French Women and the Age of Enlightenment

Spencer, Samia

Published by Indiana University Press

Spencer, Samia.
French Women and the Age of Enlightenment.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/113358.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/113358

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3628666
IN FRANCE, the last decades of the eighteenth century saw a revolution in the realm of family life. This revolution was as deep-seated and as far-reaching as the political revolution that would erupt in 1789, and it brought many more changes to the daily lives of women. At the heart of this revolution was the emergence of the modern, affectionate nuclear family, in which the spouses married for love, treated each other with dignity and respect, and worked together to raise their children in an atmosphere of security and indulgence. All this was different from the traditional pattern of family life in France. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries, families had been patriarchal institutions, in which the husband and father ruled as a monarch ruled his kingdom and God ruled his creation. In the traditional patriarchal family, wives and children were clearly subordinate to their husbands and fathers, who exercised both legal and actual power over their property and their persons. Marriages were arranged with an eye to the economic advantage of the family rather than the personal happiness and fulfillment of the spouses. Within these marriages, relations between husband and wife and between parents and children were cold, distant, and unloving.¹

Why these traditional patterns of family behavior began to change in the last half of the eighteenth century is at present unclear.² What is certain is that change did occur, at both ends of the social scale. In the last decades of the Old Regime, the French nobility began spontaneously to adopt the values of the modern affectionate nuclear family and the domesticity that went with it; at the same time, there were the beginnings of a concerted attempt, which would last through the nineteenth century, to impose these values on the lower classes.³

WOMEN IN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILIES: FROM SALONNIÈRE TO WIFE AND MOTHER

On May 31, 1781, the marquise de Bombelles, lady-in-waiting to Mme Elisabeth, great-aunt of King Louis XVI, wrote to her husband, the French ambassador to the Holy Roman Empire:

---

Downloaded on behalf of University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Women and Society

The court is a dog of a place. I shall long regret the sweet and tranquil life I led at Ratisbon [Regensburg, where her husband was stationed] and I feel certain that my lot should have been to be a good wife [une bonne femme] occupied solely with her husband, her children, and her household. For the pleasures of the court, of what is called good taste [le bon ton] have no attraction for me, and I have too bourgeois a way of thinking for that place.4

The marquise was not alone in her dislike for the court and her preference for the simple joys of family life. Margaret Darrow has shown that in the late eighteenth century French noblewomen by the score repudiated their traditional “careers” as court ladies and salonnières in favor of the roles of wife and mother.5 In part, this change was just one aspect of the general passion for the simple life that swept the nobility in the 1770s and 1780s. But this change also had deeper causes: it stemmed from fundamental shifts in attitude toward marriage and motherhood.

Noblewomen, of course, had always been wives and mothers. In general, they had married early (in their mid-teens in the seventeenth century and at seventeen or eighteen in the following one6), and their marriages were arranged by their parents or relatives with an eye to family advantage rather than to the personal happiness of the spouses. Their letters and memoirs give the impression that noble wives were poorly treated by their husbands. At worst, they were bullied and threatened by everyone in the household from spouse and mother-in-law to the lowliest servant, as was the seventeenth-century mystic Mme de La Mothe Guyon; at best, they were simply ignored, like the poor wife of the libertine comte Dufort de Cheverny, who kindly taught his boring young bride to play solitaire so that she would have something to occupy her time while he pursued his own pleasures.7 It is not surprising, then, that seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century noblewomen found little emotional fulfillment in marriage and that they centered their lives instead around their “careers” as ladies-in-waiting or salonnières.8

