

Mary Clarke and the Nineteenth-Century Salon

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Mary Clarke first appeared to me in Cecil Woodham-Smith's life of Florence Nightingale:

Without money, influence, or beauty, Mary Clarke had made herself a major figure in the political and literary world of Paris. In her hands the *salon* was revived, and every Friday night Cabinet Ministers, Dukes of France, English peers, bishops, scholars, and writers of international reputation crowded the drawing-room of her apartment in the former hotel of the Clermont-Tonnerre family, 120 rue du Bac . . . Her personal appearance was odd. She was very small, with the figure and height of a child; her eyes were startlingly large and bright, and at a period when women brushed their hair smoothly she wore hers over her forehead in a tangle of curls. Guizot, who was devoted to her, said that she and his Yorkshire terrier patronized the same coiffeur.¹

The questions which arose for me were:

- 1 What were the functions of *salons* in the nineteenth century; did they still matter in the production of literature and of literary opinion?
- 2 How did such a person as Mary Clarke, without money, powerful connections, beauty, a famous marriage or liaison, make a life for herself?
- 3 Would an investigation of the personal material connected with Mary Clarke—letters, journals, conversations in so far as they were recorded—reveal anything of interest about people's perceptions of this highly revolutionary period, from 1800 to 1870, which might differ from received analyses?

In this paper I shall deal chiefly with the first and second questions, and by implication, with the third, which is central to the larger project on which I am still working.

It is clear, from both memoirs and commentary, that the great days of the European literary *salon* were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is largely because literature was then a coterie affair, produced by a small number of people for a small, known audience. The general audience might be more extensive (e.g. in the theatre) and we now know that there was a large body of "sub-literature" for the lower orders, but the discerning

1 *Florence Nightingale* (Penguin), p. 27.

audience, whose opinions mattered, and who thought of itself as the public, was small. Given the growth in population and changes in methods of publication in the nineteenth century, this could no longer be so. But the question remains, "did the *salon* still have an important function in the production of literature and of literary opinion, or was it now merely a place of entertainment?"

Here we must face the fact of the proliferation of kinds of *salon*. Tolstoy, at the beginning of *War and Peace*, gives us an account of Anna Schérer's *salon*. This account is clearly meant to show the vapidness of the aristocracy, its separation from the processes of history, and the artificiality which blinds it to the perception of the natural laws which will take their toll of the members of this society in spite of their pretence of knowledge and power. The chief purpose of this gathering is to strengthen the circle: by arranging marriages, securing information about possibilities at court, forging alliances. (Tolstoy uses the image of the spinning-mill with Anna Schérer as its foreman, for this "conversational machine" and this recognition of women's work is suggestive. He also presents her as a *maître d'hôtel* serving up celebrities like joints of meat.) When any real exchange of ideas begins, Mlle Schérer immediately interrupts the participants. Tolstoy is clear throughout the book about the work of women in this range of society—the efforts of Princess Drubetskaya to procure an appointment in the Guard for her son Boris (chapter 4) are only the beginning.

Mary Clarke, too, in her book on Madame Récamier, her only extensive written work, published in 1862, tells several stories which reveal the importance of women within these aristocratic family groups and their continued importance among the bourgeoisie under Napoleon: in the matter of securing favours which might even involve the freedom from prison or the life of a relative. For instance, Mary Clarke quotes this story from Madame Récamier's journal: "My acquaintance with Bernadotte belongs to an event of my life too important, too painful ever to be forgotten; his kindness to me will ever remain deeply impressed on my mind."² Monsieur Bernard, Madame Récamier's father (although it was rumoured, and Mary Clarke believed it true, that M. Récamier was actually Madame Récamier's father: the marriage was never consummated) was manager of the Post

2 *Madame Récamier*, p. 21.

Office in 1802. On suspicion of his being a Royalist, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Temple. Madame Récamier received this news at a party at Clichy given for Madame Bacciochi, "and although Madame Bacciochi showed more desire to get out of the way than to help," writes Mary Clarke, Madame Récamier said "As Providence, madame, has made you a witness of our misfortune, no doubt it is that you may help us. I *must* see the First Consul to-day—I *must*, and I trust in you to obtain the interview." Madame Récamier was forced to visit Fouché, the Minister of Police, to pursue the reluctant Madame Bacciochi to her box at the Théâtre Français, to sit through a good deal of the tragedy on stage, and at last to gain the sympathy of Bernadotte, who was also in the theatre box, who took her home and himself went on her behalf to Napoleon and gained a promise that M. Bernard would not be tried and would later be freed. Mary Clarke remarks tartly about this incident:

In the St Helena memoirs this story is related very differently; but a letter from Bernadotte confirms Madame Récamier's account. It would be well if the whole of those memoirs were sifted and compared with contemporaries whose letters, written with all the animation of the moment, and published since, would show how completely they were dished up for posterity, as many other stories have since been for the same purpose.³

Madame Récamier's *salon* during Napoleon's time seems to have been a livelier version of the fictional aristocratic *salon* described by Tolstoy. Mary Clarke writes:

the luxury and riches of Bonaparte's court, and the wealth he had brought back from the countries he had invaded, made Paris a very different place from what it was five or six years before, and ladies had now *salons* to show themselves in . . . There are still some who remember the sensation when Madame Récamier came in; and though drawing-rooms in those days were not so crowded as they now are, all rushed to see her, and it was difficult to approach. She was celebrated for the shawl dance, and the description of it in 'Corinne' is taken from her: it was invented by Lady Hamilton on seeing the drawings of Pompeii and Herculaneum. At a period when everything was Greek it could not fail of success.⁴

Napoleon's hostility to her, especially because of her friendship with Madame de Staël, whom he loathed, had sent Madame Récamier wandering in France and Italy. But ironically, the financial confusion caused by his fall forced her to live a much

3 *Madame Récamier*, p. 25.

4 *Madame Récamier*, p. 37.

reduced life. She took up lodgings in the convent of the Abbaye-au-Bois where Mary Clarke knew her and where the Clarkes came to live. Mary Clarke writes:

We must now picture her in a small apartment with a brick floor on the third story in the Abbaye-au-Bois, a large old building in the Rue de Sèvres, with a courtyard closed on the street by a high iron grate, surmounted by a cross of the same metal. Through this gate you see the square court, and opposite to it the entrance-door of the chapel, and another small one which is the entrance to the *parloir* of the convent. Various stair-cases ascend from this yard, conducting to apartments inhabited by retired ladies. This was called the exterior of the convent. Madame Récamier only inhabited this third floor for a year, and then removed to a very pretty small apartment on the first floor, the windows of which looked on the convent garden: here she remained until 1838.⁵

Here Madame Récamier conducted her *salon* for Chateaubriand:

All the world found the road to this out-of-the-way place; and the visitors included some of the most eminent men of the day for rank and talent. . . . From the very beginning of M. de Chateaubriand's daily visits to Madame Récamier he became the first object of her life. Though peculiarly governed by his imagination, he was the most methodical man in the world in his daily habits. He wrote a letter to her every morning, and arrived at three o'clock precisely. He was not a shy man, but very reserved. He disliked company, and she admitted no one at his hour without his consent. The circle enlarged by degrees; but at that time, all the mixed or casual company she saw came in the evening, when he was not there. All her habits were modified to suit his tastes. Madame Récamier had been till then the object round which others revolved. He was now the centre; and perhaps the self-forgetfulness now required of her elevated her character.⁶

Once Chateaubriand could admit that his political career was over, the form of Madame Récamier's *salon* again changed:

He had for some time been writing the memoirs of his life; and about 1833 or 1834, either because he wished, like Charles V, to have a foretaste of the opinions of posterity, or because Madame Récamier thought it would amuse him, they decided to invite a small and very select party to hear a fragment of the first part of these memoirs. They admitted four or five of his contemporaries, and as many more of the young generation, whose impressions might be considered a barometer of the modern taste. The experiment completely succeeded. The reading began at four o'clock, they dined at six, and went on again from eight to half-past ten. Not only did attention never flag, but no one knew that he had listened between four and five hours. . . . The readings continued for months about

5 *Madame Récamier*, p. 69.

6 *Madame Récamier*, p. 70.

once a week . . . The audience increased. All Madame Récamier's good sense, quick tact and knowledge of society were exerted in selecting those whose sympathy with the author would be sufficient to outweigh their political hostility, those who could forget their political hostility in literary pleasure, or those who had the vivid sensibility to enjoy and to show enjoyment.⁷

Mary Clarke was present at these later sessions of Madame Récamier's *salon* and it is her keen insight which illuminates the scene. Her book on Madame Récamier was written to refute much of the information in a biography by Madame Récamier's niece, Madame le Normant. She writes as an insider and from an historical perspective. She had always wanted to write a history of women: she refers to this as early as her 1820s letters to Fauriel, and the latter part of the Madame Récamier book is an attempt to account for the social pre-eminence of women in France—"A Sketch of the History of Society in France". Thus, she records the social customs of the recent past:

Têtes-à-têtes in a low voice were entirely discouraged. If any of the younger *habitués* took this liberty, they received a gentle chiding in a real *tête-à-tête* when everybody was gone. There were generally from six to twelve persons. Madame Récamier sat on one side of the fireplace, the others round in a circle. Two or three stood against the chimney-piece, and spoke loud enough to be heard by all. Whoever had an observation to make contributed it to the common stock. Madame Récamier spoke little, but threw in an occasional word; or if a new person entered who happened to know anything of the subject going on she would instantly question him that the others might be aware of it; otherwise it was his place to try and understand. If any one in the circle was likely to have any special knowledge, she would appeal to him with an air of deference; if he chanced to be unknown and shy, her manner raised his spirits. Some, who before they frequented the Abbaye could only talk to one or two persons, soon learnt to put their ideas into the compact form fitted for several. The number who were thus drawn into the conversation secured this advantage that talking of the weather or of one's health, or any other egotistical topic, could scarcely be indulged in long. . . The talent for narration is much cultivated in Paris. Sometimes one of the *habitués*, standing up, would tell his story; it was short and pithy. A wise or witty remark would shoot forth from one of the circle; then a quick repartee rose up like a rocket from another side. If a mot was particularly happy, Madame Récamier would take it up and show it to the audience as a connoisseur shows a picture. She was not fond of talking. If she knew an anecdote *à propos* of something, she would call on any one else who knew it also to relate it, though no one narrated better than herself. No one ever understood more thoroughly how to show off others to the best advantage:

7 *Madame Récamier*, p. 89ff.

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if she was able to fathom their minds, she would always endeavour to draw up what was valuable. This was one of her great charms: and as the spirits of the speaker were raised by his success, he became really more animated, and his ideas and words flowed on more rapidly. She had heard Madame de Staël, whose greatest delight lay in this management of society, say, 'I have not conducted the conversation well to-day,' or the reverse. She certainly had not the depth of Madame de Staël, but she had wonderful tact in this art. . . . There was a *velvetiness* in her manner, as well as a slight shade of doubt; but this was unconscious. . . . She was peculiarly charmed with simplicity, and dreaded exaggeration. Speaking of a person who had fine qualities, but from the violence of her feelings and the vivacity of her fancy kept those she loved in constant agitation, she said: 'Il n'y a que la raison qui ne fatigue pas à la longue.' This is so profound a truth that it becomes an axiom to those who have once heard it.⁸

I have quoted this long description of Madame Récamier's management of her *salon* because I think it reflects Mary Clarke's ideal of such conduct and because it reveals the amount of conscious effort and planning it required. Not that Mary Clarke idealized Madame Récamier herself. She was well aware of her caprices and exigencies—"Madame Récamier is very much ennuyé," she wrote to her family, "and wants me to go there every evening than which I had rather be flogged. However I must do it much oftener than I like." It was the professionalism she admired: the work, the rational discipline, the use of talent.

Though Mary Clarke speaks of Madame Récamier's as the last of the Paris *salons*, there were, clearly, others. Madame de Girardin, for example (1804-1855), ran celebrated literary *salons*. Her mother, Sophie Gay, was herself a successful *salonnière* and novelist and in 1831 Delphine married de Girardin who in 1836 created modern popular journalism in France with his cheap newspaper *La Presse*. Gautier wrote of one of Delphine's *salons*:

She received her friends in her bedroom . . . It was a very long time before we divined the bed behind the folds of the curtains. There, after the Opéra and the Bouffes, or before the social round began, between eleven o'clock and midnight, there came Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Latour-Mézeray, Eugène Sue, Alphonse Karr, Cabarrus, Chassériau—not all at once, but certainly some of them every morning. Alfred de Musset also appeared there at long intervals. Mme Emile de Girardin was extremely proud of her friends: they were her coquetry, her elegance, her luxury. She rightly felt that no festivity with ten thousand candles, a forest of camellias,

8 *Madame Récamier*, p. 102.

and the scintillation of all the diamonds of Golconda, was worth those three or four chairs thus occupied round her hearth.⁹

And Madame de Girardin herself wrote in one of her famous *Lettres parisiennes*:

The fate of conversation depends on three things: the quality of the speakers, the harmony of minds, and the material arrangement of the *salon*. By material arrangement we mean the complete disarrangement of all the furniture. An entertaining conversation can never begin in a *salon* where the furniture is symmetrically arranged.

The disposition of a *salon* is like that of an English garden. This apparent disorder is not an effect of chance; on the contrary it is the ultimate art, the result of the most fortunate combinations; there are clumps of chairs and sofas, as there are clumps of trees and shrubs; don't make your *salon* a parterre, but an English garden . . .¹⁰

Madame de Girardin was herself a prolific writer, both of journalism and of plays, which she tried out in her *salon*. She was also much engaged in the productions of others, both on account of her husband's journals and in the general sense of encouraging and criticizing the works of her friends. Hers was a *salon* much less devoted to the amusement and to the productions of one single person than was Madame Récamier's.

