Integrating Women and Gender into the Teaching of French History, 1789 to the Present

Elinor Accampo

Whether one teaches a seminar on the French Revolution or on Vichy, or a survey course on modern France to three hundred students, the challenge to integrate any new subfield is daunting because of the obvious limits on time and space in a syllabus; to incorporate new material other topics or reading assignments might have to be eliminated, a brutal reality that has fed the ongoing “culture wars” in academia. The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to persuade those who have not taught gender of its centrality in understanding modern France; and second, to suggest ways of integrating gender into topics usually taught in a survey or in more narrowly defined specialized courses. My approach is also twofold: on the one hand, I suggest here a new periodization for modern France that is based on the fruit that scholarship in women’s and gender history has borne during the past twenty-five years; on the other, I also follow the standard textbook chronology of major events and regimes so that instructors can choose readings without having to reformulate an entire syllabus. Thus my intent is not to propose a specific syllabus but to suggest ways to enhance parts of existing courses and to suggest new ways of thinking about French history for those who do wish to revamp their courses.

The argument implicit in this essay is that the course of French history is closely linked to the history of gender. French gender identity, while having a good deal in common with other modernizing countries, also has its particularities, and being aware of them helps us better

Elinor Accampo is associate professor of history at the University of Southern California. She is working on a book-length biography of feminist and birth-control advocate Nelly Roussel (1878–1922), tentatively titled “Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France.”

The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers of French Historical Studies, whose suggestions for rewriting this article, particularly with regard to rethinking the periodization, were inspirational and invaluable.

French Historical Studies, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 2004)
Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies
understand national identity. Stated rather simplistically, eighteenth-century philosophy, coupled with the experience of revolution, created an essentialist conception of womanhood. The Revolution of 1789, in abandoning the estates-based order determined by blood and birth and replacing it with the principles of the universality of human rights and equality before the law, created a new need for more precisely defined gender distinctions. As Joan Wallach Scott and others have argued, the “universality” of rights was based on a white, male concept of the individual; women were viewed as different, and the application of rights to them would be “exceptional” and undermine the universal quality of rights. Moreover, the potential application of human rights and equality to women (and nonwhite races) threatened to denaturalize differences deemed to be dictated by nature (instead of, or in addition to, God). Because the experience of revolution did erode differences between men and women, by 1793 it became necessary to reinscribe those differences.¹

Unlike the early modern period treated in Kathryn Norberg’s essay, in which the main story line is state building, the late modern period is more about the “rise of the masses” and its challenges to the state in the assertion of individual rights, as well as rights based on class, gender, and race. What happens to women at every twist and turn in this transition from an absolutist state to one based on representation? As Norberg notes, women are better able to exert power during periods of tumult. Each successive revolution and war from 1789 on created the language for women to demand new rights, and the opportunities for them to engage in new kinds of political, social, and cultural activities. But these same tumultuous events in turn created new regimes whose integrity depended on women returning to “traditional” roles and on reinforcing the essentialist notions that took hold at the end of the eighteenth century. Other experiences unique to the French—their precocious fertility decline, their particular form of imperialism (as discussed in Patricia Lorcin’s essay), the military defeats of 1870 and 1940, and the traumatic war experience of 1914–18—also shaped perceptions of gender and reactions to women and men who transgressed their prescribed roles or sexual identities.

This interpretation is not meant to be monolithic or airtight. Instead, it offers a way to organize course readings, pose and debate questions about them, and guide students in their understanding. A new

breakdown for teaching periods in modern France might use the following dates and themes. The period 1750 to 1815 can be understood as one in which science, medicine, and political philosophy used “nature” to define men and women as opposites and the definition of womanhood came to rest on physiology and maternal functions. Defined as *le sexe*, women were not supposed to be or feel sexual. The ensuing ideology of “separate spheres” and female domesticity came to dominate bourgeois moral values in the next period, 1815 to 1880, particularly as industrial capitalism transformed the economy. From 1880 to 1930, many factors—girl’s education, feminism, consumerism, innovations in travel and communication, new forms of leisure and entertainment, and war—undermined both the ideal and the practice of separate spheres. Reaction to this destabilization of gender identities, compounded by ongoing hysteria about depopulation, ushered in a new period of conservatism from 1930 to 1960, culminating in Vichy policy and postwar domesticity. After 1960, second-wave feminism, the legalization of birth control and abortion, and gay rights all destabilized definitions of gender once again, though demands for gender parity continue to come up against French notions of “universalism” and persistent essentialist conceptions of womanhood.

The broad themes of these periods transcend the discrete events of war, revolution, and changing constitutions, but they are also forged by them over the longer term. This essay uses this gender-oriented periodization as a backdrop, but it also incorporates the traditional chronology in which French history is taught. As Lorcin points out in her essay, when analyzing and integrating the place of women and gender in French history, we must consider the important distinction between “discourse” about gender, and actual experience. Both are important, as is the relationship between the two.

