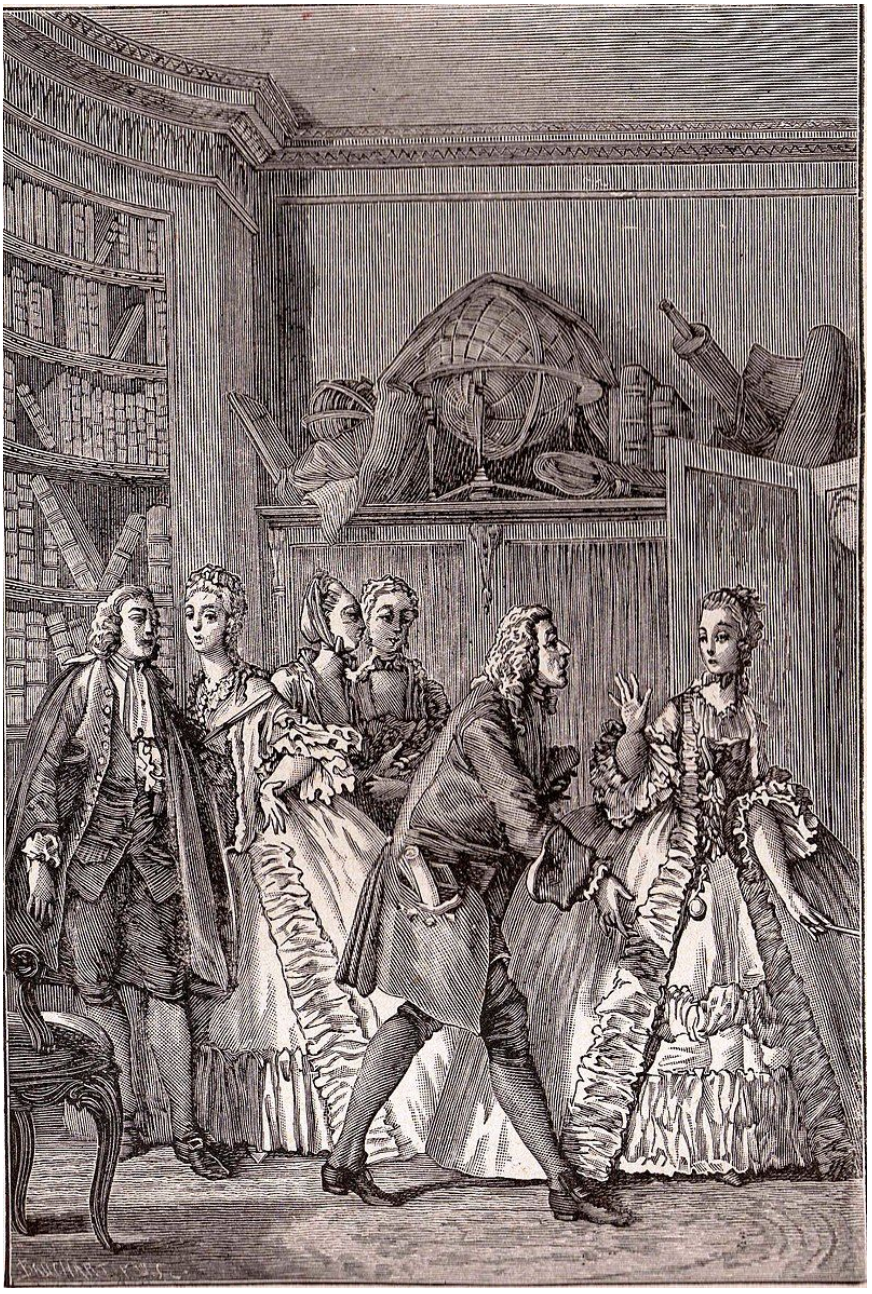
Bending the bars

The opportunities of the eighteenth century salonnière



Stella van Ginkel - MA Europe 1000-1800 - Supervisor: dr. Lionel Laborie
s1389416

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Introduction

The French eighteenth century has always managed to capture the imagination, from its extravagant courtly personalities to its exuberant style and from its enormous political upheavals to its artists and thinkers. Continuing on that last part, one of the most well-known parts of the period is the intellectual movement or era known as the Enlightenment. Equally well-known are some of its key players, like Voltaire and Denis Diderot. Perhaps less universally known but never forgotten are the subjects of this thesis: the *salonnières*. These women hosted the so-called salons[1] that were for two centuries important centres of conversation and intellectual exchange and have always been acknowledged as parts of Enlightenment culture.

In their own time, their role was sometimes seen as a positive, and sometimes as something to be criticized; some of their contemporaries, like the abbé Morellet and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, praised the way they organized their salons, while others, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, felt that salonnières had too tight a grip on philosophical culture.[2] Later on, salonnières have been portrayed as romantic figures, exemplary of the dignified eighteenth century when women wielded considerable power; one of the best known works that takes this approach is *La femme au XVIII siècle*, the 1882 book by Edmund and Jules de Goncourt. In modern times there has been less of a focus on the salonnière as a romantic ideal and more on her role in the larger culture she was a part of, both in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although historians like Dena Goodman have criticized the prevalence of Rousseau's opinions throughout modern salon historiography.[3] The leading salonnières, their personal lives and guests have been well-documented, as well as the role salonnieres played in Enlightenment culture and to what extent they helped in creating books, works of art and new philosophical ideas.

The aspect of salons and salonnières that will be the topic of this thesis is the analysis of salons and salonnières from a feminist perspective; whether salonnières in any way had more opportunities than other women of their status and how they worked within Enlightenment ideas about women. Questions like these are often touched upon in works about salons or eighteenth century French women in general and there has been a lot of research about general attitudes towards women and the way these manifested in salons as well as the reasons why women might have chosen to open a salon. Overall, since the 1980s and 1990s there has been a fairly steady influx of books that focus on the salonnière

[1] The word 'salon' is not a contemporary word; it refers to the room where these artistic and intellectual gatherings were usually held, but was not used to refer to the gatherings themselves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This will be discussed more in-depth in the first chapter.
[2] Goodman, Dena, 'The Republic of Letters: a cultural history of the French Enlightenment' (Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 53-55.
[3] Idem.

and her importance and interest as a leading figure of the Enlightenment. Writers like Benedetta Craveri focus more on the social aspect of the salon and its function as a pastime, whereas writers like Dena Goodman focus more on the intellectual ambitions of salonnières and writers like Steven D. Kale focus mostly on the salon as a political institution.

While most, if not all, modern literature on the salonnières has paid attention to the lives, feelings, but also ambitions and talents of these women and has underscored the interesting place they occupied in the French Enlightenment, many works have one aspect of these women as their focus depending on the angle taken and portray the salonnières accordingly. Sometimes, like in 'The age of conversation', salonnières come off more as bored socialites whose role in the Enlightenment was a natural development of the culture of the time, while writers like Goodman more often portray them as intellectual masterminds of the period.[4] According to Steven Kale, on the other hand, the association of salons with 'femininity' made them remain popular and idealized by (male) writers, who saw the salonnière as someone who through propriety facilitated neutral and welcoming spaces for open discussion.[5] Kale also describes salonnières as not necessarily being extremely powerful in the world of letters in the way that Goodman portrays them, but as nevertheless having created a successful medium to integrate intellectuals, aristocrats and high society.[6] Works that focus on the social and organisational aspect of the salon more often paint a portrait of the salonnière as a talented and popular hostess, while works that focus on the intellectual parts of the salon show us women who were a lot more intelligent than their time period could give them space to be. Some works posit salonnières as the mostly logical result of overall eighteenth century culture, while others portray them as extraordinary individuals who occupied a space they had to create for themselves.

According to Kale, it is hard to define the role and function of a salon because it invented its own formula and its own rules.[7] Likewise, it is hard to define the position of a salonnière because she operated within those newly made rules that existed somewhere at an intersection between public and private, between progressive and conservative ideas; Kale even explicitly states that a salon could be both feminist and 'masculinist'.[8] According to Karen Offen, French women were seen as being particularly assertive and 'powerful' by contemporary men, while they had barely any legal power.[9] According to Offen, the power of the eighteenth century woman may have been somewhat exaggerated by the Goncourts, but that they did not invent the notion; that there is a lot of evidence that women were an important factor in many aspects of society.[10] Early modern French women occupy a space somewhere between a lack of legal power and a considerable degree of 'softer' social power. Offen cites how often French women were portrayed as being extremely influential

[4] Craveri, Benedetta, *The age of Conversation* (New York, 2006), p. 29, among others.
[5] Kale, Steven D. *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability From the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848.* (Baltimore, 2006), p. 3.
[6] Ibidem, 27.
[7] Ibidem, 3-5.
[8] Ibidem, 4.
[9] Offen, Karen, The Woman Question in France, 1400–1870 (Cambridge, 2017), p. 30.
[10] Idem.

in society, despite the aforementioned lack of formal power. Like Kale's comments on the hard to define nature of salons, Offen's comments show the difficulties in assessing what women could and could not do and how the power and opportunities women might have had need to be analyzed in a nuanced way.

This thesis aims to bring these perspectives on salonnières together in order to create a critical overview of the possible opportunities salons held for women. This thesis is less concerned with what salonnières did or achieved, and more with what these possible or proven achievements mean in terms of their opportunities as women; it is concerned with the way salonnières held the informal power associated with women of the era.

The ´opportunities´ at the centre of this thesis will be opportunities to gain power and influence in a more socioeconomic sense and opportunities for gaining access to intellectual pursuits, as these are the opportunities that have been most often identified as being connected to the salon in literature on the topic. This thesis will look at how salons could have challenged practical realities for upper-class women of the time, but also at how they might have challenged the perception of women. It will also feature discussion on the salonnières' personal lives as a means of illustrating to what extent the opportunities afforded by the salon might have impacted their overall lives.

The combined presence of women's legal and practical inequality with the thoroughly unequal way they were thought of means that assessing whether something 'empowered' women can't be done by only looking at the practical side of things; in order to fully critically analyze women's activities it is also important to consider whether women were free to act against others' perception of them. There are various nuances and differences between doing something one is legally allowed to do, but doing so in a way society deems unacceptable, and doing something one is not supposed to do but doing it in a more acceptable way. In order to shed a light on these nuances this thesis will feature a close reading of sources from the era, both by and about five well-known and well-connected salonnières from the era. It will use these sources to illustrate the power salonnières had within their Enlightenment circle and how hosting a salon could give them opportunities for intellectual development, as well as the way in which ideas about women typical of the era can be recognized in these sources.

The eighteenth century and more specifically its second half has been chosen because salons from that period were more centered around intellectual discussions and *philosophes* than those of the century before, allowing this thesis to analyze salonnières compared to other women's intellectual opportunities. Salons of the mid- to late 1700s had also reached their peak as centres of high society and thought, so again by researching the salonnières in this period this thesis hopes to analyze the salonnières during what could arguably their most influential years.[11]

[11] Mason, Amelia Gere, *Women of the French salons* (Paris 1891), 129.

This thesis consists of three chapters. In the first, an overview of the history of the salon will be given, along with short biographies of the salonnières mentioned in this thesis. It will also include an overview of eighteenth century thought on women's power and education in order to contextualize the main question of this thesis. The second chapter will deal with the salonnières' socioeconomic power; their influence within the Enlightenment, but also how salons functioned as a 'career' of sorts and their status as 'women with power'. The third chapter will discuss the salonnières' opportunities for gaining an education; the way their involvement with prominent Enlightenment thinkers introduced them to the knowledge they were mostly denied in their official education as well as the difficulties in presenting oneself as a 'learned woman'. Finally, this thesis will be rounded out by a conclusion.

These topics will be discussed using primary sources by and about five important salonnières from the mid- to late eighteenth century, who were all very involved with Enlightenment culture and its key characters. The salonnières featured in this thesis are Marie du Deffand, Marie Geoffrin, Louise d'Epinay, Julie de Lespinasse and Suzanne Necker. These women have been chosen because they are mentioned in nearly every work concerning salons, often exchanged letters with *philosophes* of the era and all operated in the intellectually fruitful period of the 1750s to 1780s. Most biographical information about their lives comes from *The Women of the French Salons* by Amelia Gere Mason from 1891. Despite its age, the biographical information this book offers about the best-known salonnières is mostly unchallenged by later works. As such, it is a useful reference for getting to know the salonnières and their world.

Despite their centrality to Enlightenment culture and their lasting historical fame, salons are in a way not very well documented. That is to say, there is no comprehensive list of all salons, salonnières and guests, nor are there records of what exactly was said in them. Most of what is known comes from the memoirs left by both salonnières and their guests, which give us multiple interesting insights but are not conclusive as to what really, truly happened in salons.[12] This is a problem that any work discussing salons will have to reckon with, but at the same time many things about the salons can be divined from letters and memoirs; if not the content of the salons at least what was thought about them and how their hosts and guests were seen. A complicating factor with regards to this thesis and its sources is that generally speaking the letters and memoirs left by the salonnières discussed here contain more information about their daily lives and personal feelings than on their salons. It is possible to read months worth of letters without a single mention of a salon having been hosted. What this means is another question; were salons not as central to their lives as one might assume, or were they so very central that mentioning their existence would be redundant? Many of the recipients of the salonnières' letters were their guests, so they would not need to be notified of what happened in a salon they attended themselves.

[12] High society and political sociability, 2.

This lack of ‘regular’ insight into the salon through the eyes of a salonnière does however not mean that their letters and memoirs aren’t useful for this thesis. Crucially, these women did express their thoughts on subjects related to the framework this thesis places the salon in, namely power, influence and education. Their thoughts on many matters become clear through their letters, and the same goes for the letters written by their guests and friends.

Chapter one: introduction to salons, salonnières and the situation for women

This chapter will give the necessary context for the analysis of the salonnières' opportunities. It will give an overview of the history of the salon as well as the difficulties surrounding its terminology and a short overview of the names of frequent guests of the salons. It will also give short biographical sketches of the five salonnières at the centre of this thesis, and finally an overview of both practical realities for upper-class women of the time and the ideas and beliefs that were commonly held about them.

The origins of the salon

The first salonnière was Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet (1588-1665), who in the early seventeenth century (possibly around 1613) started inviting both nobles and men of letters to her house and held organized meetings with them.[13] From the 1640s on other women in her circle, like the duchesse de Montpensier and the marquise de Créquy, started following her example.[14] Over the course of the seventeenth century salons would grow into established institutions, although they would change a fair amount between their start and their final form. The seventeenth century salon was on the whole less philosophically oriented than that of the eighteenth century and was oriented more towards idealized manners of expression and sociability. Salonnières and other women who styled themselves according to these ideals and who occupied themselves with arts and literature were called *précieuses*, the ideal behaviour was called *honnêteté* - gallantry in men, virtue in women - and the overall ideal of gallant conversation of the salon was called *politesse*.[15] Later in the seventeenth century, the précieuses were often ridiculed for their literary aspirations, for example in Molière's aptly named *Les Précieuses Ridicules* (1659) where two men rejected by précieuses take revenge by having their uneducated servants court the ladies by pretending to be cultured men, in order to expose the shallow nature of the précieuses.

