Scandalous Asylum Commitments and Patriarchal Power

In 1840, an anonymous author published a play condemning the institutionalization of sane people. Called The Madhouse Supplier, its plot involved a scheming doctor who conspired with the relatives of potential patients in order to turn a profit. In exchange for their payment, patients’ families could commit their inconvenient relations and hold onto family fortunes themselves. The play’s most sympathetic character was Mademoiselle Varlon, a young woman who hoped to marry an impoverished student much to her wealthy father’s chagrin. He brought her to the asylum several days before she reached the age of majority, and the doctor diagnosed her with monomania—supposedly sick with love, her insistence that her feelings were reasonable merely reinforced the doctor’s claim that she suffered from an unhealthy obsession. In the end, the clever young woman took part in an escape, and agents of the state put a stop to the illegal machinations of the asylum doctor. As for Mademoiselle Varlon, she agreed to marry her betrothed on the condition that he become a lawyer sworn to defend the unjustly interned against “religious, domestic, and especially medical” inquisitions.¹

Family conflicts surrounding the commitment process provided plenty of ammunition for critics of medical power, and the writer of The Madhouse Supplier was hardly the only voice railing against the misuse of psychiatric authority in nineteenth-century France. A full-fledged anti-alienist movement evolved by the 1860s, focusing on the plights of men and women committed to institutions against their will.² Asylum doctors had worried about their professional reputations before the rise of anti-alienism, as evidenced by the cold shower debate of the 1840s. However, these concerns intensified and became more justifiable under shifting political circumstances.

Alienists typically benefited from their association with the state. This was certainly the case in the Revolutionary era and, again, during Louis-Philippe’s constitutional monarchy, whose government’s promotion of bourgeois class interests had much in common ideologically with the efforts of psychiatric...
professionals despite the regime’s extremely limited franchise. Yet the July Monarchy ended abruptly in 1848 when liberal and radical members of the middle and working classes rebelled against the elitist government in the name of increased political rights and, in some cases, economic opportunity. The revolution succeeded in bringing about a Second Republic, but it did not last long: the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, Louis-Napoleon, was elected president in 1848 and declared himself Emperor in 1852, thereby severely curtailing citizens’ ability to openly dissent from the government for nearly two decades. In this context, critics expressed their dissatisfaction with the regime by publicizing abuses committed by the state-sponsored psychiatric system. Accusations of medical maltreatment continued after the 1870 inauguration of the Third Republic, when the denial of patients’ liberty appeared especially incongruous with the stated values of a republican government.

While the asylum’s critics did not succeed in overturning the law of 1838, their press campaigns represented the beginning of the end for the moral treatment. Critics vocally opposed the hypocrisy of a system that stripped innocent people of their independence under the guise of rehabilitation, calling the asylum a “modern Bastille” that benefited doctors but hurt their patients. Allegations of unjust commitment proved a liability to the psychiatric profession, and doctors regularly attempted to combat negative stereotypes about themselves and their institutions during the last several decades of the century. That said, many charges of unwilling institutionalization focused on the financial motives of patients’ families and depicted doctors as convenient coconspirators or even dupes. In this sense the asylum system provided a dangerous backdrop for the enactment of “inquisitions” whose origins resided in the domestic realm.

Representations of these medical dramas reveal a great deal about postrevolutionary family dynamics, especially the contested but steady transition from an authoritarian family ideal to something more sentimental and even egalitarian. We have seen how asylum doctors helped elaborate these family ideals by implying men should wield authority—within the home and society—by virtue of their rationality rather than their sex alone. However, as in the fictional case presented in *The Madhouse Supplier*, fathers who resisted the gradual leveling of familial hierarchies could also use the asylum system to discipline children who failed to display appropriate deference. Psychiatry thus helped to maintain authoritarian family relations despite the profession’s intellectual commitment to bourgeois gender and family values. Press attention to cases of unwilling asylum commitment nevertheless often condemned dictatorial conduct within families, and controversial instances of the sequestration of male heads of household.
indicate that the medico-legal system actually threatened the powers of some fathers in the starkest of terms.

The writings of asylum inmates, in particular, provide evocative snapshots of evolving attitudes towards familial authority and its relationship to mental medicine. While psychiatric and legal discourses greatly circumscribed the options available to the interned when it came to mounting their own defense, the victims of unjust asylum commitment sought to expose their plights to the public whenever possible. Patient voices presented compelling counternarratives to those constructed by the psychiatric community and by family members using the asylum system for their own purposes. The elaboration of these counternarratives, however, depended on each patient’s ability to ascertain and manipulate cultural norms, particularly those located at the ever-shifting nexus of psychological disability, gender, and class. Publicizing their circumstances in a way that drew attention and sympathy required the navigation of a cultural landscape seemingly designed to thwart all their efforts. Some managed to do so, while others found themselves trapped—both physically and rhetorically—by the powerful alliance of medicine, the family, and the state.

Despite working at cross purposes, the writings of mental patients featured a number of similarities with those published by doctors, in that patients consistently made use of normative values informed by psychiatry against the psychiatric establishment itself. Tropes associated with the sentimental family—domesticity, benevolent paternalism, personal and familial honor—provided male patients a powerful defense strategy, even if the spread of these same norms narrowed the range of gendered behaviors considered rational and, thus, acceptable. Scandalous asylum commitments drew attention to the constructed and performative dimensions of gender and rationality, undermining both asylum psychiatry and the family ideal it sought to naturalize. Against all odds, gender in nineteenth-century France constituted more than a prop for medical and patriarchal authority (the paired “inquisitions” central to the plot of *The Madhouse Supplier*): it was also a tool with which to challenge these very structures. Tragically, for most patients ensnared by the psychiatric system at the request of their families, this made for a hollow victory.

Asylum Psychiatry and the Legal Foundations of Patriarchal Power

The revolutionary origins of French psychiatry shaped the profession’s self-image, as well as its practical role in a society newly rooted in class-based conceptions of merit rather than the legal privileges of the Old Regime. Psychiatric
attempts to inculcate bourgeois gender norms in patients as proof of cure, and thereby reify such values, propped up associations between manliness and rationality in a way that aligned perfectly with postrevolutionary understandings of citizenship and economic participation. As we have seen, psychiatry stood for a new kind of freedom, but only for some—like political liberalism itself, the actions and attitudes of asylum doctors simultaneously challenged authoritarian sensibilities and enshrined new limitations. The specialty’s connection to the French state likewise reflected this duality, in that laws pertaining to asylum sequestration reinforced the development of anti-authoritarian—but by no means equitable—family relations by curtailing the ability of relatives to imprison one another without medical cause. Such laws, however, were open to manipulation by men hoping to control their children and wives in ways that struck many observers as out of step with modern sensibilities. In spite of the profession’s nominally progressive stance, critics leveled accusations of cruelty and corruption against asylum doctors as their legal and cultural influence grew.