But by the last half of the eighteenth century, noblewomen began to expect more out of marriage than a chance to be left alone. The Enlightenment revolutionized the way people viewed love and marriage. This supremely rational movement popularized the supremely romantic notion of marriage for love. In the face of centuries of Christian aestheticism, the Enlightenment propounded the possibility of individual happiness on earth; in the face of centuries of Christian disparagement, the Enlightenment rehabilitated the passions, including romantic love and sexual desire, as essential elements in such happiness.9 In line with its emphasis on the family as the cradle of productive citizens, the Enlightenment placed romantic love and
sexual fulfillment, not in illicit relationships (the traditional pattern from medieval courtly love on), but firmly within the marriage bond. Romantic and sexual love became, in the words of Rousseau’s Julie, “the greatest matter of life”—and the sole justification for marriage. Noblewomen of the late eighteenth century were clearly fascinated by the idea of marrying for love. The baronne d’Oberkirch, herself the victim of an unhappy arranged marriage, carefully recorded in her memoirs all the love matches among her friends, and she wondered wistfully if such marriages might work. No, she concluded, “sadly, this happiness of marriages of inclination never lasts because that would be paradise on earth.” Teen-aged Laurette de Malboissière agreed that a marriage for love would be paradisical but decided that it was not only possible but also the sort of marriage she wanted. She wrote to her best friend:

I would wish, if I were married, that my husband occupied himself only with me, that he loved only me . . . that he lived with me forever more like a lover than a husband . . . When the marriage tie has charm is when [the husband and wife] love each other so tenderly that they look only to give each other new pleasures; when, joining the tender cares of lovers to those of spouses, they know no other happiness than living together.

At least in part, the new expectations that girls like Laurette de Malboissière had of marriage seem to have been fulfilled. In the last half of the eighteenth century, matches among the nobility were still arranged by parents, and family advantage was still their prime consideration. But the young people themselves were allowed to play a greater role in choosing their mates (Mme de La Tour du Pin herself engineered her marriage at age sixteen to the marquis de La Tour du Pin), and the compatibility of the prospective spouses and their possibilities of future happiness together weighed more strongly in all marriage calculations. When, for example, the duc de Croy was looking for a wife for his eighteen-year-old son, “our first object was to make him happy, to give him ‘la douceur de la vie.’” Therefore, he rejected Mlle d’Enville de La Rochefoucauld, who had a dowry of 800,000-livres and the protection of the court but was ugly and bad-tempered, in favor of poorer but prettier and more intelligent Mlle de Salm.

Once the match was made, relationships between the spouses seem to have been warmer and more loving than had previously been the case. A number of noblewomen, including Mme de La Tour du Pin and Laure Junot, wife of the Napoleonic General, maintained in their memoirs that they fell in love with their husbands at first sight when they were introduced to them after the match had been arranged.
This sort of statement is never found in earlier memoirs. Nor do earlier noble couples show the shared delight in domesticity that shines through the letters of M. and Mme d’Albis de Belbeze, noble Toulousan parlamentaires. Madame wrote to her husband of her problems with the servants and of the clever things their four-year-old daughter had said, and M. d’Albis wrote of his longing to be back in the bosom of his loving family. In the late eighteenth century, noble spouses for the first time used tu in their letters and addressed each other with nicknames and endearments. For the first time, they showed their affection by kissing and embracing each other in public. Aristocrats may not yet have married for love, but they behaved after marriage as though they had. Clearly, noble wives were better treated than they had ever been before, and they expected and received more emotional satisfaction from their marriages than they had ever found in the past.

The late eighteenth century saw even more striking changes in noblewomen’s role as mother. While the protests of love for their spouses in their letters and memoirs often sound forced, the passages in which noblewomen speak of their love for their children ring true. If the turn toward romantic marriage among the nobility was only half-hearted, the turn toward good mothering was much more complete. Noblewomen, like almost everyone else in the eighteenth century, viewed maternity as the most fulfilling experience a woman could have, “the most sacred and at the same time the sweetest of duties,” as one enthusiastic mother, Mme Roland, put it.

