Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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Part IV

Forming Communities
11. Claude-Catherine de Clermont

A Taste-Maker in the Continuum of Salon Society

Julie D. Campbell

Abstract

Claude-Catherine de Clermont, duchesse de Retz (1543–1603), stands at an important juncture in the continuum of salon history. Her mother-in-law, Marie Catherine de Pierrevive (c. 1500–1570), was known for her salon in Lyon during the 1520s and 1530s. Her young cousin, Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet (1588–1665), would host the most famous salon of the seventeenth-century. Retz, too, was lauded for entertaining her circle in ways that both reflect the earlier Franco-Italian traditions of Lyonnaise société mondaine and anticipate those of the précieuses. Consideration of texts that allude to Retz’s status as a proto-salonnière illustrate ways that game-playing, conversation, and the championing of key vernacular literary styles cross boundaries of periodization to serve as foundational elements of salon history.

Keywords: salons; Claude-Catherine de Clermont, duchesse de Retz; games; letters; Marie de Romieu; Estienne Pasquier

French salons of the seventeenth century are typically characterized as something new in women’s history: 1 a clean break with the harsh manners of the French court made by such women as Catherine de Vivonne, the marquise de Rambouillet (1588–1665) and Louise Marguerite de Lorraine, the princesse de Conti (1588–1631). They are considered the birthplace of the modern novel designed according to women’s tastes, 2 and the bastions

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1 Timmermans, L’Accès des femmes à la culture sous l’Ancien Régime, p. 64; Cholakian, Women and the Politics of Self-representation, pp. 31–32; Randall, The Concept of Conversation, pp. 11, 123, 142–156.

2 DeJean, Tender Geographies, pp. 5–6, 11–12, 43–93.
of the so-called précieuses who directed polite, cultivated conversation and games. While scholars of seventeenth-century salon culture and sixteenth-century women's history have long gestured to similarities in sixteenth-century social practices, few, if any, have detailed those similarities. The majority of scholars of seventeenth-century salon society generally assert that, as L. Clark Keating put it in 1941, ‘the salon of Mme de Rambouillet was not an outgrowth of, but a protest against, the sixteenth-century society which she saw round about her’. While that may be the case if we look only at the immediate political context of this group and others like it, the historical record suggests something quite different—that while such seventeenth-century groups may have broken with the Bourbon court, there was no perfectly clean break with social practices of the sixteenth century.

In reality, sixteenth-century noble and royal women cultivated a société mondaine that partook of Italian social influence and paved the way for the celebrated salons of the seventeenth century. Specific transnational elements included game-playing, group authorship, debates, the championing of particular vernacular literary styles and authors, and the impulse to escape religiopolitical chaos by taking refuge in regulated conversation spaces. Here I will focus on Claude Catherine de Clermont, maréchale then duchesse de Retz (1543–1603). My goals are to position her in the

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3 ‘Précieuse’ is a loaded term that spread following Molière’s usage in Les Précieuses ridicules (1659). I use it sparingly, in context with characteristics attributed to it—cultivated manners, genteel conversation, use of pseudonyms, etc.—without engaging in the debate over the validity of the term. Regarding interrogation of the term, see Dufour-Maitre ‘La critique des femmes’, pp. 157–168 and ‘Les précieuses’, pp. 251–263, as well as the entire Les Précieuses. See also Stanton The Dynamics of Gender, pp. 96–97.


5 Keating, Studies on the Literary Salon in France, p. 144.

6 I use ‘salon’, ‘proto-salon’, and similar terms to refer to the sociabilité mondaine which was already in practice in the sixteenth century before the Franco-Italian architectural term salon, derived from salone and sala, appeared c. 1664. See Bray, ‘Les Salons’, pp. 925–928. Harth, Cartesian Women, p. 15, explains that the term ‘salon’ was not ‘applied to social gatherings until the nineteenth century.’ See also Menestrier, Bibliothèque curieuse, vol. 2, pp. 115–128, who calls the gatherings of the société mondaine of sixteenth-century Lyon académies, assemblées, and conferences. In Italy, such gatherings are ridotti, veglie, or cencoli (French version, cénacles), and all essentially mean gatherings for sociability of various kinds: formal debates and discourses, informal conversation and debate, sometimes prescribed by games. Such gatherings might include music or dramatic performance.
continuum of salon history and examine texts that allude to her status as a *proto-salonnière*. Since much scholarly attention has been focused on the manuscript poetry miscellany associated with her circle, I will focus instead on the genres of games and letters, as well as poetry by Marie de Romieu (c. 1569 – c. 1585).

