VII

Portrayal of French Women in Other European Literatures
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The View from England

In eighteenth-century England, as in France, there was much discussion of the nature and role of women and increasing protest, direct and indirect, against institutions that remained patriarchal. English women were gradually gaining more intellectual respect from men and more meaningful participation in social life, but they continued to lag behind French women in these areas. The English and French differed most sharply in their attitude toward marriage. In England, marriage based on love, expressed as intimate companionship and demanding absolute fidelity at least from the wife, was an ideal generally professed and increasingly practiced. In France, of course, despite the efforts of certain philosophers and painters to popularize an ideal of domestic affection, marriages continued to be arranged for mercenary reasons, and young men and women so connected were neither expected to be intimate nor forbidden to seek satisfaction through adultery. In accordance with these contrasting views, English girls mixed more freely in society than French ones, so as to meet men they could love; and married English women were more guarded in their behavior with men because, supposedly, they had already found sexual and emotional fulfillment in their marriage.

English observers constantly emphasized the acceptance of adultery in France. Sometimes they simply noted the difference, such as when Philip Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, assured his son that in Paris a presentable young man could certainly have an affair “with a woman of health, education, and rank,” since all the women of fashion had lovers. The bachelor hero of Frances Brooke’s novel Emily Montague, who is too considerate to endanger a wife’s reputation in England, has no qualms about courting married women in France, for there, “marriages... being made by the parents, and therefore generally without inclination on either side, gallantry seems to be a tacit condition, though not absolutely expressed in the contract.” But other commentators saw the French attitude as evidence of immorality and unmanliness. In a witheringly contemptuous estimate, David Hume charged that the French held adultery “in the highest vogue and esteem... every man of education chose for his mistress a married
woman, the wife, perhaps, of his friend and companion” and every man, likewise, took “pride in his tameness and facility” in allowing his own wife “full liberty and indulgence.”

The more relaxed, less possessive relationships between the sexes in French society not only allowed adulterous affairs but encouraged a general gallantry remarkable to the English. Eliza Haywood contrasted Englishmen’s indifference to all women on whom they had no sexual designs with the general attentiveness of French men to women, and Chesterfield confirmed that “a gallant turn prevails in all their companies, to women, with whom they neither are, nor pretend to be, in love.” Hence language that was mere gallantry from a Frenchman would be a declaration of love from an Englishman. Hester Thrale remarked that Parisian crowds were less rude and dangerous than London ones, for in Paris “every man thinks himself the protector of every woman.”

While most English, particularly women, appreciated the superior politeness of the French, some despised it as typical French effeminacy. Tobias Smollett, contemptuous of both French people and women, reduced the Frenchman’s politeness to mindless routine: “He learns like a parrot . . . the whole circle of French compliments . . . and these he throws out indiscriminately to all women without distinction . . . it is no more than his making love to every woman who will give him the hearing.” He can be so adept only because, “mingling with the females from his infancy,” he “not only becomes acquainted with all their customs and humours, but grows wonderfully alert in performing a thousand little offices, which are overlooked by other men, whose time hath been spent in making more valuable acquisitions.”

Perhaps it was this habitual gallantry that convinced Englishmen that women ruled in France, a situation they all deplored. Christopher Wren attributed the fussy over-ornamentation of Versailles to feminine influence: “The women as they make here the language and fashions, and meddle with politics and philosophy, so they sway also in architecture.” Frances Burney d’Arblay’s small son picked up the commonplace that “the ladies govern . . . entirely” in France, and Arthur Young stated as an obvious fact that women exerted “enormous” influence on political affairs under the ancien régime. Hume agreed that in France “the females enter into all transactions and all management of church and state: and no man can expect success, who takes not care to obtain their good graces.” He went so far as to call French society a continuous saturnalia, in which masters not only serve their slaves all year long but also serve slaves who are such not by misfortune but by nature. The French nation gravely exalts those, whom nature has subjected to them, and whose inferiority and infirmities are absolutely incurable. The women, though

without virtue, are their masters and sovereigns... in all places and all times, the superiority of the females is readily acknowledged and submitted to by everyone, who has the least pretensions to education and politeness.  

