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REVIVING THE ART OF SOCIABILITY: Madame de Genlis's Post-Revolutionary Salon at the Arsenal

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Madame de Genlis is famous as a critic of the *philosophes* thanks largely to her society dialogue of the 1820s, *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach* (1822). Her portrait of positive sociability, *Les soupers chez la maréchale de Luxembourg* (1828), is far less famous. The *soupers* establish Genlis's ideal of courtly sociability as superior to what she saw as perverse Enlightenment sociability and the incivility of the Revolutionary period. Yet these stylized dialogues are far from straightforwardly historical representations of high society conversations. Instead, they are practical models for conversation, calculated to serve as a moral tonic for a divided society. Issuing from her experience as a *salonnière* at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Genlis's fictionalized dialogues of the 1820s reinvent the idea of eighteenth-century sociability to suit the tastes of the leaders of the nineteenth century.

The Premier Consul and the Archivist of the Ancien Régime

In 1800, Napoléon Bonaparte made a very curious decision: he granted Madame de Genlis, by then a fifty-four year old socialite and renowned pedagogue, an apartment at the newly restructured Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.¹ Along with solidifying her right to remain in France, this state position gave Genlis significant means to influence the elite of the new regime, including the reestablishment of her circle of *habitués*, composed in part of members of the Bonapartist regime and in part of *émigrés* who had returned to France. At the Arsenal, Madame de Genlis — widow of the *ci-devant* comte de Genlis — obtained access to rare books, and

the freedom to write her novels, educational treatises, and memoirs — all of this in exchange for her support for the regime and her organization of a literary salon which integrated members of Napoléon's inner circle into her network of literary celebrities and noble moderates.

Genlis's success under the new regime was due to her politically savvy deployment of a conciliatory, agreement-oriented sociability, associated with the old regime discourse of *honnêteté* and the so-called "art de plaire." Her pose as moral savior to the new regime relied upon the power of the discourse of *honnêteté* for legitimacy. But, since *honnêteté* was never codified, Genlis was free to redefine the rules as she saw fit. As Benedetta Craveri has shown in *The Age of Conversation*, divergent practices flourished under the same names: there were many different conversational models in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *grand monde*. What they had in common was the association of aesthetic and moral discernment, the idea that improved moral qualities were linked to aesthetic taste and social skills (Craveri, 205). Genlis was one of the old regime nobles to profit handsomely from the cultural capital that would make nineteenth-century nobles into the cultural tutors of the bourgeoisie, or "the dancing-masters of Europe," as Karl Marx later quipped. Her version of *honnêteté* was particularly moderate, focused upon creating open-ended conversations, and thus well suited as a salve for the wounds of a divided country following the Revolution.



Fig. 1: The salle de musique, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, World Monuments Fund, 2008.

Madame de Genlis's celebrated second career was far from preordained. Like many *émigrés*, Genlis returned to Paris in 1800, after her name was struck from the list of banned individuals based on her current profession as a writer.² For the first six months, Genlis lived in obscurity in the Chaussée d'Antin, with limited financial support from her aunt, Madame de Montesson (Laborde, 51). Within a few months, Genlis had moved into the ornately decorated second floor quarters of the Arsenal library (Laborde, 52). How did she bring about this coup? It is worth considering at length Napoléon's reasons for allowing her to return to France. Some have argued that the Emperor's support, culminating in a pension beginning in 1804, was proof that Genlis had been granted her perch at the Arsenal to spy for the Imperial regime. There is little evidence to this effect, though we may never know for certain because the bi-weekly letters that the Emperor and the countess exchanged have been destroyed.³

In explaining her post-Revolutionary success, literary critics have generally given very high credence to Madame de Genlis's literary powers, accepting, for example, the notion that the Emperor was so moved by reading her historical

novel *La Duchesse de La Vallière* (1804) that he decided to grant her a pension of 6,000 livres in appreciation of her writing (Broglie, 327). Napoléon was certainly an admirer of her novel, but he was nothing if not a master strategist: Genlis was a valuable ally insofar as she was at once a famed author, a blueblood aristocrat, and willing to pay deference to him and his family. He seems to have increased his support for her as her fame as a novelist grew, brilliantly exploiting her successes.