The readings I propose in this essay are intended for undergraduates who do not necessarily read French. I include further suggestions in footnotes, as well as materials instructors might use to develop lectures. My suggestions include essays or excerpts that can be used for weekly readings, as well as entire books to which more than one week would have to be devoted. Several books worth mentioning at the outset have chapters that can be assigned over the course of a term in conjunction with a standard textbook on national history. The last two volumes of *A History of Women*, an anthology with global coverage, includes essays specific to France through the period under consideration here. Another is the excellent and very readable *A History of Private Life*, an innovative source on the history of the family and gender. James McMillan’s recent, highly praised *France and Women* begins
with the Revolution of 1789 and ends in 1914. Its convenient organization makes it an excellent companion to a standard text on modern France. Similarly, Claire Goldberg Moses’s *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* begins with a very brief summary of the Revolution of 1789 and its legacy and ends with 1870. The history of sexuality is central to conceptions of gender, and some of the best work in this field has been done on homosexuality. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan Jr.’s edited volume, *Homosexuality in Modern France*, has excellent essays that span this period. They collectively analyze the subcultures of same-sex relationships within the context of French national culture, including literature, religion, philosophy, the law, and the medical profession. Finally, translated primary sources, articles, and essays lend themselves to weekly assignments and can be reproduced in reading packets. One important example covering the entire modern period is Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen’s two-volume *Women, the Family, and Freedom*; its primary sources reflect the themes discussed below.2

1750–1815: The Enlightenment, French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Empire

Because Jean-Jacques Rousseau had such an influence on the Revolution of 1789 and on French mentality throughout the nineteenth century, his works offer a good starting point for teaching the interrelationship between the course of French history and changing gender roles. “Could I forget the precious half of the Republic,” he wrote in *A Discourse on Inequality*, “which creates the happiness of the other and whose sweetness and prudence maintain peace and good morals?”3 Rousseau certainly did not forget women, but historians of France have often failed to appreciate how French conceptions of a republic—even the Third Republic—were rooted in their highly gendered understanding of citizenship and virtue and that women’s role as mothers in the private sphere was just as important as men’s role in the public sphere. In addition to the works that Norberg suggests, one might assign Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* or *A Discourse on Inequality* to show students the philo-


sophical motor that powered the course of the Revolution, but *Emile* is indispensable for understanding how gender undergirded his system of thought and how the Jacobins justified eliminating women from political activity. Since *Emile* is a very long work, one can just assign book 5 (a “popularized” version of *The Social Contract*) or excerpts from it. It provokes good discussion among students and later helps them understand better the concept of citizenship, as well as the ultimately deadly concept of “virtue,” and how these concepts played out in the Revolution. Why, one might ask, did Rousseau have such appeal to women? To balance Rousseau, one should assign excerpts from the marquis de Condorcet’s important tract arguing for women’s citizenship. Excerpts from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* also offer a rich comparison. A superb film that fits well with this part of a course is Patrice Leconte’s *Ridicule*, which portrays the nobility and the court of Louis XVI just prior to the Revolution, the power of sexual liaisons, “good” and “bad” womanhood, and the teachings of Rousseau.

The outbreak of the Revolution and the phase of the constitutional monarchy gave women, as well as the lower classes, an unprecedented occasion to voice their complaints and concerns, many of which were recorded in the often reprinted *Cahiers des doléances*. Other frequently reproduced documents include the “Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King” and Olympe de Gouges’s “The Declaration of the Rights of Woman” (fruitfully compared with “The Declaration of the Rights of Man”), as well as women’s testimonies regarding their march to Versailles on October 5, 1789. The issue of French “universalism” and the “liberal paradox” becomes an important context here for analyzing women’s demands. As Joan Wallach Scott has argued, it plagued subsequent French feminism: the French conception of rights as “universal” meant that no one group could claim them on the basis of its identity.

---

4 See note 74 in Norberg’s essay in this issue. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London, 2000). Rousseau’s thinking about women was a fundamental part of Joan B. Landes’s *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), a book that gave the historiography of women and the Revolution a new direction. Landes used the work of Jürgen Habermas and his followers to study the “public sphere” from a feminist viewpoint. She also used theories of representation to trace the shift in Old Regime iconic imagery of the father/king to a bourgeois system of representation whose symbols were grounded in the written and spoken word and in the law. She showed how concepts of reason and nature were used to create gendered private and public spheres. On Rousseau’s influence see also Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), esp. 204–15. Other works that discuss Rousseau on women include Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Chicago, 1984); and Penny A. Weiss, *Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics* (New York, 1993). An excerpt from Condorcet’s “On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship” can be found in Lynn Hunt, ed. and trans., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston, 1996), 119–21. See also Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York, 1988).
Thus women could not claim rights as women because of their difference from men. Nor could they claim rights by denying that difference. Women’s experience and the language of their demands make the analysis of other standard documents, such as the abbé Sieyès’s “What Is the Third Estate?” much richer; these factors push students, for example, to question further the meaning of the author’s categories when he classifies women along with children, beggars, vagrants, and servants in explaining why these people should be denied political liberty. They also help students understand why independence was so important to citizenship. Especially revealing are the documents regarding the National Convention’s outlawing of women’s clubs and popular societies, in which its members, echoing Rousseau, discussed the respective “natures” of men and women. The concerns they expressed demonstrate how much the Revolution had disrupted gender boundaries. Chaumette, for example, declared: “Since when is it permitted to give up one’s sex? Since when is it decent to see women abandoning the pious cares of their households, the cribs of their children, to come to public places, to harangues in the galleries, at the bar of the Senate? Is it to men that nature confided domestic cares? Has she given us breasts to breast-feed our children?”


6 Quoted in Levy, Applewhite, and Johnson, Women in Revolutionary Paris, 219.

7 See Norberg’s essay in this issue and the citations in her notes 61–69. See also Lynn Hunt, “The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution,” in Eroticism and the Body Politic, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore, 1991), 108–30; and Hunt, Family Romance. Antoine de Baecque similarly analyzes the emasculation of Louis XVI—the king’s impotence and initial inability to impregnate his wife—in “The Defeat of the Body of the King,” in de Baecque, The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770–1800 (Stanford, CA, 1993), 29–75. Such works demonstrate the interrelationship of gender, sexuality,
The first narrative of ordinary women’s lives during the Revolution is Dominique Godineau’s *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*. Godineau documents with fascinating detail women’s everyday activities while they struggled for subsistence and at the same time participated in political activities, whether in clubs, at national assemblies, or on the streets. Godineau illustrates the variety and pervasive-ness of women’s influence during the Revolution and explains lucidly why and how men came to view women as a disruptive force, eventually excluding them from public life. She provides a wonderfully rich context for the documents mentioned above. Among her most important points is that republican men connected women and the counterrevolutionary clergy (a view that was very influential throughout the nineteenth century), even though deeply religious women, she shows, were not often counterrevolutionary. She points out that the church offered one of the few spaces for social contact among “respectable” women, and this would certainly remain true for the nineteenth century. Suzanne Desan’s “Constitutional Amazons: Jacobin Women’s Clubs in the French Revolution” would also be an excellent shorter assignment to show women’s extensive participation and education in politics, as well as the logic—analyzed very well here—for their exclusion.¹