It had not always been so. Until the late eighteenth century, it had been considered vulgar for aristocratic mothers to take too great an interest in the dirty and smelly tasks of child rearing. Immediately after birth, babies were handed over to wet nurses, who often starved and neglected them. When they returned home, they passed into the hands of other hired servants, a nursemaid or gouvernante until the age of seven and then (for boys, at least) a précepteur or tutor. Since parents paid little attention to the process of child raising, these servants were usually equally neglectful of their charges. Mme de La Mothe Guyon summed up many an aristocratic childhood besides her own when she wrote, “My mother . . . neglected me a little, and left me too much to the care of the women [servants], who neglected me also.” She was so little supervised that she frequently wandered out into the streets unnoticed; her childhood was full of near-fatal tumbles down airshafts and cellar steps. The servants of the children of prince de Montbarrey neglected to feed their charges, who were so hungry they ate wax; and the parents of the future cardinal de Bernis paid so little attention to him that they did not discover that he had been beaten and tortured by his tutor until his welts began to fester.
But by the last half of the eighteenth century, such horror stories were largely things of the past. Aristocratic mothers took a genuine interest in their children and either raised them themselves or at least closely supervised the servants who did so. In part, they owed this new interest in mothering to the new notions they shared with their society about the uniqueness, preciousness, and fraility of young children. But their interest also stemmed from the fact that in the last half of the eighteenth century motherhood was a much more pleasant experience than it had been. For the first time, birth control was used to limit family size. The average number of children in the families of France’s ducs and peers dropped from 6.5 in the seventeenth century to 2 in the eighteenth. This meant that noblewomen had to endure fewer painful pregnancies and births, which became less traumatic as doctors rather than midwives began to deliver babies and to substitute medical advances, such as the forceps, for folk practices. Despite the prejudices of modern feminist historians, the intrusion of men into the hitherto female world of childbirth seems to have improved the chances of a mother’s survival. At any rate, the presence of a male doctor signified the interest that husbands now took in the process of childbirth. For the first time, aristocratic husbands like the younger duc de Croy watched their children being born. This manifest concern of husbands, their devotion to their children, and the delight they took in playing with them and spending time with them must have reinforced the new satisfaction aristocratic women found in motherhood.

In raising their children, noblewomen followed a cluster of notions propounded by doctors and educators in the late eighteenth century, notions perhaps best summarized as “natural” child raising under the eye of a vigilant mother. The major burden of child rearing manuals in the late eighteenth century was to let nature take its course. Mothers should nurse their own babies; their own mother’s milk was the most natural food for infants. Babies should not be swaddled; that restricted the natural movement of their limbs. They should not be forced to learn to walk; they would learn when they were ready to do so. They should not be beaten; they were born good and would grow up good if they were surrounded by a protective environment from which all bad influences were carefully excluded. Key to all of this was the mother. Only she could nurse her child, only she could instinctively anticipate its needs, only she would care enough to exercise the ceaseless vigilance necessary to create the protective environment in which a child could grow and flourish.

Aristocratic mothers interpreted this newly enlarged maternal role in various ways. For most, it meant that they should nurse their own babies. In the 1780s, there was a veritable craze for maternal breast...
feeding among the highest aristocracy. The marquise de Bombelles nursed her infant son, Bombon, while on duty at court, and even Marie-Antoinette expressed a desire to nurse her children.\textsuperscript{27} For a few others, the new child rearing also meant that they should raise their offspring themselves, without the help of servants. Two who attempted to do so were Mme Necker, wife of finance minister Jacques Necker and mother of the future novelist, Germaine de Staël, and Mme Roland, Girondin politician and mother of a daughter, Eudora. Mme Roland’s proudest boast was that “the child is not for one hour in a fortnight left to the servants; I never take a step without her.” Mme Necker not only cared for Germaine herself but educated her as well, turning her into a child prodigy who knew her catechism before age three and recited long poems in Latin and English at five. Not surprisingly, both of these carefully reared children grew up to hate their mothers.\textsuperscript{28}

Perhaps fortunately, most noblewomen did not interpret the new mothering in so strenuous a fashion. They could not really conceive of doing without servants. Therefore, to them, being a good mother did not mean raising a child without help; instead, it meant hiring competent domestics and exercising a constant vigilance to see that they did their jobs properly. The correspondence of aristocratic noblewomen in the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s reveals an obsession with the child raising process in striking contrast to the silence on this subject in earlier periods. This obsession takes the form of endless worrying over finding and keeping good servants. The marquise de Bombelles wrote constantly about the Swiss nurse, Mme Giles, whom she hired to help raise Bombon. The woman was becoming homesick; could she be persuaded to stay at least until Bombon got over the traumas of weaning?\textsuperscript{29} Mme d’Albis de Belbèze was upset by the problem of finding the right gouvernante for her four-year-old daughter, Poulou. The current gouvernante, Thérèse, beat the child; obviously, she had to go. But was her replacement too lenient?\textsuperscript{30} The comtesse de Sabran suffered almost as much as her seven-year-old son, Elzéar, when the boy’s nursemaid was replaced with a tutor:

\begin{quote}
I am very disturbed right now because of Elzéar; the grief that he feels at being parted from his nurse has upset him so much that he is sick. For the last three days he has neither eaten nor slept and he has a slight fever. … I can’t tell you how unhappy this makes me, how worried I am…
\end{quote}