Madame de Retz, also known by the pseudonym Dyctinne, participated in academic debate before Henri III in the Académie du Palais—in other words, she was a *femme savante* long before Molière made that a negative label for women with humanist educations—and she hosted dinners and what sound like rather diverting, conversation-game-driven evenings at her home, long before Molière made *précieuse* a negative label for *salonnières.*

Moreover, Retz stands in a fascinating place in salon history regarding family connections because she is the daughter-in-law of Marie-Catherine de

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7 Rouget and Winn, *Catherine de Clermont Retz (Maréchale de)*, *Album de poésies*.
8 Clermont was married to Albert de Gondi (1522–1602) in 1565. In 1561, at around age eighteen, Clermont was married to Jean d'Annebaut, baron of Retz (1527–1562), who was killed in the battle of Dreux. See the *Nouvelle biographie générale*, vol. 10, p. 842 (the source for this citation is Prudhomme's *Biographie des femmes célèbres*), and Keating, *Studies on the Literary Salon*, p. 104. Marguerite de Valois, *Mémoires*, p. 51, stated that ‘Fortune’ in the form of the battle of Dreux delivered Clermont from a great bother, her first husband, who was unworthy of her: ‘Madame qui sut en ce lieu la grâce que la Fortune lui avait faite de la délivrer à la bataille de Dreux d’un facheux, son premier mari, Monsieur d’Annebaut, qui était indigne de posséder un sujet si divin et parfait.’ Translations are mine unless otherwise attributed.
9 Her academic devices were the rose, lily, amaranth, shrubs, and brambles. See *L’Anglois, Discours des Hieroglyphes Aegyptiens*, pp. 106v–107v.
12 Key Sources: 1) Dale (1576), accessed 2 November 2013: ‘For all these troubles the King has used of late to call certain poets and philosophers into his chamber to hear them dispute three or four hours together *de primis causis de sensu et sensibili* and such like questions. The auditors are none but the King, the Queen of Navarre, the Duke of Nevers, the Countess of Retz, and another lady or two.’
2) D’Aubigné, ‘À mes filles touchant les femmes doctes de nostre siècle’ (1669), pp. 852–853: ‘Je choisis aussy dans la Cour pour mettre en ce rang [des femmes de mérite] la Mareschale de Rez et Mme de Lignerols. [...] Ces deux on fait preuve de ce qu’elles savoyent plus aux choses qu’aux aproles, dans l’Academie qu’avait dressee le Roy Henry troisiesme, et me souvient qu’un jour entre autres, le problem estoit sur l’excellence des vertus morales et intellectuelles: elles furent antagonists, et se firent admirer.’ (‘I also choose among the Court to put in this rank the Mareschale de Rez and Mme de Lignerols. [...] These two have shown that they know more things than words, in the Academy which addressed King Henri III, and myself one day among others; the debate was on the excellence of the moral and intellectual virtues: they were antagonists, and were admired.’)
Pierrevive (c. 1500–1570), dame du Perron and wife of Antonio Gondi, who hosted one of the early sixteenth-century cercles mondains or salons in Lyon (from the 1520s to the 1530s). As the daughter of Claude de Clermont-Tonnerre and Jeanne de Vivonne, Retz was through her mother’s side of the family related to Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet. Retz was a cousin and contemporary of Jean de Vivonne (1530–1599), Rambouillet’s father, a key ambassador for Catherine de Medici. Retz was one of her dames d’honneur during the same period. Her life overlapped with Rambouillet’s from 1588 to 1603. Rambouillet was fifteen and had been married since age twelve when Retz died. Rambouillet, who had an Italian mother, Giulia Savelli, a member of the illustrious Strozzi family, would go on to host the famous chambre bleu and would be known by her pseudonym, Arthénice.