While these comments grossly exaggerate the power of French women in society, it is true that they exerted an influence over social life that amazed English observers. They led conversation and taste in a way that was unknown in England, where, at least early in the century, men and women met only for cards, dancing, or flirtation. Even in 1783, a character in Hannah Cowley's play *Which is the Man?* complained that Englishmen reserve "all their passions" for their clubs and "all their wit" for Parliament, while the French marquis learns his politics "in the drawing-room of Mme the Dutchess... whilst the sprightly countess dispenses taste and philosophy to a circle of bishops, generals, and abbés." Helen Maria Williams noted with approval that women were admitted to coffeehouses (at least in Revolutionary Paris), "for the English idea of finding ease, comfort, or festivity, in societies where women are excluded, never enters the imagination of a Frenchman." French visitors were shocked by the English custom that required ladies to withdraw after dinner. They attributed this to English contempt or fear of women, but Englishmen typically saw it as proof of the superiority of English males. Samuel Johnson, defending the society of London against that of Paris at the end of an all-male dinner in 1778, pronounced: "They talk in France of the felicity of men and women living together: the truth is, that there the men are not higher than the women, they know no more than the women do, and they are not held down in their conversation by the presence of women." He probably meant that the French attached less importance to Latin and Greek, the great barrier in England between solid masculine learning and feminine superficiality.

Observers more attuned to the graces, however, preferred French conversation to English. Chesterfield found

the polite conversation of the men and women of fashion at Paris, though not always very deep... much less futile and frivolous than ours here. It turns at least upon some subject, something of taste, some point of history, criticism, and even philosophy, which, though probably not quite so solid as Mr. Locke's, is however better, and more becoming rational beings, than our frivolous dissertations upon the weather or upon whist.

He attributed the inferiority of mixed conversation in England to the fact that "our English women are not near so well informed and cultivated as the French; besides that they are naturally more serious and silent." Frances Brooke confirms his estimate: "A French woman
of distinction would be more ashamed of wanting a taste for the belles-lettres, than of being ill dressed," and because English ladies fail to adorn their minds, they are "at Paris the objects of unspeakable contempt."

Brooke's hero, Colonel Rivers, deplores French ladies' shallowness of feeling, as shown in their preference "of unmeaning admiration to the real devotion of the heart"; but he also believes that respectable English ones "are generally too reserved; their manner is cold and forbidding; they seem to think it a crime to be too attractive."

Elizabeth Montagu, the leading Bluestocking hostess, agreed that French conversation was superior. In Paris, the men of letters "by their vivacity and politeness shew they have been used to converse much with women. The ladies by being well informed and full of those graces we neglect when with each other shew they have been used to converse with men." Maria Edgeworth's social ideal combined "French manners" with "English morals." She would rule out the political and gallant intrigues of French social life; but she approved of the mingling of "feminine and masculine subjects of conversation, instead of separating the sexes... into hostile parties, dooming one sex to politics, argument, and eternal sense, the other to scandal, dress, and eternal nonsense."

Mary Wollstonecraft, similarly applauding the benefits of French women's greater social freedom, noted that it strengthened their characters as well as improving their conversation. (Only a radical writer, attaching less importance to sexual propriety than most English people and believing that women ought to take an interest in politics, could approve of the character of French women.) She found French ladies less insipid than the English because they had freer social contacts with men, were less enslaved to the mind-narrowing occupation of ornamental needlework, and were less restricted by the artificial reserve enjoined by English propriety: "acting more freely, they have more decision of character, and even more generosity." The result is that they are more respected as well as more respectable: the French, admitting "more of mind into their notions of beauty, give the preference to women of thirty... they allow women to be in their most perfect state, when vivacity gives place to reason, and to that majestic seriousness of character, which marks maturity."

French men not only enjoyed conversing with women but made a point of sharing knowledge with them. (Formal education for girls was equally inadequate in both countries.) Bernard Le Bouvier de Fontenelle's Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes (1686), the most famous effort to instruct women in a traditionally "masculine" area, was well known in England. A writer in The Female Spectator said that women were more respected and better educated in France because they could expect men to share with them the results of their scholarly reading.
Goldsmith confirmed that a man who would court a lady must be capable of discussing Newton and Locke, coyly adding that he saw “as bright a circle of beauty at the chymical lectures of Rouelle, as at the court of Versailles.”