Noblewomen like the comtesse clearly took their roles as mothers very seriously. Mothering may have caused them endless trouble and concern, but it also gave them, as the letter of the marquise de Bombelles quoted at the beginning of this section suggests, a satisfaction greater than any that could be derived from their more traditional
roles as court ladies and salonnières. It was the noblewoman—who had, in modern jargon, more freedom of action and more “options” than any other woman in eighteenth-century France—who most willingly and enthusiastically embraced the new domesticity.32 In doing so, she made possible the rise in France of the modern, affectionate, child-centered nuclear family.

LOWER-CLASS FAMILIES: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY ECONOMY

At the other end of the social scale, among the poverty-stricken peasants, who made up some seventy per cent of the French population, and the urban artisans and day laborers, who formed another twenty per cent, family life was very different. In a sense, the lower classes had always had the domesticity that the nobility now sought; they married more or less for love, and they mothered their own children. But working-class domesticity was domesticity with a difference. Overshadowing all other aspects of the lower-class family was its role as an economic unit, a “family economy,” dedicated to guaranteeing the sheer physical survival of its members. The contributions of the wife—her work in the fields and her spinning and weaving if she were a peasant’s wife, or her labors in the workshop or behind the counter if she were the wife of an urban artisan—were vital to the family budget.33 It was these economic duties of the lower-class women that shaped their roles as wives and mothers. Thus, “good mothering” in the lower-class context meant a mother’s working in the shops or fields so that her children did not go hungry. Lower-class family life did not show a turn toward greater domesticity in the last decades of the Old Regime. Instead, the economic problems of the period—rising prices, especially for food, and population growth, which brought more competition for work and more mouths to feed—meant that the niceties of family life were increasingly sacrificed to the struggle for survival.

Among the lower classes marriage had always been “romantic” in a sense. Young people married not for family or economic advantage but for personal happiness and satisfaction. They generally chose their own mates and carried out the courting process themselves, and they often consummated their love before marriage, since the popular tradition, dating back before the Council of Trent, which considered a betrothal equivalent of marriage, made sex between an engaged couple permissible.34 Yet this “romantic” view of marriage was always hedged with prudence and respect for community traditions. The lower classes married only when they could afford to do so, when the man had saved enough to buy land or a mastership and the woman had
accumulated a substantial dowry to buy the necessary *lit garni* and other household goods. This meant that they married very late; in the eighteenth century, the average age of marriage for women was 25-26 and that of men was 27-28. They usually chose as a spouse someone whose character and background they knew well. In most villages, ninety-five percent of the marriages involved someone who lived within a radius of ten kilometers; in most cities, around half of all the artisans married within their craft. Lower-class courtships were carried out under the supervision of the community, which often subjected couples it thought mismatched to *charivaris*, and marriages and even conceptions were timed according to its age-old rituals. Marriages were usually celebrated on Mondays and Tuesdays, never on Fridays, the day of fasting: marriages and even conceptions were rare during Advent and Lent.

It has been suggested that in the late eighteenth century love and marriage among the lower classes became increasingly more romantic and less prudential. The major evidence for this is the rise in the ratio of illegitimacy, which went from approximately two percent to five percent of all births. This is said to have resulted from an increasing willingness on the part of young people, especially women, to defy family and community mores and have sex without marriage or the promise of one. In fact, this does not seem to have been the case. *Déclarations de grossesse* (statements required by law of unwed mothers detailing the circumstances of their pregnancies) show that the women who bore illegitimate children continued to be marriage-oriented and to hold the traditional mixture of romantic and prudential attitudes in regard to courtship. Most slept with their swains only after marriage was implicitly—and often explicitly—promised. What caused the rise in illegitimacy were the unfavorable economic conditions of the period, which made it increasingly difficult for couples who planned to marry actually to do so. By the late eighteenth century, courting was for lower-class women a gamble that only the lucky won.