Salonnière family history aside, consideration of textual artifacts from the historical trajectory of the société mondaine of this period illustrate that sixteenth-century Italian social practices became recurring elements of salon society. These findings problematize the notion that the sixteenth-century salons were purely academic or humanist in nature, as some scholars of seventeenth-century salon society have asserted.

The twentieth-century scholar Verdun-Louis Saulnier (1917–1980) identifies the Lyonnais salon of Pierrevive, Retz’s mother-in-law, as one

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13 Marie Catherine de Pierrevive (c. 1500–1570), wife of Antonio Gondi (1486–1560), was born in Lyon, the daughter of Nicolas de Pierrevive and Jeanne de Turin. The Pierrevives came from Chieri in Piedmont to Lyon around 1470 and established themselves as grocers and apothecaries. Gondi came from Florence to Lyon in 1506. In 1521, the couple acquired the Seigniory of Le Perron, which provided their entrée into French nobility, and in the 1520s to 1530s, they held their salon. Vincentian Encyclopaedia (accessed 12 October 2017); Milstein, The Gondi, pp. 178–179. For more on the Pierrevive and Gondi families, see Picot, Les Italiens en France au XVIe Siècle, pp. 37–43.

14 Regarding powerful family connections, Viennnot, ‘Douze lettres inédites de Marguerite de Valois (1996), p. 262 n. 6, points out, ‘La mère de Claude-Catherine, Jeanne de Vivonne (Mme de Dampierre), était la soeur d’Anne de Vivonne, mère de Brantôme; elle avait épousé Claude de Clermont.’ (‘The mother of Claude-Catherine de Clermont, Jeanne de Vivonne (Mme de Dampierre), was the sister of Anne de Vivonne, mother of Brantôme; she married Claude de Clermont.’) Lavaud, Un poète de cour au temps des derniers Valois, pp. 106–107, paints a vivid picture of his view of the family relationships. He asserts that Jean, the issue of a cadet branch of the Vivonnes, that of the ‘seigneurs de Fors et de Saint-Gouard’, would be included among Claude-Catherine’s guests when he was home between diplomatic missions.


for high-ranking nobles and royals. He argues, rather chauvinistically, that their interests were more aligned with ‘la sève italienne’, or Italian sappiness, than humanist study. He clearly prefers the humanist circles made up of what he calls the authentic Lyonnais families and a few foreigners who had lived there a very long time—and who had the good taste to prefer Greek and Latin literature. He identifies the sappy material as French and Italian vernacular literature and ‘fêtes et jeux (ou les lettres au service de jeux)’, (‘feasts and games (or literature [used] in service to games’). 18 This sounds, on one hand, rather like the entertainments in Sienese salon society that George McClure has addressed in Parlour Games and the Public Life of Women in Renaissance Italy 19 and on the other, like the literary taste and the conversation games of the seventeenth-century salonnières who enjoyed, for example, creating Madeleine de Scudéry’s Carte de Tendre (Clélie, 1654–1661) or the Guirlande (1641) for Rambouillet’s daughter Julie. 20

For textual examples popular in the sixteenth-century, we may look to Innocenzo Ringhieri’s Cento giuochi liberali, et d’ingegno—Hundred Games of Learning and Wit (1551)—translated in part by Hubert-Philippe de Villiers in his Cinquante jeux divers d’honnête entretien—Fifty Diverse Games of Honest Conversation (Lyon, 1555). 21 Both would target Franco-Italian female audiences, with the first dedicated to Catherine de Médicis (who befriended Pierrevive and brought her to court) and the second to Marguerite de Bourbon, duchesse de Nevers (1516–1559),22 the mother of Retz’s close friend Henriette de Clèves (1542–1601). The work did indeed feature literature in the service of games. In Cinquante jeux, we find, for example, ‘Le jeu de beauté’, (‘The Game of Beauty’), in which players describe elements of a woman’s beauty with lines ‘drawn from the Sonnets of Petrarch’. 23 Moreover, in his dedicatory letter to the ladies (Aus dames), De Villiers hints at the

