II

Masters & Servants
The Psychology of Mastership: Masters’ Attitudes toward Their Servants

“He is my domestic enemy.”
—A master, describing his thirteen-year-old valet, in Marana’s L’Espion dans les cours des princes

The Patriarchal Master in Theory

Masters’ relationships with their “domestic enemies” should be easy to define, for in theory they conformed to a model widely disseminated in domestic manuals and religious tracts during the seventeenth century: that of the patriarchal household. While some elements of this model were as old as the ancient world (Xenophon and Quintilian were frequently quoted), the classic texts of French patriarchy were products of the Counter-Reformation, especially of its last phase in the 1670s, 1680s, and 1690s. They came from the pens of churchmen like the Abbé Gous­sault (Le Portrait d’un honneste homme, 1692; Le Portrait d’une femme hon­neste, raisonnable, et veritablement chrétienne, 1694) and their dévot followers like Claude Fleury (Les Devoirs des maîtres et des domestiques, 1688) who opposed the political and social innovations of the reign of Louis XIV. Patriarchal theory was therefore a product of religious movement devoted to the moralizing of society (hence the emphasis in patriarchal writings on the religious and moral duties of masters) and of a political movement based on a vision of traditional, agrarian, static, and deferential society outmoded even as it was propounded.¹
The fact that the patriarchal theory of the household grew out of the most important religious and political movements of its time points up the universality of its concepts. In the seventeenth century patriarchy was not simply a theory of the way families and households should function: it was a paradigm for all social organizations, political and religious as well as familial. The family and the household were the basic units of the social order. As Claude Fleury put it, “The family is the image of the state, which is only an assemblage of many families.” The authority of the father of the family was the model for all authority: a king was the father of his people, God was the Father of all mankind.

While its precepts held true for all power relationships, the patriarchal vision of authority was especially applicable to master-servant relationships, for the seventeenth-century household by definition was a family, and a master by definition was the father of his servants. The conviction that the household was a family carried with it important implications about the proper roles and demeanor of master and man. It implied, first of all, that servants were the “adopted children” of the family. They were, therefore, like children, immature, helpless, and dependent. They lacked the essential characteristic of adulthood: the ability to be responsible for their own welfare. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries adulthood implied a certain level of economic self-sufficiency. An adult man was one able to support himself and his family through his own efforts. Those unable to do so, like servants, had to subordinate themselves to someone who could provide for them. In return for financial support, they surrendered their labor, a certain amount of bodily autonomy (see the discussion of corporal punishment in the last chapter), and, most importantly, the freedom of will that was the mark of an adult. Subordination to the will of another was in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries considered the essence of servanthood. One patriarchal writer even compared domestic service to the monastic life, for servants like monks gave up their freedom of will: “if a monk never does what he wills, a lackey too must do what he is ordered to do.” The duty of servants listed first in every domestic manual was obedience. Only when ordered to do something against the law or the principles of religion could they go against their master’s orders.

If the servant was a child, condemned to a child’s perpetual submission to adult authority, the master was of course a father, with a father’s privileges and responsibilities. A master had certain rights, amounting almost to property rights, over the bodies of his servants, analogous to the rights of a husband over the body of his wife and a father over the bodies of his children. A master had a right to his servants’ labor, a right to regulate their behavior and to inflict corporal punishment if necessary, and a right to supervise their sexual conduct and control access to their sexual favors. In return for these rights, however, a master incurred responsibilities similar to those a patriarch-
The Psychology of Mastership

A master was, first and foremost, responsible for the material welfare of his domestics. He owed them food, shelter, and some sort of financial reward for their services, although not necessarily, as we have seen, a regular wage. Masters, like fathers, were also expected to see that, when their servant-children left the household to fend for themselves, they had an adequate start in life. Employers were expected to provide dowries for their female domestics and apprenticeships for their young men, in sums adequate to place them in their proper station in life, “in the front ranks of the poor.” And if his servants fell ill or grew too old to work, the ideal master would not turn them out to starve or die, but instead would care for them as he would for aged or infirm relatives.

Besides providing for the daily bodily needs of his domestics, a master was also required to oversee their moral and spiritual welfare. In patriarchal households the master was in effect a “priest in his house,” the intermediary between his wife, his children, his servants, and God, responsible before God for their conduct. Therefore a master owed his domestics spiritual instruction and guidance. This duty was never taken so seriously in Catholic countries as it was in Protestant England. Household prayers, in which the master literally acted as “priest in his house,” leading his dependents in worship, were never so widespread in France as they were in England, and unlike English heads of households, French masters were not exhorted to teach their servants to read so that they could read the Bible. But in the France of the Counter-Reformation masters were at least expected to see that their domestics attended Mass and Confession regularly, and to make certain that the ill and dying received the last rites. Masters were also expected to oversee the sexual conduct of their servants, and to discourage drinking, gambling, idle quarreling, and other vices.

Yet another responsibility of masters was to see that their servants did not break the law. According to most French legal codes, an employer could be held legally responsible for his servants’ crimes only if they were committed under his direct and explicit orders. But public opinion nevertheless tended to hold employers accountable for their servants’ misdeeds, and masters themselves shared this notion, often preferring to punish their erring servants themselves rather than handing them over to the police. For the final duty a master owed to his servant was protection against all other authorities. If a servant submitted himself to a master, that master had the duty to see that he was forced to submit to no one else.

Thus in patriarchal theory masters and servants took the roles of fathers and children, bound together by the same sort of network of mutual rights and duties that bound real fathers and their offspring. Relations between masters
and servants should be affectionate, but in the same way that relationships between parents and children were affectionate in the heyday of patriarchy: that is, the affection was measured, distant, decorous, tinged on the child-servant's side with a healthy fear of the all-powerful father-master, and on the father-master's side with a firm conviction that overindulgence was morally harmful for his charges. Bound together by ties of affection and duty, masters and servants would, in theory, take their places in the great chain of similarly obligated superiors and inferiors that constituted the God-ordained social order in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries.

The Patriarchal Master in Reality

How closely did this elaborate theory of patriarchy match the reality of relationships within the household? How seriously did masters take their responsibilities toward their domestics? Did Old Regime France deserve the label that some historians have applied to the antebellum American South: was it "a patriarchy that worked"?

It is hard to know. On the one hand, there definitely were masters who fit the patriarchal model in every respect. One example is Sr. Sentou Dumont, a minor noble who lived near Toulouse from 1690 to 1741. Sentou Dumont took his servants from a small circle of local families; he employed, for example, not only Françoise Dauban but also her niece, Marie Baradate, and he hired the daughter of his valet Louis Gilede when she was old enough to work. He knew his domestics well and treated them generously, caring for them when they were sick, providing dances for them on holidays (his livre de raison noted for March 19, 1736, "I have celebrated the feast of St. Joseph, my patron saint, with éclat," at a cost of 24 livres), and opening his purse for their daily needs. He was also concerned to establish them in life. When Françoise Dauban married the son of a fellow servant, Sentou Dumont paid for the banns and the ring, attended the ceremony, provided a house for the couple, and kept them on in his service. When Françoise's niece Marie married yet another of his employees he gave the couple a 100-livre rente and 50 livres' worth of household goods, and also spent 15 livres on the wedding feast. But if Sentou Dumont was generous he was also strict, as a good patriarch should be. When his son's tutor seduced the nursemaid, he packed off the guilty couple, although when the woman returned, penniless and repentant, he took her in again. M. Sentou Dumont was not an isolated example. M. François de Mongaillard arranged for his servant to be apprenticed; Dlle. Marie de Bous-sac left hers a pension for her old age; Marie Ann Brun taught her servante to read, cared for her when she was ill, provided her with a dowry, and left her a legacy besides!