Yet another kind of *salon* was that investigated by Hannah Arendt in her biographical study, *Rahel Varnhagen, The Life of a Jewess* (1957). Arendt's argument is that Varnhagen (1771-1833) was able to create in Berlin (as Fanny von Arnstein did in Vienna) a social space in which both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie could mix. She could do this because as a Jew she occupied a marginal place in a society which had not yet become bourgeois and nationalistic. Jews, actors, writers, aristocrats, were all on the edges of this society, and they could create a vital culture of their own in which each person represented merely himself—not his rank, or his possessions, or his function. Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, Arendt says, "attempts by acquiring education in the broadest sense to learn how to represent himself" (p. 29), and the German concept of *Bildung*, self-making, was clearly very influential here. Literature, especially Goethe, whose cult Varnhagen began in Berlin, and the *salon*, were essential to this process. As Arendt states

9 Quoted in "Madame de Girardin, the Tenth Muse", by Joanna Richardson, in *Genius in the Drawing-Room*, ed. Peter Quennell.

10 *Ibid.*

The *salon* in which private things were given objectivity by being communicated, and in which public matters counted only insofar as they had private significance—this *salon* ceased to exist when the public world, the power of general misfortune, became so overwhelming that it could no longer be translated into private terms. Once more everything personal was being decided by the things that affected everyone, all that really remained to be communicated was pure gossip.¹¹

Once the bourgeoisie gained pre-eminence, Anti-Semitism reappeared and the social space occupied by the Jews and their friends no longer existed.

It is interesting that the anti-feminist attacks on the seventeenth-century French *salons* had also been made in terms of their function as places where undesirable, indiscriminate, social mixing took place. Carolyn C. Lougee writes in her well documented study, *Le Paradis des Femmes* (1976): “The *salon* played a central role in the process of social assimilation because within the *salons* ladies taught the social graces which covered the new rich with the ‘*parfum de l’aristocratie*’.” She cites Poulin de la Barre’s contemporary comment that from women men learned how to comport themselves: “if they wish to enter the *monde* and play well their role in it, they are obliged to go to the school of ladies in order to learn there the politeness, affability, and all the exterior which today makes up the essence of *honnêtes gens*” (p. 53-4). Anti-feminists, seeing society in older terms as a function of the family, the family writ large, attacked this new version of social life which allowed the mixing of nobles and non-nobles, new and old nobility, professional groups (though the “bourgeois” and “provincial” were excluded by the *salonnières* themselves, who in this way still preserved an elite within the changing social structure).

I would conclude from this that women in the *salons* were extremely active in the restructuring of social groups in times of social change; that they were not only “facilitators” but active positive agents of change and also of preservation. So, too, they were active in those changes to what Habermas, following Arendt and the Frankfurt School, has called “the public sphere”.¹² This is the area of appearance, of discussion and opinion and attitudes, which he sees as far wider than the conventional “public arena” or “public opinion”, and whose preservation is essential to democratic freedom. It is in this “public sphere” that the creation of

11 *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 98.

12 See his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962).

literature takes place, here that it is made, read and recited, criticized, parodied, and becomes part of social thinking and mores.

Roger Picard in *Les Salons Littéraires et la Société Française 1610-1789* (2nd edn, 1943) gives an amusing account of the changing activities of the seventeenth-century *salons* in this "public sphere". In 1640 Vincent Voiture was the chief poet of a *cour d'amour* offering epigrams, madrigals, odes, sonnets and rondeaux; practical jokes (a dinner of all the dishes the chief guest hated); *fêtes champêtres* on mythological subjects; concerts; conversations on the psychology of the sentiments, especially love; enigmas (guess who?); portraits; metamorphoses (little poems in the manner of Ovid that turned one word into another, e.g. "Julie" into "a rose"); readings (la Fontaine read his *Fables*); ballets; *Gazettes allégoriques* (people received the names of characters and told their stories).

As late as 1714, L'abbé de Vaubrun organized for the Duchesse du Maine "les Grandes Nuits de Sceaux", a sort of mixture of costume ball, opera, ballet and mime, in which the guests took part, elaborately costumed. Each night a "king" furnished a theme for the entertainment, e.g. Venus's girdle, which was then elaborated with songs, madrigals, enigmas, etc.

What is especially interesting about these accounts, which Picard gives as typical examples, is that they were organized by literary men as entertainments for the nobility, that they are a sort of public/private performance of a very high degree of complexity, comparable to more public performances in the theatres themselves. This kind of activity was also accompanied by critical discussion of the particular works offered—the poems, songs, ballets, tableaux—which both affected the works themselves (they were often rewritten), and formed a part of the education of the critical taste of the time.