One of the most consistently successful readings I have assigned related to the Revolution—a text that also addresses the issue of race—is Claire de Duras’s 1824 novella *Ourika*, based on a true story.⁹ Duras’s *Ourika* is a young Senegalese woman rescued from slavery as a baby and raised by an aristocratic family. The Revolution and the San Domingue slave rebellion are backdrops to the story, which is really about the failure of Enlightenment ideals. At sixteen Ourika “discovers” that her skin color makes her different and that her difference means that she will never marry; unmarried, she has no role as a woman. She wastes


away in a convent, beyond the efforts of a doctor (to whom she narrates her story) to rescue her. This tiny book inevitably provokes sophisticated, multilayered debate among students. From a slightly different angle, particularly with the biographical details of its author in mind, the book could as easily and fruitfully be taught as a representation of retrospective thinking about the Revolution, especially from the viewpoint of an aristocratic woman in 1824. It was, after all, a best-seller during the Restoration.

When teaching this and other periods, it is important to stress to students that despite the weight of the new ideology that defined masculinity, femininity, and “appropriate” sexuality, many people conducted their lives outside those definitions. Many women—as Godineau’s and Desan’s works also show—operated largely apart from the sphere of male power. Most recently, Carla Hesse has demonstrated in *The Other Enlightenment* that many women, by reading and writing fiction and other literary forms, enjoyed a cultural autonomy that allowed them to avoid the “trap of biological essentialism.” It is noteworthy that one of these women, Duras, nonetheless devoted her popular novella to biological essentialism in the forms of both race and sex.

Historians have only recently recognized the importance that iconography and gendered representations therein played in the Revolution. Women allegorically represented the Republic, liberty, the fatherland, nature, equality, and truth—paradoxically at the same time that revolutionaries relegated women to domestic concerns. Maurice Agulhon pioneered and legitimized this direction of research, and others have pursued it, including Landes in her most recent work, *Visualizing the Nation*. These studies constitute a small part of a growing field in visual culture, and they lend themselves especially well to pedagogical ends. Jack Censer’s and Lynn Hunt’s recent textbook, accompanied by a CD-ROM, has many such images. In addition there is a large and growing number of Web sites dedicated to the French Revolution. Images and primary documents from Censer and Hunt’s book and the CD-ROM are also available on a Web site, chnm.gmu.edu/revolution. Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* represents a continuation of the allegorical representations of women in the Revolution of 1830, certainly worth sharing with students, and is available at many Web sites accessible through the title of the painting via Google, including history.hanover.edu/courses/artdelalib.html.

---


11 Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–*
Instructors can show continuity from the Revolution through the Napoleonic era with the themes of domesticity, separate spheres, and fear of female sexuality. While I imagine that most academic historians say little about Josephine, students are fascinated by her; her relationship with Napoléon Bonaparte, moreover, can be seen as a microcosm of the larger aristocratic world, as well as an illustration of the problems women posed with their sexuality, infidelity, and in Josephine’s case, inability to provide an heir. David Grubin’s 2000 PBS documentary, *Napoleon*, is a good source, and something my students thoroughly enjoyed. Far more than a product of Napoléon’s difficulties, the Civil Code is a reaction to the Revolution as a whole, and it is useful to explain the logic behind it. Its most important aspect was the protection of property. Teaching how the code subordinated wives to their husbands in economic and sexual matters not only shows the practical application of Rousseau’s thought but is a vital lesson in how the state began to regulate private life in a manner that favored the accumulation of private property. Articles stipulating that women had to obey their husbands, the far stiffer penalties for single and married women if they committed adultery, and the legal protection that men, married or single, enjoyed if they fathered a child out of wedlock, all reflected the fear that female sexuality could destabilize the family and thus the society. Indeed, the legal equality among adult men rested on the legal gender inequality within the family. Although prenuptial agreements among the wealthier classes and lack of enforcement among the poor to some degree mitigated the code’s power to regulate private life, the moral spirit behind it prescribed gender roles throughout the nineteenth century, both materially and culturally. The Civil Code sought to reinstate “natural” roles and social cohesion that, in the minds of those in power, rested on female domesticity. By assigning Michael Sibalis’s “The Regulation of Male Homosexuality,” an instructor could bring in themes about the relationship between gender and sexuality but also underscore how female sexuality was regulated more through the code because of women’s childbearing capacities.12


1815–1880: The (Short) Nineteenth Century

The events of the French Revolution became a permanent backdrop in French consciousness, and each political upheaval during the nineteenth century brought those memories to the fore. The “gender system” put in place by the Revolution and the Civil Code also prevailed, though it was certainly not monolithic and was continuously challenged either by the daily aspirations of “marginal women” such as writers, political activists, or actresses or by recurring revolution. One can incorporate gender into teaching this period by highlighting the middle-class effort (as demonstrated by novelists, social reformers, medical professionals, and the like) to prescribe and reinforce more sharply defined gender and sexual roles. One can also assign readings about men and women who transgressed those roles and analyze the impacts of and reactions to these transgressions.