In the eighteenth century salons became more 'serious'; they became better structured and established, and while the terms to denote ideal behaviour disappeared the discussions became more philosophical and less leisurely. Where the seventeenth century salon had offered men of letters sociability, the eighteenth century salon functioned more as a career-booster and a workspace to discuss new ideas.[16]

[13] The age of conversation, 27.
[14] High society and political sociability, 20.
[15] The age of conversation, 20-22.
[16] High society and political sociability, 18.

There is some difficulty in the use of the term 'salon', ast it is not the term that was historically used to denote these meetings. The 'salon' or drawing room of a house was often were the meetings known as salons were held, but wasn't used to refer to them. In the seventeenth century, the salon wasn't even the location for these meetings; that was the salonnière's bedroom, or specifically a small alcove in this room called the *ruelle*.[17] As salons became more 'serious' and institutionalized in the eighteenth century, the location changed, but their name had little to do with their location. When what we understand to be salons are talked about in letters often the days of the week are used, because salons were usually held on the same day each week. [18] This can be seen in two quotes from the next chapter: abbé Morellet refers to Mme. Geoffrin's 'lundis', while Ferdinando Galiani refers to the salon he visits in Naples as 'Neapolitan Fridays' while comparing it to Geoffrin's salon he used to visit. However, as this thesis will discuss multiple salons it would be more comprehensive to refer to them by a combined name - salon - than by their respective weekdays, especially since 'salon' has been the commonly used term to refer to these organized gatherings since the nineteenth century. This terminological difficulty does complicate finding information on salons from primary sources as one can't search for the word 'salon' and weekdays will be used in letters for many different purposes as well, but often searching for the name of a particular salonnière yields the desired results.

Important figures in the salon society of the 1750s-1780s

Generally speaking, most salonnières were women while most of their guests were men. One example of the rare male 'salonnier' was Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789).[19] His dinners were visited by many of the best-known intellectuals of the era, who frequented most of the salons discussed in this thesis. These intellectuals include Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Friedrich Melchior Grimm, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the economist and Encyclopedist abbé André Morellet, the Neapolitan economist abbé Ferdinando Galiani and the comte de Guibert, a general and writer on military tactics. One of the most prominent groups of thinkers were those concerned with the Encyclopédie, led by Diderot and d'Alembert. Collectively, these men are often referred to as 'philosophes' or 'men of letters'. Despite their varying backgrounds, they had an interest in intellectual matters and gathered in salons as part of this.

Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin (1699-1777) came from a bourgeois family and was daughter to a valet de chambre to the duchess of Burgundy. She was partially raised by her grandmother, who taught her to write but not read and gave her a mostly religious

[17] The age of conversation, 29.
[18] High society and political sociability, 19.
[19] Women of the French salons, 143.

upbringing. At thirteen, Geoffrin was married to a forty-nine year old widower, and at eighteen began visiting the salon of her neighbor, Madame Tencin. She visited Tencin's salon until her death in 1749, when she started a salon of her own with many of Tencin's former guests.[20] She held salons twice per week: one for artists on Mondays, and one for men of letters on Wednesdays. Madame Geoffrin famously exchanged letters with Catherine the Great, and once paid the debts of the future Polish king Stanislas Poniatowski, whose court she would later even visit.[21] Geoffrin was also known for being good at boosting her guests' reputations, as well as getting them elected to the Académie Française.[22]

Marie Anne de Vichy-Chamrond, marquise du Deffand (1679-1780), was part of a Burgundian noble family. She was mostly educated in a convent, where she received the meagre education typical for girls of the period.[23] In her later youth, she spent much time at the court of Sceaux, home of the duchesse de Maine who held a salon of sorts at her court. Du Deffand's salon was focused more on the aristocracy than the others in this list, but prominent men of letters like Montesquieu and d'Alembert also visited.[24] In 1754 she lost her eyesight and took on her niece Julie de Lespinasse as a companion. Unfortunately, her guests got along well with de Lespinasse and would sometimes arrive earlier to speak with her without du Deffand's knowledge; when the latter found out, she threw her niece out, but her guests followed and her salon had ended. But, she found a new friend in the English writer Horace Walpole, who she corresponded with until her death in 1780.[25] As a salonnière, Mme. du Deffand was known mostly for her sharp, even cynical wit and for bridging the gap between aristocratic and philosophical, more worldly salons.

Jeanne Julie Éléonore de Lespinasse (1732-1776) was the illegitimate daughter of Mme. du Deffand's brother. She grew up in relative poverty and received a basic but fairly education at a convent and was later taken in by her aunt, whose salon she would later take over as described above with financial support from prominent figures, among which Madame Geoffrin.[26] On her own, she hosted an incredibly popular salon that was known as the working space of the Encyclopédie as well as the 'antechamber to the Académie Française'.[27] De Lespinasse became lifelong friends with d'Alembert, but unfortunately died of tuberculosis aged only 43. She is not only well-known for her salon, but also for her collection of tragic love letters written to comte de Guibert and the marquis de Mora, the Spanish ambassador to France, that have yielded comparisons between her and Rousseau's Julie d'Étange.[28]

[20] Republic of letters, 77.
[21] Women of the French salons, 140-141.
[22] Ibidem, 165.
[23] Ibidem, 153.
[24] Republic of letters, 76.
[25] Women of the French salons, 158.
[26] Ibidem, 162.
[27] Ibidem, 165.
[28] Ibidem, 166.

Louise Florence Pétronille Tardieu d'Esclavelles d'Epinay (1726-1783) was first introduced to the world of the salon through that of Mlle. Quinault, a former actress of the Comédie Française.[29] D'Epinay gathered around her many famous thinkers of the period; she had a longstanding relationship with Grimm, was a friend of Voltaire and had a peculiar history with Rousseau; he lived on her estate for a while, but they fell out after Rousseau fell in love with d'Epinay's sister in law, who would become the inspiration for *La Nouvelle Helöise*.[30] Her salon itself did not become as famous as that of the others in this list, and sometimes d'Epinay is seen as a woman with many intellectual friends rather than as someone who organized a salon. However, her friendship with many men of letters as well as with Mme. Geoffrin makes her a valuable source on women who engaged with the Enlightenment. She she is also notable for her literary oeuvre. Not only did d'Epinay write a three-volume pseudo memoir, *L'Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant*, she also wrote a treatise on education. In this work, *Les conversations d'Émilie* (1774), d'Epinay argued for a more equal education for girls, and it was awarded a prize by the Académie Française for its contributions to the field of education.[31]

Suzanne Curchod Necker (1737-1796) came from very different origins than the other salonnières discussed here; she was the daughter of a Swiss Protestant pastor and moved to France when she was around 26 years old, where she soon married the later Director-General of Finances and fellow Swiss Protestant Jacques Necker. Madame Necker's salon was the last standing Enlightenment salon after the other great salonnières of her time had died, and before salons would take on a more strictly political tone.[32] She had also received a better education than her fellow salonnières and was sometimes described by her contemporaries as being somewhat aloof and strict, although her salons were popular and she was generally well-liked.[33] After Jacques Necker was fired from his position, they went back to Switzerland, but their daughter Germaine de Staël would later become a famous salonnière in her own right.

Women in the eighteenth century; a general overview of 'opportunities' and ideas

In order to understand and assess 'empowerment' and 'opportunities' within the salon, it is important to understand the opportunities upper-class women in eighteenth century France might otherwise have had, and what the role of women in society generally. The early modern period is a period wherein women's nature was continuously under discussion in what is called the 'querelle des femmes'. Many authors weighed in on what they thought

[29] Ibidem, 145.
[30] Ibidem, 146.
[31] Knights, Elspeth, 'Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau' in *Women's Writing* vol. 7.2 (2000), p. 100.
[32] Women of the French salons, 176.
[33] Ibidem, 170-172.

women to be, and many came to the conclusion that the answer to this question was that women were essentially unruly, untrustworthy and always in danger of upsetting the world around them.[34] Women had not been seen as equal to men in earlier periods either and had always been assumed to operate within the realm of emotion rather than reason, but starting in the fifteenth century their nature had become a topic of debate where entire detailed sets of specific characteristics were attributed to them. In the eighteenth century, the advance of science had given men the tools to not just assume women's inferiority based on centuries of accepted knowledge, but to 'prove' it as being grounded in their physiology.[35] Women were often ascribed various bad or at least unfavorable traits based on medical ideas of the time; a common idea was that of 'hysteria' or 'uterine furor' that would lead women to behave irrationally.[36] Besides the idea of hysteria, there was a general thought that women were fundamentally different because of their anatomy in a way that made them categorically unsuited for 'male' pursuits like politics.[37] France is a particular case within the larger discourse surrounding women, as its 'Salic law' prevented women from inheriting royal titles. The prejudice against women with power went beyond literal governing; there was also a general prejudice against women speaking out and taking on any sort of public role. Women could be well-known, but were not supposed to be too outspoken, with the term 'public woman' being another word for prostitute.[38] These ideas went hand in hand with laws and conventions, that were more restrictive than those of the Middle Ages had been; women had almost no legal personhood, no say over their possessions and while they had never been able to vote, holding properties no longer granted them much influence in regional assemblies either.[39]

There was somewhat of a discrepancy between women's legal rights and the power they were nevertheless perceived as having. Eighteenth-century writers would sometimes claim that while men made laws, women made morals; that women contributed to culture in manifold ways. It was said that women were a civilizing influence, and that their roles as mothers and wives granted them the power to shape others' lives.[40] This phenomenon was even remarked upon by foreign travellers to France, who thought that French women had more power in their society than most other women they met.[41] On the one hand, some contemporary men painted women's power as something mostly positive and clearly 'feminine'; as a civilizing, nurturing force that could make life more beautiful and was the right kind of power for women to hold. Women were seen as generally being 'softer' and

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[34] Davis, Natalie Zemon, *Society and Culture In Early Modern France: Eight Essays.* (Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 125.
[35] The Woman Question, 83.
[36] Bodek, Evelyn Gordon, Salonnieres and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism (Oxford 1991), 103.
[37] Ibidem, 90.
[38] Landes, Joan B., *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 3.
[39] Society and Culture In Early Modern France, p. 126.
[40] The woman question, 23.
[41] Ibidem, 30.

more gentle than men and were expected to act more or less in line with this idea. [42] On the other hand, there were also many men who thought that women's power over society was far too great. According to them, men were quite unable to resist doing what women asked of them, which meant that women were the *de facto* rulers of the country, a power which they should not have.[43] This in turn led to more attempts at controlling women and writing about their supposedly dangerous ways of manipulating society.[44] To what extent this female power really was great and to what extent it was born out of fear from a patriarchal society is an important question to keep in mind, but in the context of the salons two things stand out: power held by women was generally seen in an unfavorable light, and a lack of legal power was at the time perceived as easily coexisting with a more subtle, sociocultural power. This double-sided conception of female power can be seen in the Encyclopédie article 'Femme [Morale]', for example:

> "La nature semble avoir conféré aux hommes le droit de gouverner. Les *femmes* ont eu recours à l'art pour s'affranchir. Les deux sexes ont abusé réciproquement de leurs avantages, de la force & de la beauté, ces deux moyens de faire des malheureux. Les hommes ont augmenté leur puissance naturelle par les lois qu'ils ont dictées ; les *femmes* ont augmenté le prix de leur possession par la difficulté de l'obtenir. Il ne seroit pas difficile de dire de quel côté est aujourd'hui la servitude. Quoi qu'il en soit, l'autorité est le but où tendent les *femmes:* l'amour qu'elles donnent les y conduit ; celui qu'elles prennent les en éloigne ; tâcher d'en inspirer, s'efforcer de n'en point sentir, ou de cacher du moins celui qu'elles sentent : voilà toute leur politique & toute leur morale."[45]

Education

Eighteenth century women's lack of an intellectual education was not only a matter of tradition or a simple notion about the importance of raising children, but was like the ideas about women's power part of the general ideas surrounding women's nature. Theories about women's intellectual capacities were part of the *querelle des femmes*, meaning that they too have a long early modern history.[46] Throughout the *querelle*, there were thinkers who denied any proper intellectual ability in women, who thought that women should not rather than could not be intellectual and who thought that women should be allowed an education equal to that of men. As stated above, by the seventeenth century women who engaged with intellectual pursuits were often ridiculed. Besides Molières *Précieuses Ridicules*, he also wrote *Les Femmes Savantes* which again deals with the shallow nature of women who care for nothing but the appearance of intelligence.[47]

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[42] Ibidem, 23.
[43] Ibidem, 30-37.
[44] Ibidem, 35.
[45] Desmahis, Joseph-François-Edouard de Corsembleu de, 'Femme [Morale]' in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (n.d.).
[46] The Woman Question, 113-115.
[47] Ibidem, 117-118.

On the one hand, women were seen as being less rational and therefore less suited for academic pursuits, but at the same time too much curiosity and knowledge was thought to corrupt women, which resulted in a 'general prejudice against the learned lady'.[48] Women were not only not expected to have much intellectual knowledge, they were also not supposed to have it because it was seen as something unbecoming, if not improper, for them. The ideas about education largely coincide with the ideas about female power and ambition; they are based in medical thoughts of the time and the idea that it would be best for women to stick to their roles as wives and mothers. Education does not, however, come with the same strange discrepancy between the legal and perceived power women had; there was no widespread idea that women actually knew everything in France.

The idea that women with intellectual aspirations were perpetually close to being pretentious and ridiculous continued into the eighteenth century. Generally speaking, women of higher status would have been educated to some degree, often in a convent, as total ignorance wasn't desired from them either.[49] They would usually have been taught reading and writing in addition to the *arts à plaire*; music, dancing and other skills that would make them eligible wives and society ladies. It was generally thought that women had to be raised to be good wives and mothers before all else; that teaching them too much might result in them forsaking their duties. An important proponent of this line of thinking was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloise* and *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (both from 1761) argued that women should mostly be educated to serve men and children and that women lacked the genius that men could sometimes have.[50] Denis Diderot brought medical discourse into the discussion and claimed that women's physiology made them mentally unstable, but that women's lack of formal knowledge made them more original in their thoughts when they did possess the 'genius' that Rousseau denied them.[51]
Other philosophes rejected this line of thinking; Jean le Rond d'Alembert argued that women's education was oppressive, stifling and 'almost murderous', for example.[52]

[48] Salonnières and Bluestockings, 185
[49] Idem.
[50] The woman question, 122-123.
[51] Ibidem, 124.
[52] Ibidem, 123.

Chapter two: power and career

A true 'career' in the sense that we understand the word today was off limits to most women in the eighteenth century. Some successful female painters of the period can be considered to have had a career, but for the most part women would either be working class without much choice or change over the years, while the 'job' of richer women would be that of mother, spouse and keeper of house and status. However, this does not mean that these women were automatically without personal goals, and for some women achieving these goals could be made possible through the men they associated with, be it through marriage or by becoming someone's mistress. Some women who held little to no independent power could still wield influence in society. Influence and power move through more channels than voting and political office, and one of these channels would be to become a salonnière.