There is no doubt that this was a French rather than an English practice by the eighteenth century. There is no continuity between the English aristocratic literary circles of the seventeenth century and the literary "public sphere" of the eighteenth. The eighteenth-century English preference for male clubs and coffee houses separated from "female Maecenases" left little opportunity for forming such an elaborate public space. Mrs Thrale's Streatam dining-room seems to have been the closest English equivalent to a *salon*: the Blue Stocking Club seems to have been altogether more solemn. As Gibbon wrote in his letters from Paris:

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In two months I am acquainted with more (and more agreeable) people, than I knew in London in two years. Indeed the way of life is quite different. Much less play, more conversation, and instead of our immense routs, agreeable societies where you know and are known by almost every body you meet.¹³

Hannah Arendt remarked of the early nineteenth-century Berlin *salons* that they “were the meeting places of those who had learned how to represent themselves through conversation”, i.e. those who could no longer rely on rank or family to signal their worth but who had, as it were, to make themselves visible through talk. For Arendt this is not merely a phenomenon belonging to a period of social confusion, but an essential part of our humanity, first articulated by the Greeks in the polis. As she wrote in *Men in Dark Times*, “we humanise what is going on in the world and in ourselves by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human . . . it is precisely the human person in all his subjectivity who needs to appear in public in order to achieve full reality” (p. 25). The *salon* provided a place, neither private nor public, where *habitués* could go and be accepted on the terms they wished (or could maintain), where strangers (with proper introductions) could be met, where democratic rules, especially of discussion, could apply, where women could have influence (even power), where rôles could be tried out (by professional and non-professional actors), where new works could be read, new music heard, taste developed and formed, attitudes examined, new kinds of feeling elaborated, games played. I think the relative openness of the nineteenth-century *salon* is of particular importance to its function in intellectual life, making it neither a coterie nor a domestic affair. Intersecting networks of salons extended the “public space”.¹⁴

Even in England in the nineteenth century where the salon tended to be political (Lady Holland’s) or marginal (Lady Blessington’s), it still had some validity as a complication of the neat division between public and private spheres which we tend to see as antagonistic (and of whose antagonism Dickens is the great propagandist). Anna Davin has demonstrated how little the distinction can be applied to the nineteenth-century working classes, in terms of any division between work-place and home, apart from those working in factories (a minority of the London

13 *Letters*, I.31.

14 See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, for an interesting discussion of the disappearance of this possibility of self-representation.

working class). In the matter of what went on in the *salons*, as perhaps also in the London clubs, the private/public distinction is not a very useful one.

So it seems to me that the *salons* in their diversity were still functioning in the nineteenth century as complex "public spheres" useful in the formation of opinion, taste, manners and morals, and especially in the breaking down of the antagonism between "private" and "public" which was so energetic a part of one set of nineteenth-century morals and which was so reductive in its concepts of human possibility.

This brings me to the consideration of Mary Clarke in relation to the nineteenth-century *salon*. What kind of *salon* did she have? How did she manage to have one at all?

Mary Clarke's mother was an invalid who could not tolerate the English climate. She left for France in 1801 with her mother, Mrs Hay, and Mary (who was born in 1793). Mary was educated in a convent in the south and returned to Paris in 1813, after which she never again lived for more than months at a time in England. Mary became bi-lingual and neither exactly French nor exactly English in manner. This could evoke ridicule. As Edgar Quintet wrote to his mother:

As to *ma chère miss*, as you call her, I am compelled to own that she made a sorry figure, although greatly liked and considered by serious people, I firmly believe that she had on a brown silk dress, with her hair frizzed and tangled as usual. She is, luckily, quite unconscious of her appearance; she glides about, she runs, she stands, she exhibits herself amidst the lovely faces that the saloons are full of with a serious self-satisfaction and an imperturbable assurance that could not be surpassed if she had the head of Venus herself. As for me, I hardly dared look at her. But bless her! She never notices anything.¹⁵

But Mary Clarke's strangeness also allowed her a freedom of action not easily open to respectable unmarried women. In a more approving comment, Ampère, the son of the scientist and her lifelong friend (and lifelong devotee of Madame Récamier) wrote of her relation to Chateaubriand:

She is a charming combination of French sprightliness and English originality; but I think the French element predominates. She was the delight of the *grand ennuyé*; her expressions were entirely her own; and he more than once made use of them in his writings. Her

15 Quoted in K. O'Meara, *Madame Mohl: her salon & her friends* (1885).

French was as original as the turn of her mind, exquisite in quality; but savouring more of the last century than of our own.¹⁶

Through her grandmother's connections with Hume and other Scottish intellectuals and through her family relations (Lord Dalrymple was her cousin; Frewen Turner M.P., of Cold Overton in Leicestershire, her brother-in-law) Mary Clarke had access to some French intellectuals and was sought out by some of the visiting English (the Nightingales, Lady Eastlake, Tennyson, Mrs Gaskell, Augusta Stanley). I assume that the Scottish connection provided her first opportunity to meet the "jeune France" who formed her earliest group of friends. But her main attraction seems to have been personal.