Thus there were masters who behaved like model patriarchs. But they seem
to have been few and far between. The drinking, gambling, and sexual license rampant below stairs in most households suggests that only a minority of employers took their responsibilities for the moral guidance of their domestics seriously. Responsibilities for their material needs were similarly neglected. As we saw earlier, few employers hesitated to fire servants who were too old or too ill to work. And few seem to have felt they owed their servants a dowry or an apprenticeship to give them a good start in life. Only 3 percent of the marriage contracts in my samples from Toulouse, Bordeaux, and Paris stated that employers had contributed to their servants' dowries, and of all the wills I read only three contained provisions by which masters arranged apprenticeships for their domestics.17

Probably the best barometer—and certainly the most convenient in terms of making comparisons across periods and classes—of the degree to which masters took their patriarchal obligations seriously are legacies to servants in their wills. In the Old Regime such legacies were not simply generous gestures; they were part and parcel of a master's obligation to provide for the future of his servants. Remembering one's domestics at one's dying moments was essential to a “beautiful death.” Priests and notaries present at deathbed scenes constantly exhorted the dying to fulfill their “Christian obligations” toward their faithful domestics.18 Yet wills show that only a minority of masters took these obligations seriously.

Table 21 summarizes the legacies to servants in testaments from Toulouse and Bordeaux in the late 1720s. Column I shows the percentage of all wills leaving legacies to domestics, classified by social category. But these figures are not a true indication of patriarchal generosity, for the relatively high figures for the nobility and low figures for the lower classes probably simply reflect the fact that many more nobles were more likely to have servants in the first place. Therefore I corrected these figures for patterns of servant employment.19 The results are shown in Column II.

These figures suggest that only a minority of masters took their patriarchal

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<th>Toulouse</th>
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<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobility</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>35.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>35.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>28.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>39.0</td>
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Sources: See Bibliography, section I, B.

Note: I = percentage of legacies in total wills, and II = percentage of legacies in wills corrected to reflect patterns of servant employment.
obligations seriously, and that this was true of all social classes. We might have expected bourgeois and lower-class masters to have been more generous with their domestics, since the small size of their households could encourage intimate ties between master and servant. Or, conversely, we might have expected more concern from the nobility because of their sense of noblesse oblige. Yet the figures for all social groups are quite similar—in each only around one-third of the masters remembered their servants in their wills. Not even the clergy, who might have been expected to take the religiously founded precepts of patriarchy more seriously than the laity, were especially generous toward their domestics.

If the social class of masters had little effect on generosity toward servants, neither did their gender. Historians of households have often suggested that relationships between women employers and their female servants were much warmer and closer than those between master and man; that there often developed a mother-daughter relationship between a mistress of the house and her young servant girl or a sisterly affection between mistress and maid who grew old together, sharing the cares of the household. But in Old Regime France it is not clear that this was so. Table 22 suggests that, at least as measured by the barometer of legacies in wills, there was little difference in the relationships of mistress and maid and master and man. It is true that women heads of households, spinsters and widows, were often more generous to their servants than were men. This generosity probably reflected the sisterly relationships that often grew up between such women and their servantes. In the ancien régime widows and spinsters usually had little money and little social life. They lived modestly, employing a single servante who often remained in their service for decades and became companion, counselor, and friend as well as servant. The warmth of such relationships infuses wills like that of Marguerite Chauvel, widow of a conseiller in the Parlement of Bordeaux: "I declare that Marie Philip my femme de chambre who has been near me for more than twenty-five

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### TABLE 22
Percentage of Wills Including Legacies to Servants, by Gender, 1727–29

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<th>Toulouse</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
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<tr>
<td>All men</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All women</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female heads of households</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
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**Sources:** See Bibliography, section I, B.

**Note:** I = percentage of total wills, and II = percentage of legacies in wills corrected to reflect patterns of servant employment. The figures for all women could not be corrected for patterns of servant employment because they include married women who are not listed on tax rolls.
years and who has always served me with the rarest of fidelity and affection . . . merits the greatest kindness from my children.”

But married women were rarely so generous with their servants as single women and widows were, in part because they had little control over their money, but also probably because relationships between married women and their domestics were often difficult. For unlike the situation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, married women of the Old Regime did not necessarily have undisputed authority over the servants in their households. In the seventeenth century at least the running of a household and the supervision of domestics seem to have been male rather than female responsibilities. Domestic manuals of the period were addressed to men rather than women. In patriarchal theory, and seemingly in practice, the male head of the household bore the ultimate responsibility for its functioning; his wife was at best a lieutenant carrying out his orders. The correspondence of men like the Comte d’Avaux reveals that they were deeply involved in the minutiae of running a household. To be sure, some wives did exercise considerable control over their households, but they often had to fight for this. An example is the Duchesse de Liancourt, who was truly mistress in her house, but only as the result of a bargain with her dissolute husband: he “rendered her mistress of everything, and in return she ‘closed her eyes to all which she had to ignore’ ” in his private life. Other wives were not so fortunate. The Marquise de Courcelles was denied any voice in domestic affairs by her husband: “I did not even have in that household the authority to ask for a glass of water, and I remember that one day [when] I called for a horse . . . my husband’s grooms had the insolence to ask me who I was and by what right I gave orders.” The seventeenth-century mystic, Mme. de la Mothe Guyon, was not only deprived of control over her servants but also bullied and even physically abused by her maid. Such experiences did not make married women fond of their servants.

Thus while relationships between employer and domestic differed by gender, they did not do so in ways that necessarily made women more generous toward their servants. In fact, for all classes and both sexes levels of legacies to servants in wills hovered around 30 percent in the early years of the eighteenth century. If such legacies are a reflection of an employer’s acceptance of his patriarchal responsibilities for his domestics, they suggest that only a minority of masters took these responsibilities seriously.

After all, there was little to make them do so. Admittedly some social opprobrium came with being known as a mean master (such employers were the butt of proverbs: “De maistres gourmans, serviteurs et chiens ont toujours faim”), while to be loved by one’s servants reflected well on one’s personal reputation. Mme. de Pompadour counted “the attachment of my domestics,” along with the kindness of the king, the respect of courtiers, and the fidelity of her friends as one of the blessings of her life, and a conscience-stricken Mme. de Montespan asked the forgiveness of her servants on her deathbed.
But the mild social disapproval accorded the mean master seems to have weighed little against the temptations to tyranny inherent in the very nature of the master-servant relationship. For patriarchal theory, with its network of reciprocal rights and duties binding master and man, was in reality little more than a social myth. It masked a much more unequal relationship in which the master had all the rights while the servant had all the duties. Patriarchal theorists themselves dimly recognized this: their constant exhortations to masters to recognize their servants as their “brothers in Christ,” to treat them kindly, “however stupid they may be,” to overlook their faults and incapacities, are acknowledgments of the realities of a relationship in which all power lay on the side of the master. In such circumstances there was little to induce masters to behave toward their servants with the benevolent concern of model patriarchs.