18 Saulnier, Maurice Scève, vol. 1, p. 113.
19 McClure, Parlour Games and the Public Life of Women, pp. 55–80.
21 De Villiers, Cinquante jeux divers d’honnête entretien, industrieusement inventés par messer Innocent Rhinghier, gentilhomme Boloignoys.
22 Marguerite de Bourbon was married to François I de Clèves, duc de Nevers. Their children included François II, duc de Nevers; Henriette, duchesse de Nevers; Catherine, comtesse d’Eu; Jacques, duc de Nevers, and Marie, princesse de Condé.
23 De Villiers, Cinquante jeux divers, p. 132: ‘le Seigneur, qui dispensora toutes ces parties d’une belle Dame entre tous les loyeurs, avec ces vers a icelle convenables, tirés des Sonnets Petrarque’ (‘the elected Lord of the game will pass out these descriptions of parts of a beautiful woman among all the players as is suitable, with these verses drawn from the Sonnets of Petrarch’). A list of lines from Petrarch’s poems to use in the game is provided.
civilizing or ameliorating influence such games and women should have on men. He writes that ‘men should count themselves most fortunate’ (regarding the playing of these games) because ‘the conversation of your divine and modest troupe ought to make them clearly understand that it is the greatest happiness that their most favorable destiny will present them’.\(^\text{24}\) That Italian conversation games made their way from Italy to Lyon and into the society of high-ranking noble and royal women by the mid-sixteenth century is certain, and De Villiers’ assertion that women’s edifying conversation with men during the course of play would be a highlight of the men’s lives seems to foreshadow the perceived précieuse quality of such sport.

Sixteenth-century Italian salon culture is featured alongside that occurring in France in Marie de Romieu’s Brief discours, a defense of women, which appears in her Premières œuvres poétiques (1581). In November of 1581, ‘the baronie of Retz was elevated to a duché-pairie’,\(^\text{25}\) elevating at the same time Retz’s position as an important mécène, or patron, a circumstance surely not lost on Romieu. In the section on French women, Romieu awards the most lines to the ‘comtesse de Retz’, whom she makes ‘[l]a premiere en mes vers’ (‘the first in her verses’), noting that Retz is familiar with Greek, that she is so eloquent that she delights kings and their court, and that she knows Latin and Italian.\(^\text{26}\) She includes Retz among a catalogue of learned female exempla that includes the Italians, the ‘docte Degambara’, and ‘Pesquiere’, as well as the poet Armill’ Angosiole (Emilia Angosciola).\(^\text{27}\) The first two, Veronica Gambara, Countess of Corregio (1485–1550) and Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara (1492–1547), were especially known for their erudition, their poetry, and the salons

\(^{24}\) De Villiers, 1: ‘Mes Dames, s’il se trouve ça bas chose par la-quelle les hommes se doivent tenir pour bien-fortunés, la seule conversation de votre divine & pudique troupe leur doit clairement donner a entendre, qu’elle est le comble de tout l’heure que leur plus favorable destin leur savroyt presenter’.


\(^{26}\) Romieu, Brief discours, p. 20, ll. 296–300.

\(^{27}\) Romieu, Brief discours, pp. 19–20. See also p. 24, notes for ll. 263, 267, and 271. Winandy says Angosciola is a painter and the eldest of a noble family in Cremona, but he seems to confuse her with Sofonisba Anguissola, the famous Cremonan painter, who was the eldest of her family and did not have a sister named Emilia or Armilla. Most sources that mention Emilia Angosciola identify her as a poet or erudita. Bronzini includes Angosciola in his Della Dignità, & nobiltà delle donne, p. 53 and p. 143, where he mentions her poetry. Lando mentions her in Lettere di molte valorose donne (1548), p. 31v. In Della Letteratura Italiana, Tiraboschi includes her in a list of ‘donne erudite’ next to Gambara, p. 1184.
of poets and scholars that they cultivated.\textsuperscript{28} Intriguingly, Colonna and Gambera are also highlighted in De Villier's \textit{Cinquante Jeus}, in his 'Jeu des arts', game of arts.\textsuperscript{29}