This chapter will show in exactly what way salonnières were influential or powerful. As stated in the introduction, the ways in which salonnières had power and influence will also be discussed in terms of 'acceptable female behaviour' and in what ways hosting a salon compares to common thoughts held about women.

What was the power of the salonnière?

In order to analyze the way a salonnière's power and influence compares to that of her contemporary women, it is first important to describe the sort of power and influence they had as pertains to their salon. In the mid-1700s, salons were mostly an artistic, literary and scholarly enterprise, which means that the sort of influence women could have wielded through them consists mostly of influence in those areas. Most importantly, the salonnière could help artists and *philosophes* gain patronage and fame by connecting them to more established figures. Salonnières were mostly women of high rank and status, and their approval of someone's work could vouch for them with others of that rank and status. To have one's work seen or read by a famous salon could be an important jumpstart for someone's career, and because salonnières chose their guests they could invite people who they thought showed promise to meet with their guests who might be willing to help them financially.[53]

[53] High society and political sociability, 27.

This role of broker between artist and patron can be found in sources from the era. For example, abbé Morellet contributes the creation of many French paintings to madame Geoffrin:

> "On peut dire que Madame Geoffrin a contribué, par l'établissement de ses lundis, à faire faire une grande partie des tableaux de l'école françoise moderne, qui ornent aujourd'hui les cabinets de l'Europe. C'est ainsi que la société de Madame Geoffrin, avec les agréments & les avantages qu'elle offroit au goût & aux talents, fut bientôt recherchée des artistes les plus connus."[54]

According to Morellet, Geoffrin offered opportunities to talented painters that would go on to become very famous because she connected them to others in her circle. Morellet also once wrote about Geoffrin that her prime ambition was 'to make herself useful by bringing men of letters together with men of power and position', which she did successfully.[55]

Another example of this influence is how Julie de Lespinasse's salon became known as 'the antechamber of the Académie'. These women offered connections and a stage to newcomers and visiting the right salon could greatly increase someone's status, and in this way influenced the French Enlightenment. These instances of influence might be hard to quantify - which writer wrote which important work due to which salon-based friend he could exchange ideas with - but within their larger circle salons and the women who led them were important. Montesquieu once wrote that the salons were like 'a state within a state', governed by women who formed 'a sort of republic'.[56]
Another area were salons were influential is that of social mobility. In salons, the nobility would meet those of (somewhat) lower status, granted that these individuals had the education needed to keep up with salon debates and the means to be introduced to a salon in the first place.[57] Salonnières did not only facilitate between artists and possible patrons, but also between bourgeoisie and nobility in general; various people could meet each other in salons and the salonnières sat at the centre of these networks.[58]

Another factor crucial to this topic is not necessarily the practical results of a salonnière's power, but the fact that a salon can be seen as an expression of power; in her salon, a woman ruled absolutely. The salonnière chose her guests and her topics, and she directed

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[54] Morellet, André, *Portrait de madame Geoffrin* (Paris, 1777), p. 33. Morellet does not say which paintings Geoffrin has helped to create, but some interesting discussion on paintings commissioned by her can be found in Barker, Emma. 'Mme Geoffrin, Painting and Galanterie: Carle Van Loo's "Conversation Espagnole" and "Lecture Espagnole".' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 40. 4 (2007)
[55] Idem.
[56] Salonnières & Bluestockings, 186.
[57] The women hosting them did not originally have the prerequisite education or knowledge either, but could have learned enough to host a salon of their own during their 'apprenticeship' at another salon, which will be discussed more in-depth later.
[58] High society and political sociability, 27.

the conversation into what were by all accounts fruitful discussions. Various eulogies and expressions of praise have been written about the great salonnières, and these all reveal a certain kind of reverence for their skills in managing their salons. The men writing these praises were not simply grateful for a room to convene in; they saw these women as forces that could mold them together into something greater than the sum of their parts.

In a letter to Louise d'Epinay, the Neapolitan economist Ferdinando Galiani writes about the importance of the right salonnière to a salon:

> "But our Fridays are becoming Neapolitan Fridays, and are getting farther away from the character and tone of those of France, despite all efforts… There is no way to make Naples resemble Paris unless we find a woman to guide us, organise us, 'Geoffrinise' us."[59]

Here, Galiani paints Geoffrin as someone with an great deal of influence over her salon, as someone who could form a group of people into something greater. In 1777, Jacques-Henri Meister, editor of the *Correspondance Littéraire* wrote the following after the death of mademoiselle de Lespinasse and madame Geoffrin's suffering of paralysis some months before her death:

> "The disorder and anarchy that have reigned in this party since the death of Mlle de Lespinasse and the paralysis of Mme Geoffrin prove how much the wisdom of their government had averted evils, how much it had dissipated storms, and above all how much it had rescued it from ridicule."[60]

Note the use of the word 'government'; even if meant as a hyperbole, the fact that Meister uses this specific comparison shows that hosting a salon and governing are in a way comparable activities. What Meister describes about disorder, anarchy and ridicule sounds positively bleak, but he attributes the ability to dissipate these troubles to women.

The theme of salonnières knowing how to organize and animate others to keep up a good conversation can also be found in the elegy written by Jean le Rond d'Alembert and the comte de Guibert for Julie de Lespinasse, *Le Tombeau de Mlle. de Lespinasse* (1776). In this work, de Lespinasse is praised in many ways, including the following:

> "Elle savoit que le grand secret de plaire est de s'oublier pour s'occuper des autres, et elle s'oublioit sans cesse. Elle étoit l'âme de la conversation, et elle ne s'en faisoit

[59] *Republic of Letters,* p.89.
[60] Ibidem, 100.

> jamais l'objet. Son grand art étoit de mettre en valeur l'esprit des autres, et elle en jouissoit plus que de montrer le sien."[61]

From a purely conceptual point of view, the fact that salonnières were heavily praised for their ability to let others talk fits in well with a period in time where women were not supposed to be loud and visible. De Lespinasse knows how to forget herself in order to take care of others and to constantly make those others the center of a conversation rather than herself, in an era where women were indeed supposed to forget themselves in order to be good wives and mothers. Still, despite all this, d'Alembert and de Guibert do not tie de Lespinasse's ability to be a pleasing conversationalist to her gender; we cannot be sure that they would not have written the same about a man. The fact that de Lespinasse was a woman does not mean that most people wouldn't agree that it is a good ability to be able to conduct a conversation without having to focus all attention on yourself; being a pleasant conversational partner is not a given to everyone, men and women alike. These two sides of the praise bestowed upon salonnières do not have to erase each other; the fact that women were praised for something that was, in a broad sense, in line with what was already expected of them does not mean that they were praised for the wrong reasons and that the praise was void of any meaning because of its ties to gendered expectations.

Also in *Le Tombeau de Mlle. de Lespinasse*, the eponymous salonnière has been ascribed the most extraordinary powers of conversation:

> "J'ai connu des coeurs apathiques qu'elle avoit électrisés; j'ai vu des esprits médiocres que sa société avoit élevés. "Élisa, lui disois-je en lui voyant opérer ce phénomène, vous rendez le marbre sensible et vous faites penser la matière." Que 'dut être cette âme céleste pour celui dont elle avoit fait son premier objet, pour celui qui l'anima à son tour!"[62]

Here, de Lespinasse is credited with metaphorically making marble feel and making matter think, amongst other things. Again, the idea that women have a certain power to entertain or influence others is not necessarily something notable within attitudes towards women in the eighteenth century. For the more 'emotional' sex, 'electrifying an apathetic heart' might not have been considered an extraordinary feat; women have after all always been allowed to be muses and inspirational figures for the men around them. it is crucial to note that de Lespinasse was no mere muse; she organised her own salon with the talents that her friends clearly thought she possessed in excess.

[61] D'Alembert, Jean le Rond and de Guibert, Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, *Le tombeau de Mlle. de Lespinasse* (Paris, 1776), p. 9-10.
[62] Ibidem, 7.

As Mme. Necker remarked, also on the passing of De Lespinasse and the void she subsequently left in her society:

> "Mlle de l'Espinasse n'est plus ; le mouvement qu'elle donnoit à sa société s'est extrêmement ralenti. M. d'Alembert, qui en étoit l'âme, a de la peine à en devenir l'organe : il réunit ses amis trois jours de la semaine ; mais on se convainc, dans ces assemblées, que les femmes remplissent les intervalles de la conversation et de la vie, comme ces duvets qu'on introduit dans des caisses de porcelaine ; on les compte pour rien, et tout se brise sans elles."[63]

Here, Necker offers us the perspective of another woman on the governance of society by the salonnières. She acknowledges the important role De Lespinasse played in organizing those around her, which is something d'Alembert, despite being his circle's 'spirit', cannot do as well. Not only does Necker describe the importance of De Lespinasse in particular, she also describes her thoughts on women in general. She compares women to protective material: seen as being without value, but without them everything breaks. Incidentally, this is one of the clearest examples of a salonnière reflecting on her position in society, which shows that Mme. Necker was fully aware of her role in society, but could also make one wonder whether she thought that salonnières were undervalued.

How empowering was the salonnières' power?

Having described in what tangible ways salonnières had power and influence, it must now be assessed whether having this power would give salonnières tangible opportunities over other women of their class. Overall, the power of the salonnière seems to fit in well with the image of eighteenth century women's power in general; not a 'hard' kind of power codified in any law, but a 'soft' power that can civilize and influence through a skill in talking to people and letting them talk to each other. But, all in all, their presence in Enlightenment society appears to be highly valued.

However, the role women could play in Enlightenment society through their salons in many ways fit the mold of what 'acceptable' female behaviour looked like. Being a hostess has always been expected of women, and the idea that women can have a positive influence on those around them through a kind of sensibility is prevalent throughout history. It was thought that women were, through their innate sensitivity and love for the softer things in life, very suited to take the sharp edges away from men. Therefore, someone praising a salonnière for being a sort of civilizing influence and appealing to people's spirit is not immediately an admission of any right for women to be ruling over men. Patronizing the arts was also a widespread activity among upper-class women beyond the salonnières, so seen in that context hosting a salon didn't necessarily have to be what lead Mme. Geoffrin to assist in creating numerous paintings; patronizing the arts is not a

[63] *Mélanges extraits des manuscrits de Mme Necker* (Paris, 1798), volume 1, p. 344.

special feature that women could only achieve through hosting a salon. However, as will be expanded on later, salons were a very organized way of doing this and were a network rather than individual women choosing to help artists.

To name another 'acceptably feminine' aspect of the salon, starting in the sixteenth century, French scholars wanted to boost the image of the French language; they thought it had absorbed too many foreign influences and should be spoken in a more 'pure' form. These scholars then thought that women were the right people to use in this campaign, because their lack of education and experiences with the wider world meant that their use of French would be more 'natural'. They also thought that women had a natural ear for beautiful language. This goes to show that there has often been some form of appreciation for 'feminine qualities' within an intellectual context and that men even saw the benefits of letting women be influential in some areas where they thought their typical skills would be useful.[64] In an era where women were not exactly easily associated with any importance in the intellectual realm, they could still be granted some form of power, but rather than recognizing that women's qualities might be on par with those of men, their valuable qualities were rooted in all the things they did not know or do *because* they were women.

Some further nuance to this issue can be found in the works of Ferdinando Galiani. Earlier, he was quoted as being very impressed by Mme. Geoffrin's hosting skills that he could not find in Naples, and his longstanding correspondence with Louise d'Epinay also suggests that he was a friend to the salonnières. What might be surprising to know based on these facts is that Galiani published a book discussing the inherent weakness of women and how that influenced everything about them. According to Galiani, women's inherent weakness led to them being dependent on men, living withdrawn lives, dress frivolously and pursue certain pastimes and activities.[65] In a letter he wrote to Antoine Leonard Thomas, author of a comparable work, Galiani refers to his book as his '*dialogue anti-féminin*' and asks Thomas to keep it a secret that he wrote this. He also specifically asks for this secret to be hidden from Mlle. de Lespinasse and Mme. Geoffrin, who he believes 'would travel to Naples to subject him to the destiny of Orpheus or Abelard' if they found out. He closes his letter by saying to love but fear both women and God.

What to make of this statement? It is unclear whether Galiani thought salons were within the realm of acceptable female pastimes, but considering his frequent visits to them it would appear that he at least did severely dislike them in the way that someone like Rousseau did. Did he see the salon as something that remained firmly within the 'withdrawn' life suited to women? At the same time, his fear of being mutilated by two prominent salonnières for his opinions makes him seem aware of the undesirability of his ideas in a salon circle, or he could see the salonnières as being deluded enough to get angry over what was to him an apparent truth about women.

[64] The age of Conversation, 18-19.

[65] Messbarger, Rebecca, 'The century of women: representations of women in eighteenth century Italian public discourse' (Toronto 2002), p. 66.

Opinions like Galiani's do not say much about the influence and power women could wield through their salons; they do not invalidate the organizing of Enlightenment culture that happened through them. They do, however, point to the fact that salonnières were still staying relatively 'safely' within acceptable female behaviour; salons weren't places were women boldly seized power from men and were finally able to do things their own way.

The restraints of the salon: Mme. Necker's thoughts on hosting

While the sources quoted above give a decent amount of insight into the appreciation and influence of salonnières, in order to assess whether women had more power through hosting a salon it is also crucial to consider how they felt about the matter. Madame Necker has left an extensive collection of memoirs in her *Mélanges* where she often discussed her ideas about hosting a salon and how women should act in public. These often show that Necker saw many constraints to the way women could conduct themselves, even within their own salon. Take for example the following quote:

> "Certaines expressions sont trop fortes, sans être déshonnêtes, pour qu'une femme puisse se les permettre: il ne faut rien d'exagéré dans leur bouche; tout doit être voilé. Le mot de gueux, par exemple, quoiqu'il ne soit pas indécent au masculin, est de mauvais ton. Une des premières règles pour plaire et pour entretenir la conversation, n'est pas toujours de ne dire que des choses réfléchies, mais au contraire de se laisser aller à sa première pensée; car la vérité, même dans les idées sans réalité et qui ne font que peindre les nuances rapides de notre âme, a toujours son charme particulier."[66]

Expressions that are not in themselves improper and would be acceptable when used by a man, cannot be used by a woman, writes Necker; she recognizes that women are expected to be 'softer' than men. On the other hand, thoughts and ideas do not always need to be filtered before being spoken, according to Necker; there is something charming about the truth. So, women must make sure to speak in proper ways, while also being entertaining by expressing their initial thoughts freely. Necker also wrote the following about the way women should act:

> "A tous les âges les femmes sont toujours sûres de plaire par beaucoup de gaieté, de douceur et de complaisance; elles pourroient compenser un peu la perte de leurs charmes, en perfectionnant leur caractère; mais la plupart n'ont pas le courage de se vaincre; elles ne peuvent se résoudre à faire des efforts pour plaire; l'empire de la

[66] Melanges,, vol. 1, 270.