Part 2 of McMillan’s *France and Women*, “Public Man, Private Woman?” offers excellent coverage of the period 1815 to 1850 and by its very title problematizes the issue of “separate spheres.” McMillan devotes the three chapters to bourgeois domesticity (and its limits); laboring women; and utopian socialism, feminism, and 1848. Part 3, “Discourses on ‘Woman,’” covers 1850 to 1880. Its three chapters analyze the construction of “femininity” through education, medicine, sexuality, and the regulation of prostitution; discourse about female labor; and the reformulation of the “woman question” in light of reemergent feminism and the Paris Commune. An instructor could integrate any of these chapters into other course material and ask students to think about or discuss the relationship between changing regimes, prescriptions about male and female roles, and who challenged them.13

Several novels that are standard fare for courses on modern France are excellent for analyzing contemporary gender roles and the power, and male fear of, female sexuality. Honoré de Balzac’s *Père Goriot* is a notable example of a literary reaction to and critique of French society, particularly the persistence of aristocratic and bourgeois pretensions and decadence after the Revolution of 1789. But the book is also very much about women and gender relations. Dependent on men financially, women manipulate them ruthlessly with their sexuality as wives and lovers; Goriot’s daughters exploit his blind paternal love. Balzac makes explicit comments about women’s “nature” that are worth analyzing with regard to his own characters, as well as the historical con-

text in which he writes. For example, he notes that “it is a woman’s nature to . . . demolish facts by intuitions,” and that “women are always true, even in the midst of their greatest falsities, because they are always influenced by some natural feeling.” Such statements, along with the representations of women through various characters, also offer a convenient basis of comparison with Rousseau. Balzac makes a mockery of “virtue” in this novel and suggests that the Revolution did little to improve social mores.

Begun in 1851, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* provides a scathing critique of July Monarchy society, but it also reflects the first half of the 1850s. Though the novel offers far more than a commentary on gender relations, it deftly depicts the boredom in which bourgeois marriages could trap women, and it reveals Flaubert’s own notions—characteristic of many in his society—about the dangers of female sexual passion. One can analyze this novel according to his proclamations about both manhood and womanhood. It would be difficult to better represent the general thinking of his time than in Emma Bovary’s hope “for a son; he would be strong and dark. . . . The thought of having a male child was an anticipatory revenge for all her earlier helplessness. A man, at least, is free. He can explore passions and countries, surmount obstacles, taste the most exotic pleasures. But a woman is continually held back. Inert and flexible at the same time, she has both the susceptibilities of the flesh and legal restrictions against her. Her will, like the veil of her hat that is tied by a ribbon, reacts to every wind; there is always some desire to respond to, some convention that restricts action.”

Tried for his “obscene” and “blasphemous” portrayal of adultery, Flaubert was ultimately acquitted because his lawyer convinced the court that Emma Bovary was meant to be a warning about moral decay rather than an object of admiration. The Penguin edition of this novel includes the trial proceedings, which are also of instructional value for teaching about the law and representations of sexuality.

Emile Zola’s *Nana*, which appeared more than twenty years later, critiques moral corruption during the Second Empire with a story that reflects anxiety about strong women. In the character of Nana, an actress and a courtesan, female sexuality takes on mythological proportions with its power to corrupt rich, powerful, even religiously inclined men. Nana symbolizes the sickness of the regime itself as she dies of smallpox on the day the Franco-Prussian War begins. Zola’s *Fécon-

---

dité (translated as Fruitfulness), first published in 1899, is a response to women’s apparent abandonment of their maternal role during the early Third Republic. “Marianne,” as the mother of four and carrying a fifth, represents the essence of goodness: “The whole of her face, full of love and tenderness, bespoke beauty in full health, the gayety which comes from the accomplishment of duty, and the serene conviction that by loving life she would live as she ought to live.” But the beautiful, seductive, “bad,” and childless Séraphine believed that “maternity poisoned love, aged woman, and made a horror of her in the eyes of man.” This sentimental, didactic novel was apparently intended to change popular attitudes responsible for the decline in the birthrate and to inspire females to be “real women” instead of “new women.” It is hardly necessary (or desirable) to assign the entire book, since each chapter repeats the same themes; excerpts from it would give students a very good idea of the impact that “depopulation” had on the popular imagination and conceptions of gender.16

Many recent secondary sources delve into the issues of domesticity, separate spheres, and sexuality. Jo Burr Margadant, for example, has written about the enormous change that occurred in royal representations of motherhood during the Restoration. The duchesse de Berry, she argues, unwittingly contributed to the modernization of royalist political culture in the 1830s by helping transform royalists’ conception of the family from one based on aristocratic values to one that prized motherhood. On this subject see also Margaret Darrow’s article, “French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750–1850.” Victoria Thompson’s The Virtuous Marketplace examines the conflict produced by the women who remained in the public space of markets; previously taken for granted as producers and consumers, market women in the mid-nineteenth century became a threat to social order. Joan Wallach Scott’s “‘L’ouvrière, mot impie, sordide . . . ’: Women Workers in the Discourse of French Political Economy, 1840–1860” lucidly and compellingly explains the logic of political economists in justifying lower wages for women and their exclusion from economic production. Works such as these show that capitalism was no mere “mechanism” that determined family dynamics; rather, perceptions of proper roles and fears of social instability provided the basis for a new understanding of economic modernization, one that promoted the exclusion of women from productive activity.17 Such readings should provoke students to think

about what is “natural” about gender difference, what is “culturally constructed,” and what broader functions gender difference served.