In order to fully appreciate the tactics used by unwilling mental patients and their relatives, we must first understand the precise legal codes that regulated familial order during and after the French Revolution, specifically those statutes related to the expression of authority between parents and children and between husbands and wives. The emergence of sentimental family values among bourgeois families can be traced to the eighteenth century. It nonetheless took the intervention of Revolutionary and Napoleonic legislators to connect this way of life to the legal structures of the French state, legitimating it and further fueling its spread. In this way, postrevolutionary legal changes propelled the subtle but persistent shift from an authoritarian to a bourgeois family ideal while providing a new context through which families attempted to settle marital and intergenerational conflicts. The laws most relevant to cases of scandalous asylum commitment involved inheritance, property rights, and marital separation. Equally important was the law of 1838 regulating asylum admissions, although historians have largely neglected this law in discussions of postrevolutionary family legislation. Aside from this addition, the legal status of the French family remained essentially static in the period between the elaboration of the Civil Code in 1804 and the passage of various policies related to child welfare, divorce, and paternity during the early decades of the Third Republic.

While Revolutionary family law and even the more moderate Civil Code created a situation that tempered paternal authority, the law of 1838 served to reestablish a method through which families could control relatives who behaved in a fashion they considered dishonorable, irrational, or financially risky.
This was not the intent of men like Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, the prime force within the psychiatric community who pushed for the law’s passage. As indicated during the debate over the cold shower, most asylum doctors considered the creation of a national asylum system a key moment in the profession’s attainment of social and cultural authority, and they feared the mistreatment of patients would hurt their fragile reputations. Esquirol and his colleagues nevertheless opened the door for familial abuse of the new regulations. While he believed governmental intervention would secure the humane treatment of insane people and keep sane ones from ending up in asylums, it actually provided a legal means for family members to sequester inconvenient relations for an indeterminate amount of time, now with the state’s official seal of approval.

In this respect, the law of 1838 could function as a replacement for the Old Regime lettre de cachet. The king issued the lettre de cachet, literally a sealed letter, at the request of a family member—most often a male head of household, although there were notable exceptions—to imprison a wife, child, or other relative without trial. This process served to solidify the link between patriarchal and monarchical power and highlighted the interdependence between familial and governmental order. Dissatisfaction with this state of affairs revealed itself in the cahiers de doléances, petitions collected throughout France expressing various grievances against the state that the National Assembly took under consideration in 1789. A number of the cahiers pointed to the perceived injustice of the lettre de cachet, and its abolition was one of many momentous alterations in family law that occurred during the Revolutionary period and shortly thereafter.

Fatherly authority, like kingly authority, was theoretically absolute in the eighteenth century, and when people began to question the legitimacy of the king, they likewise questioned the justness of hierarchical relations within the “small state” of the French household. The lettre de cachet established the most obvious link between these two mutually reinforcing forms of domination and blatantly exposed the pernicious influence of arbitrary power on the expression of individual liberty, especially with regard to marriage choice. On the eve of the Revolution, children could control their property once they reached majority and marriage technically required the consent of both husband and wife. However, because of the lettre de cachet, parents—particularly fathers—continued to wield significant influence over a child’s selection of a spouse, even when that child was an adult man. The National Assembly’s speedy abolition of the lettre de cachet in 1789 and the release of all those interned through the process who had not been found guilty of a crime attests to the widespread questioning of patriarchal power that occurred in the opening months of the Revolution. Unlike
other provisions of family law enacted during the early years of the Revolution, later governments never reversed the abolition of the *lettre de cachet*, thereby striking a definitive blow against the Old Regime household.11

Inheritance law likewise underwent profound transformations during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras.12 The first notable change involved the elimination of primogeniture in March 1790. The ability of parents to choose one successor among their children was eventually replaced by a requirement to divide family property evenly among them. By November 1793, the right of children to inherit equally also included illegitimate sons and daughters. Lawmakers ultimately reversed some of the most radical innovations in inheritance law in an effort to re-stabilize paternal authority within the family. Thus, the 1804 Civil Code did not require equal inheritance among legitimate and illegitimate children. In fact, as Suzanne Desan has shown, “natural” children could no longer become heirs at all, merely creditors of their fathers’ estates and only if the deceased had explicitly included them in his will.13 This reaffirmed the power of fathers, giving them more authority to dispense of their property in a manner of their choosing. Nonetheless, the Code maintained that all legitimate children had a right to a portion of the estate even as it also specified that an extra portion could be passed along in whatever way a father saw fit.14 Few legal channels existed for someone who hoped to disinherit his legally recognized offspring. Some nineteenth-century families, however, eventually maneuvered around this restriction by using the law on asylum commitments.

In the decades following the Revolution but preceding the passage of the 1838 law, it was not uncommon for family members to deliver their purportedly insane relatives for treatment in private asylums. The government provided little oversight of this process and it required merely the support of an asylum director and the payment of boarding fees by the patient’s family. The new law stipulated that the directors of public and private institutions could accept “voluntary” patients only with conclusive proof of an individual’s deteriorating mental state.15 Any person seeking the commitment of a relative had to present a doctor’s certificate that outlined the particulars of the individual’s illness and attested to the necessity of psychiatric treatment. Following placement in an asylum, the prefect of police (in Paris) or the prefect or mayor (in the provinces) would appoint at least one additional doctor to inspect and diagnose the interned individual, who would then be released as soon as doctors declared them cured.16 Any person who found him- or herself in an asylum through *placement volontaire* could also secure release based on the request of whomever sought to have them interned in the first place.17 The prefect might demand any patient’s immediate discharge as
well, and patients could appeal their commitment through the local court unless they had lost their civil status through interdiction.¹⁸

The second method of sequestration outlined in the law of 1838 did not involve the patient’s family, at least not in theory. Patients interned through placements d’office found themselves in asylums at the request of governmental authorities. According to the law, the prefect of police could mandate that any person “whose state of mental disturbance might compromise public order or the safety of persons” be committed to a public or private asylum for an indeterminate amount of time.¹⁹ Like family members, prefects needed to outline the circumstances leading up to the initiation of commitment proceedings, and a doctor had to certify the patient’s mental instability.²⁰ The director of the institution subsequently delivered a report on the patient’s mental state to the prefect twice a year.²¹ If the doctor believed a patient cured, the law required him to immediately inform the prefect, who then determined whether the patient should be set free. The implementation of a placement d’office required cooperative interaction between governmental and medical authorities, the two groups specifically mentioned in the 1838 law. In practice, however, the patient’s family often brought their relative’s condition to police attention.