Historian Steven Kale has given a more cynical account of why the *salonnières* were so essential during the post-Revolutionary period. Rather than effective social mediation, the *salonnières* provided a veneer of authenticity. Kale presents Napoléon and the members of his regime as envious of the social capital of the *salonnières* — partly for their role within high society and partly for their literary reputations. According to Kale, Napoléon could not act against a group of elderly high-ranking women without facing dire social consequences. He also wanted information from the Faubourg Saint-Germain but was not admitted to the royalist houses:

Unable to communicate directly with those whom he held in such high esteem, Bonaparte was always eager to receive news of Faubourg Saint-Germain from noble courtiers who had access. [...] The royalist grandes dames of Paris, whom he liked to refer to as *de gros bonnets*, were special objects of his frustration — not only were they the guardians of an authenticity he could not possess, but their entrenchment in private life shielded them from the normal sanctions of the law to which men were vulnerable and allowed them to criticize with impunity. (Kale, 82)

For Kale, Napoléon — having no personal knowledge of old regime high society — had a belief in the magical power of noble manners to reduce social tension and charm opponents.⁴ And he was well aware of the need to influence the intellectuals of his age through well-placed intermediaries (Hemmings, 123).

Genlis's Return to Paris and the Revival of Manners

Genlis was never able to fully resurrect her ostentatious pre-Revolutionary lifestyle, but she did rebuild a small model of old regime society at the Arsenal. In her *Mémoires*, she narrates the shock of her return to Paris, where statues of *philosophes* had replaced those of saints. As a further indignity, republican slogans had been scratched on the façades of former *hôtels particuliers*:

L'antipathie très naturelle que les chefs de la république avaient pour tout ce qui n'était pas ignoble, ou du moins vulgaire, leur avait fait supprimer les mots *hôtels* et *palais*. Ainsi je retrouvais à peine effacées les inscriptions qu'on avait écrites sur les façades de ces anciens édifices: *maison ci-devant Bourbon, maison ci-devant Conti, propriété nationale*, etc. Je lisais encore sur quelques murs cette phrase républicaine: *La liberté, la fraternité ou la mort*. (1857, 326)



Fig. 2: "L'Arsenal" from Frédéric Contet, *Les vieux hôtels de Paris, Notices historiques et descriptives*, tome 2, Paris, F. Contet, 1920.

Madame de Genlis saw the signs of her dead and exiled friends everywhere: in the passing carriages, some of which had been expropriated from her former acquaintances; in the bookshops that contained books and portraits taken from the homes of the old *noblesse*:

Je voyais passer des fiacres que je reconnaissais pour les voitures confisquées de mes amis; je m'arrêtais sur les quais, devant de petites boutiques, dont les livres reliés portaient les armes d'une quantité de personnes de ma connaissance, et, dans d'autres boutiques, j'apercevais leurs portraits étalés en vente publique. (1857, 326-27)

It is notable that here — as in many of her laments for the casualties of the Revolution — Genlis focuses on her friends' losses, rather than her own. Genlis was concerned with the expropriation of property not out of materialism, but because these objects testified to the memory of the individuals who owned them, now in danger of obliteration. It is the death of an entire civilization, and not merely the loss of property, that she mourns in the first months of her return to Paris. Concern for others, a respect for tradition and the past, and a lack of egotism were central to *bienséance*, a cornerstone of her ethical outlook. Madame de Genlis's role as credible witness to the grandeur of Bourbon kings and courts made her a valuable associate for the "parvenus" of the new regime. Genlis herself recognized the importance of the Court's prestige to the popularity of her historical novels, since the *grands noms* continued to fascinate people of all classes (Robb, 190). Likewise, the society that she created at the Arsenal benefited from the glamorous reputation of the *Ancien Régime* nobles, through her association with *le grand monde*.