Only with the Bluestocking assemblies of the later eighteenth century did the English have anything comparable to the salons that dominated French fashionable society. But although these assemblies brought women and eminent men together to converse as equals, they never exerted the influence of the salons. They were rigorously limited by the propriety that dictated female behavior in England. Intellectual brilliance was less important than chastity; the assemblies were open only to ladies of unimpeachable respectability. Hannah More’s highest praise for Bluestocking conversation was that virtue always controlled what was said, so that, whenever necessary, “virtue sunk what wit inspired.” Furthermore, she claimed, competitive display of wit was not encouraged. Frances Burney d’Arblay, sharing her distaste for aggressiveness in women, was relieved to discover that Mme de Laval did not have “the vehement vivacity so usual amongst les femmes d’esprit. . . . Her observations were sagacious, and her satire . . . too just to be ill natured.” Finally, the assemblies could never serve, like the salons philosophiques, as forums for the propagation of new ideas; they had to be conservative and apolitical because even relatively liberal English thinkers considered politics and religion unsuitable topics for women. The Bluestockings did much to raise the intellectual status of English women, but, by French standards, they were restricted; and they never enjoyed the respect and power of the salonnieres. Hence, France could be called, in contrast to England, “the paradise of lady wits.”

Expecting women to confine their interests to private life, matters of taste, and orthodox religion, English observers were surprised to see French women participate in philosophical and political controversy. Laurence Sterne, titillated by the novelty, threw a coy allusion to a physical précieuse (a female philosophical materialist) into his Sentimental Journey, where he also described the “three epochas in the empire of a French woman” as she goes from coquette to deist to dévoté: “When thirty-five years and more have unpeopled her dominions of the slaves of love, she re-peoples it with slaves of infidelity—and then with the slaves of the Church.” Despite its facetious tone, revealing his lack of respect for women’s ideas, whether freethinking or orthodox, Sterne’s remark shows both the acceptability of religious questioning among French women and the prevalent English belief that they ruled French society. Arthur Young was surprised to see two ladies at a political dinner in France in 1787, something that could never happen in England. Unlike most English people, he thoroughly approved: “The
conversation of men, not engaged in trifling pursuits, is the best school for the education of a woman.”

Most English observers, however, had misgivings about the greater freedom produced in French women by their wider intellectual range and their easier and more flirtatious associations with men. Frances Burney d’Arblay’s relationships with Germaine Necker de Staël and Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis illustrate the mixture of fascination, disapproval, and alarm that French female intellectuals aroused in an intelligent but conventional Englishwoman. D’Arblay admired and was charmed by both women but was compelled by external pressure and her own inhibitions to break off their acquaintance. First, she was reluctantly forced to recognize that they had extramarital affairs. Then, they mixed in politics—even worse, liberal politics. De Genlis, whom she had once admired as “the apparent pattern of female perfection,” shocked her by espousing revolutionary ideals to the extent of dining with people of servant rank and permitting a young noblewoman to dance at a ball “with anybody, known or unknown.” De Staël put herself forward as an intellectual leader and freely expressed her views on liberal politics and the restrictiveness of English feminine propriety. D’Arblay, on the other hand, was embarrassed and annoyed when the headmistress of a French school tried to present her as a celebrity at a prize-giving ceremony. English women felt they must at least maintain an air of modesty.

Many English writers simply deplored French women’s ease with men and desire to shine intellectually as destructive of modesty, chastity, and family affection. Their suspicions were aggravated by such French habits as wearing rouge, riding astride, speaking plainly of natural functions, and receiving male visitors in their bedrooms. Sir James Macdonald complained that French women seemed “not to know what diffidence and modesty mean” because they constantly forced witty flattery from men, and he went on to draw a distinction dear to the English heart: “In France women are more flattered and less esteemed than in other countries.”

Jane West, indignantly rejecting “the ostentatious obsequiousness” that the French “practise to a degree of farcical affectation,” celebrated “the mild chaste attractions of the British fair . . . simple elegance, domestic habits, and all the graces of discretion, delicacy, and ingenuous attachment.” Edgeworth, with almost equal fatuity, explained why a hero who searched through Europe for a woman worthy to be his wife found her in England. Though he admires the wit and elegance of French women and wants an enlarged understanding capable of comprehending his political aspirations, he disapproves of their love of power, political intrigue, and “devouring diseased appetite for admiration . . . which substitutes a precarious, factitious, intemperate existence in public, for the safe self-approval,
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The sober, the permanent happiness of domestic life.37 Thomas Gisborne agreed with Edgeworth that, though Englishmen wanted intelligent wives, they did not want one intelligent in the Parisian style: erecting “herself into an idol for the votaries of science and taste to worship,” giving “audience to a levee of deistical philosophers,” or pronouncing “to the listening circle her decision on a manuscript sonnet.” And he was shocked by French women’s participation in political intrigue, which he attributed to the absolutism of the ancien régime and the disorder of the Revolutionary government.38 The more liberal Arthur Young, who differed from Gisborne in approving of the early Revolutionary changes, agreed with him about women’s participation. He believed that their political influence declined as the French government was becoming more democratic and declared that, as a result, French women “will become more amiable, and the nation better governed.”39