Her first *salons*, between 1815 and 1838, in the rue Bonaparte and then in the Abbaye-au-Bois, were run for the benefit of her mother, a woman of lively mind and sociable disposition, interested in politics, who because of her illness could not easily go about in the city. They consisted of young men beginning their careers (Ampère, Mohl, Quintet, Thiers, Guizot, the Thierry brothers) and some older friends, like Fauriel, the Provencal scholar, who valued an informal meeting place with lively discussion. Her fortuitous connection with Madame Récamier (I think through Ampère) and with Chateaubriand gave her access to a more exclusively literary *salon* and also extended the scope of her own.

After the death of her mother, and of Fauriel, to whom she had been romantically devoted for years (he had been devoted to Condorcet's widow), Mary married Julius Mohl (in 1847; she was 54, he 47) and continued her *salon* in the rue du Bac until after the Franco-Prussian war. Mohl was a German orientalist who did much to establish French pre-eminence in Near-Eastern archaeology and who translated from Persian and Chinese manuscripts which Mary edited after his death, as she edited Fauriel's Provencal manuscripts after his.

Mary Clarke herself comments on the change in style of the *salon* during her lifetime from the very simple forms of entertainment like her own to the more elaborate manner of the end of the century. Of her own early life she wrote:

I lived some weeks with two ladies, mother and daughter, the latter was wondrous clever. They dined at five, drank tea at eight, and they were not out of the pale of humanity, though not fashionable

16 Quoted in M. Simpson, *Letters and Recollections of Julius and Mary Mohl* (1887).

... Now, since that time, literary people have dwindled into the fancy of being fashionable and it has ruined their society. No doubt these were the remains—I may say the tail—of the days when Dr Johnson was the delight of all London at Mrs Thrale's, the brewer's wife. It was after dinner, and not at all late—eight, nine, or ten, I suppose. Those evenings in the last century left a good long tail among people of moderate means and sociable lively brains. But being invited to a tea party at nine was still feasible and common in 1820 to 1830; not among fashionable, but among cultivated people—lawyers, doctors, and literary folk... There's no society in London now—none, none!¹⁷

Very little money was required for the kind of *salon* Mary Clarke ran, in all its manifestations. She relied on her personal idiosyncrasy; on the particular Parisian social arrangements which were less domestic than those of London but also had fewer man's clubs; on the *éclat* of Paris for the English tourist; and on the predominance of Paris for the French themselves. Mary Clarke did not much care for English social arrangements:

I know nothing is so ruinous to time as the life of an English country house, but except when one is a visitor it may be mended and to a certain degree turned to one's purpose. I have tried it and been able tho' I agree it takes a strong resolution but look upon it as a means of exercising resolution, your brother Robbie tells me that he found it most difficult to work at home. Florence Nightingale has written a beautiful book of which five copies only are printed because it is the eloquent expression of grief at the dawdling life she was obliged to lead breakfasting from nine till ten chatting till eleven, the day began when half over... who ever is strong enough or can have some of their way and lives in the country should get up at six and make a point of having their time till two or three... its all very well for the dawdling rich people but those who have their way to make never can if they live in the country...¹⁸

She believed in the need to exercise personal discipline to make one's way in the world and to entertain ("I receive now every Wednesday which rather amuses me but I do it from policy more than anything else") and in the effect of such entertainment: "I agree with my dear old Johnson, civilization and society are greater moralizers than preaching, at least in large towns" (Letter 20 January 1872). As late as 1872 (when she was 79), although her more extensive *salon* had been curtailed by the Franco-Prussian War, she could still write:

I have a dinner party pretty regularly once a fortnight on Friday of 12 or 13 people the intervening Friday people come in the evening

17 Letter to Miss Wyse, in Simpson, *Recollections*, p. 37.

18 Letter, 16 February, 1866.

without invitation, and very pleasant it is, beside which I have often a few intimates . . . I have made a point even when this winter I was at the worst of cultivating society which being my especial habit I will not bury for in the present state it is far more useful than giving away money . . .