One final relevant aspect of the law on asylum commitments involved patients’ finances. Almost all instances of unjust internment involved money in one way or another. Once put in an asylum, a patient lost the right to freely control their property. Instead, the courts appointed a provisional financial administrator who would see to the patient’s best interests.²² Sometimes the administrator was an employee of the institution or a notary appointed by the court.²³ More often, it was a member of the family—a rather opportune situation for someone wanting to curb the spending habits of a supposedly insane relative. The administrator would pay the patient’s debts, collect their revenue, and even represent their interests in legal actions.

The law of 1838 included safeguards meant to protect patients from the financial manipulation of provisional administrators. For example, an impartial judge selected the overseer and their appointment required judicial renewal every three years.²⁴ Furthermore, a patient could request the additional appointment of a personal curator meant to guarantee that “the income of the insane person is used to improve his lot and hasten his cure” and that “said individual shall be restored to the free exercise of his rights as soon as the situation permits.”²⁵ While the presence of such an advocate made it difficult for relatives to spend a patient’s money indiscriminately, relatives still had the option to request a patient’s interdiction (i.e., the loss of civil status) on grounds of mental incompetence. If the
courts granted the interdiction, the patient’s guardian effectively gained control over his or her assets. In sum, the law of 1838 created a new legal context within which to settle family disputes, or at least prolong them indefinitely: it filled the vacuum left by the lettre de cachet, replacing the king’s seal with the medical certificate.

Institutionalized Sons and the Persistence of Fatherly Authority

One of the first instances of scandalous asylum sequestration occurred shortly after the passage of the 1838 law and involved a father with traditional ideas about paternal authority using the medico-legal system to keep a wayward son from inheriting his fortune. François-Joseph Mistral, a prominent businessman from the South of France, was livid when he discovered that his twenty-two year old son, Jean, had married a young Polish woman without his consent. As a legitimate heir, Jean would inherit his father’s property regardless, and Mistral decided to orchestrate his son’s internment in order to keep the family wealth out of the young couple’s hands. Jean returned to his natal region for medical care following a brief sojourn in Paris, where he had contracted a chest ailment. Once he arrived home his father immediately sent him to the asylum and forced his new wife into the streets. The elder Mistral secured an interdiction shortly after committing Jean against his will, thereby gaining the power to have his son’s marriage annulled.

The sequestration of Jean Mistral—who came to be known as the “fou aux soixante millions”—gained notoriety shortly after his internment, when the writer Adolphe Dumas wrote a series of articles in the young man’s defense. Dumas presented the père de famille as a conniving and money-hungry man whose understanding of the rights and responsibilities of fatherhood flew in the face of modern values. The writer argued “twelve good fathers” should assess François-Joseph Mistral’s behavior, implying that a jury of the man’s peers would judge him harshly. Conversely, François-Joseph insisted that his actions toward his son actually proved he was a good father. In several letters to the editor published by the local newspaper, he presented himself as an honorable man looking out for the best interests of his family, including his wayward son, whom he hoped to protect from the manipulations of a scheming foreign woman of ill repute. He claimed the institutionalization of the young man fell within his fatherly prerogatives and complained that Dumas’s depiction of his personal, family issue constituted an affront to his good name and a threat to his “rights as a father.” In time, Dumas abandoned Jean’s cause after determining that his
Polish wife was not the virtuous girl he had initially imagined; the local press subsequently ceased to pay attention.

Despite some questioning of François-Joseph’s behavior, the outcome of the case suggests that the rhetoric of paternal authority still held a great deal of currency at midcentury, particularly when the father in question was a respected member of the community and his son had a reputation for disobedience and irrationality (often viewed as one and the same). The father Mistral had followed the letter of the law in pursuit of his family’s financial interests, which he argued that his son had betrayed by marrying irresponsibly. In this way, the tragic life of Jean Mistral reveals not only the halting nature of authoritarian paternalism’s legal and cultural decline but also a fundamental tension within the bourgeois family ideal.

The nineteenth-century family was supposedly built on sentimental foundations; love bonded husbands to wives, parents to children, and brothers to sisters. The legal code supported an individual’s right to make his or her own choice regarding the pursuit of marital happiness, thereby perpetuating the sentimental ideal across generations by encouraging ties of affection within each grown child’s nuclear segment of the extended family. At the same time, the middle classes celebrated affective family relations at least in part because they helped preserve and expand family wealth in an economically tumultuous society that lacked the protections of primogeniture. Conflict arose when a child’s actions appeared to contradict this essential goal by threatening the fortunes of the family as a whole. François-Joseph Mistral effectively argued this was the case when Jean sought to marry a woman he deemed inappropriate: Mistral père was merely protecting the family’s interests, albeit at the expense of his son. The fact that Jean’s support in the press evaporated when his fiancé’s apparently sordid past came to light suggests that despotic fatherly behavior was still largely accepted, even within bourgeois families. Jean Mistral would remain locked away for the next forty years, all but forgotten until his father’s death.

The case of a middle-aged man named Ernest Faligan had similar overtones but a happier outcome. Relatively few scandalous commitments gained enough public attention to result in wide coverage in the nonmedical press, so it can be difficult to make claims about changing attitudes over time, even when two examples share a number of salient features. A brief comparison of the predicaments faced by Jean Mistral and Ernest Faligan, however, speaks to the persistence of dictatorial family dynamics in the nineteenth century and their ready accommodation within the so-called sentimental family. Faligan’s institutionalization occurred in the early 1870s, several decades after the passage of the
1838 law, at a time when many French viewed the psychiatric profession with suspicion. Authoritarian family relations likewise became more controversial as the century wore on, especially after the establishment of the Third Republic. That said, Faligan regained his freedom only when his father gave his blessing, on the condition that his son recoup from his purported illness at the family estate, and not because of any backlash from the press.

Faligan’s parents interned him against his will twice in 1873, first in a provincial private institution for several days and later in the Parisian public asylum Charenton for almost nine months. In 1879, one year after his father’s death and the subsequent discovery of papers detailing the events surrounding his incarceration, Faligan sent petitions to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate charging the police with unlawful arrest and sequestration. The publication of two narrative descriptions and a document collection relating his ordeal represented part of the unwilling patient’s effort to persuade the government to open an investigation into his treatment. These reports roundly condemned the alliance between state, family, and medical authorities. As in the case of Jean Mistral, Faligan’s situation revealed inconsistencies inherent in postrevolutionary family law, not to mention the middle-class family ideal, when it came to the expression of paternal power.