It was assumed that French women’s relative emancipation entailed a loss of domestic virtue. Hume said the French “have resolved to sacrifice some of the domestic to the sociable pleasures; and to prefer ease, freedom, and an open commerce, to a strict fidelity and constancy.”40 Hannah More, indignantly rebutting de Staël’s charge that English ladies were insipid, claimed that the reserve and diffidence she deplored were virtues; English ladies were, very properly, educated to fulfill their duties at home rather than to shine in society and compete with men. And, of course, she was horrified by de Staël’s view that coquetry is “the flavor which gives to society its poignancy.”41 Anna Barbauld turned with revulsion from the egotistical French mother to the English one, “endowed with talents and graces to draw the attention of polite circles, yet devoting her time and cares to her family and children.”42 Even Wollstonecraft said French women’s skill in repartee was necessary “to supply the place of that real interest only to be nourished in the affectionate intercourse of domestic intimacy.”43

The belief that fashionable French ideals detracted from domestic virtue, which had some basis in actuality, was augmented by vague but powerful suspicions that sexual and intellectual freedom were connected. As Joseph Addison reprehends the French—imported custom of admitting male visitors to a lady’s dressing room, he mentions that the lady he visits is talking politics. Going on to warn against the tendency of French manners “to make the sex... more awaken’d, than is consistent either with virtue or discretion,” he gives an example not of sexual looseness but of intellectual assertion: making one’s opinions heard in public.44 Richard Edgeworth made the same association when he cautioned Anna Barbauld:

As your sex becomes more civilized every day, it is necessary that they should become more circumspect in conversation and in all the paraphernalia of modesty. A married lady in France is allowed one lover,
she is pardon'd for two; three is rather too many—but great delicacy of sentiment, elegant language, decent dress, and a good choice of the objects of her attachments will preserve her from absolute excommunication. 45

The French Revolution does not appear to have changed the English view of French women, but only confirmed attitudes already held. The political activities of French women during the Revolution reinforced Montagu's previous opinion that they "have too much of the male character, the men of the female." 46 The radical Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, applauded their involvement and hoped it would kindle patriotism, which would inspire them to abjure the coquetry and artifice in which they had been trained. She hoped that the new Revolutionary leadership would try what effect reason would have to bring them back to nature, and their duty; and allowing them to share the advantages of education and government with man, see whether they will become better, as they grow wiser and become free. They cannot be injured by the experiment; for it is not in the power of man to render them more insignificant than they are at present. 47

Note that Wollstonecraft, the only feminist among these writers, saw less difference than the others between French and English women; in her view, both groups were powerless and debased by social oppression.

Nevertheless, English observers were responding to some real differences. A domestic ideal of loving marriage and familial intimacy was becoming increasingly predominant in England, while gallantry remained the mode in France, producing both flattering attentiveness to women in general and acceptance of adulterous affairs. French women were less inhibited than English ones, not only sexually, but intellectually. They felt more free to display their wit and knowledge, to take the lead in conversation, and to range into religious and political controversy.

However, subjective elements were at least as important in forming the English attitude. The English conviction that women ruled men in France may be based not so much on actual life as on romances such as those of Madeleine de Scudéry. These works, whose heroes submit to every whim of the lady they love and strive for years to make themselves worthy of her hand, were widely read in England and must have contributed to the impression that French women were treated with exaggerated respect. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse reinforced the conviction of its many English readers that the French approved of sexual passion unsanctioned by marriage.

Secondly, the English attitude toward French women was part of their intensely ambivalent attitude toward the French in general:
strong attraction and admiration opposed by contempt required by national pride. Actually, the English stereotype of the French was like their stereotype of women; both groups were supposed to be vain, superficial, frivolous, affected, clever but not solidly learned, and socially agreeable but weak in character. Such a nation would naturally submit to women and emphasize flashy but insubstantial "feminine" values. Hume explicitly concluded that where men associate much with women, as in France, gaiety will be preferred over prudence, politeness over simplicity of manners, taste and delicacy over good sense and judgment.48

Finally, English observers projected on French women the exciting but frightening idea of emancipation, which naturally arose as women in England were beginning to develop their minds and aspirations. Even so conservative a woman as Hannah More felt the attraction a little, for—though she detested de Staël's Corinne and rejected its values—she could not stop reading it.49 For many English, however, the beginnings of female emancipation, occurring in both countries but more apparent in France, were simply a source of anxiety. French women were more free to display and claim recognition of their talents; they were also more free to have liaisons and ignore their families. The French example made it easier for English conservatives to associate easy social intercourse with destruction of domestic virtue, intellectual freedom with sexual license, and mental achievement with brazen assertiveness; and, thus, to cast a blighting suspicion of immodesty over any efforts by women to exercise their talents and enlarge their sphere.