Masters’ Attitudes toward Their Servants: Indifference and Contempt

If only a minority of masters regarded their servants with paternalistic benevolence, what was the attitude of the rest? In the seventeenth century, in striking contrast to later periods, memoirs and letters offer no clues, only silence. Masters rarely mentioned their servants in their memoirs and letters. A good example is the famed letter-writer Mme. de Sévigné. She wrote literally thousands of letters to her beloved daughter, and few events in her life were too trivial to merit a mention. Yet the thirty-odd servants who shared her household garnered only a handful of comments. And in this she was, I suspect, typical of the men and women of her time. Perhaps this very silence is the key to masters’ attitudes toward their servants: they were indifferent to and almost oblivious of their existence. The cliché “domestic enemies,” so often used to refer to servants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was probably an inaccurate representation of the feelings of masters toward their domestics, for it implied an awareness of servants, an active engagement with them, which most masters simply did not have.

The roots of employers’ indifference to their domestics lay, I think, in the extraordinary intimacies of households of the patriarchal period. As we have seen, masters rarely had a private moment away from their servants. Employer and employee often shared the same room and sometimes the same bed; and masters lived out the most intimate moments of their lives in full view of hordes of liveried retainers. This intimacy could stimulate close and affectionate relationships between employer and employee, as in the case of single women and their servantes, but it did not necessarily do so. For it could also drive masters to indulge in a sort of psychological distancing which served as a substitute for the actual physical distancing separating employer and domes-
tic in the households of later periods. Masters may have preserved their sanity in the face of the immense psychological pressures created by the constant presence in their lives of people who were, in essence, unknown and judgmental strangers by simply refusing to recognize their existence. Thus the intimacy of the households of the patriarchal period was probably at best a pseudo-intimacy; the familiarity of master with servant bred not just contempt but also indifference.

The techniques of psychological distancing were many and varied. We have already discussed some of them: the bestowal of nicknames and sobriquets, which robbed servants of their personal identities, and the enforced wearing of livery, which reduced them from people to things, to *objets d'art* forming part of the decorative background of their masters' lives. Servants were simply *there*, like the furniture; employers took their presence for granted, and refused to recognize or acknowledge their existence as individuals. Masters regarded servants almost as extensions of themselves, not only as instruments to do their will but also as extensions of their very physical being. One early seventeenth-century mistress, the notorious libertine Mme. d'Olonne, saw nothing incongruous in replying, when told by her confessor that she must do penance for her sins, "I'll have my servants fast." 34

Even when servants did succeed in penetrating their master's consciousness, their employers seem rarely to have recognized them as individual human beings with unique personalities of their own. They saw them instead as representatives of the *genus* servant—a social type characterized by a variety of unfortunate personality traits. Masters seem to have thought of their servants (when they thought of them at all) in terms of stereotypes which were uniformly negative. Servants were widely regarded as licentious, as *L'Etat de servitude, ou La Misère des domestiques* (an eighteenth-century *bibliothèque bleue* peddled cheaply by wandering booksellers) suggests. In it a lackey laments:

> On le [the servant] croit entaché de l'humeur libertine,  
> Naturelle et commune à la gente Lacquesine. 35

Servants were also perceived as gluttons and drunkards; in seventeenth-century comedies domestics often bore names like Brodevin (Wine jug), Ferme-à-table (Fixed at the table) and Trinequeboc (Drinking mug). 36 They were also thought notoriously lazy and shiftless. They were cowards, who bullied passers-by whenever they got the chance but trembled before the wrath of their masters: the cringing servant ducking his master's blows was a standard comic turn in seventeenth-century plays. 37 They were fundamentally dishonest ("to lie like a lackey" was a common figure of speech in the Old Regime) and indeed inclined to crimes of every sort (according to Des Essarts' *Dictionnaire universel de police* of 1787 servants were prone to "perfidy, de-
bauchery, corruption, cupidity, and the ignoring of all social virtues; theft, assassination, and poison are the crimes common to them."

But, above all, servants were stupid and ignorant. This was the most common servant stereotype in the ancien régime, as the abundance of “ignorant servant stories” in the literature of the period attests. Employers regarded stupidity as not only one of the most common traits of servants but also as one of the most desirable. A sixteenth-century nobleman once recommended a maître d’hôtel to his son in the following terms: “he writes very well and is very docile—that is, very stupid (fort sot).” The stupidity employers attributed to their domestics was of a certain sort, as the use of the word sot in the preceding quotation suggests. Servants’ stupidity was the loutish stupidity of country bumpkins, who wallowed happily in their ignorance as pigs wallowed in barnyard filth. Servants were “gros réjouis,” as the Comte de Montlosier referred to his valet; “sotises gens,” as Mme. de Sévigné called her domestics one of the few times she mentioned them.

The connotations of animality in these expressions are noteworthy, for they betray the deeply rooted associations of servants with animals in their masters’ minds. Religious tracts and domestic manuals often admonished employers not to think of their servants as “animals of a different species,” but they seem to have had little effect. Employers constantly borrowed metaphors and similes from the animal kingdom when referring to their domestics. To Mme. de Sévigné a rough-housing domestic “played like a dog”; to Mme. de Créquy a group of angry lackeys resembled “furious beasts”; and to the Baronne d’Oberkirch a favorite valet de chambre was her “chat de maison.” The association of servants with domestic animals was a favorite motif in French art of the period (see figure 7). The similarities of pose, treatment, and function of servant and pet in such paintings suggest that artists viewed them as more or less interchangeable. Indeed, a whole genre of popular woodcuts in the sixteenth century endowed domestics with the features and attributes of animals: pigs’ snouts, asses’ ears, and the like. Here is a contemporary verbal exegesis of one such image du bon valet:

He wears on his head a well-made red hat and on his body a proper shirt; he has the snout of a pig, ears of an ass, hoofs of a deer; his right hand is raised and always open, and he has on his left shoulder a yoke, from the two ends of which are hung two sacks of water. . . . In his left hand he carries a pail full of burning coals. The interpretation of this figure is apposite. The good servant must be properly dressed. The pig’s snout means that a valet must not be choosy about his food, and that he must be content with all sorts of viands. The ass’s ears signify that he must hear and support with patience the harsh words that his master says to him. The raised right hand signifies fidelity . . . the deer’s hoofs mean that he must be prompt to execute his orders. The water and fire show with what swiftness and industry he must apply himself to his household chores.