> beauté les flatte davantage, car il n'exige aucun soin, et il agit dans le moment présent sans jamais se faire attendre."[67]

Necker thought that most women did not wish to put effort into having a pleasing character, but that they would rather rely on their beauty as it did not require much care. In another passage, Necker compares overseeing a salon to ruling a state. Not only does this give us the idea that Necker took her duties as a salonnière very seriously, she also compares the feminine task of hosting a salon to the traditionally masculine task of governing.
However, this does not mean that Necker was very much in favor of women showing off their capacities. In another passage, she writes:

> "...mais il ne convient pas plus à une femme, dans son automne, de faire parade des qualités de son âme, que des charmes de sa figure. Jeunes ou vieilles, les femmes sont bien de se cacher; mais vieilles, elles le doivent indispensablement."[68]

Young or old, women would do well to hide, according to Necker. What does this say about Necker's views on her own role as a salonnière? It could be taken to mean that she did not see hosting a salon as showing off the qualities of one's mind. Alternatively, this quote could be seen as Necker expressing what would be considered most proper for a woman, and not necessarily what she believed the best conduct for a woman to be. It is also important to note that this quote comes from a passage on amour propre, self-love of the arrogant and conceited kind. While she does mention women in this context specifically, Necker probably held the opinion that everyone was better off behaving modestly. In another passage, Necker again expresses some thoughts on older women, but in a tone that seems to be fairly critical of the way they are to conduct themselves:

> "La vieillesse des femmes n'est supportable dans le monde qu'autant qu'elles n'y remplissent point d'espace, qu'elles n'y font point de bruit, qu'elles ne demandent aucun service, qu'elles rendent tous ceux qui dépendent d'elles, et qu'elles ne se montrent que pour le bonheur des autres. Lorsqu'on est vieille, il faut travailler à se supporter soi-même, à plus forte raison à se faire supporter."[69]

Here, the phrasing is more focused on what the world thinks of women than on the way it is best for them to behave. Necker does not offer any advice, but states the only ways in which an older woman can be born by society; demands that place quite a burden on a woman. While Necker does not expressly state her opinion on these demands, the fact that she sums them all up in a fairly harsh tone with no attempt at spinning her statement into

[67] Ibidem, 278.
[68] Ibidem, 209-210.
[69] Melanges, vol.3. p 28

some sort of advice for women makes it seem like she is critical of the societal view of older women.

Madame Necker also notes useful qualities for any woman who is to rule:

> "Un grand avantage des femmes, quand elles gouvernent, c'est de savoir supporter, étudier, observer, et surtout céder à propos."[70]

A woman in a sort of regulating position with power over others, should know how to support, study, observe and be able to cede when necessary. On the one hand, this statement seems to fit in quite well with the more 'conservative' view of salonnières; they listened more than they spoke and had a supporting role. Still, while Necker specifically notes these as qualities that women rulers should have, we cannot assume that she would not wish to see the same qualities in male rulers.

Although Necker stresses a modest demeanor for women, she allows herself to make fun of her contemporary men of letters, writing:

> "La correspondance de Rousseau achève de faire connoitre les gens de lettres. Quelle inquiétude d'esprit! Quelle affectation de vertu et quels écarts de morale! Saint-Lambert écrivoit à quelqu'un: 'O philosophes dignes des étrivières, je vous honore et je vous respecte, mais je m'aperçois que vous n'êtes aussi que des hommes.' A quoi donc attribuer toute cette orgueilleuse extravagance? Les gens de lettres ressemblent à ces jolies femmes qui ne peuvent se regarder sans perdre la tête. Voyez quel plaisir l'on goûte en revanche au milieu de cette correspondance de Charenton, en lisant les lettres simples et vraies de Saint-Lambert et du docteur Tronchin."[71]

An interesting aspect of Necker's life that reflects on the way in which a woman might wield some organizational power is her establishment of a hospital. Necker founded the hospital in 1778 while her husband was in charge of hospital reform. Now called the Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, it became the first children's hospital in the world. While Necker was not in charge of the practical aspects of the hospital, she was its public face. This is of interest, as women in the public eye were highly suspect in eighteenth century society. Necker wrote a piece on the establishment of the hospital, in which she explains some of its driving principles in business-like terms. However, along with the more practical information on her hospital, Necker uses a great number of terms that are closely associated with traditional conceptions of femininity. She writes about her compassion and sensitivity that led her to create the hospital and implores others to support her work by appealing to their

[70] Ibidem, vol.1. p 283.
[71] Melanges, vol. 3, p. 149-150.

compassion and sensitivity.[72] Thus, Necker puts on a very feminine façade; as is evidenced by her other writings, Necker knew what sort of behavior was expected of women. Her Mélanges state that women should not flaunt their capacities and that they would do well to hide; in establishing a hospital and publishing about its creation, Necker was clearly not hiding, and perhaps even flaunting her capacities both as the face of a charitable institution and a woman who understood some of the flaws that could be found in hospitals of the era. But these capacities were not framed as those of a smart woman with influence, but rather as those of a sensitive woman who could not bear to see others suffer and was moved to help them. In this way, her stepping out into the public became not an act of personal ambition, but an ambition driven by typical feminine virtues. Furthermore, a hospital is in itself already something that could lend itself well as an acceptable project for women, as a hospital is easily associated with care and compassion.

The same themes of salonnières being listeners more than centers of attention can also be found in the eulogy Morellet wrote about Mme. Geoffrin:

> "Dans la Société plus nombreuse elle ne fournissoit pas régulièrement à la conversation: le plus souvent elle se contentoir d'écouter avec intérêt; elle ne parloit guère de suite que pour conter, ou pour développer un sentiment vif que la conversation faisoit naître en elle; ses contes, quoique sans malignité, étoient communément d'excellentes peintures des caractères des personnes qu'elle avoit connues. Ils avoient un tour vif & original qu'il étoit difficile de copier."[73]

From this quote does not emerge a woman who wielded power over her salon with massive intellect, but rather someone who knew how to let her guests shine and how to intervene at the right moment in order to liven up the conversation.
Still, as Morellet writes, she did manage to gain a fair amount of social influence and is now known as one of the leading women of the Enlightenment. Therefore Geoffrin, like Necker, presents a good example of the way salonnières held their power by working through 'feminine' means.

The quotes mentioned above illustrate that salonnières might have had influence in the intellectual world and have constructed spheres for themselves where they 'governed' over men instead of the other way around, but that at the same time they could not be on quite equal footing with their male guests. They were in charge, but did not really partake in the discussions and also fulfilled the relatively 'acceptable' role of hostess.[74] Necker's comments show a great awareness of the way women were supposed to act, but considering her thoughts on Julie de Lespinasse's death it seems as if she wished that

[72] Boon, Sonja, 'Performing the Woman of Sensibility: Suzanne Curchod Necker and the Hospice de Charité' in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 32.2 (2009), p. 235-254.
[73] Portrait de madame Geoffrin, 6.
[74] Salonnières and bluestockings, 190-191

women would be valued more for their contributions instead of being seen as, or even just being, a 'soft power' supporting others.

A silver lining: more theories on the power of salonnières

While the tangible power of the salonnière partially took the shape of acceptable female behaviour, there are also other ways to look at this power.

Benedetta Craveri refers to the influence salonnières had in advancing their guests' careers as the 'transference of ambition'; women could not have careers of their own, but they could advance the careers of those around them. In that way, all the ambition that was effectively useless for a woman to have with regards to her own life could still be put to good use; a woman could not be a member of the Académie, but she might help get someone she liked or admired into its ranks.[75] The marquise de la Ferté-Imbault, daughter of Mme. Geoffrin, described her mother as having as much ambition as Alexander the Great or cardinal Richelieu.[76] Whether these two specific examples truly had anything in common with Geoffrin is another matter, but the marquise seems to confirm the idea that salons were an outlet of sorts for ambitious women.

In *The republic of letters*, Dena Goodman argues that salonnières shouldn't be seen as social climbers who used men to gain fame and glory by opening a salon. According to Goodman, this 'assumes centrality of men to the actions of women' and attributes some sort of service ideal to the salonnières instead of allowing them to be people with genuine interest and skill in furthering the Enlightenment.[77] The genuine interest of salonnières in intellectual matters will be discussed further in the next chapter, but this argument also merits discussion in the context of women and ambition. It is true that by writing about the power and influence salonnières could gain through their male guests, salons could be portrayed as centers of male power that women could sometimes use to their own advantage rather than as successful projects centered around skilled women. However, it is undeniable that salons thrived on a combination of skilled hostess and the right, male, guests, which means that the power a woman held in the salon is linked to men visiting it. Moreso, it could be argued that in an era where women had very little power it would make sense that the power they could have would often have to come from men. Wanting to gain fame and power and doing so through men is also not mutually exclusive to genuinely caring about and being good at one's means to achieve this power. Suggesting that salonnières wanted go gain power through their salons and their male visitors does also not have to lead to the assumption that salonnières were solely interested in helping men; as discussed above, they could have seen their salon as a way to combine their own ambitions and ideas with those of the men around them. It is possible to both allow salonnières to be people

[75] The age of conversation, 278.
[76] Ibidem, 298-299.
[77] The republic of letters, 75.

with interests and skills of their own while still acknowledging the role men necessarily played in allowing them to work with these skills and interests.

It could be argued that the salon was by far the most organized form of power these women could hold, as they were institutions with mostly women leading them were connecting artists with each other was one of the 'main events'. The salon could be seen as a way for these women to not just have some power based in their wealth or influential male relatives, but to explicitly place themselves at the head of something. Salonnières chose their own guests and determined the topics that would be discussed, and their 'rule' over the salon was unquestioned.[78] In an age where a connection between women and power was looked on unfavorably to say the least, a salonnières explicit assumption of power could be seen as something boundary-pushing in and of itself, even if it was 'cloaked' in acceptable female behaviour. It is also notable that the salonnière existed outside the realm of 'wife and mother' that was normally the only part women were allowed to play. Not only did the salon allow women to associate openly with power, it also allowed them to take on a role that, while complying to some feminine ideals, had little to do with the main tasks they were supposed to fulfill.

An idea formulated by Dena Goodman is that hosting a salon would be a sort of career to women that could not have had a career otherwise.[79] Working-class women would be able to work, but typically not the work that allowed for enough advancement to be called a 'career'. Higher up in society, although not necessarily only among the very wealthy, women did become painters fairly often and in ways that can constitute what we might call a career; Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun for example began earning money by painting portraits when she was around fifteen years old, and later became a favored painter at the French court.[80] There were also female entrepreneurs in the eighteenth century, like Marie Antoinette's favoured dressmaker Rose Bertin. To say that a salon was the only viable career for women would be disingenuous, but it is true that for women of the nobility a true career would indeed not be an option. They could have painting as a hobby, but of the many expectations placed on women of the highest status earning money independently wasn't one of them. Therefore, once again, at least where upper-class or noble women are concerned, salons might indeed have been the closest they could get to having a career. And careers they were; salonnières competed against each other and not all of them became as influential as the most famous ones.

There was even a form of apprenticeship involved, where often a salonnière would already have frequented a salon before opening one of her own; in some case even taking over the guests of an older salonnière after she had died. This happened in the case of Mme. Geoffrin, who was 'mentored' by Madame de Tencin and more or less took over her

[78] High society and political sociability, 222.
[79] The republic of letters, 76.
[80] Nicholson, Kathleen. "Vigée Le Brun, Elisabeth-Louise". *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 9 June 2020.

salon when she died, for example.[81] Hosting a salon would not have been a career in the sense that one could earn money doing it, but maybe semantics are less important than the idea behind this comparison: that salons were a project women created for themselves and one they could advance in. The point Goodman raises about the 'apprenticeship' of the salonnière is also valuable because it underscores the female-driven aspect of the salon. Salons were visited primarily by men because they were more likely to have the knowledge that could contribute to the conversations being held,[82] and because most upper-class women did not become salonnières they could be seen as exceptional women who operated on their own amidst men. This is not entirely untrue, but as Goodman writes there was still a 'female network' of sorts behind the salon, meaning that women did not only create a salon for themselves but also encouraged other women to do the same. A good example of this is the fact that Madame Geoffrin sponsored Julie de Lespinasse after she had to leave Mme. du Deffand; it might be simple generosity, but Geoffrin knew de Lespinasse and her popularity with the philosophes, so she might have seen her as a promising talent that could use her help. In general, the case of de Lespinasse is a very interesting example with regards to the idea of the salon as a career; she made herself popular among the men (and at least one woman) of letters, who helped her out because of it. As opposed to the other famous salonnières, de Lespinasse had no money through either marriage or inheritance and was therefore dependent on the charity of her friends; friends she made through her developing skills as a salonnière. Therefore, de Lespinasse might be the only woman who can be said to have made money through hosting a salon; more than gaining influence in the world of letters, de Lespinasse's talents gave her a house and a pension. This model of earning money may still be a far cry from a woman's financial independence, but the story of Julie de Lespinasse shows that the world of salons was a world in which talent and skill could sometimes count for more than birth and status when it comes to being successful, not only for men but also for women.

The salonnières' personal power

Having cited a number of examples of salonnières gaining a measure of influence on those around them and reflecting on that influence, something that also deserves attention is the question of whether they had any tangible power or influence over their own lives as well.

The power a salonnière could hold over society around her is one thing, but another question is whether salons empowered their hosts in a more personal way. That is to say, did the salon give women power over their own lives to do things other women of their status could not? One answer to this question could be the ability a salon gave them to educate themselves, but that topic will be explored in the next chapter. It could definitely

[81] The republic of letters, 74-77.
[82] The age of conversation, 287.

be argued that the opportunity to have an occupation beyond 'mother' or 'wife' is one worth mentioning, as well as a general broadening of horizons beyond the purely intellectual. Take for example Madame Geoffrin, who became friends with two foreign rulers, one of which was Catherine the Great; no mean feat for the daughter of a valet de chambre.

Other areas in which women would usually have little power are their marriages and their financial situation. Upper class women would usually not be allowed to select their own spouse, and would generally not have many legal rights. It may be a bit far-fetched to assume that hosting a salon would suddenly grant a woman political rights, but it would not be inconceivable that a woman with an independent status (i.e. self-made status as a salonnière rather than a status as 'wife of' or 'daughter of') who stood at the head of a company of people where rank and money were not quite as important as they were elsewhere might have some more leverage than many of her peers. Most women mentioned in this thesis had been married for a long time when they opened their salon, but there is one exception: Julie de Lespinasse. As an impoverished and illegitimate child she might not have been a desirable bride, but as a successful salonnière her fortunes were not much better; she has, in addition to being a salonnière, become posthumously famous for her passionately written love letters to the comte de Guibert and the marquis de Mora, both failed affairs. Reading her letters, de Lespinasse seems more concerned with her troubles, amorous or otherwise, than with her salon; a deep-seated unhappiness seems to be part and parcel of her life. As de Lespinasse once wrote:

> "Je ne connais qu'un plaisir, je n'ai eu qu'un intérêt, celui de l'amitié; cela me soutient et me console; mais plus souvent j'en suis déchirée."[83]

The same can be said for her aunt du Deffand, perhaps the only woman to have lost her salon before her death, who once wrote the following similar remark:

> "Il n'y aurait que deux plaisirs pour moi dans ce monde, la société et la lecture. Quelle société trouve-t-on? Des imbéciles qui ne débitent que des lieux communs, qui ne savent rien, qui ne sentent rien, qui ne pensent rien; quelques gens d'esprit pleins d'eux-mêmes, jaloux, envieux, méchants, qu'il faut haïr ou mépriser."[84]

Du Deffand wrote this after her falling out with de Lespinasse and subsequent loss of her salon. It makes it painfully clear that many benefits she felt from hosting a salon disappeared with it, but that even before her salon she was unhappy with her life. It shows

[83] *Lettres inédites de Mlle. de Lespinasse* (publ. 1893), p. 109.
[84] *Lettres de la marquise Du Deffand à Horace Walpole, écrites dans les années 1766 à 1780* (publ. 1864), p. 505.

that a salon could help stave off whatever unhappiness someone might have felt, but that at the end of the day their lives were also just their lives.