Mary Clarke's preference was for good talk (though Florence Nightingale first met her playing games at a children's party, an activity she continued until her mother's death). Talking to Nassau Senior in 1860, Mary Clarke said of Madame Récamier:

It was one of the few houses in which you could hear a subject sifted. She liked discussion, not indeed to take much part in it, but to hear it. In modern conversation you get to the bottom of nothing, the most interesting questions are taken up, and thrown down again not half-examined. At Madame Récamier's any subject that deserved it was gone into, and at times it would be taken up again next day. She would put forward opinions which she had heard or remembered to have heard on the same subject which she had recollected in the night.¹⁹

Since the people who frequented her *salons* were mainly intellectuals rather than actors, musicians or literary lions, it is reasonable to assume that she was able to exercise this preference for talk. Unfortunately, no one has written the detailed description of her *salon* that she wrote of Madame Récamier's, and discovering what actually went on in Mary Clarke's *salons* is quite difficult.

Stendhal, for example, simply writes:

M. Fauriel . . . saw a lot of Mlle Clarke, a little almost humpbacked shrew. Mlle Clarke was an English woman with a lively mind—that was undeniable—but a mind like the horns of a chamois; dry, hard and twisted. M. Fauriel, who appreciated me a great deal at that time, very soon took me to Mlle Clarke's, where I once again came across my friend Augustin Thierry, author of the history of William the Conqueror. There, he ruled the roost. I was struck by the superb features of Mme Belloc (wife of the painter). She was astonishingly like Lord Byron whom I then liked a lot. A shrewd man, who took me for a Machiavellian because I had just come back from Italy, said to me: "Don't you see you're wasting your time with Mme Belloc? She makes love with Mlle Montgolfier" (a little horrible monster with beautiful eyes) . . . At the end of a year or two, Mlle Clarke picked a quarrel with me for no reason at all, after which I stopped seeing her . . .²⁰

And other people simply list the celebrities present without giving any sense of the occasion.

19 Nassau Senior, *Conversations*, II.291.

20 *Memoirs of an Egotist*, trans. D. Ellis, p. 81.

One of the best accounts comes from an article, "Evenings with Madame Mohl", by M. C. M. Simpson, published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1893, roughly thirty-four years after some of the events described. Mrs Simpson relies, as I have done, on quotations from *Madame Récamier* to indicate Mary Clarke's strengths as a hostess, but she also gives many intimate details of her own: the dinner served *à la Russe* "which was at that date (1858) by no means usual in England"; the conversation in French despite the awkwardness of some of the English guests (but not Lady William Russell, a "*grande dame* to the tips of her fingers"). Then she recounts the arrival of the evening guests in the drawing-room hung with crimson woollen damask and lit by soft green-shaded lamps. Thackeray and his daughters were amongst the first to arrive, becoming the centre of an admiring circle (his "very animated" talk is not recorded). The only refreshments were cake and tea poured out by the hostess herself: "no music, no cards, no games in the *salon*, only conversation; but the ease and grace of French manners struck us particularly".

On another visit to Mary Clarke's *salon*, in 1867, Simpson was fascinated by Renan, whose unpleasant physical appearance ("stout, broad, and short-necked; his large projecting eyes were placed far apart, and with the wide mouth were the reverse of attractive") was countered by the charm of his speech. She also remarked on the free expression of political opinion, all of it hostile to Louis Napoleon, so that she wondered that the police did not close the *salon*.

Simpson also quotes one of the best accounts of Mary Clarke's ideas about conversation:

We are scarcely aware in England how seldom we practise that form of talk which alone can be called conversation, in which what we really think is brought out, and which flows the quicker from the pleasure of seeing it excite thoughts in others—conversation to which both reason and fancy pay their tribute... Conversation is the mingling of mind with mind, and is the most complete exercise of the social faculty; but the general barter of commonplaces we choose to call conversation is as far removed from its reality as the signs of Caspar Hauser were from the talking of ordinary men.

Mary Clarke said of "esprit", "it does not mean great wit, it is rather that quick perception that seizes the ideas of others and returns change for them".

Mrs Gaskell also provides a vivid sense of occasion in a letter of March 1865:

After breakfast no. 2 . . . very often callers came—*always* on Wednesdays, on which day Mme Mohl receives . . . When we dine at home it is at six sharp. No dressing required. Soup, meat one dish of vegetables and roasted apples are what we have in general. After dinner M. and Mme Mohl go to sleep, and I have fallen into this habit; and at eight exactly M. Mohl wakes up and makes a cup of very weak tea for Mme Mohl and me. Nothing to eat after dinner—not even if we have been to the play. Then Mme Mohl rouses herself up and is very amusing and brilliant; stops up till one, and would stop up later if encouraged by listeners—She generally has a dinner-party of ten or twelve every Friday, when we spread out into all the rooms (I am so glad, for continued living and eating in this room and no open windows makes it very stuffy) and “receive” in the evening.