Le Cercle de l'Arsenal, a Literary Institution with Political Purposes

In her *Mémoires*, Genlis presented her arrival at the Arsenal as what literary critic Béatrice Didier calls "un retour à la norme," a return to literature and a turn away from politics:

Mme de Genlis retrouve les livres, la lecture, la vie mondaine. Elle le doit à Napoléon, mais elle préfère insister sur le fait que cette installation lui permet de renouer avec une existence qui est celle de l'Ancien Régime. Elle peut se consacrer à la littérature, et rend compte dans ses mémoires des ouvrages qui lui ont semblé importants, ainsi, bien entendu, le *Génie du christianisme*. (Didier, 215)

The comtesse de Genlis's circle was, above all, a literary and intellectual gathering, not a *mondain* or political one. Through the Arsenal, Genlis sought to restore her former cultural milieu, rather than having political influence. From what we know about the members of the *cercle de L'Arsenal* and the topics of conversation, it appears that the *comtesse* did her utmost to make sure that her salon remained strictly literary and not overtly political: "Enfin tout le monde, à l'exception des nobles non ralliés, mais diplomates, poètes, artistes, étrangers de marque, gens à la mode, impérialistes d'aujourd'hui et royalistes de demain, se fit gloire de défilier à l'Arsenal" (Harmand, 330).

The exact membership of the *cercle de l'Arsenal* is not well documented. In Genlis's *Mémoires*, she presents the members of her salon as by and large female, mostly with literary vocations (Laborde, 53-54). It is worth noting that Genlis, in her *Mémoires*, remarks upon her male guests mainly in passing and rarely notes their political orientation. While it is clear that many of Genlis's guests at the Arsenal had connections with the government (often through marriage), these are not mentioned in her anecdotes. Likewise, the topics discussed were probably apolitical (De Pootere, 45). We do not know exactly what their discussions were like but the preponderance of upper-class women suggests that the *cercle de l'Arsenal* was a polite affair.

Unlike at the famed salon of her rival Madame de Staël, literary achievements were more important at the Arsenal than were the social or political reputations of the guests.⁵ The contrast between Genlis and Staël is worth bearing in mind because it was so much in the minds of her *habitués* and supporters. Whereas Madame de Staël believed in the power of the art of conversation to transform political realities, Genlis was more circumspect about the function of the *salonnières*, not assigning to them any particular political role.⁶ Her discretion and the apolitical nature of her salon meant that Genlis was acknowledged by the men of the new regime, especially as a substitute for her exiled rival.⁷ The Arsenal filled the need for a social circle which would not create vicious rumors or philosophical controversies, but rather open a public space for the discussion of art, music, and literature.

The salon at the Arsenal brought together rich and powerful figures, but from a material perspective, it lacked the grandeur of the old regime *grand monde*: "Si la maîtresse de maison conservait par ses propos, son maintien, son aisance à la fois noble et vive, les habitudes de société d'avant la Révolution, rien d'autre n'y rappelait le parfum des cours" (Harmand, 403). Numerous visitors to her salon noted the winding passages that led to her rooms and the outmoded decor.

Indeed, by 1811, Genlis's rooms were so run-down that the Emperor ordered they be closed: "L'appartement de l'Arsenal devient vraiment insalubre. Il y règne une humidité intolérable. L'empereur, qui lui a accordé un logement à vie, décide, par décret, de transformer cette faveur en une indemnité de huit mille francs par an" (Laborde, 55). It was arguably the relatively impoverished environment of the Arsenal that made Genlis's ideal of sociability so anti-materialistic.

At the heart of Genlis's vision of sociability was her reverence for the salon as a school of *politesse* and educated conversation that could be carried on in the new century. For Genlis, the eighteenth-century salons at their best were quasi-academic institutions, "salons académiques" (1857, 329), not "bureaux d'esprit," or offices of gossip, as they were called sarcastically by the enemies of the aristocracy even before the Revolution: "On appelait ainsi jadis, en dérision, les maisons dont la société était principalement composée de gens de lettres, de savants et d'artistes célèbres, et dont les conversations n'avaient pour objet que les sciences, la littérature et les beaux-arts" (1857, 329). The material circumstances of these conversations, which were "ni élégant ni mondain," were inconsequential to the exchange of ideas and building of relationships, to the "conversation enjouée, spirituelle et élevée" (Broglie, 331).⁸