Now, it would be strange to suggest that a salon would solve someone's personal problems, but when discussing what power salons could give to women we can't forget the women they would ostensibly give power to. That is to say, from a theoretical point of view there are many things to say about the salonnières' power, but it is possible that these women did not experience their salon life as a very powerful one. These women were still subjected to unhappy marriages, illnesses and a lack of opportunities to truly make a life for themselves in the way the men around them could; maybe the salon was as close to a career as they could get, but who is to say they experienced them as such? Overall, the women discussed in this thesis all devote more space in their letters and memoirs to their social life and personal problems than to what they were discussing in their salons; to us, they might be salonnières first and women second, but to them that may have felt otherwise. Nevertheless, this paragraph is not meant to suggest that salons were not important or that women could not benefit from hosting them; rather, it is meant to encourage looking at these women from all perspectives and not only their role in the Enlightenment.

Reading the comments left by the salonnières' contemporaries, it is clear that their contributions and presence in French Enlightenment culture were much appreciated. There are some caveats to this: the exact power and influence salonnières had is hard to trace, as their power consisted in large part of bringing people together which resulted in careers being boosted or perhaps new ideas being created. Much of the praise given to these women also references notions of acceptable or desirable female behavior: salonnières were civilizing influences who knew how to make men shine in conversation. As is evidenced by Mme. Necker's comments, she was deeply aware of what it meant to host and the restraints that being a woman placed on her self-expression. At the same time, the fact that through a salon women had created a space that they 'ruled' is quite different from what other women of their status would have been allowed to 'rule', which was practically nothing, although the idea that despite their lack of legal power women effectively 'ruled' society was widespread in the era. In any case, salonnières 'ruled' their own salon which is more concrete than a general notion of women having power over men because of their beauty.

It is exactly this contrast between acceptable female behaviour and undeniable influence and importance that makes salons into interesting phenomena for feminist historiography. Salonnières did not necessarily prove to anyone that women could be as great as men were, but they nevertheless occupied space and occupied it in a way that still fascinates people about 300 years later. They made a name for themselves and contributed to the French Enlightenment in ways that were clearly acknowledged by their contemporaries, even if they may have partially fallen into the role of nurturing and civilizing influence. With careers

being generally off-limits to higher class women and outlets for ambition being sparse, salons were at least one method to create a position of some influence for oneself.

This chapter represents the difference between legal or political and sociocultural power and the way in which salonnières were allowed to have the latter, albeit by what often seems to be adhering to a very standard femininity. In the next chapter, a more personal sort of power will be discussed, which is the power salonnières had to engage with intellectual topics.

Chapter three: Intellectual opportunities

According to Dena Goodman, gaining an education was one of the main reasons a woman might open a salon.[85] As described in the first chapter, the state of education for upper-class eighteenth century women was, if not dismal, not exactly advanced. With knowledge beyond the basic and the pleasing, it is wholly imaginable that some women would jump at the chance to broaden their intellectual horizons somewhat.

This aspect of the salon will be discussed in this chapter. First, it will give examples of salonnières who expressed a wish for more knowledge and how their salon helped them gain it. Then, it will discuss how eighteenth century ideas about women and education might have impacted their opportunity for intellectual self-expression, as well as the ways in which their intellectual self-expression might have been pushing boundaries with regards to these ideas. It will also discuss whether the salonnières' guests saw them as intellectual equals.

The salonnière and 'intellectual frustration'

An interesting example with regards to the salonnière's self education is Louise d'Epinay. Not only did d'Epinay write about her dissatisfaction with her own education, she also wrote a treatise on education for girls, *Les conversations d'Emilie*, making her the most 'activistic' of the salonnières in this regard. Theorising about how to best educate children was a

[85] Goodman, Dena. 'Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions.' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1989, p. 329–350, p. 332-333.

popular topic at the time, and as women were, at least until the children were older, chiefly tasked with educating their children having a woman write about such things was not entirely boundary-pushing.[86] Still, throughout her works and letters it becomes clear that she is not conservative in her thoughts on women's education. In a letter to Ferdinando Galiani she gives an extensive overview of all the things women can't learn or do and her frustration with this fact:

> "Je dis donc qu'une femme n'est point à portée, par la raison qu'elle est femme, d'en acquérir d'assez étendues pour être utile à ses semblables, et il me semble qu'il n'y a que de celles-là qu'on puisse raisonnablement tirer vanité. Pour pouvoir faire un usage utile de ses connaissances, en quelque genre que ce soit, il faut pouvoir joindre la pratique à la théorie, sans quoi on n'a que des notions très imparfaites. Que de choses dont il ne leur est pas permis d'approcher! Tout ce qui tient à la science de l'administration, de la politique, du commerce, leur est étranger et leur est interdit; elles ne peuvent ni ne doivent s'en mêler, et voilà presque les seules grandes causes par lesquelles les hommes instruits ou savants peuvent vraiment être utiles à leurs semblables, à l'État, à leur patrie. Il leur reste donc les belles-lettres, la philosophie et les arts. Dans les belles-lettres leurs occupations, leurs devoirs, leur faiblesse leur interdisent encore l'étude profonde et suivie des langues anciennes, comme le grec et le latin. C'est donc la littérature française, anglaise, italienne qui sera leur partage. Dans la philosophie, étant privées de la lecture des anciens, ou ne les connaissant que par des traductions presque toujours faibles ou infidèles, leurs lumières seront courtes; et lorsqu'elles voudront raisonner et spéculer, elles seront arrêtées à chaque pas par leur ignorance.Je ne parle ici ni de la métaphysique, ni de la géométrie. La science de la métaphysique appartient à tout le monde, est applicable à tout, et n'est presque utile à rien. J'en dirais presque autant de la géométrie. Voyons donc si elles s'empareront de l'empire des arts, et jusqu'à quel point elles pourront s'y livrer. Les arts mécaniques ne peuvent être de leur ressort. Dans les arts agréables je les vois encore forcées de renoncer à la sculpture, même à la peinture. L'impossibilité de voyager et de contempler les chefs-d'oeuvre des écoles étrangères, la décence qui leur interdit l'étude de la nature, tout dans nos moeurs s'oppose à leurs progrès. Je crois qu'il est inutile de parler d'architecture. Les voilà donc réduites à la musique, à la danse et aux vers innocents: chétive ressource, et qui n'a qu'un temps limité.
>
> Concluons donc de tout cela qu'une femme a grand tort, et n'acquiert que du ridicule, lorsqu'elle s'affiche pour savante ou pour bel esprit, et qu'elle croit pouvoir en soutenir la réputation; mais elle a grande raison néanmoins d'acquérir le plus de connaissances qu'il lui est possible. Elle a grande raison, les devoirs de mère, de fille, d'épouse, une fois remplis, de se livrer à l'étude et au travail, parce que c'est un moyen sûr de se suffire à soi même, d'être libre et indépendante, de se consoler des

[86] Women writers read Rousseau, 129.

> injustices du sort et des hommes, et qu'on n'est jamais plus chérie, plus considérée d'eux que lorsqu'on n'en a pas besoin. Quoi qu'il en soit, une femme qui, avec de l'esprit, du caractère, n'aurait même qu'une légère teinture des choses qu'elle doit renoncer à approfondir, serait encore un objet très rare, très aimable, très considéré, pourvu qu'elle n'y prétendit pas."[87]

D'Epinay's argument that a woman's duties should be fulfilled first does make this statement a bit less 'radical', but her point still stands: knowledge is not inherently dangerous for a woman to possess, and it is a good thing for women to be independent. It is clear that d'Epinay was very dissatisfied with the opportunities women had with regards to learning; not only are some fields of study prohibited to them, the fields they are allowed to engage with are limited as well. Not only does d'Epinay think that women should be taught more than the simple *arts à plaire*, she wants them to be able to learn and practice anything and everything. Meeting with various intellectuals would be a great step up to at least engage with some of the topics that were off-limits to women, but it is imaginable that for someone with d'Epinay's intellectual ambitions the salon would not have been enough. Not only does she wish that she knew Greek and Latin to study original philosophical texts, she expresses a wish to engage in what she calls 'useful' subjects of politics and commerce; d'Epinay reveals that she doesn't just wish to become an intellectual, she wanted to contribute to society in what she seems to think are more substantial ways than through art and literature. In a way, this letter is almost a call for women to be able to enter politics; to be able to study the subjects that would make them 'truly useful to their peers, their State, their homeland.'. In this letter, d'Epinay also once again states her gripes with the stigma placed on women who openly engage with intellectual matters; she was fully aware of the negative reputation she might have by being an intellectual woman, but she thinks that it is worth it to become spiritually independent.

The desire for a more substantial education can also be seen in the letters of madame du Deffand, like in the following example, written to her friend Horace Walpole:

> "Je suis bien fâchée d'être aussi ignorante, d'avoir été si mal élevée, de n'avoir aucun talent, ou de n'être pas bête à manger du foin. Cette dernière manière serait peut-être la meilleure, je m'ennuierais moins, je dormirais mieux et je ne ferais pas de mauvaises digestions [...]"[88]

> "Je maudis bien mon éducation; on fait quelquefois la question si l'on voudrait revenir à tel âge: oh! je ne voudrais pas redevenir jeune à la condition d'être élevée

[87] Ristelhuber, Paul ed., *Un Napolitain du dernier siècle : contes, lettres et pensées de l'abbé Galiani / avec introduction et notes* (1866), lettre 71.
[88] Correspondance complète de la Marquise du Deffand, p. 461 to Horace Walpole.

> comme je l'ai été, de ne vivre qu'avec lesquels j'ai vécu, et d'avoir le genre d'esprit et de caractère que j'ai; j'aurais tous les mêmes malheurs que j'ai eus; mais j'accepterais avec grand plaisir de revenir à quatre ans, d'avoir pour gouverneur un Horace qui me ferait tout apprendre, langues, sciences, etc., et qui m'empêcherait bien de devenir pédante ou précieuse. Il me formerait le goût, le jugement, le discernement; il m'apprendrait à connaître le monde, à m'en méfier, à le mépriser et à m'en amuser; il ne briderait point mon imagination, il n'éteindrait point mes passions, il ne refroidirait point mon âme; mais il serait comme les bons maîtres à danser, qui conservent le maintien naturel et y ajoutent la bonne grâce. Ces pensées causent des regrets, font faire de tristes réflexions, et confirment l'idée que j'ai toujours eue, que personne n'a tout l'esprit et tout le mérite qu'il aurait pu avoir."[89]
>
> "Souvenez-vous que vous êtes mon tuteur, mon gouverneur; n'abandonnez pas mon éducation [...]"[90]

From these quotes a woman appears who wishes she had been educated better, or had been stupid enough not to get bored by her lack of better instruction. An interesting aspect to du Deffand's intellectual pursuits is her friendship with Horace Walpole; the marquise was in her seventies and completely blind while he was around fifty when they started exchanging letters. Throughout her letters, she often addressed him as her tutor, and in the middle passage expresses a wish to have been educated by him from a young age. But Du Deffand does not just bemoan her lack of an education; she also has a very specific view of the type of tutor she would have liked, one that would not have stifled her spirit. At first, this passage may read as a woman telling a man that she is totally ignorant and needs to be taught everything by him, but what follows shows us that du Deffand knew very well what she wanted; that she did not want someone to submit to, but someone to aid her in developing her mind. Her writing that her reflecting on her poor education confirms her idea that nobody has all the spirit and mind and all the worth they could have had, could be a somewhat sad summary of her thoughts on the worth of a good education and on her own life.

Mme. du Deffand has not only left us her reflections on her own situation, but also the thoughts she had about one of the most famous learned women of the eighteenth century: Emilie du Châtelet (1706-1749). Du Châtelet wrote and translated many important works about physics; her translation of Newton's *Principia*, to which she even added her own formula of kinetic energy, is still in use as the standard French translation. Du Châtelet had the fortune to have had er mathematical talents recognized by both her father and a later lover, the marechal de Richelieu, who both encouraged and helped her to take lessons and develop her skills. In a way, du Châtelet had accomplished, and been allowed to accomplish, what d'Epinay, du Deffand and possibly countless other women wished to have accomplished. One wonders what a salonnière so interested in learning more would have

[89] Ibidem, 453, letter to Horace Walpole.
[90] Ibidem, 342, letter to Horace Walpole.

thought about a woman like du Châtelet, and Mme. du Deffand answers the question, at least as far as she's concerned, in a literary portrait of 'la belle Emilie':

> Représentez-vous une femme grande et sèche, le teint échauffé, le visage aigu, le nez pointu, voilà la figure de la belle Emilie, figure dont elle est si contente qu'elle n'épargne rien pour la faire valoir, frisure, pompons, pierreries, verreries, tout est à profusion ; mais comme elle veut être belle en dépit de la nature, et qu'elle veut être magnifique en dépit de la fortune, elle est obligée pour se donner le superflu de se passer du nécessaire, comme chemises et autres bagatelles.
> Elle est née avec assez d'esprit ; le désir d'en paraître davantage lui a fait préférer l'étude des sciences les plus abstraites aux connaissances agréables : elle croit par cette singularité à une plus grande réputation et à une supériorité décidée sur toutes les femmes.
> Quelque célèbre que soit Mme Du Ch***, elle ne serait pas satisfaite si elle n'était pas célébrée, et c'est encore à quoi elle est parvenue en devenant l'amie déclarée de M. de Voltaire. C'est lui qui donne de l'éclat à sa vie, et c'est à lui qu'elle devra l'immortalité.[91]

The rather harsh description du Deffand gives of du Châtelet's appearance does not read as if she is predisposed to admiring or even liking her, but is not the most interesting part of this portrait with regards to education and intelligence. What is most of note to the topic of this chapter is du Deffand's idea that du Châtelet turned to the abstract sciences in order to appear smarter than she actually was as well as to gain superiority over other women. If we allow du Châtelet's lasting scientific legacy to disprove that her intellect was only 'sufficient', du Deffand's remarks might mean that she did not understand abstract sciences well enough to understand when someone was good at them, that she did not like abstract sciences, or perhaps that she was jealous of what du Châtelet had been able to accomplish. Without diving too much into psychoanalysis, her remark that du Châtelet wanted to gain superiority over other women could be rather telling; maybe du Deffand thought that it was unfair that one woman should be able to do something so many others couldn't, or maybe she thought that abstract sciences were, as far as women's education went, more of a novelty than a necessity. Note the final sentences as well: according to du Deffand, the relationship between du Châtelet and Voltaire was born out of her wish to become famous, and Voltaire would be the reason she would become immortal. Whether there is any veracity in this statement is a different matter, but it's interesting to note that du Deffand credited Voltaire with du Châtelet's lasting fame, while at the same time acknowledging that lasting fame was at all possible for du Châtelet. After all, even if one becomes 'immortal' by association, all famous 'associates' throughout history did do something to gain that fame, even if they needed someone else to make sure their own talents were noticed. The rarity of a female physicist did not escape du Deffand, even if she did not like this one in particular.

