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# Moving Back to the 18th Century View's of Women's Role and Perception of Their Lives: The Case of Motherhood

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# Moving Back to the 18th Century View's of Women's Roles and Perception of Their Lives: The case of motherhood



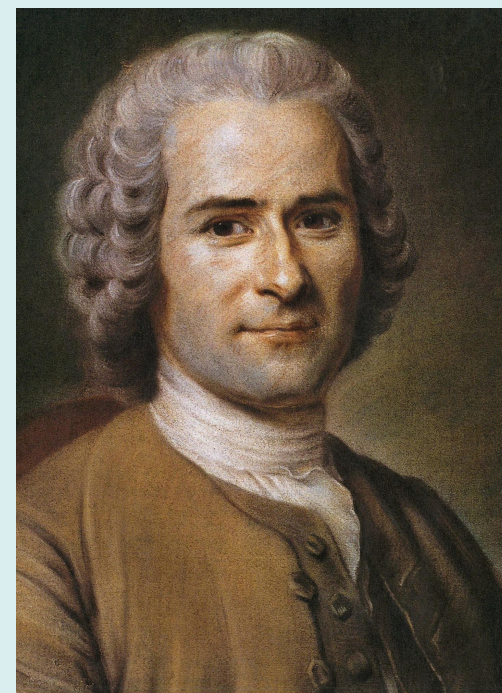
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## 18th Century Positive and Negative Views of Motherhood



**Emilie du Châtelet (1706-1749)**

- Emilie du Châtelet was a French mathematician, physicist, author, and lover of the French philosopher Voltaire during the Age of the Enlightenment.
- In her book, *Discourse on Happiness* (1779), Emilie du Châtelet wrote, "The first of all [conditions] is to be well decided on what one wants to do, and this is what is lacking in almost all men..."
- Her concept of happiness was revolutionary for women at this time, because it derived from self-ambition rather than from motherhood. Even though she was herself a mother.



**Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)**

- Rousseau argued that the onset of families created the first difference in the manner of life of the two sexes.
- "Women became more sedentary and grew accustomed to keep the cloak and children, while the man was going to seek the common livelihood. Both sexes also began a life that was a little soft, to lose something of their ferocity and vigor..." - *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1754)
- Rousseau believed women played an important role in society; however, their existence was always relative to men.
- For Rousseau, a female who was not a mother was not a woman.

**Woman = Mother**

**"On ne naît pas femme, on le devient."  
"One is not born, but rather becomes woman."  
-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)**



**Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)**

•In her essay *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that women contain a productive and reproductive capacity, the former describing their position as a contributor to society. She writes that woman has been enslaved to her reproductive function, and proposes the need for women to be integrated into the "totality of human reality" to become a true partner to man.



**Élisabeth Badinter (1944-)**

- Explanation of the 19th century Rousseauian view of maternity:
- "Motherhood becomes a rewarding role because it is presently charged of an ideal. The way we talk about this "noble function" with a vocabulary borrowed from religion...indicates that a new mystique is attached to the maternal role." - *L'amour en Plus* (1980)
- Her 20th century Feminist view of maternity:
- Badinter challenges "maternal instinct", calling it a societal construct.
- "When a woman has ambitions (sociable, intellectual, or professional like today) and the means to satisfy them, she is infinitely less encouraged than others to invest her time and her energy in the raising of her children." - *L'amour en Plus* (1980)



- In the book *Le Bébé*, Marie Darrieussecq, a well-known French writer, describes the first months spent with her baby.
- "Today, I understand that one is not interested in him, in the baby; but this indifference seems affected to me, it is not serious.

Before, it was not that I did not like babies; it was that they did not exist. There was no link, no connection between them and me. A baby, I had wanted one, one day. The word "baby", cutesy and redundant, had hit every invalidity that referred to it; the subject seemed minor."

#### References

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## Contemporary Context:



### • Women in the Workplace

- From Facebook to Google, some companies are covering the cost of elective egg freezing for women who want to postpone child-bearing.
- "For women of a certain age, reared with the reliability of birth control, this could, as the technology improves, be our generation's Pill - a way to circumvent a biological glass ceiling that, even as we make social and professional progress, does not budge." - Jessica Bennett, *Time Magazine*

"Women today have autonomy - and choice - over virtually every aspect of their lives: marriage, birth control, income, work. And yet our biology is the one thing we can't control." - Jessica Bennett, *Time Magazine*

## The following questions were asked to female students on Chapman's campus:

1. **Would you like to be a mother one day?**
2. **Do you see issues about motherhood and working/having a career?**
3. **When do you think you would have children?**

### Subject 1:

- Yes.
- No, because my career will have flexible hours. It's still a challenge but it is absolutely doable.
- It depends. I want to work first and set up my career. I don't think I would want to do that simultaneously.

### Subject 2:

- Maybe.
- Yes, only because I would like to travel for work and it would be difficult to leave kids for long periods of time. I do believe it is possible to have a successful career as a mother, it could just be especially difficult in my line of work.
- If I do decide to have children, it would probably be in my early 30s after receiving a PhD and starting my career.

### Subject 3:

- Maybe.
- Yes, because I don't want somebody else raising my kids. With a career, getting help might be necessary if your parents do not live near you (unless my husband is a stay at home dad).
- 30-33 or after job security.

### Conclusion:

Since the 18th century, women have gained a great deal of freedom in terms of gender equality. However, a woman's biology remains a major aspect that is out of her control. Today, women are faced with new barriers, including the demand of making the limited choice between fulfilling both their productive and reproductive capacities.