Despite the modest circumstances of the salon at the Arsenal, it was this later salon which influenced the broadest swath of society, far beyond the reaches of the aristocratic *grand monde*. Genlis's disheveled appearance and disorganized *appartements* added to the myth of a woman from a past age, a charismatic outsider to contemporary society. This air of eccentricity arguably added to her charm. The eleven-year period during which Genlis occupied the apartment at the Arsenal was key both to Napoléon's reconstruction of French high society and to Genlis's enduring reputation as an expert in the manners and *mœurs* of the old regime. Genlis's views on sociability — especially the importance of "limites sages" to the expression of "idées libérales" — were of the moment: a reimagining of the rules of old régime society, tempered by an understanding of the appeal of equality and fairness for the new regime (Genlis, 1818: 12).

Because there are few records of discussion in the salon at the Arsenal, we paradoxically have more to learn about what these conversations may have been like — or what Genlis wanted them to be like — from Genlis's fictionalized dialogues set in the eighteenth century but written in the 1820s. I would like to read these dialogues for what they tell us about Genlis's ideal of sociability, rather than any historical content that they may or may not contain. Certainly, Genlis thought revolutionary politics and atheistic views were topics to be avoided, but

it becomes apparent from reading these texts that what she valued above all was a mode of conversation which would fit with the dictates of protocol and *bienséance* — that is, conversation that stuck to a light, classical style of understatement and incorporated rephrasing, with variation, the words of others. As Marc Fumarioli has demonstrated, the *philosophes* saw themselves as cultivating the art of conversation as a corrective to excessive academic specialization (1994, 107). Yet in these dialogues, Genlis shows that the *philosophes'* love of truth could lead them to a boastful, anti-social mode of self-expression. Their respect for clarity and truthfulness, as opposed to discretion and modesty, could easily lead to clashes. The monological “conversation” that emerges from their reconstructed dialogues is an anti-ideal for Genlis, as rhetorical attacks dissuade listeners from actively participating in the discussion.

Pernicious Forms of Sociability: Jacobins and *Philosophes*

Genlis had well-developed views of positive forms of sociability, yet she is better known for her denunciation of the (to her mind) dangerously anti-social and anti-Christian conversational habits of the *philosophes*. In her *Mémoires*, Genlis asserts consistently that the revolutionaries had destroyed the good in old regime society — elite sociability and reverence for literature, the sciences, and the arts. At the same time, the *philosophes* had dismissed out of hand the possibility that light conversation could be morally instructive, a direct contradiction of Genlis’s notion of sociability as educational and morally uplifting: “Cependant des réunions seraient aussi agréables qu’instructives si elles étaient exemptes de toute pédanterie, et nul autre genre de société” (1857, 125). These precepts might seem anti-intellectual, but the notion of *bienséance*, or comportment appropriate to one’s station, was central to keeping together a diverse group of people with varied interests, from theater to chemistry to the *mœurs* of ancient civilizations.

Genlis was more than an unthinking foe of the Enlightenment; she thought deeply about the contradictions between the doctrines of the *philosophes* and their social practices. The ideas of the *philosophes* — especially Voltaire — were bad, “pernicieuses doctrines” (Genlis, 1822, vi). Yet still more crucially for Genlis, the *philosophes'* rhetoric and private conversations established them as an exclusive community of superior individuals; theirs was a mode of sociability that betrayed both anti-egalitarian and intolerant sympathies among the supposed champions of equality. She brought her considerable practical knowledge from the salon at the Arsenal to bear in her fictional conversations, constructing believable models

of two genres of discussion — that of the *philosophes* and that of the *gens de la Cour*.

Near the end of her life, Genlis published two semi-fictional books that supposedly revealed the secrets of *le monde*: *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach* (1822) and *Les soupers chez la maréchale de Luxembourg* (1828). The first book recreated the conversations of the *philosophes* for posterity and the second did the same for the *gens de la cour*. *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach* is a partially fictionalized record of the famed dinners at the house of the baron d'Holbach, the German-born *philosophe* and atheist who drew the cream of Parisian society to his controversial dinner conversations. At the baron's dinners, as the frontispiece of the book reminds us, were found one part of the elite of old regime society, the most radical one, but elite individuals nonetheless: there "se trouvent rassemblés, sous leurs noms, une partie des gens de la cour et des littérateurs les plus remarquables du 18^e siècle" (vi). Whatever the claims to equality of the *philosophes*, their gatherings were as illustrious — if not more so — as more conservative ones.