It would be impossible to divine du Deffand's entire opinion on learned women, abstract sciences, women's education or even Emilie du Châtelet from this portrait, but one

[91] Meister, Jacob, *Correspondance littéraire*, tome XI, march 1777, p. 436-437.

thing it makes clear: that a learned woman was not automatically a role model or someone who proved what could be done, but could also be someone to be mistrusted, whether out of jealousy or some reserve with regards to proper subjects for a woman.

The existence of a learned woman like Emilie du Châtelet is, in itself, of note to the subject of this thesis; she is, in a way, the exception that proves the rule with regards to women's education or lack thereof. With a combination of the right talents and interests and the right men in her life, she had managed to truly be a learned woman, and was respected in that capacity. Could the salonnières have done the same? Could they not, aided by their rank, have overcome the 'general prejudice against the learned lady'? Would, if not their fathers or husbands, their philosophe friends have been willing to help them become scholars? It is hard to say; it is hard to know at what intersection of prejudice and troubles these women had to operate. After all, not everyone is a brilliant physicist; in fact, most people are not. Maybe the salonnières did not wish to become scholars, but only wished to know roughly how the world worked and to understand more complex topics than were normally within their reach or comprehension. Maybe, if they did wish to turn their newfound education into something more, they did not know where to start. Or maybe the salon itself was not only the provider of an education, but also the project that benefited most from it. And, importantly, even if du Châtelet gained immense celebrity on account of her intelligence and contributions to physics, some of the other salonnières also left works.

Another woman who was clearly intellectually interested was Madame Necker. Necker's works do not include the more overt frustration about a lack of education that can be found in the works of d'Epinay and Du Deffand, but Necker had been educated very thoroughly by her father, who was a Swiss pastor.[92] This meant that Necker in all likelihood was less 'educationally frustrated', but she often writes about all kinds of intellectual topics. Necker often reflects on what makes people smart and educated, how these qualities are best brought forward and what these qualities mean; she often speaks of 'hommes de génie' and what they are like. She has also expressed her thoughts on what women ought to know according to her:

> Souvent on écrit et on ne se fait imprimer que par le désir de briller; et pour les femmes surtout, c'est toujours un acte de personnalité; mais l'instruction se rapporte plus aux autres; elle nous rapproche d'eux par la pensée; elle attire à nous les gens de mérite de tous genres, par la variété de notre conversation; enfin elle nous détourne des objets qui pourroient nous donner de l'humeur. Les femmes croient avoir l'esprit cultivé, quand elles se sont occupées de littérature sans avoir rien enchaîné. Elles se trompent: l'esprit se cultive premièrement par l'habitude de

[92] Salonnières & Bluestockings, 189

> l'ordre et la justesse; secondement par la réflexion, en mêlant ses pensées à celles des autres, et enfin en réunissant les sciences aux connoissances d'agrément. On ne dira jamais qu'un homme ou une femme ont l'esprit cultivé, s'ils ne sont pas instruits sur les objets généralement utiles, et qui se rencontrent sans cesse dans le cours de la vie. Les femmes devroient donc étudier l'histoire, puisqu'elles en font partie elles-mêmes, ne fût-ce que par les moeurs de leur siècle; elles ne peuvent ignorer l'hygiène et les élémens de la médicine, puisque un de leur devoirs est de prévenir les erreurs des pharmaciens et les négligences des médecins, tant pour elles que pour les autres; elles doivent aussi lire les bons livres de morale qui règlent le caractère et leur apprennent à se connoitre; la physique expérimentale leur est utile, car elle leur donne les moyens de parler d'objets piquans par leur nouveauté, et qui enchainent toute la nature par le lien de nos pensées; elles ne doivent pas négliger la littérature, mais en dirigeant leurs connoissances en ce genre vers l'art de perfectionner leur style et d'acquérir de l'éloquence, autant que cela est possible. Enfin, quand on a fait de mauvaises études, il est encore un moyen d'en profiter, en revenant sur les mêmes objets, et en reprenant ainsi, en quelque manière, le tems passé: car la mémoire est plus facile sur les choses qu'on a déjà sues; et l'on peut, en enchaînant les idées anciennes à des idées nouvelles, mettre de l'ordre dans les connoissances incomplètes, et remplir les intervalles que faisoient la confusion: ainsi les idées les plus vagues et les connoissances les plus mail apprises peuvent devenir utiles et se classer en trouvant leur place.[93]

This passage makes it clear that Necker is in favor of an education for women, and not just a basic education that focuses on reading, writing and being pleasing. She stresses the importance of various subjects for various reasons, as well as stating that a good education allows us to get in touch with other people and exchanging ideas with them. She also stresses that just reading books is not enough; both men and women must combine theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge and reflect on what they know in order to be truly cultivated. Finally, Neckers offers the advice that even when one has learned the wrong things in the past, this knowledge can still be improved and used.
In some passages, Necker writes about the knowledge she considers to be most important for women: knowledge that will be useful in conversation, and knowledge that fits well with their husbands' dispositions.

> Une femme doit cultiver surtout les connaissances propres à la conversation ou à la disposition de l'âme de son mari, et il faut aussi conserver ses habitudes avec soin, et surtout celles de bien écrire et de lire facilement les langues étrangères. Plus la mémoire est foible, plus les habitudes doivent être cultivées.[94]

[93] Mélanges, vol. 3 p. 29-32.
[94] Mélanges, vol. 3 p 75-76.

Still, Necker's many comments on intelligence and the importance of knowledge do not read like those of a woman who was happy to sit on the sidelines and only wished to be useful for her husband and pleasing in conversations. While acknowledging that a woman would benefit from being good at conversing and being agreeable to her husband, Necker seems to have thought that knowledge was also very useful for other purposes, and wished to encourage others to improve theirs.

We can also learn something about the opinions of madame Geoffrin from the elegy Morellet wrote. In it, he included an excerpt from a letter Geoffrin once wrote to Catherine the Great of Russia, in which she wrote about her upbringing:

> "J'ai élevée par une vieille grand-mère qui avoit beaucoup d'esprit & une tête bien faite. [...] Elle étoit si contente de son lot, qu'elle regardoit le savoir comme une chose très inutile pour une femme. Elle disoit, je m'en suis si bien passée, que je n'en ai jamais senti le besoin. [...] Elle ne m'a donc fait apprendre, dans mon enfance, simplement qu'à lire, mais elle me faisoit beaucoup lire; elle m'apprenoit à penser, en me faisant beaucoup raisonner; elle m'apprenoit à connoître les hommes, en me faisant dire ce que j'en pensois, & me disant aussi le jugement qu'elle en portoit. [...] Mon éducation étoit continuelle: je ne quittois jamais ma grand-mère, & tout étoit pour moi un sujet d'instruction. [...] je suis, comme ma grand-mère, très-contente de mon lot."[95]

At first, Geoffrin's tale shows a resemblance to that of d'Epinay and du Deffand, but where her contemporaries showed annoyance at their lack of an education, Geoffrin writes that she is content, in part because she has learned many other things from her grandmother beyond a formal education. Due to this only being one letter, Geoffrin's opinions are harder to form a complete image of. We can't know if there are letters to other people in which she expressed other ideas about her own education; all we know is that, according to Morellet, Geoffrin had given a copy or description of this letter to a few of her friends, which indicates that the opinions expressed in this letter are at least opinions she wished to be known to her friends. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that hosting a salon contributed to Geoffrin's knowledge, as she herself writes that her education has been continual and she learned from everything, and Morellet writes that she was a keen observer. The earlier mentioned story of Geoffrin visiting the salon of Mme. de Tencin when she was 18 is also noteworthy in this context; whether her primary incentive was education or not, Geoffrin was evidently interested in visiting a group of learned people, or she could have found other company.

Louise d'Epinay's self-discovery

Besides her treatise on education for girls, d'Epinay also wrote a three-part pseudo-memoir called *La vie de madame de Montbrillant*. Montbrillant remains dubious with regards to its

[95] Portrait de madame Geoffrin, 2-3.

facts and fictions, so none of the quotes have to immediately reflect what d'Epinay felt. However, the entire work can be taken as one big reflection of d'Epinay's thoughts and feelings, so a selection of quotes from the three volumes will be taken to illustrate her place within salon society. Many of the themes that can be found in these memoirs appear in other salonnières'letters and lives as well, but as one of the rare examples of a finished work by a salonnière and because of the many insights it gives into d'Epinay's ideas, it merits some discussion apart from other sources.

Even though she wrote Montbrillant before the Conversations, they were not published until after her death. In these memoirs, d'Epinay gave everyone she knew and interacted with (except for Voltaire) a pseudonym, but everyone with any knowledge about the circumstances would have known who she wrote about. This is especially the case with regards to Rousseau (nicknamed 'René'), as d'Epinay fully details their friendship and subsequent falling out. Firstly, it is important to note that these memoirs were not published, and may not have been intended for publication at all. Yet, they again present a case where a woman softened her opinions somewhat, while still expressing them.
The case is that in her conflict with Rousseau, d'Epinay has her other friends (notably Grimm and Diderot, or 'Volx' and 'Garnier') write letters about how abhorrent they find his behaviour. If her friends actually wrote her these letters, transcribing them into her novel is a smart way of not having to give a direct commentary on Rousseau. However, the memoirs may have been a fictionalised account of things rather than a straightforward transcription of everything that occurred in d'Epinays life.[96] In this case, she still tried to avoid confronting anyone herself by having her 'friends' say it, but at the same time it could have been very obvious that those letters of assurance were her own words. Whether it was intended for publication or not does matter a great deal as to the 'sensibility' of these memoirs- if they were supposed to remain private, they were simply d'Epinays wish to write away her troubles. But if they were at some point intended for publication, she would have published a damning account of not only Rousseau, but also her husband, and some less than flattering descriptions of other people from her life- hardly a paragon of womanly virtue and modesty.

Another item of note is her back-and-forth with Grimm about who she should let her novel be read by. In one passage, Grimm tells her not to let anyone read her book until it is finished because it might stifle her otherwise naturally flowing prose when she is too concerned with her audience.[97] After announcing that she will be writing a book, d'Epinay and Grimm discuss another reason for not letting anyone read the work:

> "J'approuve très fort le refus que vous avez fait de montrer vos ouvrages à Garnier; cette marque de confiance n'est due qu'à vos amis. Vous pouvez vous souvenir, ma tendre amie, que nous sommes souvent convenus qu'une femme ne saurait être trop réservée sur cet article. Peu de gens sont tentés de rendre justice à leur talent, et beaucoup sont pressés de leur supposer de la prétention. D'ailleurs, il est bon, et

[96] Women writers read Rousseau, 99.
[97] D'Epinay, Louise, *L'Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant* (Georges Roth ed., 1951), vol. 3 p. 171.

même très nécessaire, d'avoir le ressentiment des injustices qu'on nous fait éprouver, et de traiter les gens en conséquence de l'estime qu'ils nous marquent."[98]

In this passage, Grimm gives a voice to the idea that women should not seek publication because they could be seen as being too pretentious. From the way it is phrased, it would seem that Grimm does not agree with this idea, speaking of 'injustices' with regards to the advice he gives d'Epinay.

In another passage d'Epinay's avatar Émilie de Montbrillant writes that she wishes to begin her own book after having read *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* by her then-friend Rousseau:

> "Je ne vous ai point écrit depuis trois jors, parce que j'ai eu du monde, et puis parce que…, parce que je viens de commencer un ouvrage dont le début me plaît. C'est le roman de René qui m'en a donné l'idée. Toutes ses lettres sont si belles, si faites, que la lecture m'en paraît froide et fatigante. Lorsque j'aurai quelques cahiers de faits, je vous les enverrai pour savoir s'ils valent la peine d être continués."[99]

This again shows a benefit that salons held for women; in this case, d'Epinay was inspired by her intellectual friends to try her hand at writing. What is also interesting is that she offers criticism of Rousseau's style without any appeal to her feminine nature; she plainly states that she finds his style cold and tiresome and thinks that she can do it better. D'Epinay is soon proven to be right, as she starts sending pieces of her book to Grimm, who writes the following, quite hefty, praise:

> "Au reste, maintenant que René ne soupire plus pour vous, ma pauvre amie, si vous lui avez contré quelque chose de ces mémoires, je vous tiens pour brouillée avec lui. Il a le tact trop fin pour ne pas sentir l'extrême distance qu'il y a entre votre Sophie et son ennuyeuse et pédantesque héroïne."[100]

Whether this is an actual compliment Grimm made her or one she made up herself, by including it in her memoirs d'Epinay was in any case asserting her claim that she was a better writer than Rousseau.

D'Epinay also continuously comments on how easy she finds writing (while Rousseau often told her how hard it was for him to do so).[101] This is a recurring theme; according to Mary Seidman Trouille, she was trying to posit herself as Rousseau's worthy literary opponent. This can be clearly seen in two ways; in the way she often has her 'friends' comment on comparisons between their works, but also in the works themselves. Whereas

[98] Montbrillant vol. 3, 131.
[99] Idem.
[100] Ibidem, 171-172.
[101] Women writers read Rousseau, 106

Rousseau's female characters are paragons of virtue who receive only a modest education in order to enhance that virtue, d'Epinay uses one book to argue for better female education, while in her autobiographical account she presents herself as a woman who has suffered unjustly but who clearly goes against feminine ideals of the time, especially those of Rousseau: she has a sharp mind that she does not wish to suppress and raising her children does not bring her fulfillment.[102] She also describes looking for the fulfillment she misses in extramarital affairs, a wish that in contrast to Rousseau's Julie she does not suppress but seeks out to fulfill because she acknowledges that true love would make her happy.[103]

Besides her criticism of Rousseau, Montbrillant works as an overall vindication of d'Epinays life. In it, she describes her aunt who would not let her governess teach her, her equally uneducational years in a convent and her careless husband who wastes their money and constantly cheats on her, leading d'Epinay to become infected by a venereal disease. But then, d'Epinay manages to separate her finances from those of her husband, starts reading extensively and comes into contact with men of letters, for whom she opens a salon and who praise her intellectual capabilities. Reading her work, the salon appears only as a small part of d'Epinay's self-assertion and venture into a more independent life. D'Epinay emerges from her work as a woman who wished for much more than women of her age usually got, and through luck and talents strove to live her life and express herself the way she wished. In her book, she shows herself not only developing her talents, but also her self-confidence:

> "Je faisais mille choses qui ne me convenaient pas avec une complaisance qui me convenait encore moins, et dont on ne se doutait seulement pas. J'en étais continuellement la victime, sans qu'on m'en sût aucun gré. J'y ai bien regardé; j'ai commencé à oser être moi; je ne compte plus que pour rien les caprices des autres. Je ne fais plus que ce qui me plaît; je m'en trouve à merveille, et il me semble que mes amis ne s'en trouvent pas mal."[104]

Overall, d'Epinay's troubles did not cease because she held a salon or had intellectual friends; her eventual separation from her husband had little to do with these things, tying in to the fact that hosting a salon did usually not give salonnières opportunities to impact the rest of their lives. However, it is entirely imaginable that a salon, by virtue of being a large project that a woman like d'Epinay could pursue because she wanted it, would have improved how she felt about her life. For a woman who was not keen on running away or starting a scandal, so to speak, hosting a salon might have been an act of reclaiming her life, of creating something for herself because she wanted to. D'Epinay 'started to dare being herself' and writes that it is important for women to be well-educated so that they may be

[102] For example, see Montbrillant vol. 1, 468
[103] Women writers read Rousseau, 114-115
[104] Montbrillant vol. 3, 209

independent; one can imagine how those things might be connected and how hosting a salon might have made her feel empowered.

Expressing intelligence

Salons did not only allow women to engage with the academic world and expand their knowledge; because they were known to be intellectual affairs, they were a place where it was accepted for a woman to be surrounded by knowledge and intellectual discussions.[105] It could be argued that in terms of 'respectability', it is one thing for a woman to have access to a library and educate herself, but another thing to be able to showcase the knowledge she was not expected or encouraged to possess to others and to very visibly surround herself with it; this would mean that salons did not only offer more practical intellectual opportunities to women, but also challenged the common ideas about intellectual women. As with the influence and power described in the first chapter, part of the progressive nature of the salons might stem not only from the practical opportunities they opened up for women but also from the ways in which they challenged ideas about them.

That being said, what can often be seen in sources where the salonnières discuss an intellectual subject is a certain 'softening' of their opinions; a disclaimer that they might not know what they are talking about. The way they phrase their opinions can be seen as them invoking a sort of 'feminine sensibility' in the same way that Mme. Necker talked about her desire to create a children's hospital.

See, for example, Julie de Lespinasse. She received a fairly good education, or at least a better one than du Deffand and Geoffrin. She also often references all sorts of written works in her letters, not only by discussing those works with her friends but also by comparing her own life to the things she has read. At the same time, she often describes herself as being a person of feelings rather than rationality, often calling herself 'folle' or writing that the recipient of her letter will call her that. While being well-read does not preclude someone from seeing themselves as an irrational person, this self description of de Lespinasse does fit in well with the idea of the era that women were ill suited for rational thought. In a way, de Lespinasse was able to use this idea as a way to give herself credibility in matters of taste and intellect without sounding too pedantic. In the following quote, she discusses a work written by her lover, the comte de Guibert:

> "A coup sûr, l'auteur ira loin; ce n'est pas assez dire qu'il a du talent, de l'âme, de l'esprit, du génie: il a ce qui manque à presque tout ce qui est bon, cette éloquence et cette chaleur qui fait qu'on le sent avant que de le juger. C'est ce qui fait que, sans présomption, je puis louer, approuver avec autant de vérité que si j'avais de l'esprit

[105] Salonnières & bluestockings, 185-186.

> et du goût. Je ne sais ni discuter, ni mesurer rien; mais ce qui est beau enlève mon âme, et alors j'ai raison, quoi que vous en puissiez dire."[106]

De Lespinasse writes that she does not now how to discuss or analyse anything, but because she can feel a work's merit in her soul, she is always right. By saying this, she gives herself a large amount of authority in matters of taste, without claiming an equally large intellect. We cannot be sure why de Lespinasse wrote in this way: maybe she consciously constructed herself as a woman of feeling rather than of reason, or she truly believed herself to be like that - after all, she had been raised in an era where women's rationality was contested, to say the least. But her self-expression does fit in with the overall Enlightenment conceptions of womanhood, and pairing her literary criticisms with a focus on her sensibility would probably have helped her along in a society so focused on that characteristic. In multiple letters, she also contrasts herself against other women, who she denotes as being vain and frivolous, while she writes that she admires women that are 'simple, modest and natural and whose souls reach the height of love and passion.'[107] Again, this can be read as de Lespinasse asserting her rightful place as a woman of feeling in the world; she does not pretend to be something she is not, she is free of pretensions and only acts on her pure feelings.

Something similar can also be seen in some quotes from d'Epinay. For example, she records herself having philosophical discussions with Rousseau, and then discussing these discussions with Grimm, for example. One of these discussions follows d'Epinay and Rousseau discussing education, in which Rousseau explains his belief that parents are unsuited to educate their own children in current society. D'Epinay responds to these claims in a way that sounds similar to the way Julie de Lespinasse expressed her literary criticisms, namely focusing a sort of sensible clarity informed by her womanhood:

> "Ah! Monsieur, lui dis-je, vraiment en colère, vous oubliez que je suis mère et vous me désespérez avec votre philosophie!"[108]

She then goes on to report this discussion to Grimm. D'Epinay asks him to 'secure her hopes and fears', which he obliges to by asserting that Rousseau 'has gone mad'.[109] So, on the one hand d'Epinay asks for Grimm's opinion on the matter and comes up with an emotional response rather than philosophical arguments, but on the other hand she frames herself as being in the right because of her instincts. D'Epinay seems to have been aware of the discourse surrounding learned women or 'femmes savantes'; in the letter to Ferdinando Galiani quoted above, she starts her reflections on women's education in the following way:

[106]Engendering the Republic of letters, p. 139-140.
[107] Ibidem, 38.
[108] Montbrillant vol. 3, 137
[109] Ibidem, 137-141

> "La réputation d'une femme bel esprit ne me paraît qu'un persiflage inventé par les hommes, pour se venger de ce qu'elles ont communément plus d'agréments qu'eux dans l'esprit, d'autant qu'on joint presque toujours à cette épithète l'idée d'une femme savante; et la femme la plus savante n'a et ne peut avoir que des connaissances très superficielles. Il me prend envie de disserter sur ceci pédantesquement."[110]

Here, d'Epinay distinguishes between a 'femme bel esprit' and a 'femme savante', both were terms used disparagingly about women who occupied themselves with intellectual matters, although in origin and when applied to men being *bel esprit* refers more to being cultured and speaking about it in a pleasing matter, while being *savant(e)* has more to do with being very knowledgeable.[111] In any case, d'Epinay is dissatisfied with these terms or at least the reputations connected to them and describes them as empty fictions. What might also be noteworthy is her usage of the word 'pédantesquement'; she wants to act in the way learned women were often accused of acting, in order to prove that these reputations are nonsensical. Perhaps a self-referential joke on her part?

Madame du Deffand also exhibits familiarity with the reputation of learned women in her writings. In one letter she writes Walpole that he would have kept her from becoming 'pédante ou précieuse'; these two things were among the aspects of salon culture and salonnières that garnered most criticism, criticism that the marquise seems to have agreed with. Usually, we read about the critiques contemporaries had for the *précieuse* salonnières, or how those critiques were thinly veiled attacks on women in any kind of power; these things are not often being discussed by the salonnières themselves.

In another letter to Walpole, du Deffand discusses a letter to Voltaire on which he had asked her opinion. Du Deffand replies to his request in the following way:

> "Vous me faites beaucoup plus d'honneur que je ne mérite; vous ne savez pas que quand on me demande mon avis, je ne sais plus quel il est; toutes mes lumières sont premiers mouvements; je ne juge que par sentiment; si je demande à mon esprit une opération quelconque, je reconnais alors que je n'en ai point du tout. Cependant le désir de vous complaire va me faire parler; je vous demande de me pardonner tout ce que je dirai de travers."[112]

Like Julie de Lespinasse, Mme. du Deffand stresses her impulsive and emotional way of judging things and even apologizes for what she is about to say. After this disclaimer of sorts

[110] Lettres de Galiani, lettre 71.
[111] For reference, see the results for both terms on the ARTFL project 'Dictionnaires d'autrefois' website.
[112] Lettres de la marquise du Deffand, lettre 256.

she does give her opinion on Walpole's letter and while she mostly praises it, she does criticize some parts of it, like a turn of phrase that she thinks 'might shock Voltaire' because it 'injures bourgeois ears'. However, by the end of the letter she once again writes that Walpole shouldn't ask her opinion because she was still in need of much guidance herself.

It can't be taken as a fact that du Deffand's disclaimers were a conscious effort not to appear pedantic or arrogant; they may have come from ingrained insecurity. It might be impossible to divine du Deffand's true motives in writing this letter the way she did, but wrapping her opinions in repeated claims that she does not have any is easy to interpret as the actions of a woman who knew that women's opinions were often not counted for much and didn't want to be seen as overstepping her boundaries.

It is also notable that she specifically calls on 'sentiment' as a prime reason for her opinions, as 'sentiment' is something that was so readily ascribed to women; especially combined with de Lespinasse's similar comments something of a pattern can be seen.

At the same time, du Deffand did not always claim to be a sentimental person. In a letter to Voltaire she writes:

> "Vous avez lu *l'Honnête criminel*; vous a-t-il fait fondre en larmes? C'est l'effet général qu'il a produit, excepté sur quelques mauvais coeurs comme moi, qui, pour justifier leur insensibilité, prétendent qu'il n'y a pas un sentiment naturel."[113]

Here, du Deffand does not only describe her lack of an emotional response to something, but even makes a point of saying she is an insensitive person. There could be multiple reasons for this discrepancy in how she writes about herself; the letters were written within the same year, but to different people, to name one. What this quote shows is that even if there can be a tendency for salonnières to downplay their opinions and intelligence, this is not a cut-and-dry issue.

Intellectual equals?

One important question that remains is whether the salonnières were considered to be the intellectual equals of their philosophe friends and guests, or whether they were seen as moderating voices rather than as intellectuals in their own right. The issue raised in the first chapter, that salonnières could be seen as the more socially acceptable 'inspiring hostess' as well as an influential figure is also at play here. Many of the same praises for the salonnières' animating conversation can be analyzed with an eye towards how, if at all, the women's intellectual capacities are praised. It is also interesting to see whether the philosophes felt the same reservations with regards to *femmes savantes*.

While academic pursuits were not encouraged for women, being able to speak and write well was a sign of good breeding and intelligence; a curious, scholastic woman may

[113] Lettres de la marquise du Deffand, lettre 251.

have been a taboo, but so was a completely ignorant one.[114] As stated in the first chapter, the role of hostess and moderator of a discussion was not considered improper for a woman, and was exactly the role they fulfilled; salonnières conducted the intellectual discussions more than actively taking part in them. What's more, the way they 'governed' in their salon was decidedly through 'feminine' means, as they listened more than they spoke and stressed civil conversations and the rules of etiquette. Many contemporary sources reveal a focus on the hosting and conversing abilities of a salonnière more than her mind or intellectual pursuits. Take for example the *Portrait de madame Geoffrin* written after her death by André Morellet. Morellet clearly respects Geoffrin; his elegy flows over with descriptions of her sensible, reasonable, friendly nature; her flaws, he says, are 'light and not very prominent; she had no more faults than those of her good qualities'. He also writes admiringly about the way in which she managed to gather a circle of well known guests around her:

> "Madame Geoffrin née dans un état médiocre, avec une fortune qui d'abord n'étoit pas assez considérable pour suppléer, comme il arrive souvent, à la naissance, n'ayant même aucun de ces talents extraordinaires qui attirent fortement l'attention du public, & font disparoître la distance des rangs dans la société, a vu se rassembler chez elle les hommes de Lettres les plus distingués, les Artistes les plus célèbres; & de la France & des pays étrangers, les personnes les plus considérables par leur naissance, leur rang & leur dignités. Enfin elle a vu des Souverains la rechercher, entrer en commerce de Lettres avec elle, & ceux que la curiosité attiroit en France, se faire un plaisir de cultiver la société."[115]

But her achievements are not all Morellet praised:

> "J'ai dit qu'elle avoit peu d'instruction. Les personnes qui ne l'ont jugée que sur sa réputation, pourront croire que sur ce point on ne lui rend pas justice. D'autres qui ne l'aimoient pas, ont dit avec malignité, qu'elle étoit une femme savante, car l'envie fait décrier, même en louant: on a vu Madame Geoffrin rassembler chez elle les hommes de Lettres les plus connus: on a dit qu'elle tenoit bureau d'esprit. Elle accueilloir & aimoit les Artistes, on a dit qu'elle se piquoit de beaucoup de connoissances dans les Arts; on lui a supposé des prétentions, parce qui les prétentions même fondées, s'il peut y en avoir de telles, sont encore ridicules; mais ceux qui ont vécu près d'elle, savent bien qu'elle n'en eut jamais de cette espèce: elle n'avoit presque point d'autres connoissances que celles qu'un bon esprit peut acquérir dans la société, par l'attention & l'observation. Loin d'avoir aucune prétention en ce genre, elle tiroit quelque vanité de son ignorance même: elle ne croyoit pas que les femmes eussent besoin d'être fort instruites."[116]

[114] Salonnières and bluestockings, 185.
[115] Portrait de madame Geoffrin, 30.
[116] Portrait de madame Geoffrin, 7.

According to him, those who do not love Geoffrin may call her, with spite, a femme savante, the disparaging term for women with intellectual aspirations stemming from the seventeenth century. Morellet assures us that madame Geoffrin had no pretensions of the kind: rather, she knew nothing that could not be learned through paying attention and observing others in society and did not think a good education for women necessary. This is interesting: Morellet clearly values Geoffrin for her good character and mind, but also for the fact that she had no pretensions to being smarter than she was. Now, pretentious people are not often praised for being pretentious, but it is interesting to note this remark within the context of the way women were usually discouraged from engaging with intellectual pursuits; we will see the theme of pretension among women return multiple times. Morellet's remark on women's education is also of interest: he contrasts this opinion of Geoffrin's against the pretensions people think her to have, so he seemingly thinks that this was a good thing, but he also describes it as being Geoffrin's vanity about her own ignorance, which may indicate that he did not completely agree with Geoffrin on this point. Either way, Morellet notes the following as Geoffrin's most important qualities: her unaffectedness, correctness, elegance and 'sometimes grace'; he also emphasises that she cared about order and judged very justly, or refrained from judging altogether when she did not know enough about the subject.[117] These qualities, while definitely good, do fit in well with the image of acceptable femininity from the era. Reading Morellet's comments, a woman emerges who was respected and who appears to have conformed well to what was expected of women of her class and era; it does not seem as if Geoffrin was seen as someone who pushed boundaries in an intellectual sense. However, that does not mean that hosting a salon was not immensely beneficial to Geoffrin in terms of education and knowledge.

