of *le naturel* was inherent in all the arts. In music we have the perfect example of it in the French school of violin playing and in Mme de Montgéroult's piano technique, and in the fine arts in Vigée-Lebrun's portraits. Marmontel wrote in the preface of his *Contes moraux*, that in order to make them appear more natural, he intended to write his dialogues without the prescribed conversation markers "he said" and "she said". And as librettist for the opera *Didon*, he wanted the music to reflect the natural cadences of speech, saying to the composer Piccini: "vous aurez de longues scènes à mettre en musique […] je vous demanderai un récitatif aussi naturel que la simple déclamation".[83] But it was in the manners displayed in society that *le naturel* came into its own. The sought-after effect was an amalgam of polite simplicity, spontaneity, modesty, and of grace spliced with sentiment. It was the antithesis of excess, of artifice, of coquetterie, of awkwardness, of coldness. There is ample proof that this coveted French *naturel* was stage-managed, that the French were actors playing a part, that they knew it, and everyone else knew it, but that the foreigners nonetheless admired it and wanted to possess it.

In the eighteenth century the awareness of nationhood, in the form of national differences, or "otherness", was felt in all the countries of Europe, as shown by the proliferation of works such as Andrews'. In their need to list and categorize all that they observed, including national stereotypes, such works were typical of the Enlightenment, but they also serve as independent witnesses, corroborating what the French say about themselves. The French conviction of their own superiority in the domain of the arts and manners is a striking feature of all the French memoirs examined. The oft-quoted remark of Mme de Staël regarding the Belgian Prince de Ligne, "Il est peut-être le seul étranger qui dans le genre français soit devenu modèle, au lieu d'être imitateur,"[84] exposes the truth of what the French thought of themselves: it was the role of the French nation to teach the rest of the world how to be civilized, not vice versa. This is exactly the same mentality that is revealed in Voltaire's words to Lord Hervey in 1740: Voltaire's pronouncements, heeded as they were by the French and foreigners alike, proved to be self-fulfilling. But they would have carried far less weight

[82] See Denise Yim, "Madame de Genlis's *Adèle et Théodore*: Its Influence on an English Family's Education", *AJFS*, 38:1 (2001) 141–157.
[83] Marmontel, vol. 1, p. 300.
[84] Vigée-Lebrun, vol. 2, p. 293.

without the backing of the *salonnières*, who were so influential in developing French taste, and hence the taste of the nations of Europe: their salons were the public face of France.