Students receive a more profound and well-rounded picture of how the gender system operated if one teaches masculinity and sexuality as well as women’s history. Robert Nye’s study of bourgeois masculinity in the nineteenth century, _Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor_, broke new ground for our understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality; he analyzes the impact that male honor codes, drawn from the aristocracy, had on male identity and bourgeois society and how the medical profession problematized male sexuality. Nye demonstrates the complex interrelationship between masculine identity and the political and social order of modern France; I have had great success with this book in undergraduate classes.¹⁸

One can also teach gender in this period with works by or about those who subverted or transgressed the system of separate spheres and “normal” sexuality. As noted earlier, the essays in _Homosexuality in Modern France_ do an excellent job in this regard. For example, in “Creating Boundaries: Homosexuality and the Changing Social Order in France, 1830–1870,” Victoria Thompson shows cracks in the period’s social and cultural system of gender through which men, in literary representations and in homosexual practices, violated and blurred definitions of manhood and womanhood. This essay analyzes the complex interrelationship between sex, class, and social mobility. Men who engaged in homosexual relationships not only ignored prescribed gender roles but often broke through the barriers of social class. A provocative primary source that fascinates students and clearly demonstrates the malleability of sex and gender is _Herculine Barbin_. Michel Foucault discovered these memoirs in the Public Hygiene archives. Designated female at birth and raised in an orphanage, Barbin was suddenly classified as a man; the book recounts her/his erotic experiences and metamorphosis.¹⁹

Another important analysis of masculinity and sexuality is Lenard Berlanstein’s _Daughters of Eve_. The book focuses not just on theater

---


women but on their liaisons with upper-class men, and it beautifully illustrates how women could exert power through their sexuality—or be punished for it. Beginning with the Old Regime, Berlanstein argues that during periods of high confidence in men’s ability to govern themselves (1815–48, 1880–1914), actresses were tolerated, if not admired, as enchantresses and powerful women. During regimes in which the political structure and culture were authoritarian and closed off to all but a small elite, or during times of upheaval such as revolution, actresses (and, by implication, powerful women in general) were viewed as dangerous. Berlanstein connects political culture with the performance of gender and the practice of sexuality, and he analyzes male competitiveness and the moral debates about these issues. It is one of the finest works linking gender history with political regimes.

Claire Moses’s chapters on utopian socialism and on the revolutionary upheavals between 1848 and 1851 in French Feminism, as well as her more recent Feminism, Socialism, and French Romanticism, are useful for integrating women and gender if one chooses to teach these events in depth. Utopian socialism, in particular, lends itself to such topics because within its framework feminism reemerged in the 1840s, with significant parallels to and differences from the women’s discourse and revolutionary experiences of the early 1790s. Instructors can point out the degree to which the ideology of separate spheres and discourse about motherhood shaped the feminism that emerged in the 1840s.

One might also use biography to flesh out the mechanics of gender in this period. Flora Tristan’s life and writings illustrate well how class and gender intersected privately, publicly, and politically. Her experience exemplifies the difficulties poor women faced under the restrictions of the Civil Code and also suggests why utopian socialism held such an appeal to both bourgeois and working-class women. In the midst of her struggles with her husband, she became deeply involved in feminist and socialist activities and began writing pamphlets and sending petitions to the Chamber of Deputies. Much of what Tristan wrote—such as Peregrinations of a Pariah, 1833–34, The Worker’s Union, and London Journal—has been translated into English and could be assigned to students in part or in whole. Susan Grogan’s “‘Playing the Princess’: Flora Tristan, Performance, and Female Moral Authority during the July Monarchy,” analyzes how this “pariah” used French culture to con-

---

21 Moses, French Feminism; Claire Goldberg Moses and Leslie Rabine, Feminism, Socialism, and French Romanticism (Bloomington, IN, 1993).
INTEGRATING WOMEN AND GENDER

structure several “selves” that she presented publicly as well as to justify her own violations of prescribed female roles.22

Two other biographical essays are useful for teaching the dynamics of gender relations in this period and how some women successfully subverted prescribed roles. Whitney Walton’s “Republican Women and Republican Families in the Personal Narratives of George Sand, Marie d’Agoult, and Hortense Allart” examines three famous writers who collectively influenced French culture. Drawing on male republican ideology, they substituted a “republican womanhood” for “republican motherhood” and advanced the literary political imagination by critiquing it. Mary Pickering’s “Clotilde de Vaux and the Search for Identity” offers another example of women writers’ influence in literary and political circles. The love object of Auguste Comte, de Vaux became an essential element to his vision of progress, part of which included women as sources of moral and spiritual inspiration for men. Pickering offers a completely different version of this woman than that of Comte’s vision; for Pickering, de Vaux was fiercely independent and in constant battle with Comte. This essay, like Walton’s, would be particularly useful in a course emphasizing literary, cultural, and intellectual aspects of French history. One might also show reactions to women who transgressed their roles in this manner with visual representations such as Daumier’s portrayal of the bas bleus and cartoons portraying the Vésuviennes. One might ask students to think about how individuals are pressured into certain gender roles; ridicule is certainly one such pressure.23

The most recent treatment of women during the Paris Commune is Gay Gullickson’s Unruly Women of Paris. I have used this book to teach the Commune itself, as it provides a good synopsis of the events. The legend of the petroleuses and other myths generated by women’s participation in both violence and political activity parallel those that emerged from the events of 1792–93 and 1848 and provide a good basis of comparison. Gullickson argues that the caricatures of women played a crucial role in the subsequent moral condemnation of the Commune as a whole and that at the same time they promoted conceptions of

---


womanhood as potentially violent and uncontrollable. Her work leaves little doubt that the Commune, like previous revolutions, contributed to social and cultural conservatism with regard to womanhood. Moreover, this book is important because, just as with the militant left-wing, working-class movement, women and their feminist activity remained tainted and in many ways repressed in the wake of this civil war, which might explain the timidity and fragmentation of French feminism in comparison to the far bolder British and American suffrage movements. If one does not wish to use a book-length work, a potent and visually rich account that also treats representations of women is Jeannene Przyblyski’s essay, “Between Seeing and Believing: Representing Women in Appert’s Crimes de la commune.”

1880–1930: Economic and Cultural Modernization, “The New Woman,” and War

Contemporaries viewed the period from about 1880 to 1910 as one of extremely rapid change, and several historians have suggested that there was a “crisis of masculinity” and certainly a weakening of the hold that the ideology of domesticity had on everyday practices. Despite the desire of social reformers and many men in the labor movement to remove women from the labor force and make them more “domestic,” French industrial capitalism, more than that of other countries, required a relatively large number of women to work outside the home. Instructors, especially those who focus on the working-class and labor movements, might wish to incorporate gender by assigning readings on working women and discourse about them. Several articles in the volume edited by Laura Frader and Sonya Rose, Gender and Class in Modern Europe, analyze workers in France. They address the “proletarianization” of women among the families of weavers who clung to their craft; the redefinition of skills as “masculine” and the “conflation of mechanization, deskilling, and feminization” among knitters in industrial Troyes; and the sewing machine’s enormous impact on mass production and consumption, particularly the revolution it caused in female consumption. An analysis of labor movement discourse with

regard to the “family wage” and its implications for men’s and women’s right to work also lends insight to working-class life. One thing that seems clear from recent scholarship is that proletarianization affected men and women very differently, which in turn undermined a sense of class consciousness and solidarity.25

The rise of mass consumption during this period also affected gender identity in ways that made “separate spheres” a fiction, though historians are just beginning to debate its impacts. Did consumerism liberate women or further enslave them to essentialist notions of womanhood? In “The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France,” Leora Auslander challenges the male producer/female consumer dichotomy and asserts that both men and women were avid consumers, though their consumerism had different ends. Moreover, the products of consumption themselves came to be gendered. While women initially purchased items primarily for the family and for the purposes of representing its class status, men consumed for purposes of self-enhancement. Auslander argues that through the nineteenth century the purpose of consuming changed, cumulatively including the representation of family, class, nation, and self. Thus the production and consumption of goods reflected varying masculine and feminine identities and were also linked to national identity and politics. Other works have argued that female consumerism and the rise of the department store created a new source of liberty for women and an opportunity for them to create a sense of “self” independent of the family.26

Feminism and the rise of “The New Woman”—or at least her pervasive image—also challenged the premises of separate spheres and domesticity, and threatened masculinity. Edward Berenson’s *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* is a fascinating portrayal of Belle Epoque politics and culture that also focuses on honor and unstable definitions of gender.


The story of the trial itself is compelling, and students respond enthusiastically to this well-written book. The last section of McMillan's *France and Women*, titled “Gender Relations in Crisis?” covers 1880 to 1914. Its chapters address the “progress and prospects” of bourgeois women, women workers and the sexual division of labor, and feminism and the struggle for suffrage. Two excellent works that can also be assigned for this period are Debora Silverman’s essay “The ‘New Woman,’ Feminism, and the Decorative Arts in Fin-de-Siècle France” and Mary Louise Roberts’s recent book *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Both works lend themselves easily to a discussion of the period itself and the contradictions within it, and readings on the new woman could be juxtaposed with a discussion of feminism during this period. Some feminists, such as Marguerite Durand and Nelly Roussel, were also “new” women and are featured in biographical essays that highlight the contradictions about gender characteristic of this period. An excellent collection of excerpts from feminist writings, and short biographical sketches of authors, can be found in *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque: A Historical and Literary Anthology*, which beautifully captures the diversity of French feminism. One could ask students what issues seemed prominent to these women, and what they add to our understanding of Third Republic politics and society. I have found that these primary sources provoke good class discussion. All of the sources mentioned here—both primary and secondary—show how unstable concepts and experiences of gender had become by the end of the nineteenth century. This period is also an extremely important one for the history of sexuality. If an instructor wishes to pick up on that theme to illustrate the destabilization of gender identity, she or he could assign William Penniston’s essay in *Homosexuality in Modern France*.

Another major theme in this period that links gender to the development of national politics, a theme also unique to France in its inten-

INTEGRATING WOMEN AND GENDER

Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France demonstrate the enormous influence that fears about falling birthrates had on French politics as well as how they shaped French feminisms, many of which centered on motherhood as a source of women’s status and a promise for national regeneration. Women’s childbearing responsibilities gave them new importance in the eyes of social reformers, and the nascent French welfare state came to focus on women and children. See, for example, the articles by Joshua Cole and Jean Pedersen in the French Historical Studies forum “Population and the State in the Third Republic,” as well as the essays in Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870–1914. Students can learn from these materials how central gender was to the formation of social policy and the beginning of the welfare state. A more modern and newly conservative discourse about gender took hold in this period, but most of its practical effects came into play only after World War I; this material can help students understand the impacts of war.

A number of readings offer rich material for teaching the interrelationship between gender and World War I. Did the war emancipate women or, once again, reinforce essentialist notions of womanhood? Two recent book-length studies have begun to answer these questions; both work well with undergraduates. Susan Grayzel compares the effects of the Great War on British and French women and analyzes ideas about civic participation, national service, morality, sexuality, and gender identity. She argues that the traditional gender system centered on motherhood prevailed. Margaret Darrow’s French Women and the First World War is the best book-length study in English to date.

Her first chapter summarizes recent theories about the relationship between gender and war, and her book as a whole provides a vivid picture of France’s experience with war and the role that gender played on both the battlefront and the home front. A good essay on the fate of women’s rights is Steven Hause’s “More Minerva than Mars: The French Women’s Rights Campaign and the First World War.”

What women experienced, and how they were perceived, also depended on what happened to masculinity, a relatively recent topic of study for World War I. Students could be asked to compare the experiences of men and women both during and after the war and to consider what those experiences meant for French national identity. Leonard Smith’s “Masculinity, Memory, and the French First World War Novel” and John Horne’s “Soldiers, Civilians, and the Warfare of Attrition: Representations of Combat in France, 1914–1918” both raise interesting issues about the male experience, particularly about the challenges the war posed to one’s sense of masculinity. A large variety of issues regarding gender and World War I can be addressed through primary sources, many of them found in Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I, edited by Margaret Higonnet. An excellent documentary on World War I that incorporates a large array of issues regarding gender is The Great War (1996). The third of eight hour-long episodes is “Total War,” which includes a segment on women munitions workers, “The Girls with Yellow Hands,” narrated by Laura Lee Downs. But issues of gender are portrayed indirectly in almost every episode.

Scholarship about gender and women between the two world wars has generally centered on the destabilization of gender boundaries and the intensified fears about depopulation. Mary Louise Roberts investigated through literary sources French perceptions about gender in
her very popular Civilization without Sexes. The book treats such topics as changing fashions, bobbed hair, the female body, sexuality, and birth control, and portrays the conservative backlash against the signs of female liberation as a result of the war. It provides a background for understanding the increased conservatism regarding women after 1930.35

1930–1960: Revival of the “Eternal Feminine” and Domesticity

Military losses compounded the fears of depopulation and low birthrates and had concrete effects on both the discourse about gender and practical realities. In “Gender, Anti-individualism, and Nationalism,” for example, Cheryl Koos demonstrates the tight linkage between extreme-right-wing politics among the very influential men of the natalist movement and the effort to repress the “modern woman,” particularly in antiabortion propaganda. Koos demonstrates the importance that gender played in the genre of political thinking that later manifested itself in Vichy. Concerns about motherhood and depopulation in the 1930s helped create the climate for, if not the clear path toward, policies implemented after the French defeat in 1940. A quite powerful movie that captures prevailing ideology about the “good” mother versus the “bad” mother is La maternelle (1933), which provides an excellent opportunity for students to discuss the power that modern media may have had in shaping gender roles.36

Recent scholarship on this period has established the extent to which conceptions about gender were fundamental to Vichy’s National Revolution. As they had in their previous revolutionary and wartime experiences of catastrophe, the French in 1940 once again emphasized essentialist notions of womanhood as a way to restore a sense of order and national regeneration. Propaganda, social policy, and law sought to remove mothers from wage labor, encourage more childbearing, and implement draconian measures against abortion. The relevant literature here could be used to discuss the relationship between culture and


politics, as well as to provide opportunities to compare previous periods in which essentialist notions of womanhood translated into social and political policy. One might compare, for example, Rousseau’s thinking and what happened to women in 1793.

The recent translation of Francine Muel-Dreyfus’s *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine* makes a major contribution to the body of scholarship in English on this subject. It is a provocative work that traces Vichy’s essentialist vision of womanhood (the “eternal feminine”) to the events of the Paris Commune and the failures of the Popular Front government; Muel-Dreyfus argues that French intellectuals believed women were to blame for France’s “sins” and the 1940 defeat because they had strayed from their “natural” roles and contributed to the weakening of the national fabric. Restoring them to their proper roles became central to national renewal. An important book, it is perhaps less balanced and less accessible to undergraduates than Miranda Pollard’s *Reign of Virtue*, which offers an interesting and very readable account of Vichy’s stance toward women and, unlike Muel-Dreyfus’s book, examines failure in the effort at “national renewal.” If one does not have the time to assign an entire book, a number of articles offer interesting perspectives. In an issue devoted to Vichy, *Modern and Contemporary France* offers articles on such topics as masculine identities, prostitution and its relationship to national identity, and the politics of abortion. For a more general but thorough account one could also use Hélène Eck’s “French Women under Vichy.” A very gripping film that portrays the plight of women during Vichy, especially of those who had to survive after their husbands had been sent to Germany, is the “almost perfect,” award-winning *Story of Women* (1988), in which the protagonist is guillotined for having performed abortions to earn her living. It is based on a true story.37

As in other periods of French history during war and revolution, women became active and subversive during Vichy, and an instructor

---

might prefer to focus on this side of the 1940–44 story, or to encourage
students to weigh the two sides. Women played an enormous, funda-
mental role in the Resistance that until recently has not been acknowl-
edged, and the documentation of their activities offers a crucial coun-
terpoint, and therefore a rich topic of discussion for students, to the
prevailing discourse about womanhood that was so central to Vichy
policy. Based on the personal testimonies of seventy women, Margaret
Weitz’s *Sisters in the Resistance* details women’s contributions in the pro-
duction and distribution of the underground press, and in roles such as
medics, couriers, and translators. Weitz vividly portrays daily living and
describes in graphic detail the hardships French people had to suffer,
especially the short supply of food, shelter, and clothing. Lucie Aubrac’s
memoir, *Outwitting the Gestapo*, offers another compelling example of
women’s participation. Aubrac told her story on the occasion of Klaus
Barbie’s extradition to France in 1983 in order to provide evidence
against his defenders, and it became a best-seller in France. Aubrac was
a key member of the Resistance in Lyon. She published and distributed
underground newspapers while struggling with the wartime economy
as a wife and mother. Her husband, a Jew, was arrested three times, the
last time by Barbie, who also tortured him. Aubrac, pregnant through-
out this period, masterminded an intricate scheme to rescue him. *Con-
voy to Auschwitz*, another engaging narrative, is a collective biography
based on the experience of its author and the 230 French women with
whom she was deported.38

The post–World War II period has not yet received as much
attention as previous ones from Anglo-American historians, but there
are a number of interesting issues to raise and interesting works that
could be used for courses. In spite of women’s participation in the
Resistance and their winning the vote, France, like other countries,
had a postwar “baby boom” and women were coaxed back into the
home, motherhood, and domesticity; indeed, the “eternal feminine”
seemed to persist until the 1960s. In *Women’s Rights and Women’s Lives
in France, 1944–1968*, Claire Duchen analyzes women’s magazines, pre-
scriptive literature, political documents, fiction, and memoirs, cover-
ing themes and events such as the Liberation, women in public life,
domesticity, marriage and motherhood, inequalities in unemployment,

38 Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940–1945*
(New York, 1995); Lucie Aubrac, *Outwitting the Gestapo*, trans. Konrad Bieber (Lincoln, NE, 1994);
Charlotte Delbo, *Convoj to Auschwitz* (Boston, 1997). See also Margaret Rossiter, *Women in the Resis-
tance* (New York, 1986). See other works on this period as well, e.g., Hanna Diamond, *Women and the
Second World War in France, 1938–1948: Choices and Constraints* (London, 1990); and Sarah Fishman,
and women’s rights. Multiple, competing, and contradictory visions of womanhood emerge in the sources she analyzes. Kristin Ross’s *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, with a cultural focus far broader than gender, shows how the French state’s ideology of capitalist modernization in the 1950s and 1960s influenced numerous aspects of national identity and daily life. This ideology also helped redefine masculinity and femininity. For example, the book contains illustrations of housewives deriving great pleasure from their new kitchens.39

**1960 to the Present: Feminism, Reproductive Rights, and French “Singularity”**

The period after 1960 has received even less attention than that of the postwar in Anglo-American histories of gender. Two themes, feminism and gay rights, are prominent here and might be used to tie together issues addressed earlier in the course. With regard to the first, women made great strides in increasing their participation in political life and in winning reproductive freedoms that had been denied to them from 1920 to 1967. But complex and paradoxical attitudes about gender and feminism persisted. Dorothy Kaufmann-McCall’s “Politics of Difference: The Women’s Movement in France from May 1968 to Mitterrand” explores these issues. Siân Reynolds wrote two articles on the progress of women’s rights during the Mitterrand presidency, focusing on the French Ministry of Women’s Rights and political representation, respectively. Rose-Marie Lagrave’s “A Supervised Emancipation” provides a brief but thorough overview of the modern period. Finally, the last chapter of Mona Ozouf’s *Women’s Words*, “Essay on French Singularity,” analyzes French femininity and feminism in a broad historical perspective and negatively compares American feminism. This essay provoked considerable debate with representatives of the latter. Eric Fassin weighs in with a fascinating comparative analysis of gender relations in France and the United States.40


Ironies abound in comparing France with the United States, and such comparison is interesting to students. For example, in France, where women were denied the right to birth control and abortion for almost half of the twentieth century, discourse about reproductive rights, and especially about abortion, lacks the strident tone now so typical in the United States. Were an instructor willing to enter admittedly dangerous territory, she or he might ask, “Why?” And what is it about French history that has made the abortion debate far less important in France than it is in the United States? What happened to the “eternal feminine” in French reproductive rights? Another relevant contemporary issue that highlights the differences between France and the United States is that of the PaCS (Pacte Civile de Solidarité). How do debates about the PaCS fit into an understanding of French history? A recent article by Robert Nye, and Joan Wallach Scott’s response to it, situate these issues in the historical context of French natalism and the history of sexuality, and might provide a very rich opportunity to tie gender and national history together as a course wraps up with the present.

The issue of the PaCS is also very related to gay rights, whose history has only begun to be written. Robert Nye’s essay “Michel Foucault’s Sexuality and the History of Homosexuality in France” discusses Foucault’s own experience and as well as the way sexuality became “normalized” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; as an assignment it too offers a good way to tie together other themes introduced throughout the course.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this broad overview will provide a basis for the instructor who has never incorporated women and gender in a systematic way to begin to rethink his or her standard narrative. Even if one could include in a syllabus only a few article-length reading assignments related to these topics, the suggestions presented here also provide a basis for developing these subjects in lectures.

---


42 Robert A. Nye, “Michel Foucault’s Sexuality and the History of Homosexuality in France,” in Merrick and Ragan, Homosexuality in Modern France, 225–42.
Each major upheaval through World War I and Vichy forced the French to draw on the culture of their past and their present, on their own identities as “French” men and women, as they faced new challenges, and part of that Frenchness, of course, was based on “the other”: those who did not meet the standards of that identity because of their gender, sexuality, and as Patricia Lorcin’s essay shows, race. All this literature enables us to understand better what choices the French had at particular historical moments and why they took the paths they did.

Recent scholarship offers convincing evidence that repeated experience with revolution, combined with a unique demographic profile of comparatively low birthrates, were among the forces that continually made the French question themselves in ways that brought issues of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and sexual orientation to the surface and that required a reassessment of men’s and women’s “appropriate” roles in private and public life. On the one hand, political upheaval and low birthrates spawned a conservative discourse about women and sexual identity among public officials, health professionals, and reformers, as well as among many men of the Left and women themselves; on the other, numerous women and men defied the discursive separation between private and public, and prescriptions about appropriate gender roles and sexual identities. Whether feminists, actresses, writers, homosexuals, or “ordinary” people, many women and men ignored or challenged elements of the culture that constrained them and instead took a path of their own. By doing so, they contributed to the course of French history. Women and men who did conform to prescriptions about gender roles also contributed to the infrastructure in which history was made. Incorporating women’s actual experience, conceptions of gender, and sexuality into a course on modern France deepens students’ understanding of the intricate links between politics and culture, private and public life, and the process by which national identity is forged.