Romieu's French \textit{exempla} include, along with Retz, Marguerite de Valois (1553–1615), a regular in Retz's circle, as well as leader of her own court circle filled with poets and scholars; Antoinette de Loynes (1505–1567), co-host with her husband Jean of the Morel salon; and Madeleine and Catherine Des Roches (c. 1520–1587 and 1542–1587, respectively), the mother and daughter famous for their salon in Poitiers; along with several other famous erudite women such as Madeleine Chemeraut (dates unknown), Hélisenne de Crenne (aka Marguerite or Madeleine de Briet, c. 1510–after 1552), Madame de Chastellier (Ippolita Scaravelli, dates unknown), Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549), and Catherine de Médicis (1519–1559).\textsuperscript{30} The passage on French women comprises what Claude La Charité calls 'a veritable reading program' to introduce scholars to women writers of the period.\textsuperscript{31} Such catalogues of celebrated female \textit{erudite} were common during the era,\textsuperscript{32} but the inclusion in this case of Retz, Loynes, and the Des Roches together especially gestures to an awareness of early salon society in sixteenth-century France and pairs these women with Italian counterparts also known for their cultivation of such circles.

Regarding elements of ‘la sève italienne’ in the milieu of Madame de Retz, Jacqueline Boucher points out that at the court of Henri III there developed 'a penchant for modes of expression so affected that one may see in them the beginnings of the préciosité that would expand into the following century', and regarding the sources of this trend, she notes

\textsuperscript{28} Poss, ‘A Renaissance Gentildonna’, p. 47, notes that Gambara presided over a court-salon ‘whose luminaries included the leading political and literary figures of the day’ and that ‘[p]oets, princes, and prelates gathered for discussions of literary and philosophical topics as well as for good food, singing, dancing, storytelling, and dalliance’. McIver, in 'The “Ladies of Correggio”', p. 28, writes, ‘As Gambaro’s reputation as a poet and letterata grew, her court attracted learned visitors; her \textit{studiolo}, called the “Camerino Daurato”, in the Palazzo in the city, and her Casino di Delizie in the country became fashionable settings for cultured nobility; poets, princes, and prelates gathered to discuss literary and philosophical issues and to dance, dine, sing, and tell stories.’ Robin, in \textit{Publishing Women}, pp. 3–40 (and \textit{passim}), writes of Colonna’s salon on Ischia, as well as her salons in the subsequent places that she lived.

\textsuperscript{29} De Villiers, \textit{Cinquante Jeus}, p. 19.


\textsuperscript{31} La Charité, ‘How Should Sixteenth-Century Feminine Poetry Be Taught?’, p. 223.

\textsuperscript{32} Campbell, \textit{Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe}, pp. 1–2.
that ‘Italian influence was certain’. In particular, she points to books of letters, and we find familiar dedicatees and a familiar translator. Hubert-Philippe de Villiers translated Girolamo Parabosco’s *Lettere Amorose* of 1545 (Venice, Giolito) in his *Lettres amoureuses* (Antwerp, 1556), and dedicated the volume to Martin de la Herbaudière, the secretary of the *duchesse* de Nevers, Marguerite de Bourbon, mother of Henriette de Clèves. Etienne du Tronchet, secretary to Catherine de Médicis, dedicated his later work, *Lettres amoureuses* (Paris, 1575), to Madame de Retz. Both volumes of letters contain sentimental language that probably would qualify as *la sève* for Saulnier, but it is imperative to note that it is Petrarchan and Neoplatonic in nature: these trends in literary and cultural diction elide during this slippery cross-century literary era. In De Villier’s translation of Parabosco, we find the lady praised and appealed to for her ‘humaine douceur’ (‘humaine gentleness’) and her ‘sur-humaines’ (‘super human’) graces, virtues, and beauties. In Tronchet’s dedicatory letter to Retz, he asserts that he writes of love that is ‘bonne & tressaincte’ (‘good and very holy’), of the ‘plaisir du sincere Amour’ (‘pleasure of sincere Love’), and not that which is the product of ‘la brutalité d’une bestialle imagination’ (‘the brutality of a bestial imagination’), but that is about ‘la divinité de l’Amour’ (‘the divinity of love’). Boucher argues that such women as Retz and her close friend Henriette de Clèves made this style of sensibility and language popular in their gatherings.

