Two of the illustrations that we chose for Lecture 3 depict the salon of the Princesse Mathilde as painted by Giraud Sébastien Charles (1819-1892). Of course, Mme Verdurin would have considered her to be among the most threatening of the bores and would have certainly made malicious comments to the “faithful” about the princess and her guests. Proust did frequent Princesse Mathilde’s salon and, in 1903, wrote an article about it for *Le Figaro*. The following is based on what Proust wrote about her salon:

Princesse Mathilde was over seventy when Proust met her at the salon of Madame Straus, widow of Georges Bizet, and the primary inspiration for the wit of the duchesse de Guermantes. Daughter of King Jerome of Westphalia and niece of Napoléon I, Princesse Mathilde represented the vestiges of Napoleonic glory. Tremendously proud of her heritage, she boasted of her Corsican origin and took great pleasure in remarking to ancien régime nobles whenever they deplored the French Revolution: “The French Revolution! If it weren’t for the French Revolution I would be selling oranges in the streets of Ajaccio.” In 1887, Mathilde abruptly ended her long friendship with the historian Hippolyte Taine after he published an article depicting Napoleon I as an upstart Italian condottiere. The next day the Princess sent Mme Taine her calling card with the letters P. P. C. marked on it: *pour prendre congé* (to take leave), indicating that she was ending her relationship with the Taines. A wag suggested that the initials really stood for *princesse pas contente* (princess not happy).

Upon entering Mathilde’s home, which fairly swarmed with eagles and bees, Napoleonic decorative motifs, Proust felt he had stepped back in time. Not only did the princesse’s residence, furnished in Empire Style, recall the glory days of the First Empire, her salon had hosted literary giants as well, such as Gustave Flaubert and Alexandre Dumas. Her soirée began early, with dinner served at 7:30. Like many hostesses she invited one group for dinner, after which others would arrive for the rest of the evening. When guests entered, Mathilde rose to greet the new arrivals, addressing each with a personal remark, giving the guest the impression he or she was the evening’s main attraction.

Proust noticed that the princesse, who was short and plump, wore an enormous black pearl necklace, her favorite piece of jewelry. She had a passion for pearls and liked
to add new and rare ones to the already magnificent string. Except for her pearls, Proust found her simplicity remarkable, especially regarding birth and rank. Her “somewhat male gruffness” was rendered endearing by an “extreme sweetness.” Proust’s own charm, wit, and intelligence made an excellent impression. The veterans, who remembered how she used to dote on her recent, treacherous lover, the enameler and poet Claudius Popelin, began to refer to Proust as Popelin the younger.

When Proust began to attend the princesse’s salon, it was still dominated by an older generation of writers, intellectuals, and socialites. Among the contemporary writers whom he encountered in her salon were Edmond de Goncourt, a veteran from the earliest days, now grown quite elderly; poet José-Maria de Hérédia, and historian Gustave Schlumberger. He also saw Émile and Geneviève Straus and noted that upon arriving, Émile looked around the room with a malicious air, no doubt rating the success of a rival salon.

The mixture of Mathilde’s salon may have been too liberal for some. Here ancien régime aristocrats met and conversed with those upstarts from the Empire nobility. The princess also received members of chic Jewish society, many of whom had held important posts during the Second Empire. The Jewish element, increasingly numerous, provoked the outrage of anti-Semites Edmond de Goncourt and Léon Daudet, who detested everything connected with Jews and the Empires, First and Second. After one party, Daudet noted in his diary: “The imperial dwelling was infested with Jews and Jewesses.”

The princess had a favorite set of anecdotes about those in her entourage, especially her rather simple-minded reader, the baronne de Galbois. Proust, who savored good stories, remembered these examples of innocent imbecility when he created Mme de Varambon. In *The Guermantes Way*, Mme de Varambon, who is the princesse de Parme’s lady-in-waiting, repeats a number of naïve remarks that Proust collected from Mathilde’s stories. One evening when snow had been forecast Mme de Varambon tells a departing guest that he has nothing to fear: “It can’t snow any more because they have taken the necessary steps to prevent it; they’ve sprinkled salt in the streets!”

For Proust, perhaps the most important acquaintance he made at Mathilde’s salon was Charles Ephrussi, a respected art critic, founder and director of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and author of a fine essay on Albert Dürer. Ephrussi, an important inspiration for Charles Swann, had devoted his life to studying and appreciating art. He greatly admired Vermeer, whose paintings were to become increasingly important to Proust. The novelist questioned Ephrussi about paintings with such eagerness to learn more about
them that the art critic invited the young man to view his fine collection, which included works by Gustave Moreau and Claude Monet.