The purported motivations behind the commitments of Faligan and Mistral represented two sides of the same coin, each reflective of parental desires to control a son’s marriage choices in order to secure family property. Like most bourgeois parents, Faligan’s mother and father aimed to keep family properties intact, and they attempted to force their son into an unwanted marriage to his cousin by threatening him with indefinite internment in an asylum if he did not comply (at least this was Faligan’s claim). The would-be patient recalled a tumultuous upbringing marked by near-constant disagreement between himself and his family. As a young man he dreamed of cutting family ties, while his mother and father hoped to ensure his continued dependence. Age forty at the time of his arrest in Paris, he had maintained only irregular contact with most of his relatives during the sixteen years since his arrival in the capital.

The events leading up to Faligan’s commitment were complicated and, according to him, required a multiperson conspiracy. He worked in the acquisitions department of the French National Library when his father initiated the commitment plot, although he was also a novelist and a trained doctor of medicine (a fact displayed prominently on the frontispiece of each petition to the legislature). In 1872, he began to suspect his parents of meddling in his personal and professional affairs, and he reluctantly decided to visit them in Angers to
investigate the situation. He soon determined that they aimed to marry him
to his cousin, Louise, to whom he had been promised since childhood, and he
decided to flee. The police arrested the wayward son at the local train station
and sent him to an institution. He was later released thanks to the entreaties
of a friend.

The plot against Faligan escalated upon his return to Paris in late January
1873. With his family’s urging and financial backing, several colleagues ap-
proached the prefecture of police in Passy with suspicions that their coworker’s
behavior had recently become erratic and dangerous. They expressed concern
that he would attempt to burn down the library, persuading the prefect to bring
him in for questioning and an evaluation of his mental state in an effort to trigger
a *placement d’office.* According to Faligan, someone drugged him on the way to
the police station, and he appeared out of sorts when taken to Paris’ Sainte-Anne
asylum, where all the city’s mental patients went for processing before being
dispatched to other public institutions. Shortly thereafter the authorities trans-
ferred Faligan to Charenton, where the asylum director, Doctor Constans, and
his colleague Henri Legrand du Saulle certified his insanity with a diagnosis of
délire de persecution (persecution mania). Faligan’s father finally agreed to his
release eight months later on the assurance that his son would return to live in
the family home. Faligan moved back to Paris less than a year after that, at which
point the now unemployed librarian claimed he faced considerable harassment
from his cousins and their various agents within the government. Faligan relo-
cated to Angers between the November 1878 death of his mother and that of his
father almost one year later, and the two men seem to have reached an accord
during this period if not before. He nonetheless expressed fears of another con-
finement, now at the instigation of his cousins, in writings published six years
after his institutionalization.

It is impossible to determine what is true and what is false in Faligan’s narra-
tive. From an outsider’s perspective, nothing especially conspiratorial stands out
in the letters discovered and later published by Faligan after his father’s death;
while the son saw proof of collusion in his parents’ correspondence, their be-
avior could also reflect genuine concern. In Faligan’s case, unlike that of Jean
Mistral, there seems to have been little public pushback against his relatives’ and
doctors’ claims that he had been institutionalized for his own good, despite his
publication of a vigorous self-defense. If a child exhibited signs of insanity, even
in middle age, his father had every right to step in. The persistence of this idea,
in and of itself, indicates how easily a sentimental family might be confused for
an authoritarian one. The rationale behind the expression of paternal power
might have changed, but many French—certainly those who had influence in the medical, legal, and political realms—maintained the belief that fathers had every right to control their sons under certain circumstances.

Faligan’s experience reveals more than the persistence of parental control over children in the nineteenth century, or even the great liability of being perceived as insane at this time. Although we cannot discover the “truth” of his predicament, Faligan’s presentation of his story reveals the strategies a man accused of insanity might use to best press his case, no matter the motivations of those behind his sequestration. Faligan’s tale was convoluted, but he presented it in a relatively dispassionate and straightforward manner, strategically emphasizing his rationality and trustworthiness. He made evidentiary use of his adversaries’ writings by publishing a trove of letters among his parents, his cousins, his doctors, and even people he had once thought of as colleagues and friends. These letters, and the narrative as a whole, underscore the role played by gendered notions of reputation in the tactics of unwilling mental patients and their families.

By virtue of his commitment at Charenton, Faligan found himself in the unenviable position of defending his sanity against some of the most respected and influential alienists of his day. Henri Legrand du Saulle was the preeminent French authority on délire de persecution, a common and exceedingly convenient diagnosis for patients who resisted treatment. He famously argued that a significant proportion of Communards suffered from the malady and even used it to their advantage in the months when all of Paris had purportedly “gone mad.” Faligan, like most individuals who later published accounts of their internments, sought to present himself as rational by poking holes in Legrand du Saulle’s interpretation of his behavior and contesting the terms of his diagnosis. Faligan argued, for example, that people who actually suffered from délire de persecution thought the entire world was out to get them, whereas he concerned himself with a very specific group of people who would all benefit financially from his sequestration.

Faligan thus sought to prove his sanity by engaging with alienists in their own language. Although this strategy was not likely to sway the men who initially diagnosed him, Faligan hoped to convince outside observers that he was a rational man struggling to assert his rights within an insane medico-legal system. This did not work very well, since the publication of his lengthy story—especially his numerous diatribes against government officials he called “shadowy” and “occult”—could itself be construed as a symptom of persecution mania, as the legislative tribunal seemed to conclude. The deaths of Faligan’s parents
probably ensured his continued freedom, but the Senate rejected his call for an investigation into police conduct.

As a corrective against the accusations of his doctors, Faligan regularly highlighted his social connections to men whose own performances of bourgeois, rational manhood proved beyond reproach: old friends and mentors who happened to be doctors themselves. He had trained in medicine before leaving his home province for Paris in his mid-twenties and had worked in a hospital before changing careers. A friend from university named Doctor Combes rushed to Faligan’s aid when he learned of his initial sequestration at the private asylum in Saint-Gemmes. Combes vouched for his former classmate’s soundness of mind, secured his release, and delivered him to the train station for his trip back to Paris. In this way, Faligan undermined the family plot against him and briefly regained his independence before being rearrested and eventually sent to Charenton. Faligan also stressed his reputation among other medical men when he made his case to the legislature some years later, specifically citing his status as a titular member of the Société du Médecine of Angers at the invitation of his mentor, Doctor Farges. He went so far as to republish the letter from the medical society first announcing his membership in the document collection relating the events of 1873. While his induction occurred long after his initial confinement, Faligan pointed out that Farges had also helped orchestrate his release from Charenton.