In *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach*, Genlis claims a special knowledge of both the *philosophes* and their enemies, "les gens de la Cour" with whom she spent "toute [sa] jeunesse dans la société la plus intime" (vi). Her account of the conspiratorial *dîners* promises to reveal the secrets of the famous philosophers. Yet there is a surprisingly book-bound attitude towards the reputations of Enlightenment figures, and, as Alan Charles Kors has shown, she was more influenced by counter-Revolutionary literature than her preface would suggest.⁹ Although she claims that *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach* contains precise citations from the mouths of the *philosophes* (vvii), the staged conversations include quotations from printed works and letters. The preface takes aim at Voltaire, accusing him of being a poor philosopher, an overrated historian, and a hypocrite who hated "le système de l'égalité" that he pretended to admire (vii). She defends this approach of mixing books and conversation as a way of more fully presenting the ideas and the attitudes of the *philosophes* without infringing on her own sense of moral rectitude: "Non seulement je n'ai fait dire aux philosophes que ce qu'ils ont écrit; mais je n'ai point cité les impiétés, les blasphèmes et les obscénités que la main d'une femme chrétienne (quel que soit son âge) ne pourroit copier" (Genlis, 1822, viii). Despite her intimate knowledge of the writings and the public selves of the *philosophes*, especially d'Alembert, whom she had met on a few occasions, she sets herself apart rhetorically from the elitist circle of atheists and radicals ideologically and socially.

Madame de Genlis's moral outrage over the effect of Voltaire's writings and the *philosophes'* conversation derives not only from the content of their ideas but also from the anti-social effect of their arguments and discussions. For Genlis, the *philosophes* partook in a sort of non-conversation that consisted mainly of provocative monologues and shocked reactions to these monologues, instead of the back and forth conversations that allow for the exchange of ideas. There is, thus, a stylistic distinction to be made between Genlis's art of conversation and the *philosophes'*, at least in her view. In *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach*, Genlis theatrically stages the conflict between good and bad liberty — "les nobles idées d'une sage liberté" versus "les idées libérales" (1818, 12). In one conversation, the respectable *moraliste* and *homme de lettres* Charles Pinot Duclos confronts the atheist and free-thinker d'Alembert, who is mocking the clergy in a lengthy monologue drawn from the *philosophe's* correspondence (XX, lettre 94):

D'ALEMBERT

Un curé de Saint-Herbland de Rouen, nommé Leroi, qui prêche à Saint-Eustache, vous a honoré, il y a environ quinze jours, vous a honoré, d'une sortie apostolique, dans laquelle il a pris la liberté de vous mettre en accolade avec Bayle. N'oubliez pas cet honnête homme à la première bonne digestion que vous aurez; son sermon mérite qu'il soit recommandé au prône. (On rit.) En voilà assez sur les sots et les sottises...

DUCLOS

Pardon, si je vous interromps, mais cela est aussi trop fort.

D'ALEMBERT

Comment?

DUCLOS

Que diable, pourquoi cette colère contre ce prêtre; vous raffolez tous de Bayle; vous le prônez sans cesse; ainsi *l'accolade* dont vous parlez n'est nullement injurieuse. (1822, 105-106)

D'Alembert's insulting and sacrilegious monologue is interrupted by Duclos, who finds the appellation of "sot" for a priest and "sottises" for religious thought to be beyond the pale ("trop fort"). Duclos protests that d'Alembert is too cruel to the clergy and mocking of his ideological opponents, to which d'Alembert responds, antagonizing him further, "Mon cher Duclos, soyez sûr qu'il est toujours utile de doubter la prétraille" (106). Duclos protests, silencing him, "Ne gênons point la liberté" (106); and the witty abbé Gagliani (in Italian "Galiani", misspelled

by Genlis) encourages him to continue: “On la gêne beaucoup, en nous empêchant de vous écouter” (106). Here, as in other passages of *Les dîners du baron d’Holbach*, Genlis brings out the fact that the high spirits of the *dîners* are based upon the rhetorical exclusion of those who are not present (the ridicule of the *curé de Saint-Herbland* and Bayle), a gesture at which some of the guests take offense. Protests like Duclos’s against this rhetorical regime of exclusion are not taken seriously, or even really registered by d’Alembert or d’Holbach, who continue their lengthy monologues as though their interlocutors were not present.

