
In this thought-provoking study, noted feminist critic Faith Beasley argues that literary history has misread and suppressed the major role women writers and thinkers played in seventeenth-century French salon culture. Indeed, this willful misreading and suppression became the foundation upon which to build the officially accepted view of French literary history—and consequently, French cultural identity. France’s understanding of its literary history, and of what it means to be French, is contingent on the erasure of women writers from that history. Women’s exclusion has remained so pervasive and enduring that, as Beasley reminds us in her Introduction, the Académie Française, that most august of French cultural institutions, did not elect a woman member until 1981, when Marguerite Yourcenar took her place among the forty immortals. Why were women excluded for so long, and were they ever really absent in the first place?

In order to answer these questions, seventeenth-century salon culture must be closely reexamined, and on its own terms. To begin with, the word “salon,” as applied to literary gatherings in the early modern era, is of nineteenth-century vintage. Although anachronistic, the word has become so commonly used as to be unavoidable. Beasley follows this usage, but she counterbalances it by also using the seventeenth-century term *ruelle*. In addition, she reminds the reader that seventeenth-century salon culture must not be confused with that of eighteenth-century salons. “Instead of primarily occupying the role of hostess, which became the dominant female role in the eighteenth-century salons, the seventeenth-century *salonnière* set the agenda for *ruelle* gatherings and played a much more active role than that ascribed to her eighteenth-century counterpart” (5).

The first two chapters of *Mastering Memory* are devoted to examining just what that active role was, and how seventeenth-century contemporaries reacted to it. “The first half of this study culminates in the following intriguing question: Why was this memory of salon culture ostensibly written out of French literary history?” (14). The next two chapters then draw out the implications of the first two by analyzing the historiography of the seven-
teenth-century salon, and how that historiography contributed to France’s sense of its literary past. The book then concludes with a reflective Afterword. *Mastering Memory* therefore reads as a coherent narrative, with each chapter serving as the building block for the next one. It is also a book that builds on an important body of scholarship in early modern French studies, feminist and gender studies, and cultural studies. Throughout the book, Beasley succinctly summarizes and acknowledges what other scholars (both French and North American) have contributed to the field in general and to her project in particular.

The first chapter, “The Voices of Shadows: The Salons and Literary Taste,” focuses on elucidating how salon women were just as effective and important literary critics as academic or scholarly literary critics. As Beasley is well aware, the primarily oral and collaborative nature of salon interaction means that the historical record is perhaps not as complete as the modern scholar would like. However, “[w]hile it is difficult to determine precisely how the participants in the worldly milieu functioned as literary critics, it is possible to determine how they were *viewed* as functioning, and the nature of their influence” (30). The issue of perception is important here, for as Beasley demonstrates through a variety of citations, salon women were viewed by their contemporaries as key players on the literary scene. The nature of their influence lay primarily in their taste, and so, this chapter traces how the concept of taste evolved, and what it meant to both *salonnieres* and their critics (of whom Molière is perhaps the most famous). Ultimately, by the end of the seventeenth century, in the minds of the Académie Française and influential writers such as Bouhours, “terms associated with the worldly milieu, taste and *bon sens*, for example, must be appropriated and redefined in order to weaken or even sever their connection with a worldly public dominated by women” (75).

The second chapter, “Defining Literary Culture: The Ruelles and Literary Innovation,” shifts to less abstract ground and examines the role salon women played in famous debates over individual works of literature. *Salonnieres* participated in these debates not only as arbiters of taste, such as the women Corneille unashamedly sought to please in *Le Cid*, but also as writers, as Madame de Lafayette famously did with *La Princesse de Clèves*. Beasley also offers intriguing readings of Lafayette’s *Zaïde* and Villedieu’s *Désordres de l’amour*, arguing that both novels valorize salon practices (such as collaboration) in a
Of the former, she writes, “[w]hen viewed in light of the context of the debate over criticism, this provocative novel offers an epistemological critique: it advocates reaching knowledge, evaluating the world and by extension a literary work, by other than the traditional means of institutionalized written precepts and stringent rules” (146).

In chapter three, “From Critics to Hostesses: Creating Classical France,” Beasley convincingly demonstrates how literary history has simplified and marginalized seventeenth-century women writers. Especially interesting to note is the existence of early anthologies of French literature, such as Evrard Titon du Tillet’s 1732 *Parnasse française*, which grant women an equal place with men. “Male and female figures whom today are considered relatively minor merit a place alongside those now recognized as the canonical masters of France’s illustrious ‘Grand Siècle’” (185). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, things had changed. Writers such as Ferdinand Brunetièrè, Victor Cousin, and Sainte-Beuve would set the tone for official literary history, in which Molière was right to roundly mock the salons, and in which only two exceptional women writers (Lafayette and Sévigné) can be found to have existed in seventeenth-century France.

The fourth chapter, “Disseminating a National Past: Teaching *Le Grand Siècle*,” illustrates the depressing extent to which these nineteenth-century views have been unquestioningly accepted at face value and repeated by modern literary scholars, particularly in France. When teaching seventeenth-century French literature and history, if salon culture is remembered at all, it is usually only in Molière’s satirical portrayals, and the critical apparatus in student editions of Molière’s plays is no better. Leaving the genre of theater aside, in anthologies and manuals, “the novel is consistently eliminated as a serious genre in the seventeenth century” (291). Books aimed at the general French reading public, such as Jean d’Ormesson’s *Une autre histoire de la littérature française*, and academic projects such as *Les Lieux de mémoire*, continue this same tradition of eliding and excluding women’s role in French literary history. “The ultimate erasure of the links between salons, literary criticism, women’s literary production, and the classical cultural field reveals the power of critical mythmaking. If Corneille’s sister’s literary influence, representative of general salon taste, and Scudéry’s novels provoked such critical fire and historiographical backlash, it is because of the power they exerted during a premier moment in the formation of France’s national culture and identity” (323).
Mastering Memory is dense and complex, and it is difficult to do full justice to its richness here. This book raises provocative questions by illuminating the hidden gaps and tensions underlying French literary history and cultural identity.


The offering of counsel to monarchs was at the heart of the early modern political system. Of course, the era had no shortage of haughty, headstrong princes who would have preferred to disregard dissenting opinions, but this only made the notion of freedom of speech all the more important. Provided they remained within the borders of decorous behaviour, political counsellors (at least in theory) had the opportunity to speak frankly and boldly to their rulers without running the risk of falling from favour. This was perceived as a keystone of civic life, and as a crucial antidote to the flattery and evil counsel which plagued so many early modern courts. This is, almost always, what contemporaries understood by “freedom of speech”: crucially, it was perceived as a duty—an obligation to courageously serve the commonwealth—rather than as a right. It was, in other words, a very long way from how we would understand the phrase today.

There has been much recent work on what might be termed the negative aspects of free/frank speech in Tudor and Stuart England: censorship being at the top of the current scholarly agenda. In his rewarding new study, David Colclough turns to its more positive role as “a significant civic virtue in the early years of the seventeenth century” (1). His route into the subject is via an analysis of the rhetorical figure of free speech, parrhesia (licentia in Latin). Colclough traces how the figure emerged in Greek and Roman culture, and then analyses how early modern scholars—Thomas Wilson, Abraham Fraunce and Henry Peacham among them—adopted and adapted it. Colclough makes it very clear that the term parrhesia had manifold meanings, ranging from bold speech itself to the rhetorical device of apologising for the unvarnished advice that invariably followed.

Colclough’s next task is to investigate how frank speech operated in prac-