The servant as household pet. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French art, domestics were often portrayed in close association with animals and occasionally given animalistic characteristics themselves. Note the similar expressions of the pampered lapdog and equally pampered blackamoor.
The prevalence of such images suggest that servants were seen almost as a separate race of men, more animal-like than human in fundamental characteristics. As Fénélon noted in the seventeenth century, "Servants are regarded almost like horses; people believe them to be of a separate race and suppose that they were made for the convenience of masters." Such attitudes were natural to a society like that of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, which viewed each estate and occupation as a distinct race and believed that character traits and occupational attitudes—for example, the military prowess and "virtue" of the nobility—were passed down in the blood from generation to generation.

This tendency to see servants as a separate race—surely the ultimate step of psychological distancing—was useful to masters. It relieved the psychological pressures created by the constant presence of servants in their lives, for if domestics were of a separate and inferior race, their judgments on what they saw and heard of their masters' lives simply did not matter. It also justified not conforming to the behavior expected of an ideal patriarch, for if servants were animals, they were simply not worthy of benevolence. Thus it justified the automatic bullying, blows, and scornful insults which seem to have been the normal demeanor of masters toward their servants in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. It justified the caning Sr. Duhamel meted out to his domestique Nicolas when he lost his wallet, the beating François Joseph Fourvin received when he interrupted his master's dinner to report the result of an errand. It justified the indifference with which Mme. de Sévigné watched the physical suffering of her servants: "the abbé's lackey played like a dog [note the automatic animal simile] with the amiable Jacquine [a servant of Mme. de Sévigné]. He threw her on the ground, breaking her arm and dislocating the wrist. The cries that she made were frightful; it was as if a Fury had broken her arm in hell." Madame's reaction to this? "This novelty amused me." This attitude was, I suspect, much more typical of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and early-eighteenth-century employers than the benevolent concern of Sr. Sentou Dumont.

Masters' attitudes toward their domestics may have a broader historical significance than is obvious at first glance, for they may have helped to shape the general pattern of relationships between the elite and the lower orders in the hierarchal society of the ancien régime. Certainly the way masters viewed their servants, whether as the childlike dependents of the patriarchal model or as the lazy, licentious, and animal-like creatures of the standard stereotypes, were strikingly similar to the way in which they viewed the lower classes as a whole. This was especially true of the poor, who were thought of as lazy, shiftless creatures who wallowed animal-like in their drunkenness, debauchery, and ignorance of the basic tenets of religion, needing the firm moral guidance of their betters. This coincidence of views may reflect nothing more than
masters' recognition that their servants were drawn from the poor; masters may have simply applied to their servants the views they held of the lower classes in general. But it is at least possible that the process worked the other way, and that masters' opinions of the lower classes as a whole grew out of their contacts with their servants, who were, after all, the segment of the *meu peuple* they knew best. A major theme of class relationships in seventeenth-century France was a growing gulf between the elite and the lower classes, and a determined assault by the elite on the laziness, licentiousness, and irreligion of the poor. It is possible that this assault had its ultimate psychological roots in the intimacies of master and servant in the patriarchal household. For their experiences with their servants may have taught masters to view the poor in general as in need of reformation. And masters may have tried to achieve in society as a whole the separation from and regulation of their servants, those psychologically threatening presences, which they simply could not achieve within the patriarchal household.

Masters' relationships with and attitudes toward their servants may have further historical significance as well. Their experiences with their servants may have convinced masters not only of the innate inferiority of their domestics—and by extension, of the lower classes as a whole—but also of their own innate superiority and the fact that they fully deserved their position at the apex of the social hierarchy. For surely the major products of the psychological experience of being a master were an affirmation of personal identity and a conviction of superiority, just as the major psychological products of servanthood were a shaky sense of identity and a feeling of inferiority toward one's employers. The superiority of master over servant was implicit in the very relationship itself. It was obvious in both the patriarchal and the indifferent and contemptuous models of mastership. For a patriarchal father was by definition superior to his dependents, while the negative servant stereotypes of the contemptuous model implied that masters had opposite and therefore positive characteristics. This sense of superiority was surely deepened by daily experiences within the household, where masters had their every whim catered to and bullied, beat, and fired their servants with impunity. And it was further confirmed by the behavior of the servants themselves, no matter what they did. Obedient and devoted servants legitimized their masters' right to order them about, while disorderly and rebellious servants confirmed the negative stereotypes of servanthood and thus also, albeit indirectly, confirmed their masters' innate superiority.

A deferential society like that of seventeenth- and early-eightheenth-century France can function only when both those at the top and at the bottom of the social hierarchy are convinced of the innate superiority of the former and the innate inferiority of the latter. What we saw of servants' attitudes in the last chapter suggested that the deference of servants and their acquiescence to a social order that assumed their own inferiority was more complex and
problematic than is usually thought. If this was true of servants, whose experiences tended to create a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis their masters, how much more was it likely to be true of artisans or peasants, who had no such experiences? But if the lower classes' acquiescence in their inferior position in seventeenth-century society cannot be taken for granted, the upper classes' conviction of their own superiority was clearly firm and untroubled by doubts. This may have derived in large part from their experiences of mastering servants. The household may have been, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a school in which noble, officeholder, and rich bourgeois learned the attitudes and techniques of social dominance.

Changes in Master-Servant Relationships in the Last Half of the Eighteenth Century

In Old Regime France the presentation of servants on the stage closely paralleled the way their masters viewed them in real life, and in the last decades before the French Revolution this theatrical presentation underwent a profound transformation. In earlier centuries, on stage as in reality, servants were everywhere: in the 250 seventeenth-century comedies studied by Michel Lemain, there were no less than 784 domestics, or more than 3 per play. But on the stage as in reality, these swarming servants were scarcely recognized or recognizable as human beings. Their major functions were those traditional to stage servants since the comedies of ancient Greece: through their asides they explained the plot to the audience; through their machinations they kept it moving along. They also provided comic relief with their loutish manners and fractured French, and their stupidity, ignorance, and licentiousness served as dramatic foils for the noble qualities of their masters. On stage the presentation of servants rarely went beyond the level of stereotype. They bore outlandish names: the Pierrots and Columbines of the commedia dell'arte; the Merlinis and Zélis, Sgnarelles and Dorines of their creators' imaginations. Their behavior conformed to the common image of servants: they were lusty, loutish, cowardly, dishonest, and stupid (except when they had to be conniving to help the plot along). Only in Molière do we find more well-rounded and sympathetic portrayals of servants, and his domestics, with their refreshing common sense and their attractive mixture of sturdy independence and loyalty to their masters, did not influence his immediate successors.

But during the course of the eighteenth century the presentation of servants in French theater underwent a remarkable transformation, one that I think reflected the changed way their masters viewed them in real life. The tradi-
tional stereotypes of servants disappeared, drowned in the wave of realism that washed across the stage. With the emergence of the “comédie lar­moyante” in the last decades of the Old Regime, true-to-life family conflicts replaced the whirligigs of stratagem and disguise which had earlier passed for plots. Therefore servants were no longer necessary to explain the plot and carry it forward. As a result, they almost disappeared from the stage—a parallel to the contraction of real life households. In, for example, the comedies of Sedaine, who wrote at the end of the Old Regime, there were only four valets in twenty-eight plays.

Those servants who remained were presented much more realistically than servants had been in the seventeenth century. They lost their exotic names in favor of the “Guillaumes” and “Champagnes” they bore in real life. They also shed their stereotypes, displaying instead the characteristics real servants displayed. They were ambitious, manipulative, self-interested, and often highly critical of their employers, especially in the last half of the century, when they were used as the spokesmen for their creators’ increasingly devastating criticisms of the nobility and its way of life. At the same time stage servants took on many of the “good” qualities formerly reserved for their masters: they became increasingly intelligent, dignified, and worthy of respect. They became the filles de chambre of Marivaux, as attractive, witty, virtuous, and much more warmhearted and sympathetic than their mistresses. And they became of course Figaro, the servant respectable enough to bear his creator’s name, the servant as honnête homme, the counter-ideal to all the traditional stereotypes of servant licentiousness, cowardice, and stupidity. With Figaro the servant was not merely the auxiliary who explained the action and provided comic relief; he was the focus of the play, a man of emotions complex enough to make his master look like a wooden stereotype.

This changing image of servants on the stage reflected, I think, changes in the ways masters viewed their domestics in real life. In the last half of the eighteenth century, both the myth and the reality of the patriarchal household disappeared, and with them went the traditional attitudes and patterns of behavior toward servants. In place of the condescending paternalism of patriarchalism came a recognition of the servant’s essential equality with his master; in the place of the old automatic assumptions of servant loyalty and devotion came suspicion and uneasiness; in the place of extraordinary intimacies of the traditional household came the physical distancing of master and servant; in the place of the traditional indifference and stereotyping came a fascination with domestics and a recognition of their dignity as human beings. In general master-servant relationships in the last half of the eighteenth century were colder, more distant, and more formal than they had been in earlier periods, but they were also more egalitarian. And at least some masters and servants developed genuine friendships which would have been impossible in an earlier era.
The Demise of Patriarchalism and the Disappearance of the Patriarch

In the last half of the eighteenth century patriarchy as an organizing principle of the social order was in retreat on all fronts. In politics the family and household ceased to be the basic units of society; they were replaced by a society composed of equal and autonomous individuals. And in the family the tyrannical patriarch lost his absolute authority over his wife and children, and became a concerned and loving father and an affectionate and indulgent husband. In these circumstances it was probably inevitable that the patriarch would disappear from master-servant relationships as well.

In the late eighteenth century the patriarch apparently abdicated his traditional authority over household and servants in favor of his wife, the mistress of the house, la ménagère. The newly affectionate family life of the last half of the eighteenth century led to a firmer identification of woman as wife, mother, and housekeeper, and this in turn encouraged a new and more strict division of sex roles. Man's role was to go out in the world and work for the sustenance of his family; woman's was to remain at home and organize their daily existence. Or as one domestic manual put it: "All exterior affairs are the domain of the husband; that cannot be doubted. As for the wife, her duty is to oversee all the cares of the interior." 62

Within the interior the ménagère now reigned supreme. It was now she and not the patriarchal head of the household who hired, fired, and supervised domestics. This is reflected in the domestic manuals of the immediate pre- and postrevolutionary eras. Père Collet's Traité des devoirs des gens du monde, et surtout des chefs de famille, published in 1763,63 is the last domestic manual I know of to assume that a male household head would supervise its functioning. Later domestic manuals like Mme. Gaçon-Dufour's Manuel de la ménagère à la ville et à la compagnie (1805) and Mme. Demarson's Guide de la ménagère (1828)64 reveal in their very titles the assumption that the running of a household is the responsibility of its mistress. Mme. Gaçon-Dufour even gave to the ménagère responsibility for hiring and overseeing not only domestic servants but farm servants as well.65 This change seems to have reflected the way households actually functioned. By the 1780s wives like the Marquise de Courcelles, denied any voice in the running of their households, were clearly things of the past. Instead self-confident and energetic ménagères like Mme. d'Albis de Belbèze, wife of a conseiller in the Parlement of Toulouse, had carte blanche to hire, fire, and supervise the servants. When Mme. d'Albis de Belbèze wrote her husband that she had fired their daughter's governess, his reply indicated that it was unlikely he would ever challenge her authority in household matters. "I am delighted that you fired Thérèze," he wrote. "Anyway, you know that I always approve of everything you do."66
The substitution of the _ménagère_ for the patriarchal head of the household had an important impact on master-servant relationships. For the mistress of the house was not, in the late eighteenth century at least, burdened with the full weight of responsibilities for the moral and spiritual welfare of her domestics that had been the lot of the patriarchal master. Later this would change, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the _ménagère_ would be transformed into an “angel in the house,” the moral guide and exemplar of her husband and children as well as her servants. But in the late eighteenth century only a few precursors of this type, like Rousseau’s Julie in _La Nouvelle Héloïse_, had appeared. This meant that neither the master, who had relinquished his control in the household, nor the mistress, who had not yet become the “angel in the house,” was responsible for the morality of their domestics. Instead this responsibility fell on the servants themselves, who were increasingly recognized as adults capable of seeing to their own welfare.

This dismantling of moral responsibilities of the patriarchal master is clearly visible in the domestic manuals of the last decades of the Old Regime. Père Collet’s _Traité des devoirs des gens du monde_, dating from 1763, emphasized, as befitted a tract written by a priest, that employers should give their servants a chance to attend Mass and receive religious instruction. But unlike earlier domestic manuals, the _Traité des devoirs_ denied that employers had either the right to use corporal punishment on their domestics or the primary moral responsibility for their misdeeds.

Similarly, domestic manuals of the immediate pre- and postrevolutionary decades disavowed a master’s traditional patriarchal responsibilities for the material welfare of his servants. No longer did masters have the duty to provide for their servants’ futures through dowries or apprenticeships, or to care for them in illness and old age. In fact such duties were explicitly denied. Père Collet stated that firing a servant just because he was too old or too ill to work and sending him away “like a rejected parcel” often “smacks too much of inhumanity,” yet on the other hand “a master does not owe a salary to his servant when illness makes it impossible for him to work.”

In the domestic manuals of the last years of the Old Regime only a single duty remained to masters, one barely mentioned in earlier handbooks: that they pay their servants’ salaries promptly and without complaint. As Père Collet put it: “He [a master] must pay them [his servants] exactly. To treat them badly, even to fire them, because they dare to demand their wages at the end of the year is conduct in which there is neither reason nor justice.” Thus the patriarchal father of his servants had become simply an employer. After the middle of the eighteenth century, the language of a market economy invaded domestic manuals, replacing the familial rhetoric of the patriarchal period. The cash-nexus had become the sole tie which bound master and servant.
The Discovery of the Servant: Fear and Fascination within the Household

The master was not the only one to change with the demise of patriarchalism. The intrusion of the language and values of a market economy into the relationships of the household also necessitated a redefinition of the servant. No longer the “adopted child” of a patriarchal family, he became instead an employee, bound to his employer only by the wage he was paid. The new definition of the servant as wage laborer is clearly visible in the domestic manuals of the last years of the Old Regime. To Père Collet a servant was “that man who is paid by you” to perform domestic chores, and this definition was echoed by later writers like the anonymous author of Des Devoirs des serviteurs, des maîtres, des enfants, des parents, de tous les hommes envers l’église et l’état, published in Lyons in 1830. He defined servants solely in economic terms: they were “workers obliged to employ their time in return for a daily salary.”

The new definition of the servant brought with it a number of implications disturbing to masters. The servant was no longer a docile child; he was instead an adult, the equal to his employer. He was no longer a member of the family circle but instead an unknown stranger. And he was no longer automatically loyal and deferential. He was instead an economic man, motivated by self-interest; he would be loyal to his employer only when it was profitable for him to be so. He was therefore potentially dangerous to his master, and indeed to society at large.

How troubling this new view of servants was to their masters is in the letters and memoirs of the future revolutionary politician Mme. Roland, whose attitudes were probably as typical of those of late eighteenth-century employers as Mme. de Sévigné’s had been of those of an earlier era. Mme. Roland expressed much more awareness of her servants than Mme. de Sévigné had been and constantly mentioned them in her memoirs and letters. Indeed, the last letter she wrote before her execution was addressed to her maid. But Mme. Roland was also much more uneasy in her relationships with her domestics than the imperious Mme. de Sévigné had been.

An aspect of the new view of master-servant relationships especially disturbing to Mme. Roland was the fundamental equality of master and servant, a notion implicit in the conception of a cash-nexus relationship binding employer and employee. The two parties to such a contract were equal in a way that the two parties to the “pseudo-contract” binding master and servant (or for that matter, king and subject) in a patriarchal society were not. As Père Collet told masters, “Between you and the man who is paid by you, all is equal in the eyes of humanity.”

In the late eighteenth century the recognition of the fundamental equality
of domestics inspired a more just and humane treatment of servants. They were paid promptly and in full, and the incidence of corporal punishment declined. But the recognition of the equality of servants also created a certain uneasiness in master-servant relationships, especially among that segment of the population increasingly prominent as servant-employers in the last years of the Old Regime, the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois employers found the equality of servants troubling because their own social status was often insecure. Mme. Roland, that future spokesperson of *Égalité*, is a good example of this attitude. Although she married a robe noble, Manon Philipon's own social origins were modest. Her father was an engraver, a mere artisan. Her parents had always employed a *servante*, but they also had a relative in service: Manon’s aunt was *femme de charge* in a noble household. Mme. Roland was ashamed of this fact and disliked the assumption that servants were her equals. It was this feeling that prompted the famous tirade in her memoirs commemorating the time when her aunt’s noble employer invited her to lunch and then made her eat in the *office* with the servants. This passage is often interpreted as an attack on noble arrogance in the name of equality for the bourgeoisie. But in reality it is an attack on servants and their assumption of equality with outraged Mme. Roland.

A second troubling implication of the new view of the servant, and one that also bothered Mme. Roland, was the notion that he/she was no longer a family member but instead an outsider, a stranger. This troubled those late-eighteenth-century employers who cherished their newly felicitous family life and wished to conduct it in private, hidden from the view of those outside the family circle. It was this desire which prompted the physical distancing of servants within the household which we discussed in chapter 2.

Again Mme. Roland provides a good example of this attitude. She had grown up with servants, but her youthful letters reveal that she felt uneasy with them, simply because they were always around, always watching her, always privy to the secrets of her private life. As a teen-ager she resented the family *servante*’s attempts to help along her flirtations with young men. She wrote, in a passage that epitomizes the new uneasiness many employers felt with their domestics, “I hate the hidden services one receives from that type of person. I boss them, I pity them, but I do not wish to be obliged to them.” These sentiments persisted throughout her life. As a young wife and mother Mme. Roland fought running battles to keep her servants out of her private affairs and away from her husband and child.

A final implication of the new definition of servants, and perhaps the most upsetting to their masters, was that as employees servants were self-interested and therefore potentially disloyal. When servants cease to be members of a patriarchal family, employers could no longer expect them to display their traditional devotion to that family and its interests. Instead they were thought to be devoted only to their own advantage. Self-interest was in fact regarded as
the salient characteristic of servants in the late eighteenth century. The German traveler J. C. Nemeitz found it a national trait of French domestics; they were, he reported, "interested to the last degree." The Marquise de Bombelles also found self-interest the prime characteristic of her employees. Forced to bribe the homesick Swiss nurse of her infant son with the promise of a gold watch if she stayed at her post, the disgusted Marquise wrote to her husband, “So true it is that you cannot count on the attachment of those people except insofar as it is guided by interest.” The Princesse Louise de Condé concurred. When a former servant came to visit, the Princesse received her with resignation, asking how large a loan she needed. She was astonished to learn that the servant was prospering and had visited her out of simple devotion.

The recognition that their servants acted primarily out of self-interest, and that their devotion to their masters was therefore often feigned, was a blow to the egos of many employers. The traditional loyalty and affection of servants had flattered masters and had seemed to legitimize their right to rule. Now these props to masters' self-esteem were gone. Many found this hard to bear. The memoirs of the servant-employing classes of the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary decades echo with laments similar to those of the Emperor Napoleon, who discovered that the domestics he had thought devoted refused to go with him into exile on Elba. When even his personal body servant left him, Napoleon wailed: “A servant whom I believed devoted, because I have done everything possible to attach him to me, abandons me on the day of my departure! and I remain at the mercy of people I do not know!”

The revelation of servant self-interest was not only demoralizing for masters, it was also frightening. For what was to prevent these disloyal strangers from making off with the family linen or silver or even murdering them in their beds? In the last years before the Revolution the respectable classes were obsessed with the problem of vol domestique and the necessity of policing servants—direct outgrowths, I suspect, of the new view of the servant as self-interested stranger. Lying and dishonesty had always been among the qualities attributed to servants in the traditional negative stereotypes, but they had never before seemed threatening, for they had been counterbalanced by a loyalty taken for granted. Now that this was no longer the case, the servant—self-interested stranger, potential thief, potential murderer—had indeed become the “domestic enemy” of his frightened master.

Therefore it is not surprising that one of the major themes of master-servant relationships in the prerevolutionary decades concerns attempts to guarantee the loyalty and fidelity of domestics. One way to do this was to face up to the fact the servant self-interest and appeal to this very quality to get better and more faithful service. The 1770s and 1780s saw a proliferation of proposals to reward good and faithful servants with prizes, bonuses, and official honors and recognition—proposals that would have been thought absurd
and unnecessary in an earlier era. One M. de Montyon founded a prize for a loyal domestic, and the Sociétés d'Agriculture of both Paris and Toulouse awarded faithful farm servants. Even so august a body as the Académie Française gave prizes to servants. There was also a proposal for an honorary royal order, similar to the Chevaliers de St. Louis, for servants who stayed with the same master for at least twenty years. The order was to be called the Chevaliers de la Constance. Members would be nominated by their employers. Each would receive as badges of membership a ribbon for the lapel and a medal “as big as a three-écu piece” with a star in the middle and the words “Chevalier de la Constance” around the rim. This proposal, which takes the ambition and self-interest of servants for granted yet assumes that these can be satisfied within a traditional society of orders, is, in its mixture of the notions of corporatism and those of a market society, typical of the social thought of the last years of the Old Regime.

Another solution to the problem of potential servant disloyalty was a stricter policing of the background and references of domestics. This had not been necessary in earlier periods. The trust in servants characteristic of patriarchal society came in part from the fact that masters generally hired only servants they knew something about: children of local families (the Chevalier de la Rénauudie, a seventeenth-century Toulousan noble, took his farm servants almost exclusively from what he described in his livre de raison as the “village of Poumies in my parish”), relatives of servants already in the household, domestics recommended by friends. But in the late eighteenth century the rapid turnover among domestics, as ambitious servants moved from job to job in hope of bettering themselves, made the traditional methods of hiring impossible. Employers now had to deal with an impersonal labor market and hire unknown strangers, a practice they found frightening.

To cope with this new situation, in towns like Toulouse local governments passed numerous ordinances to limit the movement and guarantee the bona fides of domestics. In Toulouse an ordinance of 1754 (significantly, the first law concerning domestics service passed in the town in the eighteenth century) cited “the facility with which domestics leave their masters,” and required servants to serve out the full term of their contracts. It also required that they provide adequate references of their background and good conduct, and forbid the hiring of servants lacking these. The municipality of Toulouse also tried to regulate the labor market in servants and guarantee their honesty by founding a municipal bureau d'adresse, or employment agency. The bureau not only matched employers to employees but also vouched for the background and respectability of every servant on its list. Bureaux d'adresse were not a new idea; Paris, with its large and impersonal labor market, had one as early as the 1620s. But they did not come to provincial towns like Toulouse and Bordeaux until the 1770s and 1780s, and their foundation was testimony to the new concerns over the potential disloyalty of domestics.
Yet another solution to the problem of servant disloyalty was to hire only those types of servants who could be expected to be docile and devoted to their masters. This helps explain the growing tendency in the late eighteenth century to hire women and boys instead of men servants. It also helps explain employers' preferences for servants fresh from the countryside, uncorrupted by city ways. Newspapers of the 1780s like Bordeaux’s *Journal de Guienne* carried many requests from employers seeking: “a servante, honest, hard-working, and by preference a peasant” (*Journal de Guienne, December 27, 1784*) and “a robust servant girl, fit to be aide-de-cuisine in a good household; preference given to a girl newly arrived from the countryside” (*Journal de Guienne, January 19, 1786*). Servants were not above playing up to the preference for rural naivété. One young woman seeking a job in Bordeaux advertised herself as “newly arrived from Saintonge”; another described herself as “dressed in the village costume” of the countryside around Clermont in the Auvergne.

Another type of servant popular because of his supposed loyalty in the waning years of the ancien régime was the black domestic. There were only about 5,000 blacks in France in 1789, and most of them worked as servants. They were concentrated in ports that served the Indies and in Paris. Apart from the ports, where even quite modest merchants with connections to the islands might employ a black, they were generally found only in the households of the highest levels of the court nobility. In Paris in the 1780s the fashionable Marquise de La Tour du Pin, Madame de Genlis, and all the ladies of the house of Orléans had their black femmes de chambre, valets, and pages. There were in fact so many blacks in the households of the Parisian haut monde that during the Revolution they provided a whole company of soldiers, commanded by the black servant of Philippe-Egalité. One reason for the popularity of black domestics was therefore sheer snobbery.

But black servants had other attractions besides their social cachet. They were also popular because they could still be viewed and treated in terms of the traditional servant stereotypes, something that was no longer possible with white servants by the end of the eighteenth century. The philosophes may have worked for the abolition of slavery, and they may have found the “noble savage” a useful weapon in their attacks on the abuses of their own society. Nonetheless, like everyone else in eighteenth-century France, they regarded blacks as fundamentally lazy, stupid, and licentious—precisely the same characteristics traditionally attributed to servants. Blacks were frequently compared by their masters to animals, just as servants always had been. The most common comparison was with the singe, or monkey, but they were also likened to numerous other household pets. One M. de la Croix, author of the *Peinture des moeurs du siècle*, maintained that they were the successors to “parrots, greyhounds, spaniels, cats” in the affection of their mistresses. And in paintings black servants were portrayed with animals long after such poses of white servants had fallen out of fashion. (See figure 7.)
Black servants were not only regarded as pets, they were also treated like them. This was especially true of the little boys dressed as blackamoors who became the indulged playthings of their female employers. Even adult black servants were treated with more generosity and indulgence that white domestic. Their masters were less apt to report them for crimes (the courts were even less apt to convict them), and they were much more likely to set them up with dowries and apprenticeships and to leave them substantial legacies. For in their relationships with blacks masters could still assume the patriarchal postures no longer acceptable in their dealings with their fellow Frenchmen. Blacks were, after all, genuinely a race apart. They were seen as childlike and dependent creatures needing care and indulgence. And they were thought to repay these with the traditional servant's virtues of unswerving, doglike devotion and loyalty—qualities so deplorably lacking in the self-interested white domestics of the late eighteenth century. Their loyalty is the characteristic most frequently mentioned in the commentaries on black servants. In the Le La Bruyère des domestiques of Mme. de Genlis, for example, a section entitled “true heroic actions by black domestics” contains innumerable stories of black servants who saved their masters' lives. Unlike white servants, who saved their masters by their wits, they did this through sheer physical courage, and they were motivated by the “gentleness, naïveté, and kindheartedness” which Mme. de Genlis saw as fundamental to the character of blacks. This childlike devotion, so similar to the patriarchal stereotype of the ideal servant but so unlike the late eighteenth-century reality, made blacks popular as domestics. Their popularity was a sign of the nostalgia many masters felt for the good old days of the patriarchal household.

There was, however, another and happier side to master-servant relationships in the last years of the Old Regime. If the disappearance of the patriarchal household made servants into threatening strangers it also made them into adults, equal to their masters and deserving of respect. And if the growing distancing between master and servant reflected a new uneasiness in their relationships, it also lessened the psychological pressures that had formerly made masters ignore and stereotype their domestics. When the models and stereotypes of patriarchal society disappeared, employers could for the first time recognize their servants as individual human beings. Therefore while master-servant relationships were in general more distant and uneasy on the eve of the Revolution, at least some masters felt a new affection for their servants, an affection based not on the condescending concern of patriarchalism but instead on respect and even admiration.

The new recognition of servants as individuals is clearly visible in the letters and memoirs from the last years of the Old Regime. Mme. Roland was far from the only employer to fill her letters with references to her domestics. The teen-ager Laurette de Malboissière wrote her closest friend of the doings of her femme de chambre; the young wife of the Conseiller d’Albis de Belbèze
wrote him about the peculations of the cook; the Comtesse de Sabran relayed to her lover her problems in finding a tutor for her son; the Duc de Bourbon entertained his mistress with an account of the clandestine marriage of two servants in his household. A court beauty writing her memoirs devoted almost as much space to the doings of her domestics as she did to the state visit of Joseph II; a nobleman writing his memoirs devoted almost as much space to the amatory triumphs of his valet de chambre as he did to his own. It was as if the elite for the first time woke up to the fact that there were servants all around them.

In these letters and memoirs servants are described not in the traditional stereotypes but instead as individuals, portrayed with accuracy and insight. We get capsule biographies of individual servants. We are told how they looked (the Comte Dufort de Cheverny's valet Marnier was “a man of 5'11", of the handsomest figure that a woman could see, with the strength of an athlete"), how they talked (the Marquise de Villeneuve-Arifat noted the impressive if misused vocabulary of her grandfather's coachman, and the Baronne d'Oberkirch described the fractured French of her Alsatian maid), and how they behaved. Employers like the Baronne de Gerando, who wrote a long account to a friend of her maid's unhappy marriage, displayed at least some knowledge of the private lives of their servants and some empathy with their personal problems.

There was, to be sure, an amused tone to these references which suggests that condescension lurked just below the surface. In the last decades of the Old Regime most masters still undoubtedly felt superior to and contemptuous of their domestics. This contempt showed in their unthinking use of the word valet and other servant titles as terms of insult. The Duc de Lauzun, who disliked the American diplomat Arthur Lee, once described him as having “very much the air of a gros palefrenier”; the young Laurette de Malboissiere found M. de St. Chamas “not worthy of being valet to M. de Choiseul”; and the Restoration essayist J. Joubert called the Devil himself a “mauvais valet.”

But in the prerevolutionary period the general contempt for the genus servant which such passages reveal was often modified by a genuine empathy with and affection for individual domestics. Once servants were seen as individuals, their good qualities could be recognized; once their loyalty and devotion could no longer be taken for granted, servants who displayed such qualities could be appreciated. The memoirs of especially the court nobility show that they sometimes developed genuine friendships with their servants, friendships that cut across class lines and were solidly based on mutual admiration and respect. The relationship of Mme. de La Tour du Pin with the governess who raised her was of this type, as was that of the Comte Dufort de Cheverny and his valet-companion Marnier. Even the relationship between the Marquis de Barthélemy and Le Tellier, the valet de chambre who died in exile with him during the Revolution, showed something of these qualities.
The possibilities of such affection may explain an otherwise puzzling phenomenon: the fact that legacies to servants in wills rose to what was probably an all-time high in the years right before the Revolution. Table 23 shows the percentages of wills leaving legacies to servants from Toulouse and Bordeaux from 1787 to 1789. Both the corrected and uncorrected figures are substantially higher than those from the 1720s shown in table 21, and this is true of all social classes. This generosity may simply reflect the monetization of servants' work in the period; legacies may have become by the 1780s an expected supplement of servants' wages. Or it may reflect the philanthropic impulse characteristic of the age; John McManners maintains that by the 1780s public opinion judged the generosity of people by the size of their legacies to domestics. But these legacies may also reflect the genuine affection and appreciation many masters felt for their loyal and hard-working servants.

At times the affection of master for servant threatened to turn into idealization. Indeed during the last years of the Old Regime employers showed some danger of falling into a new sort of stereotyping of their servants opposite to that of an earlier era. Their masters' memoirs often pictured servants as Rousseauist children of nature, uneducated but intelligent, with a natural instinct for goodness uncorrupted by civilization. Such was the presentation of the valet Marnier by his admiring master, and such was the portrait of the governess Marguerite by Mme. de La Tour du Pin's portrait of her. Marguerite, in fact, resembled no one so much as the totally good and innocent peasant heroine of Flaubert's *Un Coeur simple*. In part such portrayals reflect a sentimentalizing of the "child of nature" common to pre-romanticism, a yearning among the nobility for natural simplicity in their overcivilized lives. Noble memoirs of the late eighteenth century show that many masters harbored fantasies of replacement and inversion similar though opposite to those of their domestics. They fantasized about what it would be like to be a servant, just as their servants dreamed of being masters, and occasionally they made their fantasies come true. Mme. de La Tour du Pin often daydreamed about being

### TABLE 23

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<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Toulouse</th>
<th>Bordeaux</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Nobility</td>
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<td>61.2</td>
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<td>Middle class</td>
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<td>Lower class</td>
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<td>Clergy</td>
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*Sources:* See Bibliography, section I, B.

*Note:* 1 = percentage of legacies in total wills, and 2 = percentage of legacies in wills corrected to reflect patterns of servant employment.
Marguerite's daughter; when her maid went home for a visit, "I made her tell me all that she did in her village. For several days after, I imagined what I would do if I was a peasant." Mme. de Genlis was so fascinated with her servants' lives that she once disguised herself as a maid and accompanied her femme de chambre to a village wedding, dancing with all the local lads. The Duc de Lauzun disguised himself as a royal footman during his pursuit of Marie Antoinette, and the Duc de Richelieu dressed up as a femme de chambre, no less, to gain access to his lady-love, Mlle. de Valois. These are just a few of the numerous inversion stories in nobles' memoirs of the period. They suggest a certain amount of play-acting on the part of a social group secure in its privileges, finding titillation in contact with the lower orders. But they also suggest that the fascination servants exercised on their masters was deep and real.

In the twilight of the Old Regime, as in the patriarchal period, masters' attitudes toward their servants may have helped shape their attitudes toward the lower classes as a whole. Certainly the prerevolutionary decades saw a discovery of the "people" similar to the discovery of the servant, and the elite showed the same ambiguities in its attitudes toward the people as it did toward its domestics. On the one hand, the late eighteenth century saw a growing gulf between the elite and the menu peuple as the traditional society of orders became a society of classes, and this gulf paralleled that between master and servant with the decline of the patriarchal household. The most marked characteristic of social thought of the period was a rise in social fear. Social theorists and government officials were obsessed with the problems of vagabondage, theft, and social disorder; they were convinced of the need to discipline the people to make them more productive. These concerns had of course a basis in the realities of late-eighteenth-century French society. But they may also have grown out of the new tensions between master and servant within the household. For social theorists of the period showed a striking tendency to blame servants for the ills of French society. It was the unemployed servant who became a vagabond; it was the employed servant who was responsible for the rise in theft. Servants were even blamed for what was perceived, wrongly, as the depopulation of the French countryside and the consequent weakness of French agriculture, for domestic service was thought to draw able-bodied men away from the countryside and into unproductive idleness in towns. Thus the servant was the representative of the people at their most threatening; he became the scapegoat for the social ills of France.

But there was also another side to the discovery of the people, and this too paralleled the changing attitude of the elite toward their servants in the last years of the Old Regime. The private generosity of master to servant was echoed in the public spirit of philanthropy characteristic of the age; needy servants came in for their fair share of the proposals for charities and asylums for the aged, the ill, and the unemployed which were popular at the time.
And the people too were romanticized and idealized just as masters romanticized and idealized their servants, they too were seen as children of nature, sources of folklore, embodiments of the French spirit.\textsuperscript{110}

Thus in the last years of the Old Regime the household may still have functioned as a laboratory for social attitudes. Masters may have acquired there the social fear that marked the years of the Revolution and the early nineteenth century, but they may also have discovered there, in the guise of their servants, the “people” in all their glory. The Revolution would, however, lessen the attraction of the “people”; only the social fear would remain.