This is the sort of non-conversation of which Genlis was extremely critical. Whatever the content of his monologues, the most extreme speaker dominates the conversation by fascinating the rest of the room. In this case, while d’Alembert is creating his provocative performance, the others are pushed into the position of observer; the more extreme d’Alembert’s contentions, the less that others speak. For Genlis, the fact that the *philosophes* relied so much on the merit and truthfulness of the speaker led to a natural veneration of speaking over listening and a preference for the sort of extreme positions that entertain a crowd. In her own salon, Genlis would aim for a more balanced, moderate discussion that would limit the expression of more extreme positions and invite more guests to participate.

Positive Forms of Sociability: The *Gens de la Cour* and the *Grande Dame*

Whether or not the conversation at the Arsenal was ever raised to the level of excellence that Genlis desired, we can see the style of conversation to which Genlis aspired in *Les soupers de la maréchale de Luxembourg*. If the *philosophes* were, for Genlis, a model of rhetorical exclusion and denigration, then feminine modes of sociability associated with the old regime *grandes dames* embodied the possibility of grace and harmony through light conversation. This is the form of sociability promoted in Genlis’s fictionalized memoir of social gatherings. The “Premier souper” features the maréchale de Luxembourg, the comtesse de Boufflers, the comte de Guines, and the chevalier de Boufflers; later *soupers* feature a rotating cast of elite characters. In a dialogue which is superficially similar to the dialogues from *Les dîners du baron d’Holbach*, the chevalier, the marquis, and the maréchale question the value of Rousseau’s work:

LE CHEVALIER

Conçoit-on que Rousseau, avec une réputation comme écrivain, au-dessus même de celle qu'il mérite, après avoir donné plusieurs ouvrages qui ont eu le plus grand débit, conçoit-on, dis-je, qu'il n'ait pas de quoi vivre ?

LA MARÉCHALE

Il lui faut rendre justice; il a toujours méprisé l'argent.

LE CHEVALIER

Mais ici *le mépris* a été jusqu'à la folie.

LE MARQUIS

N'a-t-il pas été jusque-là en toutes les choses? (97)

The dialogue continues in the same direction, with the participants piling insults on Rousseau and asserting that there is a foundational morality, "la morale de l'Évangile," which "peut seule mettre à l'abri de ces déplorables erreurs" (1828, 97). Yet their tone is far lighter and more amusing than that of *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach*. Further, the monologues are few and far between. Even when the maréchale asserts, somewhat pedantically, that "la morale de l'Évangile [...] préservera toujours de toute honteuse aberration les écrivains qui, frappés de sa beauté unique et surnaturelle, la prendront pour base invariable de leurs principes" (97), all of the guests seem to agree that their implicit moral code is superior to Rousseau's misinterpretation of the message of the gospels. What they find offensive in Rousseau's teachings is his purism, his desire to reduce Christian doctrine and European culture to the doctrine of equality. And yet the precise reasons why they reject Rousseau's purism are not articulated, in part because of the sense of discretion and self-effacement that means that no one person speaks for very long, nor says anything offensive to the other participants in the conversation.

I have said that this conversation is superficially similar to the conversation of the *philosophes* as presented by Genlis in *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach*. This is because the sociability of the assembled guests is dependent upon the shared disdain for an absent person — in this case Rousseau. Yet there is a vast difference in the progression of conversations in *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach* and *Les soupers de la maréchale de Luxembourg*. The structure is entirely dissimilar. In *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach*, one person (e.g. d'Alembert) provokes the others, pushing the conversation beyond the bounds of taste; the remaining guests are either provoked (e.g. Duclos) or amused (like the abbé Gagliani) by the transgressive monologue of the speaker. In *Les soupers de la maréchale de Luxembourg*, the con-

versation is more participatory and equal. The speakers take turns adding to the shared wisdom of the group. Even when a speaker does produce a monologue, it generally builds upon the previous statements of other speakers. Although the conversation can be uncharitable to people who are not present (e.g. Rousseau), those who are lucky enough to be welcome at the *soupers* of the *maréchale* are full participants in the conversation.