As not a lot of actual correspondence between d'Epinay and Grimm survives, we cannot be sure whether the latter's praise was as hefty in real life as d'Epinay portrays it. However, we do know that he submitted works to her for her opinion, and that he wrote the following in her obituary in the Correspondance:

> "Voici quelques traits d'un portrait qu'elle fit d'elle même en 1756 ; elle avait alors trente ans. [...] "Mon amour-propre, sans me faire concevoir la folle espérance d'être parfaitement sage, me fait prétendre à devenir un jour une femme d'un grand mérite.
> Jamais espérance ne fut mieux remplie, jamais prétention ne fut mieux justifiée. Elle n'a point laissé d'autre ouvrage qu'une suite encore imparfaite des Conversations d'Emilie, beaucoup de Lettres, et l'ébauche d'un long Roman. Les deux petits volumes intitulés, l'un, Lettres à mon fils, avec cette épigraphe : Facundam faciebat

[117] Ibidem, 4.

> amor; l'autre, Mes moments heureux, Sollicitae jucunda oblivia vitoe, quoique imprimés, n'ont jamais été publiés et ne paraissent pas faits pour l'être ; on y trouverait cependant beaucoup de choses aimables, de la finesse et de la sensibilité ; mais ce sont des ouvrages de société et les premiers essais d'une plume qui n'avait pas encore acquis toute sa force et toute sa maturité."[118]

In this quote, Grimm tells us that d'Epinay was right in pretending to one day become a woman of great merits; solid praise indeed. Afterwards, he discusses the works she has left. While his assessment of her works is not terribly negative, it is a far cry from the praise he is recorded as giving her in Montbrillant. Still, the fact that Grimm writes about her pen not having found its force and maturity seems to indicate that he did see a future as a writer for d'Epinay; in any case, he acknowledges the fact that she was a writer with some amount of talent. D'Epinay also contributed to Grimm's *Correspondance Litteraire* (albeit anonymously) and often read her friends' works for them to give them her opinions.[119] According to some sources, d'Epinay sometimes even acted as an unofficial director for the *Correspondance* when Grimm, who was its director.[120]

In the section above, a letter from d'Epinay to Galiani has been discussed in which she tells him about her dissatisfaction with women's education. Galiani replied with his own ideas on the matter, which are certainly less progressive than d'Epinay's:

> "Vous voulez savoir de moi ce qu'une femme doit étudier. Sa langue, afin qu'elle puisse parler et écrire correctement; la poésie, si elle y a du penchant. En tout, elle doit cultiver toujours son imagination; car le vrai mérite des femmes et de leur société, consiste en ce qu'elles sont toujours plus originales que les hommes; elles sont moins factices, moins gâtées, moins éloignées de la nature, et par cela plus aimables. En fait de morale, elles doivent étudier beaucoup les hommes, et jamais les femmes. Elles doivent connaître et étudier tous les ridicules des hommes, et jamais ceux des femmes."[121]

Basically, Galiani thinks that women should focus on literary and spoken competency, but that's about it. Crucially, note his assertion that women should focus on their imagination above all else; that part is directly in line with the contemporary idea that women were naturally more emotional, as well as with the earlier mentioned idea that women spoke a purer form of French because of their lack of broader knowledge of languages. It also forms a useful comparison with Mme. du Deffand's and Mlle. de Lespinasse's assertions that their opinions come solely from sentiment; that line of thinking was, at least by Galiani, encouraged in women.

[118] Correspondance Littéraire, vol. 11, p. 398.
[119] Women writers read Rousseau, 95-96.
[120] Ibidem, 95.
[121] Lettres de Galiani, lettre 72.

In the previous chapter, a letter from Galiani was quoted in which he speaks of an antifeminist pamphlet that he wishes to keep a secret. This pamphlet of his is also crucial to mention in this context, as in Galiani's view women are inferior to men in practically every way, which includes their intelligence and potential for intellectual success. Galiani visited salons and exchanged letters with salonnières; in another letter he even mentions that d'Epinay commented on a piece he wrote.[122] And yet, he did not see women as intellectual equals, or equals in any matter. The mental or intellectual qualities that he did see as worthwhile in women are in part the ones that have been associated with salonnières multiple times throughout sources quoted in this thesis; the ability to speak well and to bring a sort of originality to a conversation. The case of Galiani and d'Epinay show a discrepancy of some sort: for salonnières, their salons could be a way to finally engage in topics that would have been out of their reach otherwise, whereas some of their guests might have seen them as witty and charming hostesses at the most.

The eulogy written for Mlle. de Lespinasse quoted in the previous chapter can also shed some light on the topic of intellectual equality. D'Alembert and de Guibert also describe de Lespinasse as having an immensely vivacious personality that could animate those around her. Again, this praise does not seem to be inherently tied to her gender, although again there's a focus on the fact that she had no ulterior motives or pretenses in animating people, but just did so, as is described in the following quote:

> "Cette flamme du Ciel, cette énergie de sentiment, enfin, si j'ose m'exprimer ainsi, cette abondance de vie, Éliza, quand elle n'étoit pas accablée par le malheur, elle la répandoit sur tout ce qu'elle vouloit animer; mais elle ne vouloit rien: elle animoit sans prétention et sans projet. On n'approchoit pas de son âme sans se sentir attiré."[123]

The praises of de Lespinasse's spirit continues as follows:

> "Souvent, en comparant Éliza à tout ce que j'ai connu de femmes aimables et d'hommes de beaucoup d'esprit, j'ai cherché à m'expliquer le principe de ce charme que personne ne possédoit comme elle, et voici en quoi il m'a paru consister: elle étoit toujour exempte de personnalité et toujours naturelle. Exempte de personnalité, jamais on ne le fut à ce point. Avec ses amis, c'étoit par finesse d'esprit et de jugement."[124]

This quote is interesting because de Lespinasse is being compared to both women and men with regards to her charming personality, with the conclusion being that nobody from either sex possesses the same charm as her. While the focus remains on the somewhat vague

[122] Lettres de Galiani, lettre 70.
[123] Le tombeau de Mlle. de Lespinasse, 7.
[124] Ibidem, 9.

descriptors of 'charm' and 'spirit', it is important to note that at least in this regard her friends did not see de Lespinasse as simply being good for a woman, but being good as a person. The rest of the quote does contain some focus on pretension, or in this case a lack of it, which ties in with the often expressed distaste for pretension among women. While praising her lack of pretension does not have to be tied to her sex and could have been seen as a generally good thing by her friends, this praise is repeated very often throughout *Le Tombeau,* making it something that her friends clearly found very important about her. A reading of this focus on a lack of pretension as being specifically important to a woman could also be applied to this text; in any case, it doesn't contradict the idea that salonnières had to be careful not to be seen as pretentious due to their association with intellectual pursuits. It is also notable that in a different passage de Lespinasse is compared to unnamed other women who supposedly only pretended to have the qualities that she naturally possessed, therefore drawing more attention to de Lespinasse's status as a woman rather than an intellectual.[125]

But pleasing conversations and a lack of pretension are not all that were praised within this work. Its authors also devote some time to de Lespinasse's mind and interests:

> "L'esprit d'Éliza, tout aimable, tout animé qu'il étoit, y réunissoit le mérite de la justesse et de la solidité. Elle n'avoit jamais cultivé les sciences exactes; mais elle étudioit la morale, elle aimoit la saine métaphysique. Elle lisoit souvent Montaigne; elle connoissoit Locke avant que Rousseau ne l'eût, sous des formes plus heureuses, fait passer dans notre langue; elle faisoit ses délices de Tacite et de Montesquieu. Un des auteurs vivans dont elle estimoit le plus les ouvrages étoit l'abbé de Condillac. Tout ce qui étoit fort plaisoit à son caractère, et tout ce qui étoit fin ou profond plaisoit à son esprit."[126]

Through this quote, we learn that de Lespinasse read a lot. Throughout Le Tombeau, de Lespinasse's character is praised more often than her intelligence, but de Guibert and d'Alembert are clearly very impressed with her; while none of the things they praise about her actively go against what was seen as respectable female behaviour and they do stress her lack of pretension, they seem to genuinely value her character rather than an idealized image of womanhood. D'Alembert's thoughts on women's education described in the first chapter are also important to contextualize his ode to de Lespinasse with; whether he thought that she effectively was his intellectual equal or not, he at least thought that she could become it if she would be allowed to study as much as men did. D'Alembert called women's education of the time 'almost murderous' and 'making them hide their opinions and disguise their thoughts'.[127] Someone who held these opinions would sooner have

[125] Le tombeau de Mlle. de Lespinasse, 11.
[126] Ibidem, 20.
[127] The Woman Question, 123.

encouraged de Lespinasse's intellectual development than view her as only being a successful hostess with a lively spirit.

Within the examples cited here there are many variables at play with regards to the relationships between these salonnières and these men, but what they do show is that while salonnières were often praised by their peers for more 'womanly' qualities of heart and spirit, they were also praised for their intellectual capacities. In many letters exchanged by salonnières and philosophes there are requests for proofreading and discussions of intellectual topics, and while that is not directly the same as perceived intellectual equality it shows that there was recognition of the salonnières' intellectual capacities. There were men who visited salonnières but did not think highly of women's intelligence; they likely visited for the prestige of a famous salon or the company of men whose opinions they respected. To refer to something raised in the introduction: both someone like Benedetta Craveri who portrays salonnières as bored socialites and someone like Dena Goodman who portrays them as the crucial hubs of the Enlightenment may be right to some extent, but that is not the only thing that matters with regards to the salonnières' power. It is just as important to seek their power in their ability to rectify the injustices of a poor education, and their ability to insert themselves at the heart of intellectual discussions of the Enlightenment.

Some of the pieces quoted in the previous chapter are also relevant here as they pertain to the salonnières' role in their salons. That is to say, salonnières were above all the hosts of their salon; the intellectual discussion itself wasn't theirs. That does not take away from their ability to learn and educate themselves, but it is important not to overstate the intellectual presence a salonnière had. Their intellectual presence was in essence two things at the same time. They organized spaces for intellectual discussion where they stood at the head of things and had to be able to understand the topics at hand in order to effectively lead the conversation. On the other hand, they did not speak the most in their salon; they moderated the others. This means that salonnières played a part in intellectual society that was substantiated by knowledge of it, but were not necessarily intellectuals themselves in that they wrote or conducted research. There were 'practicing' intellectual women in the eighteenth century; not only Émilie du Châtelet, but also Madame Lavoisier for example.[128] These women weren't salonnières, but had found their way to advanced knowledge through other means. Different women of the era had different intellectual interests and capacities and different opportunities to expand on these, and the women who became salonnières likely saw their chance in 'apprenticing' with an established salonnière and later using their talents for hosting to create room for themselves within the intellectual sphere.

In an era with so little opportunities for women to receive a well-rounded and intellectually oriented education, the power to expand these opportunities did not belong to the salonnières alone, but it did belong to them.

[128] Eagle, C.T. and Sloan, J., 'Marie Anne Paulze Lavoisier: The Mother of Modern Chemistry', in *Chem. Educator* 3, p. 1-18, (1998).

Conclusion

When reading their contemporaries' accounts, it becomes clear that salonnières were influential figures within the Enlightenment, mostly because they could help advance the careers of their guests by introducing them to people who might for example hire them. While this power is arguably what made them famous, it is a harder to define power; who commissioned which painting based on which salonnière's interference? What ideas first saw the light of day in whose salon? But they were also powerful in the sense that they 'ruled' over their salons; they chose their guests and topics. This sort of 'administrative' power was exceptional for a woman to have, even if it was within her own home. At the same time, these women could easily become a sort of idealized muses who had to make sure they spoke in the right way. This can be seen in Mme. Necker's notes on hosting, where she suggests that women had to be careful of how they acted. The philosophes seem mostly impressed by the salonnières, but they do often stress more acceptably 'feminine qualities'; salonnières were often portrayed a civilizing influence who listened more than they spoke. This shows the duality of female power in eighteenth century France; women may not have

had many opportunities to exert tangible power, but using social channels and more 'feminine' means they could nevertheless have some sort of influence. Furthermore, a salon was an occupation created by women and passed from one woman to another as well as a very organized form of 'informal social power'. It is however important to note that this power did not extend beyond the salon. The salonnières had to already have money to establish a salon and had usually been married since a young age. A notable exception is Julie de Lespinasse, who although not financially independent found a comfortable life because of the salon that was not built on being either born or married into money.

Another opportunity for salonnières came in the form of a more advanced education. In a way, this is a more straightforward and tangible opportunity: salonnières have written that they wished they'd been educated better, and their salon was a way of remedying that. From their own letters they seem to care about this more than about patronizing the arts or having social power. Of the five salonnières discussed in this thesis, d'Epinay and Necker have discussed the importance of a better education for women in general. Particularly d'Epinay stands out for having written an award-winning treatise on education for girls. This again shows that salonnières clearly cared about the intellectual matters they engaged with through their salons.

Their philosophe guests have on several occasions shown that they valued the salonnières' intellectual input, discussing new works with them and asking for their opinions on their own works, for example. Nevertheless, the same issue as with the praises for the salonnières' hosting abilities comes up; the salonnières are once again often praised for these more typically feminine abilities rather than for being great intellectuals in their own right. When they are portrayed as being intellectuals, this is sometimes paired with a disclaimer that they are not the dreaded 'précieuses' or another form of women who pedantically engage with intellectual matters. The salonnières themselves also seem aware of this stigma or might have internalized it to some degree; d'Epinay calls the stigma out as a male invention, while du Deffand and de Lespinasse write that they do not wish to be pedantic and give their opinions accompanied by assertions that they do not have them.

However, none of this takes away from the fact that women of the period were not expected to develop themselves intellectually, and nevertheless the salonnières found a way for themselves to not only engage with intellectual matters but to become important figures in an intellectual movement. To what extent they consciously held back on asserting themselves as intellectuals is hard to directly trace to their letters, but even if they were careful not to seem pedantic they did openly make the intellectual world part of their own. That salonnières found a way to create a soft power for themselves that allowed them to broaden their horizons somewhat may be enough of an 'opportunity' in an era that was very restrictive for women, even if aspects of this power rested on notions of acceptable female behavior.

Overall, the salon did offer opportunities to women, but they were still upper-class and noble women who had to mostly act the part; they were not great intellectuals themselves and they were not free from general restrictions placed on women. However, it could be argued that for a wealthy woman with a desire to make something more of her life

without rebelling too much, a salon presented a solid option. These women organized their own salons and became famous because of how well they did it, and they opened a door for themselves to learn and know a lot more than they would otherwise have learned. The case of Julie de Lespinasse also deserves a special mention: from a poor illegitimate child she grew up to be one of the leading salonnières of the Enlightenment, simply because others saw her talent and wanted to support her. Maybe hosting a salon was not the only way for a woman to have influence and educate herself, but it could do those things.

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