Faligan’s attempt to combat his diagnosis through his acquaintance with other professional men suggests that the definition of madness was not so much objectively fixed as agreed upon communally through an informal process of perception, judgment, and consensus. Alienists had long claimed this role for themselves, but despite the stamp of professional legitimacy conferred by the law of 1838, the authority to determine who was and was not sane never confined itself to the psychiatric community. The cultural project of demarcating lucidity from madness was profoundly gendered, both in terms of its conclusions and the individuals who had a say in establishing them. Faligan’s case revolved around decisions made by bourgeois men about who should be considered sane and, therefore, accepted as an equal and a peer.

Asylum doctors, the Angers medical society, judges, legislators, and a large cast of assorted colleagues and friends—what they all shared, aside from their influence over Faligan’s fate, was their class and gender. The frustrated patient seemed well aware of this fact and planned his self-presentation accordingly, trying to convince his readers of his personal honor by linking himself to other honorable men. He might not have succeeded in having his case reopened, but
he almost certainly safeguarded his freedom when he became a member of the medical society in Angers. If Legrand du Saulles’s diagnosis had first certified Faligan’s insanity, then his inclusion in a professional society signaled the opposite.

The sequestrations of Jean Mistral and Ernest Faligan took place several decades apart, but the legal apparatus stayed constant throughout this time. The divergent outcomes speak more to personality differences between the major players than a changing legislative context. Nonetheless, had Jean Mistral’s father committed him in the 1870s rather than the 1840s, his unfortunate son’s fate might have been very different. When the story of the “fou au soixante millions” came to light in 1886 the public reacted with widespread horror, leading to the prisoner’s immediate release (although Mistral died shortly after leaving the asylum).

Despite this apparent change in values, many individuals continued to face forced sequestration in the final decades of the nineteenth century, even after the establishment of the Third Republic and the election of legislators presumably more critical of the most anti-democratic aspects of the asylum system. It still required social connections, luck, and a knack for self-presentation—all advantages possessed by Ernest Faligan—for the unwillingly interned to push back against those who sought to commit them. If anything, the cases of Jean Mistral and Ernest Faligan each show continuities between the Old Regime and the nineteenth century in that bourgeois family dynamics appeared to readily accommodate oppressive treatment by fathers toward their sons when accusations of insanity were thrown into the mix. Asylum doctors’ own self-fashioning as sentimental father figures who nonetheless insisted on absolute psychiatric authority indicates much the same. Disappointed, angry, or merely worried heads of household, however, were not the only people institutionalizing their relatives in nineteenth-century France—sometimes they were the ones locked away.

Irrational Husbands in an Age of Reason

French family law encouraged the misuse of the asylum system by unscrupulous relatives by allowing parents who resented the newfound freedoms of children a chance to maintain hierarchical family dynamics, and some fathers, like François-Joseph Mistral, faced criticism for using the medico-legal system to keep children from exercising their rights. Republican polemics describing asylums as modern Bastilles, places more suited to the political atmosphere of the absolutist monarchy than that of a modern nation-state, likewise indicated
discomfort with the way medical and familial collusion might undermine the freedoms conferred by citizenship. These critiques point to fears of a return to a prerevolutionary past, a time when individual happiness was subsumed by the demands of family and monarchy in both a cultural and legal sense. However, representations of madness and family strife also suggest that psychiatry had a less expected and seemingly contradictory effect on nineteenth-century family and gender values. If the experiences of Jean Mistral or Ernest Faligan reveal continuities between the Old Regime and the postrevolutionary family, the institutionalization of heads of household reveals an aspect of psychiatry far less accommodating to the maintenance of patriarchal authority.

Honoré de Balzac recognized that new attitudes toward rationality and madness had the potential to undermine fatherly power. He presented this perspective in one of his lesser-known entries of The Human Comedy, titled L’Interdiction in reference to the legal process through which an individual might lose their civil status.41 The action unfolds over several days in 1828, making the Civil Code rather than the asylum law of 1838 the most relevant legal context. Like other works by Balzac, L’Interdiction, first published in 1836, bemoans the superficiality and acquisitiveness that supposedly defined postrevolutionary family life. The plot revolves around the plight of the Marquis d’Espard, a father and husband whose wife, the Marquise, attempts to have him declared incompetent by the state. A fair-minded judge, Popinot, is put in charge of the investigation, and the reader slowly learns the details of the case through his eyes. It is clear from the start that we are not to trust the Marquise, who we first meet in a discussion between the lawyer and social-climber Eugène de Rastignac and his friend, the doctor Bianchon. Honest Bianchon describes the Marquise as a “woman of fashion,” and, like others of her ilk, she “is no longer a woman: she is neither mother, nor spouse, nor lover.”42 She supposedly “has more head than heart” and is prepared to sacrifice both her friends and her so-called “true passions” if it means achieving her social and financial ambitions.43 Balzac depicts the Marquise as self-interest personified: an expert in deception, not to mention ruthlessly rational.

By the time the plot of L’Interdiction begins, the Marquis and the Marquise have been separated for over a decade; they married in 1812 and had two children before parting ways in 1815. The couple live independent of one another, the husband controlling his family wealth while the Marquise lives off her dowry. The Marquise proffers a diverse array of evidence in her attempt to prove that her husband is insane. Most damningly, he is slowly but surely giving away his fortune (to an unattractive woman, at that). But he also keeps his wife from seeing
her children, pays undue respect to those beneath his station, and is profoundly obsessed with the history and culture of China.

In the end the reader discovers a logical explanation for each of these charges. The Marquise supposedly lacks maternal instinct and her boys prefer spending time with their father, a man of generous spirit; as judge Popinot notes, the only madness he sees in this situation is that “the children are a little crazy for their father and he a little crazy for them.” As for giving away his money, this too stems from generosity. It turns out that the Espard fortune derived from the seizure of Protestant lands after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The poor woman receiving payments from the Marquis is the descendant of the original landowners, and Espard sees himself as righting a historical injustice by returning the money to her. Making the political implications of this setup clear, Balzac likens this Protestant family to the noble émigrés whose lands were seized during the Revolution. Perhaps most amusingly, the Marquis’s fixation on China also contains a none-too-subtle critique of Revolutionary France—he admires the Chinese Empire because it is “a place where revolution is not possible.” Popinot rejects the scheming wife’s interpretation of events, noting that “an interdiction can only be granted when a man’s actions are devoid of reason,” while those of the Marquis are “based on the most sacred and honorable of motives.” In a last-minute twist, the Marquise uses her significant influence in high society to go above the judge’s head, and it is implied she will get her way.