According to Genlis, this sort of equal conversation was only possible when all members of a group had trained themselves to observe the rules of *politesse* and *bienséance*, which dictated a reduction of egotism and an acceptance of one's place in society. In her *Dictionnaire critique et raisonné des étiquettes de la cour* (1818) — which, incidentally, began its life as a short treatise written for Napoléon's sister — Genlis expounded upon the necessary qualities of a truly sociable and polite individual.¹⁰ One of the most fundamental qualities was, according to the *comtesse*, accepting the rank that personal merit, birth, and gender bestowed. There is, no doubt, a conservative implication in this call for order and conformity to rank and position:

L'élégance des manières, la noblesse et la pureté du langage, la connoissance des égards ou du respect que l'on doit avoir, dans le grand monde, pour les gens qu'on y rencontre, suivant le mérite personnel, le sexe, l'âge, le rang, enfin, toutes les bienséances et les grâces sociales forment la politesse, et sont les plus aimables; la douceur, la modestie, l'indulgence, la bonté, la délicatesse, opposées aux défauts les plus haïssables, l'aigreur, la rudesse, la grossièreté, l'arrogance et surtout l'égoïsme. (1818, v)

It is true that protocol dictated acceptable behavior for a person of every position in the social order. But the most essential aspect of this code of behavior was, for Genlis, the suppression of ignorance and arrogance: two flaws common among atheists that made them incapable of engaging in real conversation.

The essence of politeness, according to Madame de Genlis, was not found in the rules of etiquette alone, but in an inward regulation, in the constant suppression of egotistical instincts that caused people to assert themselves above their station, destroying the contentment of others: as she puts it, “la politesse est un sacrifice continuel de l'amour propre” (1818, v). Further, “l'art de plaire” was not “frivole” (1818, v); it was a habit of mind intimately related to France's other sources of excellence: “La politesse française a été combinée dans toutes ses nuances avec tant d'esprit, de goût et de finesse, qu'elle a toujours été citée comme le modèle de la grâce, de la galanterie et de la véritable obligeance” (1818, vi). For Genlis, French *politesse* was one of the causes, not the effects, of French

cultural superiority under the old regime. In her view, the new, anti-social mode of conversing advocated by the *philosophes* threatened this international preeminence.¹¹ *Politesse* was an art that had served France well under the old regime and, if sustained, it would help France prosper in the future. It was only by bringing together the elite of the new regime to her well-orchestrated conversations that this would be possible.

Conclusion: The Limits of Political Moderation for a Diverse Elite

Genlis's project of reviving a moderating, classical form of *politesse* was first realized in her salon at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Despite the lack of pomp, her salon seamlessly combined members of the old literary elite and the new political leaders to the advantage of both. Through her salon at the Arsenal, Genlis incarnated the moderating social influence that she later praised in her semi-fictional accounts of old regime high society. The lack of infighting is likely one reason that conversations and activities at the Arsenal are not particularly well documented. Indeed, whereas Madame de Staël increased her own fame dramatically through the factious politics of her salon and her loud opposition to Napoléon's regime, Madame de Genlis's reputation was mainly buttressed by her writing. Genlis's later opposition to the *philosophes* has overshadowed her role as a moderating influence within post-Revolutionary society.

