In eighteenth-century France, both the image and reality of women were undergoing profound changes. These changes extended forward into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and explain the modern concept of French womanhood. Our examination of eighteenth-century views on women will conclude by highlighting the connections that link the experience of eighteenth-century French women to French women’s future experiences.

Throughout the eighteenth century, there was great interest in women’s issues. The basic liberalism of the writers of that era guaranteed that women’s plight would be treated with sympathy. Furthermore, the willingness of the Enlightenment philosophers to question the basic immutability of apparently natural characteristics had revolutionary implications for the status of women.

Voltaire wrote that women’s inferiority was contingent upon circumstance, not upon natural necessity.\(^1\) Montesquieu thought-provokingly symbolized human tyranny in the person of a young Persian girl presumed—but falsely—to be happy in her place in the king’s harem.\(^2\) In *L’Esprit des lois*, he advocated equality of treatment of men and women in divorce.\(^3\) In the *Encyclopédie*, women were judged equal to men in intellectual capacity; it was their limited education that was held responsible for the nonrealization of their potential.\(^4\) According to Samia I. Spencer, calls for improved education for women were a not uncommon part of the general concern for education throughout the century.\(^5\) D’Alembert defended women’s rights to an education equal to men’s. Diderot, in his treatise on public education, pointed out that improved education for boys would be in vain if effective reforms were not also carried out for the training of girls.\(^6\)

It is not surprising then that fully feminist writings emerged with the Revolution. The years immediately preceding the storming of the
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Bastille witnessed a stepped-up pace in the circulation of pamphlets and brochures on a host of social and political issues. The women's issue was not neglected among them. There is evidence that these brochures circulated throughout France, passed along by friends and relatives gathering in provincial salons. The *cahiers de doléances*, prepared in 1789 by the primary electoral assemblies to inform their representatives to the Estates General of their concerns, reveal that the demand for improved female education was widespread. The third estate of Chatellerault sought equality for both sexes. In the primary election (early in 1789) for the third-estate representative from Chevanceaux, women voted, and no one dared prevent them.

The most important of the feminist publicists during the early years of the Revolution were Condorcet, Olympe de Gouges, Etta Palm d'Aelders, and Théroigne de Mericourt. In their writings, the basic concepts of Enlightenment reasoning are made to pertain to women as well as to all men. Their feminism paralleled the Revolution's politics of individual rights. They believed that individuals of both sexes were similar in capacity and character, and they ascribed male-female differences to socialization. Sex, no more so than social position at birth, should not be a cause to deny the basic rights of citizenship. Justice required that all men and women be assured the opportunity to develop their full potential.

A phenomenon of nearly equal importance was the development of a collective female consciousness, resulting from women's participation in the Revolution. A few women took part in the disturbances of July 14, 1789, and again of the night of August 4, but they were notable for their singularity. The "October Days" of that same year, however, were a women's affair; and women participated in important numbers in the Champ de Mars demonstration of 1791, as they did again on 4 Prairial (1795). Parisian women participated in politics through the "mixed fraternal societies," which had been created to inform and instruct "passive" citizens—including women—of the actions of the Revolutionary government. In the provinces, clubs of entirely female membership sprang up. Although for the most part, the women in these provincial clubs seemed to have understood their role to be that of auxiliary supporters to the male makers of the Revolution, their activities encouraged the emergence of a sense of the collective power of women.

The opposition likely sensed this nascent collective force. By the fall of 1793, all of the feminist activists found themselves at one or another point along the spectrum of the political opposition, and the Committee on General Security moved to silence them. The prosecution quickly widened from an attack on a frankly feminist group, such as the Société des Républicaines Révolutionnaires, to all women who dared to participate in politics. The violent reaction against women's
political activities, frequently believed to have been inspired by Napoleon, was, in fact, already in motion by 1793.

This reaction can, of course, be understood simply as a reemergence of a seemingly eternal patriarchal system, but such an explanation would overlook its historically specific characteristics. Jacobin arguments against women’s political activities were not some mere throwback to “unenlightened” times. Rather, Jacobins relied on the quite new reasoning formulated by Rousseau. As Gita May has made clear, Rousseau was unlike earlier patriarchalists. He depicted a middle-class, not upper-class, existence and specifically a kind of middle-class life that had not existed in earlier centuries when workplace and home overlapped. He glorified the separation of private and public spheres and elevated bourgeois women’s newly time-consuming maternal preoccupations to an exalted level. Women’s role as men’s companion was elevated too; they were indispensable to men’s happiness, and, in recognition, Rousseau’s men loved and respected them. Women’s innate aptitude for love and selfish devotion thus assured them dignity, respect, and happiness. In some ways, Rousseau reads more like women’s defenders in the earlier, seventeenth-century querelle des femmes than their detractors.