Estienne Pasquier (1529–1615), the attorney, scholar, historian, and poet, was a member of the circles of the Morels, the Dames des Roches, the *duchesse* de Retz, and Marguerite de Valois. He, too, participated in the literary and conversational entertainments popular in their company. He wrote his own collection of *Lettres amoureuses* (1610). The genre of *lettres amoureuses* would retain its popularity with *salonnières* well through the seventeenth century. Regarding his participation in games, during an evening *chez* the *duchesse* de Retz described by Pasquier in 1591, we find playful, if not terribly *précieuse*, language and literature used in the service of games, as well as

33 Boucher, *Société et mentalités*, vol. 3, p. 943: there developed a ‘penchant pour des modes d’expression si affectés qu’on peut voir en eux des prémices de la préciosité qui devait s’épanouir au siècle suivant’ and ‘L’influence italien fut certaine dans ce domaine.’
34 Henriette de Cleves becomes *duchesse* de Nevers in 1564.
38 There is a helpful chronological bibliography of this genre in Bray and Landy-Houillon, eds., *Lettres Portugaises*, pp. 7–12.
vice versa—and it all follows a fête or feast—much as Saulnier described in the earlier circles of Lyon. Pasquier records his memories of this evening in a well-known letter to his friend Pierre Airault.

In this letter, Pasquier specifies that Madame de Retz invited him to supper, and he describes an evening in which there is a mixture of the serious and ‘la sève’. During the first part of the evening, the group addresses ‘an infinity of good and beautiful topics concerning the calamity of our times’—these are references to the wars of religion raging around them and the ensuing political machinations.39 He then writes, ‘And as it is the privilege of banquets to leap from [one] topic to others that have no connection’, the group also spoke of ‘our private households’, then ‘the convenience of plowing’, and he asserts that the eloquence of such discourses was highly impressive. He suggests that they could have been included in a book such as that of Athenaeus or Macrobius.40 He then writes, ‘Finally, as the discourse of love is the seasoning of beautiful minds, we could not forget it.’41 To lighten up the serious tone of the evening, the interlocutors turn their attention to the questione d’amore, who makes a better lover, a young man or an old one? Pasquier says he wanted to participate in the discourse on love because he wanted a share of the ‘cake’ or the dessert of the evening’s entertainment, and he notes that ‘this honest woman’, Retz, cleverly chose to create an entertaining transition from the former heavy topics, by beginning to ‘wage war’ on him, stating that an old man (bonhomme) such as himself was badly positioned to take part in this new discourse.42 Pasquier, the author of Le Monophile (1554), a Neoplatonic

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39 Pasquier, ‘A Monsieur Airault’, p. 221: ‘Madame de Rets me convia à soupper, où se trouverent plusieurs seigneurs de marque. Toute la seree se passa sur une infinite de bons et beaux propos concernans la calamite de ce temps’.


discourse on love, among other topics, was, of course, the perfect guest with whom to start this ‘war’. Congratulating himself on his own quick wit, he states that he seized upon the word *bonhomme*, acting as if he had sustained a great insult, as if it were ‘an eighth mortal sin’, and, because ‘à beau jeu, beau retour’— one must to ‘a beautiful game’ or ‘play’ give ‘a beautiful come-back’, they swiftly decided that their new subject for the discourse of love would be ‘who could better speak of love, a young man or an old one’.

Inspired by his evening at the Retz salon, Pasquier wrote his *Pastorale du vieillard amoureux* and presented it to Madame de Retz with a cover letter in which he again takes up the game of ‘bon-homme’. However, in choosing her topic, Retz may have already been familiar with Pasquier’s dialogue, ‘Vieillesse Amoureuse’, or ‘Love in Old Age’, collected in his *Jeux Poétiques* (1610), in which ‘Damoiselles’ call their interlocutor ‘bon homme’ and comment on his ‘years, beard, and hair’. Jean-Pierre Dupouy notes that most of the works in *Les Jeux Poétiques* were published earlier in other works. In any case, the game that Pasquier reports playing at the home of the duchess seems to be related to that of the ‘Jeu de l’epous et l’epouse’ (‘the game of the husband and wife’) from *Cinquante jeus*, in which one of the questions is, ‘Who can sooner win a wife? The old man or the young one?’

The pattern of entertainment Pasquier describes here with its trajectory from serious to light topics is not that of a random dinner with friends. Emmanuel Buron has suggested that there is little evidence that a group ever met regularly in Retz’s homes, and that, therefore, the word ‘salon’ should not be used for her gatherings. That is a conversation for those concerned with anachronistic use of the term, but for our purposes, it is important to note that the pattern that Pasquier describes would be familiar to anyone who

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44 Pasquier, ‘A Monsieur Airault’, p. 222: ‘Je m’attache à ce mot de *bonhomme*, que je prenois à grande injure, comme un huictiesme peché mortel. Et croyez que ce fut à beau jeu, beau retour; voir cela nous apporta un noveau subjet de discours; savoir qui pouvoit mieux parler de l’amour, ou le jeune homme ou le vieillard; en quoy il y a assez pour exercer les beaux esprits qui sont de loisir.


47 De Villiers, *Cinquante jeus*, p. 60: ‘Qui doyt plus tôt prendre femme? Le vieillard, ou le jeune’?

knew the serées (‘soirées’) or banquets of Poitiers as described by Guillaume Bouchet in his Serées of 1585. In the serées, he identifies the same pattern of the evening’s conversation, and he calls the ‘sappy stuff’ at the end, the piquant sauce instead of the dessert. Similarly, the activities of a Lyonnais humanist circle in 1506 are described by Humbert Fournier in a letter of 1506 to Symphorien Champier (physician & historian), and they range from singing Petrarchan sonnets, to theatrical presentations, to game-playing. There are two points to glean here: even the so-called humanistic academic gatherings of the sixteenth century could include vernacular ludic elements purely for entertainment—la sève, according to Saulnier—and there was an accepted pattern to this sort of regulated society, from serious to playful discourses, one that Madame de Retz clearly understood and engaged in when entertaining members of her circle in her home.

Retz’s participation in the continuum of salon practices may have been influenced by knowledge of the Lyonnais salon of her mother-in-law, or by those of other groups in Paris such as those of the Morels or Villeroy, or by the general trend in Franco-Italian sociabilité developing in court circles. But in any case, it is clear that by the mid-sixteenth century, groups of men and women who met to discuss literature, politics, religion, and play games were fixtures in both Italy and France, and that they were not always debating in Neo-Latin or reading Greek texts together. Ian Maclean, in his study of seventeenth-century salon culture, reminds us that the ‘practice of assemblies of men and women interested in literature and polite conversation has always been assumed to begin in earnest at the Hôtel de Rambouillet at about the same time as the publication of the first part of L’Astrée’ but that ‘[s]uch assemblies must, however, have been common in Italy in the early sixteenth century, and probably also in Lyons in the 1550s’. He is, of course, correct.

The duchesse de Retz’s engagement in proto-salon society is but one example of such women’s agency during this period. Others include the

49 Les Serées were 36 dialogues purporting to depict discourses in which Bouchet participated at regularly held ‘banquets’ in Poitiers. They were published in three installments in 1584, 1597, and 1598, and went into several editions, continuing to circulate in the seventeenth century. For a recent study, see Janier, ed., Les Serées.
50 Boucher, Présence Italienne, pp. 137–138: ‘En 1506, existait un tel cercle qui se réunissait dans une maison située sur la colline de Fourvière, surplombant la ville.’ See also p. 138 n. 1.
51 See Campbell, Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe, p. 27, on Veronica Franco and Gaspara Stampa in the Venetian circle of Domenico Venier (1517–1582), whose salon existed from around 1546 until his death. See also Rosenthal, The Honest Courtesan, p. 177, and Quaintance, Textual Masculinity, p. 7, pp. 136–137, as well as Robin, Publishing Women, pp. 3–40, (and passim).
52 Maclean, Woman Triumphant, p. 141.
Mesdames de Roches (Madeleine, c. 1520–1587, and Catherine, 1542–1587), Antoinette de Loynes, Madame de Morel (1505–1567), and Madeleine de L'Aubespine, Madame de Villeroy (1546–1596). These women were known for the groups of poets and intellectuals that they entertained in their homes and with whom they participated in writing poetry and playing literary and conversation games, even as the wars of religion took place around them. Much like the salon society of sixteenth-century Italy that Diana Robin describes in Publishing Women, in which the women of the Colonna and Gonzaga families hosted coteries focused on the literary, political, and religious concerns of the times, we find that noblewomen in France similarly hosted such groups. These gatherings hosted by noblewomen were part of the continuum of société mondaine that would eventually blossom into the well-known salon society of seventeenth-century France.

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