Works like Genlis's *Dictionnaire critique et raisonné des étiquettes de la cour*, *Les dîners du baron d'Holbach*, *Les soupers chez la maréchale de Luxembourg* — and arguably her novels created at the same time — would not have been possible without the intense reflection on the virtues of old regime sociability that her time at the Arsenal provided. Genlis used her years at the Arsenal to reflect upon the qualities of *Ancien Régime* salons that made them supportive of learning — especially of science, grammar, music, and the theater. The surprising conclusion that she came to was that artful conversation was more essential to broad and deep learning than were correct pronouncements. “La philosophie” and its skeptical methods were destructive of the positive sociability that drove achievement in the arts and sciences, as well as the broad learning of the liberal arts. While it is possible to disagree with Genlis's conclusions about the necessity of limiting controversial topics of conversation, her defense of the *art de plaire* as the social foundation for French national excellence was robust. Her form of sociability was stern but questioning and curious, open to new ways of thinking so long as they were not pernicious or anti-social attacks on the old elite. Through the *cercle de l'Arsenal* she was able to reconstruct a microcosm of what was good about the old regime for a

new century.

Notes

¹ For a detailed account of the formation of Madame de Genlis's salon in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, see Gabriel de Broglie's 1985 biography of Genlis (331).

² For an in-depth account of how the émigrés were reintegrated into France, see Kelly Summers's 2012 dissertation *The Great Return: Reintegrating Émigrés in Republican France, 1794-1804*.

³ In 1804, Genlis received the promise of a very large annual payment from the Imperial government: "Elle reçoit une pension de six mille livres de l'empereur. Certains prétendent [...] qu'elle était une indicatrice de police. Aucune preuve ne permet de faire cette supposition" (Laborde, 54).

⁴ On Napoléon's belief in the power of noble manners to overcome social divisions: "Having taken noble presumptions for granted, he ended by ratifying their mystique: the higher he rose, the more he invested in the belief that aristocratic manners were a form of magic, capable of warding off mockery and commanding respect" (Kale, 82).

⁵ Genlis "kept things strictly literary" at the Arsenal. Unlike Madame de Staël, whose political comments ensured that Napoléon's hatred of her knew "no limits" (Woloch, 170). To distance herself from her fellow *salonnière*, Genlis even "wrote Napoléon letters denouncing the immorality of Staël's writings, while accusing her of conspiring against the government," which Napoléon saw as proofs of her loyalty because of his distrust of Madame de Staël (Kale, 87). "The salon of Mme de Staël was altogether different: first it was very political. She wanted to create an environment of confrontation and conciliation of intellects and opinions" (De Pootere, 45).

⁶ Béatrice Didier asserts that this shared belief in the art of conversation led Madame de Genlis in a very different direction from Madame de Staël, towards the correction of others' faults in line with traditional rules, including the rules of grammar and manners (215).

⁷ For Napoléon, Madame de Staël established her disloyalty with the publication of *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions* (Hemmings, 118). Not to mention that "the First Consul was uncomfortably aware of the influence [Mme de Staël] exerted over public opinion, still dangerously volatile at the time" (Hemmings, 118).

⁸ According to Genlis, older women were perfect for this role of *salonnière*, or "juge": "les vieilles femmes conviennent beaucoup mieux que les jeunes, au rôle imposant de *juges*, quand elles ne chercheront point à dissimuler leur âge, qui forme le meilleur titre de la *légitimité* de leur empire, en assurant l'autorité de leurs décisions" (1828, 21).

⁹ Genlis admits quite far into the book that her view of the *côterie d'Holbachique* was formed by her reading of counter-Revolutionary texts that alleged an eighteenth-century conspiracy among atheists, especially Maximilien Harel's *Voltaire, recueil de particularités curieuses de sa vie et de sa mort* (Kors, 582). As Kors shows, these allegations were based upon unsubstantiated charges made by the abbé Barruel.

¹⁰ In her *Dictionnaire*, Genlis makes a good number of accusations against those who she felt had corrupted the eighteenth-century court and *ville*, notably Voltaire and Marie-Antoinette (Craveri, 122-23).

¹¹ Cf. "Tandis que la philosophie moderne corrompoit les mœurs et dénouoit à la mode *le langage de la sensibilité*; mais, dans un langage emphatique, un galimatias ridicule qu'il falloit avoir l'air de comprendre, et dont personne n'étoit la dupe, toutes les démonstrations qui ne prouvent

rien, tous les discours affichent la *sensibilité* la plus exaltée, presque toutes les actions sérieuses décelent et prouvent un profond égoïsme” (1818, 9).

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