But Rousseau’s appreciation of women’s familial role was central to arguments that actually strengthened older patriarchal values by reformulating them in terms that were relevant to eighteenth-century society. It was women’s maternal responsibilities that now required her exclusion from the kind of civil, political, and economic activities that Rousseau championed for all men. Rousseau had changed the patriarchal concept of womanhood from one that was similar in quality but lesser in value to one that was qualitatively different and, if not lesser than, still subordinate to men.

Rousseau is echoed in the 1793 report of the Committee of General Security that was written to respond to the question, “Should women meet in political associations?”

No, because they would be required to sacrifice to them [the associations] the more important cares to which Nature calls them. Private functions to which women are destined by Nature are necessary to the general order of society; social order results from the difference between men and women.

That the eighteenth century ended in repression is, therefore, neither surprising nor even anachronistic. The uniform legal system that rationalist jurists spent more than a decade drawing up enshrined the Rousseauist concept of the difference of women from men. The Civil Code recognized the rights of all citizens but excluded women from the definition of citizenship. Women were thereby reduced to the status of a legal caste at the same time that the ancien régime's
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legal class system was abolished for men. Women’s status worsened—if not in absolute terms, then in relative terms. Indeed, even in absolute terms, *some* women’s status worsened, for when many different laws had applied differently to French people from different geographic areas or from different orders there had existed opportunities for women, especially noble women, to escape the full harshness of patriarchal laws. They could slip through loopholes created by differing and overlapping legal systems. Those opportunities had now been erased, and this was the meaning, for women, of the new civil equality.

Eighteenth-century views on women were contradictory, then, providing encouragement for the emergence of a feminist movement but also new weapons to gun it down. On balance, however, the movement was forward because even seemingly patriarchal views, like Rousseau’s, contained the seeds of new power for women that bore fruit in the following century.

In nineteenth-century France, the romantic woman—a direct descendant of Rousseau’s Julie—was idealized. This rehabilitation of women in theory was the foundation upon which a feminist movement would be constructed. Women’s self-esteem was elevated by their positive depiction in popular literature. As a result, some were emboldened to question the continuing limitations placed on their activities. Not surprisingly, nineteenth-century feminists were ambivalent about the image of the good, romantic woman. They recognized that this literary personnage was no equal to man; she was child-like, dependent on men’s power for her very survival, or self-sacrificing, subordinating herself to men’s interests. Nonetheless, feminists frequently employed romantic language idealizing women to further their cause. Its usefulness for feminist purposes was undeniable.

There was a relation, too, between the creation of a legal system based solely on sex and the reemergence of feminism in the nineteenth century. The Code served as a rallying point for feminist protest not only because it discriminated against women but also—and perhaps more significantly—because it intensified women’s sense of sex identification. By proclaiming the political significance of sex, the Code ironically participated in the shaping of feminist consciousness.

The continuing influence of eighteenth-century thought on women is evident, too, in the subsequent development of the French feminist movement. In nineteenth-century France, the utopian socialists were the first to discuss feminist ideas. During the 1830s and 1840s, their teachings reached an audience throughout the Western world. Feminism moved beyond isolated concern to become an international collective force.
The first of the utopian socialists to discuss feminist ideas were the Saint-Simonians, who envisioned a world order ruled over by a “couple-pope,” the male to represent “reflection,” the female “sentiment.” This dichotomization of the human personality is right out of Rousseau. At first reading, then, it appears that Saint-Simonians had accepted a patriarchal prejudice that had been intended to justify women’s restriction to a domestic role. But Saint-Simonians really turned Rousseau upside down. Their feminism was integral to a system that actually prized emotion (the female quality) over reason (the male quality). They preached that only sentiment, not reason, could provide a strong and solid bond for a peaceful society. The future direction of the new age could be entrusted only to those who were especially endowed with sentiment: women, but priests and artists as well. In practice of what they preached, both sexes participated in the governance and administration of the group.

By 1848, utopian feminists, whose numbers now included Fourierists as well as Saint-Simonians, were basing their demands for female equality on the glorification of women as mothers. In their words, “the mothers of your sons cannot be slaves.” This kind of reasoning distinguished nineteenth-century feminism from its Revolutionary predecessor: the equality of women was not merely “just”; now it was “necessary.” “It is above all this holy function of motherhood, . . . which requires that women watch over the futures of their children and gives women the right to intervene not only in all acts of civil life, but also in all acts of political life.”