NOTES

1. This is not to say that mercenary marriages were no longer made for convenience, that girls were no longer bullied into marriage, that husbands and wives were always congenial and devoted, or that adulteresses were always ostracized; but these were the accepted standards, which were coming to determine social practice. See Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

2. The duc de La Rochefoucauld, in 1788, noted that "young girls mix with the company and talk and enjoy themselves with as much freedom as if they were married" and that "husband and wife are always together and share the same society. It is the rarest thing to meet the one without the other." Quoted in Stone, pp. 318, 329.


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5. David Hume, “A Dialogue,” The Philosophical Works, edited by Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964), vol. 4. p. 294. Tobias Smollett confirms this with his usual sour exaggeration: if you make friends with a Frenchman and receive him in your family, he will try to seduce your wife or daughter and call this treachery “simple gallantry, considered in France as an indispensable duty on every man who pretended to good breeding.” See Travels through France and Italy, 1766 (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 78.


7. Smith, Emmeline, p. 346.

8. Journal of 1784, The French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Dr. Johnson, edited by Moses Tyson and Henry Guppy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932), p. 95. Arthur Young and Helen Maria Williams agreed that French men were more considerate of women than Englishmen were: see Young, Travels in France During the Years 1787, 1788, 1789, edited by M. Betham-Edwards (London: G. Bell, 1913), p. 75; and Williams, Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790 (London: T. Cadell, 1791), p. 43.


17. Chesterfield supports this interpretation, adding that French people of both sexes were well informed about the history of their own country (p. 191).

18. Chesterfield, pp. 228, 250. He was writing in 1752, when the Bluestocking assemblies were only getting started.


conservative Bluestockings, protested against men's refusal to discuss substantial subjects with women.


28. See, for example, Edgeworth, *Madame de Fleury, Tales and Novels*, vol. 6, p. 292: "no amiable or sensible woman can wish to interfere" in politics; and Brooke, *Emily Montague*, vol. 1, p. 224: infidelity is "a vice peculiarly contrary to the native softness of woman . . . I should almost doubt the sex of an unbeliever in petticoats."


30. Sterne, pp. 12-13, 123.

31. Young, pp. 85-86.

32. D'Arblay, *Diary and Letters*, vol. 3, p. 408. De Staël was amazed, in turn, by d'Arblay's dependence on her father's judgment when she was forty years old: "mais est-ce qu'une femme est en tutelle pour la vie dans ce pays?" (but is a woman under guardianship for life in this country?) (vol. 3, p. 498).


34. See, for example, Smollett, pp. 44, 69; Thrale, p. 100; Sterne, p. 72; Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, no. 45.


37. Edgeworth, *Patronage, Tales and Novels*, vol. 7, pp. 394-395. See Colonel Rivers' appreciation of Emily, the woman he loves; she combines "the smiling graces of France" with "the blushing delicacy and native softness of England" (Brooke, *Emily Montague*, vol. 1, p. 119).


41. More, vol. 3, pp. 268-270. More was scandalized that Mme du Deffand, whom she considered cynical and indelelute, who separated from her husband on grounds of incompatibility and had adulterous affairs, was nevertheless received in the best society of Paris (vol. 3, pp. 276-278).


44. Addison, *Spectator*, no. 45, 1711.


47. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, p. 167. Both Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria

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Williams deplored the failure of the French Revolutionary leaders to extend the rights of man to women, even to the extent of educating them.

48. Hume, vol. 4, p. 302. Smollett found French men “more ridiculous and insignificant than the women” (Travels, pp. 73-74). Surprisingly, it was Wollstonecraft who made this identification most explicit: “The French may be considered as a nation of women; and made feeble, probably, by the same combination of circumstances, as has rendered these insignificant”; both groups are ingenious rather than profound, sentimentally susceptible rather than impassioned (French Revolution, p. 247).