For Balzac, the interdiction process offered an ideal scenario through which to explore common themes within The Human Comedy. The Napoleonic Code’s treatment of madness and money sets the stage for his evisceration of postrevolutionary values writ large. Balzac’s France is a topsy-turvy world in which vice is masked as virtue and surface appearances count as truth. The perspective put forth in the novel is not necessarily opposed to the process of interdiction itself, but to its openness to manipulation by a greedy woman in a corrupt society. The unsupported charge of insanity against a loving, aristocratic père de famille gives credence to Balzac’s belief that postrevolutionary France is itself a world gone mad. The misogynistic portrayal of the Marquise, in particular, supports his contention that the family had become an institution built on financial expediency rather than ties of affection or respect. Here, the noble father embodies the sentimental family ideal, while his wife merely pretends to do so.

Balzac’s critique contained a great deal of misplaced nostalgia, in that the lettre de cachet had likewise facilitated the summary incarceration of inconvenient relatives during the Old Regime (interdiction itself was a holdover from the previous century which, unlike the lettre de cachet, at least involved a lengthy
and expensive legal inquiry). Nonetheless, his depiction of the postrevolutionary family held more than a kernel of truth. The Revolution’s attack on paternal authority—at the level of the state and that of the household—combined with newly emerging psychiatric practices in a fashion that did, in fact, undermine the traditional prerogatives of fathers.

This involved a subtle shift in the basis of paternal authority despite the patriarchal agenda embedded in the Civil Code. After the Revolution, both the law and the medical establishment legitimated the father’s preeminence within the home on the basis of his supposedly natural rational capacities. As shown, the first asylum doctors played a significant role in the creation and perpetuation of gender-based definitions of rationality: for example, by suggesting that women who did not conform to the ideals of bourgeois domesticity were insane or that women’s biology made them especially susceptible to madness. These notions clearly hurt women and aggrandized the power of men, in that the conceptual link between femininity and irrationality justified women’s subordination in both the family and the polity. The flip side to this, however, was that charges of madness could now be used against husbands and fathers who did not seem to embody the new requirements of masculine comportment, like Balzac’s Marquis d’Espard.

Accusations of insanity against husbands and fathers were not confined to the realm of fiction. Men and women found themselves committed to French asylums in equal numbers until at least the 1860s, according to Aude Fauvel. This suggests the perpetuation of rational masculinity as a gender ideal could be dangerous for men whose behaviors fell outside the bounds of this new standard in one way or another, even if the assumed connection between manliness and rationality proved a boon for men as a whole (and for professional men in particular). Furthermore, while institutionalization threatened men who rebelled against the bourgeois family ideal in some way—through homosexual activity or libertinage, to name just two examples—men who conformed to middle-class expectations regarding family life also risked commitment under certain circumstances, and not only when their decisions contradicted the desires of their parents, as in the cases of Jean Mistral and Ernest Faligan.

To appear mad during the nineteenth century proved such a liability that not even the privileges of normative masculinity could entirely shield an individual from its consequences. At the same time, husbands and fathers committed against their will also constituted the subsection of the patient population most able to mobilize gender ideology to their advantage. Tellingly, while Balzac depicts the calculating rationality of the Marquise as both unwomanly and
unnatural, he takes great pains to characterize the aristocratic Marquis d’Espard as a benevolent, kindhearted father figure—and it is this that wins the judge to his side.

Real-life examples of scandalous asylum commitment expose in full color what literary examples only hint at and what psychiatric case notes tend to obscure. By virtue of their notoriety, such cases were distinct from the vast majority in which patients faced the coalition of medical, familial, and state power in relative obscurity. First-person accounts nonetheless allow uncommon insight into the self-presentation strategies embodied by patients in their attempts to gain release. One particular case exhibited how the new rational masculine ideal could pose a danger to fathers, especially aging ones. Hippolyte Delas, who claimed his daughters and his sons-in-law orchestrated his asylum commitment, initially published his recollections anonymously in 1870, seven years after the fact, under the title *Histoire d’une maladie*. Over the next two decades this first protestation against injustice would turn into a full-fledged crusade, as he took his desire for vengeance to the republican press. He wrote many articles under his own name for *L’Union républicaine* and eventually published a collection of anti-alienist writings in 1886 called *Les Bastilles modernes: nécessité de leur destruction*.

Some who published accounts of their asylum experiences tried to present themselves as rational, insisting they did not deserve to be treated like asylum patients because they were not actually insane. This father, however, admitted that he experienced bouts of dementia and had not felt like himself in the weeks that led up to his eventual commitment in a private mental institution. Even the title of Delas’s first book—*The Story of an Illness*—indicates a surprising level of forthrightness concerning his condition. Delas insisted that his daughters and sons-in-law arranged for his internment in 1863 at a moment of mental fragility, persuading other members of his extended family to go along with their nefarious plot in order to hasten his death and speed up the collection of their inheritance. Rather than proclaim his sanity, he decried the laws and attitudes that could result in the confinement of *any* individual—rational or not. “I did not know,” wrote the unwilling patient, “that to be ill was the greatest of crimes, punished with the most frightening of punishments.” It was bad enough to be frightened of imaginary dangers, but commitment to an asylum justified his paranoia, making his subconscious fears “effectively real and the most frightening of all.”

Delas’s personal experience showed him that collusion between alienists and patients’ families undermined both the values of bourgeois domesticity and the
purported goals of the medical profession. He consistently contrasted his experiences inside the asylum to the peacefulness of the domestic ideal and showed how his engagement with the psychiatric system polluted his family life. For example, in *Histoire d’une maladie*, he criticized his sons-in-law for viewing the family as a source of potential profit rather than a source of affection. Of one son-in-law he wrote: “[I had] given my daughter [to him] believing he was an honest man,” only to have him become “the executor of my incarceration in a place comparable to hell.”53 By conspiring with medical authorities, Delas’s sons-in-law spread this corrupted image of domestic life to the family as a whole. His daughters turned against the father who raised them, his mother was too feeble to defend him, and his wife (“as violent and troubled” as himself) was afraid she would be committed to the asylum too.54

The unwilling patient also emphasized that asylum employees collected him in his father’s home—a place he insisted should be safe from intrusion. He asked, “Was it possible for me to predict that because I went to take refuge at my father’s house under the vague impression that I was menaced by a danger, I would be abandoned by him in such a way, after having committed no sin but to go to embrace him?”55 The family home, in theory closed to the dangers of the outside world, led the distraught Delas to the asylum. There he faced a litany of horrific experiences, including confinement in straitjackets, subjecting to the notorious cold shower, isolation in a cell, and the chaining of his neck and arms to his bed.