Why did feminists choose to coopt a line of reasoning that Jacobin patriarchalists had once used against their predecessors? I relate this shift in nineteenth-century feminist theory to the eighteenth-century cultural revolution that made of childhood a distinct and important phase of life. As each child became a more important individual to the parents and remained at home for a longer number of years, mothers’ maternal responsibilities increased. Their power increased, too, because the domestic sphere—along with the child—was elevated in importance and because the separation of workplace and home increasingly removed men from the home and left women more in control there.

The effect of the increasing separation of workplace and home was contradictory; women lost power, too, by being excluded from sharing in the new opportunities for political participation and economic independence that were opening to increasing numbers of men. But feminists protested only their exclusion from the public sphere and confinement to the domestic sphere. They did not question women’s responsibilities and roles within the home, viewing these rather as a source of empowerment.
During the 1830s, utopian feminists had also taught that women’s liberation and sexual liberation were interconnected issues, but by 1848, they had rejected this notion. Here, too, the shift in feminist theory is explained by changes in women’s lives dating to the eighteenth century. Utopian visions had been overwhelmed by the reality of a dramatic increase in the ratio of “illegitimate” births to total births that had begun about mid-eighteenth century. Until 1750, illegitimacy had been essentially unknown in ancien régime France; by the mid-nineteenth century, it accounted for between five and ten percent of all births in France, and in certain areas—especially Paris, Lyons, and Bordeaux—illegitimacy accounted for between thirty and fifty percent of all births.¹⁵

Feminists—many of whom had attempted to live the new morality of “free love”—came to the sad conclusion that sexual liberation without economic liberation or political rights was a chimera. Large numbers of young women were working in large cities far from their parents. Their geographical mobility had left them bereft of traditional familial support systems. Throughout the century, women on their own—even without a child to support—could not earn wages sufficient to support themselves. Exploitative conditions in the work force carried over to sexual relations. Example after example in literature attested to the exploitative nature of sexual relations outside of marriage, which commonly involved a woman from the lower classes and her employer of the upper classes. Almost half of the illegitimate children born in Paris in the 1880s were born to servant mothers, but employers were protected against their servants’ claims by the legal system.¹⁶

The feminist program after 1848 was shaped by this reality. Feminists demanded a legal solution to the problems raised by illegitimacy and supported changes in the Code that would permit divorce and paternity suits, establish inheritance rights for illegitimate children, and eliminate prostitution. At the same time, they insisted that the most obvious solution to illegitimacy was the best solution: sexual abstinence for the unmarried. Their feminism was based on their arguing that this morality apply to men as well as to women.

They demanded, too, the rights and opportunities for an independent existence. At the head of their platform reappeared the centuries-old demand for improved educational opportunities, which after the establishment of a state system of secondary schools for girls, in 1880, became the specific demand that girls’ education be made equal to boys’. Next, feminists demanded the right to work. For bourgeois women, this slogan meant opposition to laws that denied them access to the professions. For working-class women, it meant opposition to the so-called protective laws that limited their earning power and the demand that their wages be raised to the level of mens’.
After the Republic was secured in 1879, feminists were hopeful that their demands would be met. They fashioned a kind of politics that was patterned after that of the Opportunists Republicans, whom they challenged. They reasserted the language of individual rights that stressed the “justice” of their cause and focused on issues that could be resolved by legal reforms. At first, their campaign to change the Civil Code highlighted women’s exclusion from the rights of citizenship; they demanded that women be allowed to be witnesses to public acts, notaries, and guardians to children in addition to their own and that women be allowed to control their own earnings and share the father’s authority over the children and over the community property as well. But, soon, some feminists were urging that the demand for the vote should be put first in their program; in 1909, the Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes united formerly fragmented feminists into one block aimed at enfranchising women.