We know amazingly little about relationships between husbands and wives once the marriage had taken place. Evidence from popular proverbs ("the hat gives orders to the headdress" and "rich is the man whose wife is dead and horse alive") and folk customs (men who were bossed by their wives were subjected to *charivaris* by the youth of the village) suggest that peasant wives at least were little more than household drudges for their husbands, subject to constant physical abuse and appreciated, if at all, only for the endless work they did. But the glimpses we get of real-life marriages in court records and the like paint a slightly rosier picture. These suggest that while wife beating (often aggravated by alcohol, in which artisans and laborers found relief from the misery of their daily lives) and other forms of
abuse were common, wives were often unwilling to accept such treatment as their inevitable lot. They were much less tolerant of their husband’s adulteries than noblewomen were. When their husbands beat them or wasted the family patrimony, they fought back, sought refuge with female relatives and neighbors, complained to the police, and even demanded judicial separations or, when they became possible during the Revolution, divorces.41 Evidently, it was their work and their clearly vital contributions to the family economy that made these women feel entitled to at least a modicum of love and respect. Marie Brunel, wife of a shopkeeper, said in her divorce petition that her husband, Adrien Boullain, was an “angry and hard” man, who subjected her to many insults, threats and beatings, but she deserved better because she had worked hard in the family business, keeping the accounts, paying the workers, selling on the street. “Everyone knows how useful I was to a man who did not know how to read or write; . . . our fortune increased through my efforts and my work.”42

During their marriages, wives of peasants and artisans had to combine their constant “efforts and work” for the family economy with constant motherhood. The acceptability of premarital sexual intercourse for engaged couples meant that many brides—probably about ten percent—were pregnant at marriage.43 And if they were not pregnant at the altar, they became so soon after. Birth control was almost unknown among the lower classes before the Revolution.44 It was not really necessary, for the high age of marriage combined with the high rate of infant and child mortality (only half the children born survived to adulthood) to keep families small. A typical family would have four children, of whom two or three would survive. But the lack of birth control meant that babies arrived at intervals of twenty-five to thirty months as long as the wife remained fertile.45 Therefore, from the age of twenty-six to forty, a lower-class woman was usually either pregnant or suckling an infant.

Childbirth among the lower classes did not “improve” the way it had for noblewomen during the last decades of the eighteenth century. It was still a female event, pervaded with female folk wisdom. Although the government made efforts to train and license midwives for country districts in the last years of the Old Regime, such women were few and far between. Most peasant and artisan wives still had to rely only on the help of an untrained midwife. Death in childbirth remained a grave risk for lower-class women, while it was lessening for those of the upper classes.46

In lower-class households, infant care also remained what it had always been: a compound of folk customs whose primary purpose was to allow the mother to go about her daily chores with a minimum of attention to the newborn child. Swaddling, so deplored by the
partisans of the new, natural child raising, was still widely practiced, largely because a swaddled baby could be safely left alone for long periods. Babies were fed on demand because that was easier for a busy mother than trying to keep a schedule, and the custom of washing them only infrequently probably owed as much to the mothers' lack of time as it did to traditional beliefs about the healthiness of dirt. Indeed, the major change in lower-class infant care (and one precisely opposite to the trends among the upper classes) was the spread of wet-nursing, and this was clearly due to the fact that lower-class mothers had to free their time for productive labor. Until the early eighteenth century, the hiring of wet nurses had been confined to the elite, but by the end of the century, the practice spread to the lower reaches of the urban artisanat. Any family that could possibly afford to hire a wet nurse did so because the mother's labor was so important to the family economy. Conversely, peasant wives increasingly sought nurslings because that was one more way in which they could supplement the family budget.