Delas’s spell in the asylum led to the permanent severing of family ties. The entire family had worked to arrange for his internment; although some relatives might have believed it to be in his best interests, he understandably interpreted their actions as a personal betrayal.56 In the end, his wife regained her composure and felt strong enough to demand his release. Yet it was impossible for Delas to truly go home again. As he explained, “The victim who survives becomes a frightening specter to the guilty.”57 Furthermore, his sons-in-law were no longer welcome in his company, particularly if he ever experienced another period of irrationality. They had proven they could not be trusted. Even if his family’s intentions were honest, another trip to the asylum would be unforgivable. “My illness,” concluded Delas, “had been caused by my imagination alone, but they [his sons-in-law] were no less culpable; because, instead of trying heal me, they tried only to make me incurable!”58 He charged his family and the psychiatric establishment with joining forces in the internment of a devoted husband and father, irreparably destroying the tranquility of the household in the process.

Interest in cases of scandalous commitment intensified during the final decade of the Second Empire and continued to gain steam throughout the 1870s
and 1880s, when the image of the unjustly interned husband proved especially sensational. In November 1871, a mere six months after the fall of the Paris Commune, a play called *La Baronne* opened at the famous Odéon theater. The plot revolved around the machinations of the eponymous baroness, Edith, who sets her sights on marrying an elderly French aristocrat. Having already lost one fortune in an inheritance dispute and now the mistress of a penniless doctor, Edith wants to have her cake and eat it too—she will marry the old man, wait for him to die, then reunite with her true love as a rich widow. The physical health of Edith’s new husband, however, proves harder than she had hoped, and she soon orchestrates his internment in a psychiatric institution. She is on the verge of convincing the courts to grant her control of the patient’s finances when he escapes the asylum and strangles his duplicitous wife with her own necklace—a visually disarming piece of jewelry that looks like a snake wrapped around the neck, a gift from her lover the doctor.

The playwrights, Edouard Foussier and Charles Edmond, were well aware that family drama lie at the heart of most unjust commitment scandals. Cases like that of the elderly Hippolyte Delas, however, did not serve as *La Baronne*’s primary source of inspiration, for the well-received play paid little attention to the issue of intergenerational conflict. In fact, the baron’s daughter, played by a young Sarah Bernhardt, was the most sympathetic character and the only person interested in securing her father’s best interests rather than a share of his considerable estate. Instead, like Balzac, Foussier and Edmond focused on the role played by a plotting wife in her husband’s eventual downfall. *La Baronne* thus capitalized on the legitimate fear of unjust asylum commitment alongside a well-known nineteenth-century bogeyman: the overtly sexual, not to mention heartless and logical, woman.

The gender politics of *La Baronne* were profoundly conservative, and the play’s conclusion represented a fantasy of masculine authority in an era of intense instability. Yet its plot also shared some uncanny similarities with a notable, real-life commitment scandal known as the “Puyparlier Affair.” The case had recently gained widespread attention after an asylum inmate named Auguste Fault du Puyparlier, a former soldier in the North African campaign and an inductee of the Legion of Honor, spectacularly and mysteriously escaped from the Tribunal of Paris while present for an appeal hearing. Like other victims of involuntary asylum confinement, Puyparlier began publishing refutations of his supposed insanity. The main similarity between *La Baronne* and the Puyparlier Affair was the role of the patient’s wife in the commitment plot. The characters in the play were significantly wealthier than Puyparlier and his wife,
but the timing of its production suggests that actual events inspired it. Observers like the satirist “Crispino” linked the two, grouping Puyparlier, the writers of *La Baronne*, and even the once exiled champion of the oppressed, Victor Hugo, in an imagined meeting of the fictional “Society for the Protection of the Alienated,” published in Bertall’s *La Revue comique* in 1871. Puyparlier himself referred to another incident of unjust internment that occurred nearly simultaneously, involving a man sent to an institution by his wife and her lover, the asylum’s director, with which the creators of *La Baronne* might also have been acquainted.

Police arrested Puyparlier in his hometown of Beauvais, located approximately eighty kilometers north of Paris, in 1869. They accused him of acting erratically (he had been seen without his pants in public), and his wife claimed that he could no longer be trusted with their finances. As in several other instances of unjust internment, Puyparlier argued he had been drugged before his confrontation with the police. He wrote of a vast conspiracy involving his wife, members of her family, asylum doctors, and even household servants. Supposedly poisoned during a long lunch when the prefect of police searched his home, Puyparlier lost consciousness only to wake up inside the imposing Parisian asylum Charenton. He immediately began writing letters to his lawyer and other possible allies, including journalists and newspaper editors, in hopes that his sequestration could be legally challenged. After successfully persuading the Tribunal of Paris to hear his case, he managed to flee from the courthouse through a private stairwell. According to his obituary (he died in 1875), Puyparlier settled in England after this daring escape but returned to France following the fall of the empire and the death of his wife.

Like others in his position, Puyparlier forcefully argued that his commitment to an asylum was unwarranted. Involuntary asylum internment did not benefit his mental health; it merely aided his wife’s pocketbook. After learning of her death he returned to France for the funeral and even wrote her epitaph:

> Ci-git ma femme! Oh! Qu’elle est bien,  
> Pour son repose et pour le mien!  
>

> (Here lies my wife! Oh! That she is well,  
> For her rest and for mine!)

Clearly in good spirits, Puyparlier had the last laugh. Yet his published descriptions of his commitment and the events preceding it were far more serious in tone and offer an insightful perspective on the historical relationship between
marital discord and psychiatric authority. Puyparlier cited “conjugal rebellion” as the root of his painful situation, writing in dramatic terms about his wife’s premeditated manipulation of all the resources at her disposal in her efforts to secure his sequestration. Her collusion with psychiatric authorities—whom the aging soldier called “a horde of foreign rascals” (because they resided in Paris, but sometimes collected patients in the provinces) and “undignified public functionaries”—was particularly loathsome for Puyparlier. He wrote his “cry against injustice” in order to expose the ways a “rebel wife” could “counter all human and divine laws” to intern her husband in an insane asylum against his will.