How well did feminists fare? That their struggle was uphill and their victories slow in coming is not surprising given the strength of the patriarchal legacy of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the contradictions of that legacy afforded them opportunities as well. Feminists were most successful when those who controlled power shared the liberal values of the Enlightenment or the radicalism of Revolutionists. Unfortunately, this was only intermittently so in nineteenth-century France. Saint-Simonian activities, encouraged by the upheavals of the Revolution of 1830, were curtailed by the government in 1832 and again in 1834. From 1848 to 1850, the feminists could organize clubs and publish newspapers, but, in 1851, the government cracked down on them. An entire generation of feminist leadership was exiled; most never returned to France. Repressive laws on the press and assembly were not lifted until the final years of the Second Empire; and only then did new leaders recommence the propaganda effort. Then came the repression of the Commune uprising, and the working-class participants of the nascent feminist movement were punished, most of them by exile. The rights to organize, lecture publicly, and publish freely were necessary preconditions for further success. The Enlightenment had legitimized these safeguards in theory; in reality, they were not secured for almost another century.

Only in 1879 were the rights of feminists to publish and meet publicly ensured. Their achievements in the decades that followed were significant: 1) 1880: a state system of secondary education for girls; 2) the opening up of the university to women—1866, faculté de médecine; 1870, faculté des lettres, sciences, et droit; 1896, école des beaux-arts; 3) 1884: the reestablishment of divorce; 4) the right to practice certain “public” professions—1881, newspaper publisher; 1885, medicine; 1900, law; 5) 1897: the right to witness public acts (single women only); 6) 1898: the right to vote for judges of the tribunes
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*de commerce*; 7) 1907: the right to vote for members of the conseils de prud'hommes; 8) 1907: the mother's right to equal authority with father over their children; right of mothers alone, in case of "illegitimate" children, to exercise the "paternal" authority; and right of married women to control their own earnings; 9) 1912: the right to initiate a paternity suit; 10) 1919: the Chamber of Deputies passed a universal suffrage bill; 11) 1924: girls' lycées adopted a course of study preparatory for the baccalaureate.

Then the pace of change slowed. The feminist movement proved too weak to withstand the reaction that swept all Western countries, France included, in the period that followed. Most notable was the inaction of the Senate on the suffrage bill. French women had to await the total defeat of the Vichy Right before winning the right to vote. An ordinance of the Provisional Government, dated April 21, 1944, finally recognized their most basic right of citizenship. The eighteenth century agenda had been fulfilled.

Because change is continuous and recognizes no special moment at the turn into a new century, characteristics of the lives of French women in the nineteenth century—and even into the twentieth century—are evident already in the eighteenth century. But the historical record for that time was contradictory. The Revolution, for example, had witnessed the first burst of feminist activity, but this turned out to be short-lived. The codification of civil and criminal laws a decade later froze the inferior position of women into French jurisprudence. It is an irony that history's celebration of the remarkable ideals and slogans advanced by the Revolution overlooks the almost total interdiction of civil and political rights for women.

Yet I have read the record of this historical period and judged their significance for women positively. Such an interpretation requires a look beyond the eighteenth century and into the future. There, we can see how important these years were for the future development of feminism and for the undermining of eighteenth-century arguments against sexual equality. Whereas, prior to 1789, favor for the ideas of the emancipation of women—or at the least, for greater opportunities for women—was restricted to the upper classes and support was usually in the form of approving women's desire for a better education, a feminism more sweeping in its scope and more inclusive in its following had arisen with the Revolutionary upheavals. Eighteenth-century feminists not only added new demands to their program—the rights of full citizen participation in politics and government, the right to work, the right to equality in marriage, and even the right to share the burdens of a nation at war—but they also adopted new methods to obtain their goals. They comprehended that
political action was more than a "demand"; it was a means to achieve their demands. They had grasped the potential strength of collective female action. The eighteenth century had bequeathed to the future the means to women's liberation.

NOTES

10. Duhet, p. 25.
13. Eugénie Niboyet, La Voix des femmes, 5 April 1848.
15. Edward Shorter, "Illegitimacy, Sexual Revolution, and Social Change in Modern Europe," The Journal of Interdisciplinary History 2 (1971):265-267. The best analyses of the causes of the rise in illegitimacy are Joan Scott and Louise Tilly, "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe," Comparative Studies in Society and History 17 (1975):36-64; and Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, and Miriam Cohen, "Women's Work and European Fertility Patterns," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 6 (Winter 1976):447-476. They have compared the values and behavior of nineteenth-century women with those of eighteenth-century women (relying heavily on the work of Olwen Hufton). They are able to show continuity of both values and behavior. The rise in the birth rate outside of marriage they ascribe to: 1) a new context in which geographic mobility left the women far from parental protection; 2) economic necessity or opportunity that forced or encouraged the male partner of a sexual union to move on before a marriage was legalized; and especially 3) the increase in absolute numbers of that urban class in which legalized marriage was "traditionally" uncommon.