These patterns of infant care suggest that the lower-class family simply could not afford the niceties of the new mothering preached by doctors and practiced by the elite. The needs of the new baby had to be sacrificed to the needs of the family as a whole. Care of older children revealed a similar pattern. Children in poor families had to work instead of play. From the age of four, they were considered able to work; and they were set to gathering wood, feeding chickens, or helping to card wool. Unlike noblewomen, lower-class women did not strive to create a secure environment for their children. Instead, they sent them out into the dangerous world of the street to find what work they could. Children left the family at very young ages—nine to twelve—to work as apprentices and servants. At times, children were not just sent out into the world but were also abandoned there. The most striking fact about lower-class family life in the last half of the eighteenth century is the incredible rise in the numbers of children left by their parents in hospitals and charities. In Paris, for example, there were 312 abandoned children in hospitals in 1670; by 1770, the figure was 6,918. Some of these were bastards or orphans, but not all of them were. In the hospital of Aix-en-Provence, for example, only thirty percent of the children admitted were orphans. The rest were legitimate children whose parents could no longer afford to feed them. Child abandonment rose as the price of bread did. It was clearly a last recourse of desperate parents. They sent their children to hospitals when they could not afford to care for them and retrieved them when their family fortunes improved. In 1770, for example, a five-year-old girl was left at the Charité in Aix-en-Provence because her father had died and her mother could not support her; three years later, the mother married a shoemaker and brought her daughter home.
Upper-class observers were appalled by the seeming characteristics of lower-class family life in the late eighteenth century: the increase in illicit sex, the wife beating and abuse, the retrograde infant care and increasing abandonment of children. All of this offended their newfound notions of domesticity. Therefore, they began a campaign, which would grow to epic proportions in the nineteenth century, to impose the new domesticity on the lower classes. Indeed, the story of the working-class family in the nineteenth century is the story of its reshaping, under the twin pressures of industrialization and of this propaganda from doctors, educators, and bureaucrats, to fit the domestic model. But those who attacked the lower-class family misunderstood it. The values of domesticity, romantic marriage, and concerned motherhood were not really foreign to lower-class women; but they were unable to act on them because of economic necessity. Sheer survival had to come first. The experience of women in the family in eighteenth-century France suggests that domesticity was, during that period at least, an upper-class luxury that the lower classes simply could not afford.

NOTES


5. Margaret Darrow, “French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750-1850,” Feminist Studies 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 41-65. Darrow maintains that the change began only during the Revolution, while I think it was already visible during the 1770s.


17. For an example, see baronne d’Oberkirch, p. 224.

18. Quoted in Sussman, p. 16.


20. *La Vie de Mme de La Mothe Guyon*, pp. 18, 12.


22. Stone, pp. 221-269, 405-480.


26. For late eighteenth-century child raising, see Marie-France Morel, “City and Country in Eighteenth-Century Medical Discussions about Early Childhood,” in Forster and Ranum, pp. 48-65; and Donzelot, pp. 9-22.


30. Puis, pp. 55-56.

---


32. It should be noted that we have said nothing about bourgeois mothers for the simple reason that little is known about the bourgeois family. Modern domesticity may have originated among the bourgeoisie rather than the aristocracy. But the English example (see Stone; and Randolph Trumbach, The Rise of the Egalitarian Family [New York: Academic Press, 1978]) suggest that it began at the highest levels of society and filtered down first to the bourgeoisie and later to the lower classes.


36. Ibid., pp. 27, 26.

37. Ibid., pp. 38-41.


40. Shorter, pp. 73, 58-59. For a more favorable review of marital relations among the peasantry, see Segalen, Love and Power, especially pp. 155-161.


42. Ibid., pp. 134-135.

43. Lebrun, p. 102.

44. Birth control was practiced in scattered areas, both rural and urban, before the Revolution, but these areas are so diverse that historians have not yet discerned a pattern among them that might explain its adoption. See Lebrun, pp. 103-109; and Jean-Louis Flandrin, Familles, parentés, maison, sexualité dans l’ancienne société (Paris: Hachette, 1976), pp. 188-192.

45. Flandrin, p. 237; Gélis, Laget, and Morel, p. 185.

46. Laget, pp. 156-167; and Naissances, pp. 261-282.


49. The dangers of the street were a major theme of nineteenth-century writings about child care, but parents worried about them in the eighteenth century, too. See Arlette Farge, Vivre dans la rue (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).
52. Flandrin, p. 185.
53. Fairchilds, Poverty and Charity, p. 86.