The economist Nassau Senior published several volumes of the conversations of his more brilliant contemporaries, including M. and Mme Mohl, but he admits both to having recorded these from memory later and to having “improved” them when necessary, or to having allowed the participants to “improve” them. We get perhaps the best sense of Mary Clarke’s talk from her uninhibited, oddly punctuated, letters to friends.

One thing seems obvious, and is especially clear in Stendhal’s remarks: Mary Clarke had none of the erotic power (the “velvetiness”) of Madame Récamier and the other great *salonnières*. Max Weber in *Science and Politics* drew attention to this aspect of social development when he pointed out that despite the great differences in the social conventions of Antiquity and the Renaissance, they remained closely related in their masculinity and agonistic tendencies. Salon culture, on the other hand, assumed that inter-sexual conversation was both valuable and creative: “The overt or latent erotic sensation and the agonistic probation of the cavalier before the lady became an indispensable means of stimulating the conversation” (*From Max Weber*, p. 346). For Weber the pursuit of the erotic is the last attempt of rational modern man to stay in touch with the power of the irrational. “natural” world. We should, therefore, not be at all surprised to find it such a French preoccupation—rather than an English one.

Eroticism is not what we sense in Mary Clarke’s *salons*. Though she refers often to the obligation to please others, and though from her letters it is clear that she was deeply in love with Fauriel in the 1820s, most references to her are in terms of childishness, sprightliness, oddity and wit, and the impression her letters give, despite her enthusiasm for Scott’s novels, Fauriel’s folk poetry and Manzoni, is of brisk rationality. Her sympathy for

Romanticism was limited. In 1858 she wrote:

I know Wordsworth has introduced the fashion of making fatigue and study necessary to understand a page. Be it so; but when I have conned it over some time, I expect not to find useless pronouns and faults of logic . . . I am tortured by the gaping admiration of the young generation for such verses, and try to persuade myself I am wrong; but still I have no pleasure in the rattle of words . . .

Her *salons* did not exist for the sake of men, for educating or for testing them. Though one must also admit that she had a low opinion of uncultivated women as conversationalists, “non-conductors”, as Mrs Grote used to call them. I think one could say that her *salons* existed in a far more impersonal way, for the sake of the activity itself, for the obligation to an idea of society.

In the conclusion to her book on Madame Récamier she writes:

Society and conversation are still necessities of life, though the refined literary taste has lost much of its delicacy since politics have become the universal topic. I know men who would rather live in extreme poverty in Paris than go elsewhere for a comfortable income; not for love of the locality, but because no privation is so great to them as the loss of that interchange of thought which they find so easily there . . . There is something still very oriental in the notions of society of these Indo-Germanic nations [England and Germany] . . . So natural to the French is this companionship between men and women, that we find it among the very dregs of society. The revolutionary clubs were no sooner formed than they were frequented by the *Tricoteuses*, who were merely the women belonging to the Terrorist party. They took their knitting, the constant occupation of the lower classes in those days, were present during the meetings, and gave their opinions . . . It is in consequence of this sympathy for the sort of mind women have, when cultivated, that the middle-aged and the old women retain the same relative value in France that men have. The appellation of ‘old woman’, applied to a man because he is a fool of a certain twaddling description, is there unknown. Old women are thought as capable of wisdom as old men.²¹

Mary Clarke retained her vigour and her discipline into old age. She was devastated by the death of her husband in 1876, but in 1879 Renan wrote in a letter of “this excellent person about ninety years of age, who has more *esprit* and gaiety than ever, who speaks of 1815 and 1820 as if it were yesterday”;²² and she herself wrote to Mary Simpson in 1881, “I am a poor creature, but I run about and am as alert as ever”.

She died on 15 May 1883, aged ninety. As she wrote in one

21 *Madame Récamier*, p. 279ff.

22 *Oeuvres Complètes*, X.806.

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of her letters:

I have all my life striven to please; but I cannot forgive myself for having lost many opportunities, for not devoting more care to it . . .
Car au fond, il n'y a que cela.

Since she had also spent a great deal of energy trying to convince her friend Hilary Bonham Carter that she had a duty *not* to please her family, but to work at her painting and become a proper professional painter, and since she had always encouraged Florence Nightingale, during fifty years of friendship, to escape her family and devote herself to work, we must read this statement, I think, in the light of her own commitment to an idea of society. It was there, in that public space, that one might devote oneself to pleasing, not in the bedroom, the nursery or the parlour.