Puyparlier adeptly presented an image of his life and his marriage that served to vilify his wife without emasculating himself in the process. He was the perpetually abused but always loyal husband. He described his fate in dramatic and even heroic terms, highlighting his personal courage and resilience in the “battle” against those who sought to institutionalize him. He wrote of the “blood in (his) veins” that inspired the publication of his story and his disinclination toward scandal and “noise.” Puyparlier also depicted himself as a victim of what he called “feminine hate.” He and his wife had been married for sixteen years before his arrest and institutionalization. In a document produced by Puyparlier in order to prove his “moral sense,” he spoke at length of their strained interactions. His wife tried to undermine his authority and control their finances, living in so-called “open rebellion” for much of their time together. Against the advice of his priest and others acquainted with the couple, the aggrieved husband refused to keep a close eye on his spouse or attempt to regulate her actions or choices. Throughout their tense marriage, he defended her against the accusations of others and refused to take a mistress despite their estrangement. Puyparlier did all this, he said, because it was his duty and because he was a “gallant man.”

Like disagreements over inheritance, marital conflicts also played out within a specific legislative context. That most relevant to the Puyparlier Affair concerned the 1816 abolition of divorce following its brief legalization during the Revolutionary era. The re-legalization of divorce had long been a rallying cry and a goal of republicans, albeit one that often took a back seat to what they considered more pressing political concerns. During the Second Empire hopes for reform remained largely silent due to press censorship. The question of divorce came to the fore, however, during the 1870s and early 1880s, as republicans gradually secured control of the government and gained the ability to change the status quo. Numerous French people began voicing their discontents over their inability to legally and permanently sever marital ties, including the frustrated mental patient Puyparlier.
In many ways, and despite certain passages that carry a potentially misogynistic tone (notably his preoccupation with “feminine hate”), Puyparlier viewed himself as rather enlightened when it came to the question of marital and gender relations. He never promoted a return to more authoritarian conception of familial order; he did not, for example, hint that his wife owed him complete obedience by virtue of her sex or their marital status. His solution to marital unhappiness was both simple and forward-looking. Rather than harking back to a time in which the right of husbands to control their wives was taken for granted, the elderly veteran called for the right to divorce. It was “the object of ardent dreams for all honest hearts” and the “only moral counterweight to imprudent agreements.”

If he and his wife could legally and amicably separate, he never would have ended up in an asylum against his will. He could have divorced her before it came to that or she could have divorced him. Thus, Puyparlier took his critique of the asylum one step further than his contemporary, Delas. Not only did he present his mistreatment at the hands of the medical establishment as a perversion of bourgeois domestic values but he insisted that the middle-class cult of marriage was itself part of the problem. Or, perhaps more accurately, Puyparlier suggested that the only way to ensure the sanctity of companionate marriage was to allow incompatible couples to separate legally. Not surprisingly, the writers of *La Baronne* chose not to capitalize on this aspect of Puyparlier’s story and instead focused on the cruel machinations of a money-hungry femme fatale.

Fictional portrayals of “mad” husbands exposed the gender anxieties of their time. Balzac regretted the passing of eighteenth-century family relations, showing with characteristic astuteness that the cultural and legal prioritization of rationality led to a potential rebalancing of power within the household. *La Baronne* picked up on a similar theme much later in the century and in more sensational fashion, as concerns over women’s involvement in the public sphere began to escalate in the early Third Republic. Both stories feature a woman character whose rationality is presented as simultaneously cool and cruel. In this sense, *L’Interdiction* and *La Baronne* each relied on a stereotype—the logical woman as unnatural aberration—that alienists reified and helped to create, even if both works critiqued the pernicious influence of psychiatric authority.

Patient writings, on the other hand, exhibited a more subtle understanding of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal. Delas and Puyparlier understood the liability of madness in a rational age, yet neither man seemed to desire a return to more despotic gender and family relations. Delas attempted to use the behavioral
repertoire of sentimental fatherhood to attack the psychiatric claim that institutionalization constituted the only valid response to mental distress. For his part, Puyparlier insisted that affective ties held meaning only if spouses had the right to dissolve them. In other words, neither man looked nostalgically to a prerevolutionary past and both, in one way or another, questioned widespread cultural assumptions concerning gender and psychiatric disability. That they were able to do so points to the power of bourgeois masculinity in spite of the frightful prospects faced by men who did not meet its standards. Ironically, in rare lucky cases, men deemed insane successfully argued against their treatment at the hands of the psychiatric profession because doctors themselves had so effectively naturalized cultural assumptions regarding the ingrained rational capacities of middle-class men.

At first glance, the history of the asylum and its relation to men’s household authority might appear to support a continuity thesis rather than one centered on rupture and change. Like fathers and husbands of the Old Regime, those of the postrevolutionary era held considerable power over the lives of their wives and children by virtue of the Civil Code and the 1838 asylum law. Patriarchy—defined as a social and legal system where fathers hold power over women and younger men—spanned the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and helped structure relations of gender and generation within “authoritarian” and “sentimental” families alike. Yet, as cases of scandalous asylum commitment show, the power dynamics of the nineteenth-century home were defined by a new sort of fatherly authority—one based more on men’s purported rationality than their sexual virility or physical strength.

Cases of contested asylum commitment indicate that the postrevolutionary conflation of rationality and rights had a profound impact on the history of the French family, particularly with respect to the move away from the authoritarian family relations of the eighteenth century to the affective bourgeois ones of the nineteenth. Furthermore, highlighting the stories of unwillingly incarcerated men situates the nineteenth century as a transitional moment between the dictatorial family structure of the Old Regime and today’s modern family. It becomes clear from this vantage point that gender and psychiatry were not only intertwined by virtue of their disciplining effects on nineteenth-century women, but also, ironically, through their long-term contribution to the emergence of more egalitarian family relations. By insisting that an individual’s rationality conferred their autonomy, doctors suggested that rational women might deserve equal rights in the home and beyond. Here, as in the case of our women private
asylum *directrices* from the preceding chapter, the actions of alienists subtly eroded the naturalization of gender difference.

As Balzac sensed, the postrevolutionary emphasis on rationality as the defining trait of personhood held the potential to undermine patriarchal authority within the home, as it had already undermined the concept of absolutist monarchy outside of it. While he was critical of this change, others saw it as an opportunity to rid themselves of inconvenient relatives. The nineteenth-century family might have been sentimental, but it could also be vicious—and it is really no wonder, considering the stakes. The cultural elevation of the rational individual combined with the particulars of French family law to create a perfect storm, in which representatives of the state, the psychiatric community, and the family might conspire against individuals accused of insanity in order to secure family property. As the century progressed, voices protesting against the psychiatric profession and the domestic conflicts it engendered continued to accumulate. Eventually, doctors themselves would begin to seriously question the value of the asylum as a curative space for the first time since the French Revolution, a tendency exacerbated by the national crises of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune.