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A MINORITY OF ONE: POULAIN DE LA BARRE AND THE ATTITUDES
TOWARDS WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

By

Elizabeth Brewster

B.A., University of Montana, 1984

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

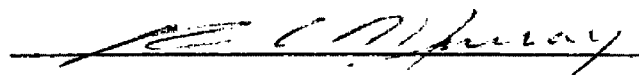
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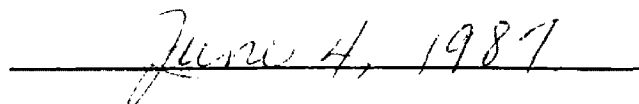
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History

A Minority of One: Poulain de la Barre and the Attitudes Towards Women's Education in Seventeenth-Century France (113 pp.)

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Theorists have traditionally argued that women's education made significant advances throughout seventeenth century France. This assumption gained adherents largely due to the emphasis that prominent theorists of the day, notably Claude Fleury, François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, and Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon placed on the subject. Although it is true that an unusual interest in female education did occur, this study questions the validity of the supposition that interest engendered improvement. It does so by comparing the theories of Fleury, Fénelon, and Madame de Maintenon to the little known ideas of another contemporary, François Poulain de la Barre.

Women's lack of an academic education had traditionally entrenched them in a position of dependency upon men. The leading theorists on women's education did nothing to remedy this situation. Their goals were to perpetuate the customary domesticity that society imposed on women, educating them only enough to enable them to perform more proficiently their roles as wives and mothers.

Poulain de la Barre did not perpetuate that trend. He recognized the wrong in continuing female dependency and ignorance and endeavored to alter the traditional approach to women's education. He wanted to re-educate the populace to force his contemporaries to recognize that their treatment of women had evolved through historical notions of inferiority. Poulain believed that society's assumptions had been influenced by ignorance, tradition, and prejudice, not reason. He intended to expose as fallacious the accepted interpretations of such influential authorities as The Bible and the ancient philosophers.

This study will explore the traditional views towards women's education because they have for too long been erroneously understood as progressive. Poulain de la Barre will be presented as a unique theorist on this subject because only he abandoned the commonly accepted belief that women were innately inferior to men. The sources include the published works of the four contemporaries as well as a plethora of secondary sources that evaluate and interpret these significant theorists.

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INTRODUCTION

INADEQUACY IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION

There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate. . . .

Mary Wollstonecraft*

As life in the seventeenth century progressed towards a period of teleological "enlightenment" and as scientific discoveries continuously challenged long accepted truths, Immanuel Kant's dictum that "We do not live in an enlightened age, but in an age of enlightenment" never seemed more appropriate.¹ Intellectuals began to focus on the question of how education could prepare society to understand the new developments of the "modern" world. Women's education became a significant aspect of that endeavor.

Historians have traditionally argued that women's education made important advances in the seventeenth century because of the emphasis that prominent theorists of the day, notably Claude Fleury, François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, and Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon placed

on the subject. These leading writers on women's education, however, offered no alternatives to women that would enable them to transcend their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Their educational theories advocated courses such as needlework, household utilities, spinning, and religious instruction, designed only to develop a greater proficiency in women for these tasks. All three only intended to produce "good mothers of families."² The academic aspect to their programs included only elementary reading, writing, and arithmetic. These subjects suffered, in turn, from an excessive religious emphasis.

The three theorists ignored the alternative proposed by François Poulain de la Barre, who contributed two comprehensive works on women's education. Poulain argued that the traditional domestic education reserved for women served neither sex well. Woman's education kept her in a state of complete dependence on her husband and perpetuated an unjust status quo that allowed half of the population literally to dominate the other. Poulain recognized the profound wrong in continuing the present state of female dependency. He lived in a society that intentionally stifled any desires a woman had to develop her mind within the realm of male scholarship. To demonstrate his objection to this convention, Poulain attacked the entire tradition of education in France.³ He accused all educators and theorists who propounded non-academic domestic educations

for women of harboring false assumptions of women's inferiority based on ignorance, prejudice, and custom. Through his work he intended to persuade mankind to examine and consequently abandon any adherence to age-old prejudices. For Poulain, an equal education for both sexes in the classical/humanist tradition enjoyed by men would bring about a free, egalitarian, and fully productive society. Before his suggestions could ever become reality, however, Poulain had to attack the problem that had produced educational inequality. He had to destroy the existence of prejudice within his society.

At this point it may be helpful to define the word "feminist" that will appear throughout this text. Poulain's conception of the word conveyed his support for bestowing upon women the same educational and vocational opportunities as men of comparable rank received. He inadvertently inaugurated the ideas of moderate feminism that would become prevalent in the twentieth century. Poulain did not use the term, however, with the intention of "levelling" society. He advocated only that merit determine one's role in life instead of sex. In doing so, he proposed unprecedented changes in the roles of women, representing a unique position in the context of seventeenth-century attitudes towards women's education.

Interest in women's education did not suddenly originate in the seventeenth century without warning or

precedent. A few humanists of the Italian Renaissance, most notably Vittorino da Feltre, attempted to educate equally girls and boys on the primary level. Da Feltre's school, Casa Giocosa (Happy House) offered a program to both sexes that required them to take the same academic subjects. These subjects included Latin and demanded equal participation in physical exercise.⁴ Unfortunately, this trend did not continue. Post-Renaissance education for women came primarily from convents, or if one's family had money, a governess. Shockingly enough, however, figures show that between 1671-1720, only twelve and one-half percent of all French women could be considered literate as compared to thirty-eight and one-half percent of French men. Women in the seventeenth century, without doubt, received a disgraceful education.⁵

One reason for this continuous inadequacy was the lack of financial support. Most available funds in seventeenth-century France supported war campaigns, communications networks, or the living standard of the court.⁶ What miniscule funds the government actually set aside for education went to boys, whose schooling would be much more productive to society than a woman's.⁷ Only in the latter twenty years of the seventeenth century did Louis XIV demonstrate an interest in women's education; he funded Madame de Maintenon's school, Saint-Cyr. Even so, higher education remained off limits to girls. Neither little

schools, convents, nor governesses taught women Latin, which thus denied them the key subject necessary to enter most secondary schools and all universities.⁸ Even if a woman managed to somehow learn Latin privately, the law itself kept her from acquiring an advanced education by denying her entrance to the universities.⁹ No real growth, then, in the practical education a woman received occurred in the seventeenth century. Instead, her education became more narrowly defined in the context of her traditional role.

These roles received their most accurate definition with the rise of the convent school. Several teaching orders arose in the seventeenth century. Although many of these catered to boys, some rather significant ones developed for girls. In 1616, Pope Paul V authorized nuns to teach girls within the walls of a regular convent.¹⁰ These "schools" emphasized religion and allowed nuns who had very little education themselves to teach the girls. The Catholic Church had historically seen the convent school as an excellent atmosphere for spreading Catholic doctrine. With the increasing pervasiveness of Protestantism, the Church had adequate motivation for supporting orders that wished to teach girls.¹¹ Still the convent schools represented one of the only places where girls, particularly middle class girls whose families could not afford a governess or a private tutor, could at least receive a modicum of an education.¹² Unfortunately, poor girls could

only attend schools set up specifically for them, such as the Day School of the Ursuline Order.¹³

Saint Angela Merici founded the Company of Saint Ursula in 1535 in the town of Brescia in Northern Italy.¹⁴ The Ursulines quickly became the most famous teaching order for girls and took the lead in female education. The nuns intended for the women to live in their own homes. Furthermore, they planned to instruct them in a secular school atmosphere. After Pope Pius V issued a Bull that prohibited congregations of women without the benefit of religious vows and enclosure, the Ursulines changed their tactics.¹⁵ The Company of Saint Ursula became a regular Order of nuns in 1568, but continued its project of educating women.¹⁶ In the early seventeenth century, Sainte-Beuve introduced the Company into France.¹⁷

On the surface the Ursulines appeared to be an adequate solution to the need to educate women, particularly middle class women whose plight had so often been ignored in favor of the noble woman. The practical education a woman received at the Ursuline schools, however, hardly enhanced her position in society.¹⁸ Ursuline training took seven years. The nuns devoted ninety percent of that time to training the girls in religious instruction.¹⁹ Each Ursuline class had two nuns "on duty" who alternated weekly; each taught one week and then returned to regular orders the next week.²⁰ The Ursuline schools insisted on mass,

confession, and long periods of silence, and required that all intellectual exercises be geared towards a religious purpose.²¹ For instance, girls learned to read in the vernacular and not in Latin or Greek. Moreover, they could read only those texts that stressed devotion, such as Thomas à Kempis' Imitation of Christ.²² In the words of Jacqueline Pascal, a Jansenist teacher at Port Royal, but one who shared as the Ursulines did a belief in restricting the reading of girls:

"Our object should be to accustom our girls never to read out of pleasure or curiosity, but with a desire to making them good Christians and to bringing them to break themselves of their faults than to rendering them learned."²³

The same restrictions applied to writing. Women in the Ursuline convents did learn to write, but only through transcribing religious texts, which limited their exposure to the printed word.²⁴ Mathematics and spelling, both in their most elementary form, completed their academic education. Needlework, such as knitting, mending, and for the advanced students, embroidery, made up the majority of the school's elective emphasis.²⁵ The only other acceptable activity, singing, had a specific religious purpose; the girls learned to "chant the daily offices" in song.²⁶

In the context of the seventeenth century, however, Ursulines represented the best of the convent schools.

Imitations of them sprang up all over France. In the early seventeenth century, Anne de Xainctongue founded a girls school in Eastern France modeled after the Ursuline convents.²⁷ Xainctongue, who considered herself, "a daughter of the Society of Jesus, as far as that is possible," intended for her school to help girls fulfill their traditional roles in the world more efficiently and virtuously.²⁸ As with the Ursulines, the religious emphasis dominated the academic. Xainctongue, however, also stressed the mundane duties of the home, such as house cleaning and sewing.²⁹ Other schools existed: the Visitation Nuns, Saint Pierre Fourier's Congregation of Notre-Dame, and the Dames Religieuses de la Croix. Unfortunately, the education available to women in the teaching orders of the seventeenth century remained as limited and traditional as it had been for centuries. They offered elementary academics, but even these suffered under the weight of excessive religious doctrine. Even Father Barré's Dames de Saint-Maur, who several theorists considered to be the most progressive of the convent schools since the nuns actually went outside the convent walls to teach, taught only such "traditionally feminine skills" as dressmaking and embroidery.³⁰ No school, then, made any attempt to offer the girls an opportunity to escape the role of nun or wife. The idea that women could be educated to do other things in society never surfaced in the schools of the first "enlightened"

century. For this very reason, however, they enjoyed immense popularity. They offered a modicum of knowledge in a respectable atmosphere during a time that ridiculed a girl who knew too much.³¹

In addition to the convent schools, a girl who wanted an education had only two other choices--the "little schools" of the provinces, or home education through a governess or tutor. The choice depended on one's class. The convent schools described above educated middle class girls, but the "little schools" instructed poorer (although not destitute) girls. In the little schools, girls received the rudiments of an elementary education.³²

Both boys and girls attended the schools, but studied very different curricula. Whereas boys learned reading and writing in Latin and in the vernacular, girls studied reading and writing in the vernacular only. As in the convents, girls' reading concentrated primarily on religious texts. Boys, however, learned from religious texts and the classics. All students, however, studied their family registers and leases to enhance practical reading skills.³³ Girls also received a thorough education in religious and moral instruction. As a matter of fact, the little schools chose their teachers on the basis of their religious education rather than their academic ability.³⁴ By comparison, boys studied contracts and land deeds and received only a moderate amount of religious and moral

instruction.³⁵

The third method of educating girls in the seventeenth century, home instruction, proved to be very different from the convents or the little schools. In terms of years, the education a girl received in the convents or little schools as compared to boys in similar schools, did not differ that radically. The subject emphasis marked the biggest discrepancy. With home education, however, the time devoted to education made a noticeable difference. Wealthy parents who chose to educate their children at home did so through tutors or governesses.³⁶ If a girl had no brothers, she received the traditional instruction in religious and moral doctrine, as well as rudimentary reading, writing, and math skills. Because of her rank, she also received an education in the social accomplishments. Upon completion of the girl's education, the governess left.³⁷ If a girl had brothers, however, particularly if they ranged in age, she could sometimes get away with sitting in on their tutoring sessions. Consequently, she could broaden her knowledge immensely, for families with both boys and girls generally took greater care to ensure that the governess (or governor) had an adequate educational background. In the main, though, home instruction restricted a girls education as efficiently as the convents and little schools.

In addition to limiting girls to a traditional education, home instruction often forced them to learn from

highly incompetent governesses. These women had themselves received horribly inadequate instruction and passed their ignorance along to their students to the point where the girls could not spell, write French correctly, or do simple mathematics.³⁸ Parents who recognized their governesses' incompetency and cared enough to do something about it, boarded their girls at a type of "boarding school convent" where at least the girls could receive a "correct" education.³⁹

Occasionally, the mothers of wealthy girls could instruct their daughters in the basic subjects and sometimes in the Greek and Latin classics because their family's money had given them the benefit of an excellent, often renowned, tutor. For example, Madame de Sévigné, wealthy socialite and "précieuse" and one of the most popular letter writers of the seventeenth century, had the luxury of an intelligent tutor, Ménage, who set up a "petite academie" for her (and others), which emphasized literature, philosophy, and science in addition to the basics.⁴⁰ Although Mme. de Sévigné represented the exception to the rule, the education she received motivated her to involve herself in her granddaughter Pauline's education, stressing to her own daughter how beneficial a good home education could be and how little Pauline would learn if sent to a convent: "Do not believe that a convent can put her education right either as regards religion, of which our nuns know next to

nothing, or in any other respect."⁴¹

Madame de Sévigné's education exemplified the best that seventeenth-century France offered to wealthy women. She participated in the salon culture of noble women who brought their polished knowledge of literature, science, and philosophy out into the public in order to perpetuate the "culture, values, and manners" that defined the noble classes.⁴² These women could not use their education outside of the sociable salon atmosphere, however, for although knowledge in the "savant" developed "character and conscience in the individual lady," knowledge in women who wished to use it outside of the social scene, was "inappropriate regardless of their mental capacities."⁴³ Thus, the salons, although wonderful places for conversation and intellectual dabbling, offered no incentive or opportunity for a woman who desired it, to transcend her role.

In the overall picture, however, women rarely acquired the education of someone like Mme. de Sévigné. The vast majority received an inadequate school experience, which emphasized strict religious values. Parents in the seventeenth century neither felt a need nor wanted to educate a daughter whose only vocation in life would be the convent or marriage.⁴⁴ Both men and women generally accepted and approved of woman's traditional role, as made evident in the words of Chrysale in Molière's popular play,

Les Femmes Savantes:

"I would rather. . . .she say a hundred times a low or bad word, than that she should burn my meat. . . .It is not proper. . . .that a woman should know so many things. To train the minds of her children in good morals, to superintend her household by keeping an eye on her servants, and to control the expenditure with economy, ought to be her study and philosophy."⁴⁵

Molière himself did not harbor a hatred towards women, but he believed in definite limits to a woman's capability and always detested "affectation" in women, much more so than in men.⁴⁶

Thus in a world that discriminated against girls even before birth by the hope for a son, and in a society that limited women to traditional vocations, it comes as no surprise that their education contained very little academics, too much religion, and never any encouragement to learn for learning's sake.⁴⁷ To even suggest entrance into the secondary schools or universities incurred emphatic refusal.

Women fared no better elsewhere. In England, for example, schools similar to the French little schools, called Free Schools, stressed knitting, spinning, the making of "bean-lace," and some reading for girls. Boys who attended these schools, on the other hand, learned reading, writing, and basic math.⁴⁸ Some schools, such as the Banbury Grammar School, forbade girls to continue who were

older than nine or who could read English (whichever came first).⁴⁹ In the English schools, as in the French schools, any subject requiring a knowledge of Latin remained off limits to girls.⁵⁰

English convent schools suffered from the same restrictions in education for women as their French counterparts. Mary Ward, an apparent crusader for women's education in England, founded teaching orders that stressed "piety, Christian morals, and the liberal arts--meaning reading and writing English."⁵¹ Although successful for awhile, Pope Urban VIII, in 1631, ordered all teaching convents to take final vows and closed all those schools who refused to comply.⁵² Convents in England, then, contained the same restrictions as those in France.

One more, often little noticed option, did exist for women's educators in the seventeenth century, yet all convents, little schools, and governesses chose to ignore it. Only Marie le Jars de Gournay chose to advocate this other choice. A woman of the sixteenth-century French Renaissance, she embodied more than anyone else, the seventeenth-century ideas of Poulain de la Barre. Mlle. de Gournay received her own education at home and through access to wonderful books.⁵³ She believed that "discrimination," (to use her word) against women's education constituted one of society's "greatest injustices."⁵⁴ Mlle. de Gournay openly displayed her own

educational accomplishments in the face of a world that mocked all learned women. She believed wholeheartedly in the capability of women to learn equally with men and pushed for the right for a "male" education. She blamed negative attitudes but especially pernicious traditions for the intellectual subjugation of women. She argued that those biases could all be changed if children could learn "poetry, history, and ethics" from their mothers as well as their fathers.⁵⁵ Mlle. de Gournay believed that customs, such as the Salic Law, which took effect in the early medieval period, came about only because men carried arms and women did not.⁵⁶ She urged the abolition of such customs.

Marie de Gournay fought for the right to an equal education in salons that she created, but even more so in her work: Egalité des hommes et des femmes (1622) and Grief des Dames (1626).⁵⁷ In these works she attacked the unfounded belief that women's "inability" to learn as easily as men had determined their roles in life. Custom and prejudice had denied women a "male" education. Mlle. de Gournay argued that "the human animal is neither man nor woman."⁵⁸ Both sexes, she contended, possessed an equal soul, which was the essence of humanness and only propagation necessitated the physical differences. Thus, no reason for assuming a mental inferiority in either sex existed. Women simply lacked a worthy education.

Mlle. de Gournay's advocacy of an equal education for all led her to participate in the French Academy, which stressed the preservation and correctness of the French language. She recognized the power that language had and how it could influence a society's thinking. She always hoped that prejudicial language, which continually placed men in positions of superiority at women's expense, could be eliminated. Only if the consciousness of society changed would the restrictions against women's education be successfully overcome.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, Mlle. de Gournay had no success in changing society's attitudes towards women or their education. Ideas as radical as Marie de Gournay's, if read at all, were ridiculed and buried in her books, until Poulain de la Barre reopened the quest for an equal education for women with the publication of his feminist theories in 1672. In the meantime, women's practical education in the century of scientific revelation remained stagnant. The attitudes towards it embodied pure traditionalism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of Claude Fleury, François de Fénelon, and Madame de Maintenon. Although all three recognized that inadequacies existed, the brilliant work of these theorists offered no fundamental alternatives as to how or why a woman should be educated. Instead, they revitalized the belief that women's traditional roles embodied their only true destiny in life.

All three theorists approached the subject from within the confines of their unquestioned yet unsurprising acceptance of women's "natural" domesticity. Fleury, Fénelon, and Mme. de Maintenon all agreed that moral and academic education were inseparable. All three emphasized the importance of the good housewife and mother and the need for women to display a constant devotion to God. Their contemporary, Poulain de la Barre, received very little recognition in his own century, even though he published his works several times, and remains relatively unknown even today. In keeping with the spirit and theories of Mlle. de Gournay Poulain advocated complete equality in education for both sexes. He went further than Marie de Gournay, however, by attempting to change society's prejudices. He exposed those prejudices as ignorance with no basis in reason.

Four theorists addressed the same issue, yet only Poulain deviated from the contemporary Weltanschauung. The pervasiveness of science and new philosophical questions wrought by the "age of enlightenment" led many in society to reaffirm their customary values and practices. Fleury, Fénelon, and Mme. de Maintenon emerged from this tradition and espoused it in their educational theories. Simultaneously, however, the "age of enlightenment" led to a refutation of age-old beliefs. It was this refutation of tradition that encouraged Poulain de la Barre to develop his feminist theories unique to the seventeenth century.

FOOTNOTES

*Mary Wollstonecraft, "Of the Pernicious Effects Which Arise from the Unnatural Distinctions Established in Society," in A Vindication of the Rights of Women in A Wollstonecraft Anthology, edited by Janet Todd, p. 100 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

¹ Immanuel Kant, quoted in Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 20.

² Carolyn C. Lougee, Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons and Social Stratifications in Seventeenth-Century France (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 194; hereafter cited as Lougee, Le Paradis des femmes.

³ Michael Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," Journal of the History of Ideas 35 (1974): 507; hereafter cited as Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man."

⁴ Philip Lee Ralph, The Renaissance in Perspective (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 141.

⁵ Daniel Roche, The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 202. These figures represent the general norm in French society. The literacy gap between the various social classes can be found in François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, Reading and Writing: Literacy in France From Calvin to Jules Ferry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), passim.

⁶ H.C. Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr (London: Black, 1934), p. 35; hereafter cited as Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr.

⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

⁸ Antonia Fraser, The Weaker Vessel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 139; hereafter cited as Fraser, The Weaker Vessel.

⁹Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁰H.C. Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime (London: Burns and Oates, 1954), p. 19; hereafter cited as Barnard, Girls At School Under the the Ancien Regime.

¹¹Elfrieda T. Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," French Studies 32 (January 1978), p. 8; hereafter cited as Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France."

¹²Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 48.

¹³Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," 3-4.

¹⁵Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 38.

¹⁶Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," 4.

¹⁷Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 41.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁹Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," 6.

²⁰Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 43.

²¹Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 43.

²²Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 45.

²³Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 41.

²⁴Ibid., p. 41.

²⁵Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 46.

²⁶Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 41.

²⁷Ibid., p. 34.

28 Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 41.

29 Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 35.

30 Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," 10.

31 Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 48.

32 Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 36.

33 Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 7.

34 Ibid., p. 5.

35 Ibid., p. 7.

36 Ibid., p. 27.

37 Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 37.

38 Ibid., p. 38.

39 Ibid., p. 37.

40 Gaston Boissier, Madame de Sévigné, translated by Henry Llewellyn Williams 1887. Reprint (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1972), pp. 70-71.

41 Quoted in Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 45, (January 24, 1689).

42 Lougee, Le Paradis des Femmes, p. 212.

43 Ibid., pp. 30, 97-98.

44 Paul Janet, Fénelon: His Life and Works, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, LTD., 1914), p. 20.

45 Molière, Les Femmes Savantes (New York: French and English Publications, Inc., 1969), pp. 51 and 53.

46 Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, translated by H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1974), p. 121; hereafter cited as Beauvoir, The Second Sex.

47 Fraser, The Weaker Vessel, p. 20.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 137.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 137.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 137.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 124.

⁵²Ibid., p. 127.

⁵³Marjorie Henry Ilsley A Daughter of the Renaissance: Marie le Jars de Gournay, Her Life and Works (The Hague, 1963), p. 1; hereafter cited as Ilsley, A Daughter of the Renaissance.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 200.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 211.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 207.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 200.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 207.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 231.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM GOOD DAUGHTER TO GOOD WIFE

"In considering the education of a girl one should take into account her position in society. . . . Keep her within the bounds of her own position. . . . Adapt her mind to those duties which she will have to perform all her life."
Fénelon*

Claude Fleury, one of the more celebrated educational theorists of the seventeenth century, examined the practical benefits of education in France for both men and women. Born on December 6, 1640, Fleury attended the Jesuit Collège de Clermont.¹ This Jesuit school stressed as its ideal goals in education piety and the "belles-lettres."² The college concentrated on developing in its students a deep faith in Catholic doctrine and strict adherence to moral behavior. After college, Fleury served in the parlement of Paris for nine years.³ His mastery of certain vital legal skills such as "selectivity, relevance, and utility" convinced him that all of society could benefit from an education that emphasized their development.⁴ Thus, his heart-felt belief in useful education began.

During Fleury's last years as a lawyer, he decided to

enter the priesthood. He did this sometime in 1669. In the last decade of the seventeenth century, the King appointed Fleury to tutor the Prince's de Conti, after banishing Fénelon (an educational theorist who preceeded Fleury) from court because he had embraced the Quietist religion.⁵ His position earned him immense respect as an educator as did his great work, the Traité du Choix et de la Méthode des Études.

Fleury argued against the teaching methods of the Jesuits throughout the Traité and compared Church education with his own ideas. Fleury represented the "modernist" school of thought concerning education, which advocated a reformist, philosophical approach and a useful education. The modernists lay particular emphasis on the study of the vernacular.⁶ Their opposites, the "ancients," most strongly represented by the Jesuits, insisted on traditional instruction in Latin and sometimes Greek, and on a sound education in religious doctrine.⁷ Moreover, they clung to formalism, or the strict adherence to outward forms and customs, similar to the scholasticism of the medieval period.

The Jesuit schools did offer a strong education, but for Fleury, they did not offer the necessary education one needed to survive in the modern world. For this reason, Fleury tended to look more favorably on the Protestant methods of instruction, although he did not support

Protestantism as a religion. Protestants simply came closer to his beliefs in practical education, because they stressed a sound elementary education, taught their subjects in the vernacular, and studied the classics in their original presentation.⁸ The Jesuits, by contrast, studied these subjects from the distorted medieval interpretations of the Church Fathers.⁹ Finally, the Protestants displayed a more open mind towards philosophy, particularly Cartesian philosophy, which in turn had a moderate influence on Fleury.¹⁰

Fleury did not accept René Descartes' philosophy unconditionally, nor did he embrace Descartes in the way that Poulain de la Barre would. Fleury did, however, accept the instructional theories of Descartes, the method of deductive reasoning, or moving from the general to the specific. He combined it, however, with the inductive method of Francis Bacon, which placed a significant emphasis on the use of one's senses.¹¹ Fleury accepted Descartes in the sense that he adhered to the "critical use of reason" in order to discover what proved useful in education.¹²

Finally, Fleury intended for the Traité to be an analysis of the education necessary to make France a dominant nation. He understood that the present educational requirements and opportunities suffered severe limitations, but even worse, the deficiency presented a real threat to a nation, which in a world of scientific advancement and

increasing economic development, stood in real danger of falling shamefully behind. As money poured into France from the Americas, a moderate movement from the land into the cities occurred. As a result, an education in the operations of the practical, modern commercial world became necessary to one's very survival.¹³ In addition to these changing economic practices, the seventeenth century also gave rise to mercantilistic policies. Fleury personally opposed these practices because he believed France should devote her energies to agricultural improvements over industry. He recognized the need, however, to deal with the system and constructed his educational theories accordingly.¹⁴ In other words, Fleury's belief in the wisdom of practical education dominated all else.

Fleury's unique method, known as "utilitarian realism," or "functional learning," mandated the creation of an "habile et honnête homme," someone who contributed to society in a practical, useful manner.¹⁵ For this reason Fleury approved wholeheartedly of the ideas of educator Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, who stressed learning only enough Latin for prayer and how to write business contracts. The goal, Fleury insisted, should be to create productive citizens, not men who spent their time quoting in Latin, while contributing nothing concrete to society.¹⁶

Fleury made clear his belief that only those who used their education to serve society were worthy of living in

the modern world. Fleury found support for this position in the work of Plato, whom he considered the inspiration of his own ideas on practical education. He remarked during a speech on Plato at the Academie Lamoignon:

"One can find in Plato an infinity of excellent maxims to put order in general education. One can learn there to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge, to see those subjects of study which are necessary. . . .One can find there the goal for which one must study, the way to do it seriously and to make best use of one's work."¹⁷

Fleury's exposure to Plato, Cartesian philosophies, law, and the uselessness of Jesuit instruction for the real world, encouraged him to advocate relevancy in education. The Traité, which beautifully expounds his views, not only explained Fleury's educational theories, but also deserves distinction as the first comprehensive work on the history of education. Fleury wrote the book in 1675, revised it in 1677, and finally published it in 1686.¹⁸ Scholars accepted and read the book, which was translated into both Spanish and Italian.¹⁹

Fleury focused his treatise on the education one would receive from governesses or tutors because he believed they would most likely adopt his methods. "Little schools," and convents received only minor attention because they followed strict programs making it more difficult to instigate change.²⁰ Fleury then categorized his theories according to the kind of education that specific groups in society should

receive, including the education necessary for a woman in the world of the seventeenth century.

One chapter devoted to women in a work of over three hundred pages may seem insignificant, but in the context of a century that had, up to that point, demonstrated little concern for women's education by comparison to men, that one chapter signifies a long overdue interest. Fleury, however, had no feminist inclinations; he advocated absolutely nothing new to change women's role in society. He deserves attention and recognition concerning women's education only because he was one of the few educators of the day to focus on the subject, but even more importantly, because his theories won such overwhelming popularity.

Fleury's program for women stemmed directly from his adherence to "utilitarian realism."²¹ Fleury granted that women could learn and that only the poor education they received made them seem incapable.²² This marked a big concession considering the popularity of the belief that women's intellect suffered by comparison to men. He did believe, however, that women's innate characteristics prevented them from learning complicated subjects as easily as men did. Fleury insisted that women "were naturally small-minded and stingy" and would never do the "significant work of thinking men."²³ A woman's education, he argued, had to be strictly geared towards her station in life because women had "less application, less patience, and less

courage" in doing anything other than "natural" work.²⁴ Fleury contended that her primary goal in life must be housework and childbirth. Consequently, her education should reflect her domestic position. Fleury then, obviously intended only for women to live in their society more efficiently; he strove simply to reinforce their traditional roles.²⁵

Fleury conceded that women must learn more than the sewing or catechism taught in the convent schools, but women did not need a classical education, which, if offered to them, would be instruction stupidly wasted. Women had "no use for Latin, Greek, rhetoric, or philosophy."²⁶ Considering Fleury's stated goals for education, i.e. educating one to his or her societal position, one could argue that Fleury's belief in educating women only to be good housewives and mothers simply exemplifies his adherence to a useful education. After all, giving a classical education to a person whose society would never allow her to use it would be wasteful. But Fleury went beyond the applicability of a practical education for women by stating personal points of view that show him to be guided more by traditional attitudes towards women, than by a need to see them properly educated. Moreover, he demonstrated just how far removed from Cartesian philosophy he actually was by believing, without the benefit of proof, that women suffered from some intrinsic defects making them incapable of

utilizing a classical education properly, even if society permitted them to do so.

Women's education should not include the classical subjects, Fleury argued, because women with classical educations would become "vain and prideful."²⁷ Teaching them "big words" only exacerbated their natural vanity.²⁸ Rather than encouraging female vanity by offering them the classics, women should be given a thorough, controlled, education in religious doctrine. Women, who tended to be "more superstitious" than men, needed more guidance in their moral upbringing.²⁹ Their religious and moral education should stress their duties in the home and should guide them in raising moral children.

Not surprisingly, Fleury recommended only a minimal elementary education for women. He perceived basic grammar as the most important, by which he meant reading and writing in proper French--French that would be useful to them in their everyday lives, not French designed for scholarly pursuits.³⁰ As for women's access to reading material, this should be tightly restricted. Women should never read "comedies, novels, Spanish and Italian books, classical mythology, or books on the art of conversation" because their natural vanity would explode into the open.³¹ Furthermore, these reading materials presented a danger to women, whom Fleury perceived as "morally lacking in judgment and susceptible to deception."³²

Fleury also had specific instructions as to how a woman should spend her leisure time. Religious reading or exercise were her only options.³³ Fleury did not mean exercise in the twentieth century sense of the term. For him, only one acceptable exercise existed for women: walking.³⁴ Walking enabled women to stay healthy for childbirth, and at the same time, to overcome their susceptibility to "hyperchondria."³⁵ He offered no explanation for this theory but it seems safe to interpret it as a manifestation of his belief in the general weak-mindedness of women.

Fleury specifically advocated only two other educational goals for women: basic arithmetic and household economics.³⁶ Again, women benefitted from these subjects only in so far as they aided them in becoming more proficient housewives. Fleury continually emphasized that women had no need to study for pleasure. A woman's education must be "the learning experience of her life."³⁷

Fleury had other motives in mind while penning his work on women's education other than simply training them to be good housewives. He believed that women played a primary role in the shaping of future generations and that for these generations, the home should function similarly to a classroom. The "shaping of a child's soul" and the "molding of its virtue" began at birth. Since Fleury believed that children copied everything their parents did, the behavior

of a woman ignorant of her moral duties would set a horrible example to her children.³⁸ If women did not know how to read, or worse, became exposed to the dangerous reading material discussed above, she would present a vain, affected, and non-virtuous nature to her children and pass her terrible traits along to them. Thus, educating women to the demands of their domestic existence took on even greater significance for Fleury because of his concern over women's influence on children in the home. However, Fleury offered no similar admonitions concerning the effects of a non-virtuous father on his children.

Fleury, then, deserves credit for examining the subject of women's education in a manner that no acceptable theorist had done before him. He cannot be seen as a progressive concerning women's education, however, because his motivations emerged directly from long-accepted traditions and personal prejudices, whose validity he never once questioned. He developed a limited, but practical program for women, strictly within the context of her seventeenth-century life, but in reality, Fleury advocated no more than the convent schools had proposed. He simply defined more precisely the functions a woman performed in society and suggested educating her specifically to fulfill those functions. The education Fleury offered to women, then, enhanced only what he perceived to be the natural order of things. It is true that Fleury advocated a

practical education based on one's station in life to all segments of society, but the education offered to noble men as compared to noble women, differed immensely. Concerning men and women, rank and capability became secondary factors while sex determined education.³⁹

One's gender decided the method and goals of education for another popular contemporary, François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon. Expanding on the ideas of Fleury, Fénelon devoted an entire book to the present state of women's education. He argued that it suffered from a gross neglect. He suggested what he considered to be vital improvements in what girls learned and how they learned it. In so doing, he wound up simply reiterating the same traditional viewpoints espoused by Claude Fleury before him.

The theories of François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon have probably received the most significant attention in studies of seventeenth century education because of the popularity of his famous work, De l'éducation des filles, published in 1687.⁴⁰ Even more than Fleury, he based his educational theories on custom, tradition, and blatant prejudice. Fleury may have insisted that a woman's role in life as wife and mother necessitated a specific type of education and he may have even embraced many of the usual prejudices of the day towards women, but compared to Fénelon, he qualifies as a champion for women's rights.

On August 6, 1651, the man most commonly referred to as

"Fénelon," breathed his first breath.⁴¹ When he reached the age of twelve, he enrolled in the University of Cahors to study philosophy and the humanities.⁴² A few years later, he entered Saint-Sulpice to study theology and took Holy Orders at the age of twenty-four.⁴³ In 1678, Fénelon received the job that, more than any other, greatly influenced his decision to write a treatise on women's education. He became the Superior of the Nouvelles Catholiques in Paris, a community of girls who had been converted to Catholicism.⁴⁴ The Nouvelles Catholiques had been established in 1634 to indoctrinate new converts in the Catholic faith and "protect" them against the incursions of Protestant parents or others who may have decided to interfere with their conversions.⁴⁵ While at the convent, Fénelon had the opportunity to influence the development of the girls into the women he believed they should become. It quickly became apparent to him that the important religious instruction the girls received suffered in substance due to the incompetency of the nuns. Fénelon expressed shock at how little the "mothers of the future" really knew. He thus recognized the necessity of developing a specific and valid educational program for women, designed to enable them to excel in their traditional vocation. Women had to be protected from bad influences, Fénelon believed, for they demonstrated an overwhelming ability to accept any vice: "the weaker they are, the more necessary it is to fortify

them."⁴⁶ As a result, their education had to come from competent teachers, which in Fénelon's eyes, meant it had to come from outside of the convent.

After ten years at the Nouvelles Catholiques, Fénelon finally received the opportunity to critique and improve women's education. The Duke and Duchess of Beauvillier, asked him for advice on educating their nine daughters.⁴⁷ This offer finally afforded Fénelon the chance to evaluate his own observations about women and to integrate them into his experiences with women in everyday life. Furthermore, Claude Fleury had already published his general work on education, Madame de Maintenon had opened Saint-Cyr, and Poulain de la Barre had published his feminist theories on education, so the subject was current and popular.⁴⁸

Fénelon's experience at the Nouvelles Catholiques with unqualified instructors molded his belief that incompetency and ignorance presented a moral danger to women.⁴⁹ For Fénelon, the moral and academic education of a woman could never be separated. The schools needed to produce virtuous women because they would some day "have a home to keep up, a husband to make happy, and children to raise."⁵⁰ Thus, a non-virtuous woman, who would have the same influences on children as the virtuous woman, could be held responsible for "men's (and women's) failings."⁵¹ In essence, Fénelon suggested that an improperly educated woman could be held accountable for the faults of the world. He inquired, "How

often does history show us intrigues, subversions of law and morality, sanguinary wars, innovations in religion, revolutions in government--all due to the profligacy of women?"⁵²

Fénelon did not emphasize, or even encourage, a modern humanist education for women because he believed they should only be educated for their roles as wife and mother. He even made an attempt to "resurrect the medieval position of women into modern society."⁵³ Fénelon's desire to reaffirm the beneficence of women's domestic role arose from several reasons. One of these focused on women's role in raising boys. Young boys needed to be raised with the thought in mind that they may some day perform a "future worldly task," hence women's roles as mothers required proper guidance, since they controlled the education of boys before formal school.⁵⁴ Fénelon believed that a woman's domestic role offered her the only real opportunity for salvation. Women, he claimed, suffered from innate failings, such as vanity, an inability to reject vice, and emotionalism. Thus, her expertise in raising virtuous children would reflect a goodness that she herself possessed and hence allow her a position in Heaven.⁵⁵

Events that Fénelon witnessed during his association with the royal court also influenced his determination to develop a proper education for girls. He had begun tutoring the Duke of Burgandy in 1689 and strongly disapproved of the

trend at court to bring women into "polite society" at the expense of their domestic obligations.⁵⁶ Fénelon adhered to a movement popular in the late seventeenth century and also embraced by that most famous court memorialist, Saint-Simon, to resurrect beloved traditions within the society.⁵⁷ As part of this movement, Fénelon intended to reduce the number of "court ladies," whose presence he felt degraded the court, in favor of the women who "were simple, industrious, dutiful, and preoccupied with household cares."⁵⁸

Fénelon detested "court life" because for him, it incurred a kind of "feminization," which made men incapable of devoting themselves to their professions, whatever they happened to be. He claimed, "an idler is not a man; he is a half-woman."⁵⁹ Fénelon wanted society to return to the strict stratification of social order, including relegating women to their customary roles as wife and mother in order to preserve social stability.⁶⁰ Fénelon intended to "confine woman within the boundaries of her condition."⁶¹ Any woman who rebelled against her natural role by insisting on being a "court lady," interested only in a life of luxury, would create "social chaos."⁶² Women needed to be convinced that their traditional role offered them more satisfaction than would any other position in life. In order to inculcate in women an acceptance of their role Fénelon outlined the necessary education of girls in a treatise for the Duke and Duchess of Beauvilliers.

Fénelon directed his work towards the girls from wealthy homes in order to describe what he considered to be the ideal education for the ideal financial situation, home education.⁶³ In De l'education des filles, he attacked in detail the problems women faced when not educated at home, namely, the problem of incompetent nuns in the convent schools and the emphasis on religion in these schools over domesticity. Because Fénelon wrote a book primarily devoted to women's education, some scholars, notably Emile Faguet, perceived him as a modern day feminist.

Fénelon developed his ideas and solutions concerning women's education based on a "profound mistrust of the feminine character."⁶⁴ Fénelon believed that women inherently had both a more "feeble" intellect and less physical and moral "vigor" than men. Those weaknesses naturally prevented them from governing states or preaching God's word in Church.⁶⁵ Finally, Fénelon felt women to be incapable of developing valid points of view on religious matters.⁶⁶ To compensate for their deficiencies, nature had given women "industry, neatness, and economy, so as to keep them quietly occupied in their homes."⁶⁷

Domestic capabilities, however, were not the only things intrinsic to women. Fénelon insisted that women had other natural traits that should influence their education, such as their insatiable fondness for things, and their innate "desire to please."⁶⁸ Since they could not "please"

through active participation in the world, for all positions with the exception of wife and mother remained closed to women, they tried to instinctively "please" through their physical appearance. Consequently, they became overly concerned with luxury and thus, vain. Since many families tended to cater to their daughters' concern for appearance, girls rarely abandoned their bad habits. Instead, they dressed and acted in ways that "excited the passions of men." Thus, Fénelon held girls responsible for any action (emphasis mine) men may commit as a result of their "passions."⁶⁹

Fénelon went even further, however, when he advocated that girls should feel shame towards their "femaleness;" they should absorb themselves in God instead. Girls exhibited an unacceptable awareness of their bodies because society permitted them that vice through its tolerance of a woman's whim for "pretty things."⁷⁰ Only a sound religious education, he argued, would lead girls to abandon their preoccupation with themselves.

But even the religious instruction Fénelon advocated suffered from his personal biases towards women. Girls, he contended, demonstrated an innate susceptibility to believe what their intuition told them without the benefit of any kind of proof. Their religious education must therefore be handled "delicately."⁷¹ Because superstitions overshadowed religious truths for women, they should never be exposed to

mythology or to any other Bible stories that encouraged differing interpretations of orthodox Church doctrine.⁷² Women's "capability" permitted them to see only black or white, thus they need know only enough about religion to accept God.⁷³

Fénelon also believed women to be "artificial, crafty, passionate, and limited in knowledge."⁷⁴ It seemed not to occur to him that women's limitations resulted from restrictions in education imposed upon them by men. They suffered from boredom more easily than men, he claimed, and concerned themselves with "petty jealousies" and meddling. Fénelon never considered the possibility that women's boredom arose as a consequence of a culture that allowed them to perform only the most mundane tasks. To curtail these "petty" tendencies, Fénelon advocated that women be instructed only in those household details geared specifically to her financial position in society. Thus her "place" would become intrinsic to her; she would desire no other life besides the one her education offered her. He also suggested that men be educated within the context of their social position. The options available for upper class men, however, surpassed women's to such an extent, that their educations would undoubtedly be much more liberal.

The duties of a woman in the household, which a proper education emphasized, centered around the raising of her

children, supervising her servants, and if she had no man to do this for her, receive her rents.⁷⁵ In order to run her home more efficiently, a woman needed to learn basic math, the grammar of her native language, reading, and writing. "Correct" reading for women, however, meant the avoidance of all works that could deter them from their traditional roles for such literature could encourage them to question the existence that society had determined for them.⁷⁶ Fénelon echoed Fleury by declaring that women should never read Spanish or Italian novels. The passions which those books inspired, he claimed, encouraged affectation and non-virtuous behavior.⁷⁷

In addition to the elementary subjects mentioned above, Fénelon advocated that women learn the basic principles of law. For Fénelon, this meant that a woman should understand the duties of a manor lord in case she ever had to assume that role. Moreover, she should understand the difference between such important documents as a will and a contract.⁷⁸ Fénelon, however, who did not think women capable of understanding the intricacies of the law, stressed in his discussion of law that women were "incapable of solving legal difficulties" and that they should "turn to men" when those difficulties arose.⁷⁹

Any woman, Fénelon insisted, who thought she needed to know anything more than what his treatise outlined for her, must be persuaded otherwise. His insistence on a

traditional role for women did not stem from the law as much as from his own personal feelings of female inadequacy for work other than what custom dictated. Seventeenth-century prejudices had so completely entrapped Fénelon that for him, the only virtuous woman was one who "spins, confines herself to her home, keeps quiet, believes and obeys."⁸⁰

Fénelon, then, made no attempt to free women from their seventeenth-century condition. Instead, he established their traditional roles more firmly by creating an educational program that guaranteed proficiency in the home. Because of his concern that society return women to roles of domesticity, Fénelon wrote unflatteringly about the convent schools, whose main problem, besides incompetent nuns, was their failure to educate women to be good wives and mothers. To make certain that the rudimentary education he did suggest for women worked, he insisted on keeping them in a state of absolute dependence on their husbands: "Obey him according to God as your head, as him who represents for you God on earth."⁸¹ For him, women's isolation within marriage meant the preservation of order, an order set deep in nature to which education should never refute.

To see Fénelon as a progressive thinker regarding women's education, then, defies reality. If anything, the popularity of his views meant regression rather than any successful leaps forward, since many of his theories had a strong influence on the most famous school for girls in all

of France, Madame de Maintenon's Saint-Cyr.

On the surface, Saint-Cyr seemed to be the solution to the question of women's education. It ranked as the first truly successful school that focused on educating girls of the nobility to carry out simultaneously the duties of proficient wives and mothers and the social obligations expected of their rank. In this success, however, lay Saint-Cyr's "failure." The school not only reflected the traditional personality of its founder, but worse, it perpetuated the commonly accepted prejudices towards women's education and stressed women's "place" in society.

The founder and main influence on Saint-Cyr, Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon, became preoccupied with education while at the court of Louis XIV. Having earned the reputation of being a "learned lady" herself, Mme. de Maintenon became the governess to the illegitimate children of Louis XIV and his mistress, Mme. de Montespan.⁸² In 1680, Mme. de Maintenon began a correspondance with Madame de Brinon, an Ursuline nun who had founded a school for women at Montmorency.⁸³ Their ensuing relationship allowed Mme. de Maintenon to discover first hand the deficiencies of the convent education. Convents, as Mme. de Maintenon soon discovered, inadequately prepared girls for the domestic life that they would most likely lead.

Mme. de Maintenon used her friendship with Mme. de Brinon to help nurture the development of the school at

Montmorency. The school offered, in addition to the usual religious instruction characteristic of Ursuline convents, reading, writing, basic math, but most unique of all, an education in household duties specifically designed to prepare a girl to maintain her own home one day.⁸⁴ Montmorency catered to noble girls, but as its popularity grew, so did the school. It moved to Rueil and permitted the entry of "poor" noble girls and some non-noble girls. The two groups, however, remained separated into definite classes.⁸⁵

Mme. de Maintenon, working closely with Mme. de Brinon, took an active role in the school. It earned a successful reputation and soon came to the attention of Louis XIV. As Mme. de Maintenon became involved with the king, whom she would marry in 1684, she used her influence to convince him to purchase land in Noisy in order to build a school of her own.⁸⁶ Louis did so and in 1684 several of the girls at Rueil, who had become fond of Mme. de Maintenon, transferred to the newly completed school at Noisy.⁸⁷ Mme. de Maintenon proceeded to mold the school into an institute designed to train girls to be wives. She did not, however, have ample opportunity to develop the school. Its location was farther from the court at Versailles than Rueil had been and now that Mme. de Maintenon had married the king, Louis wanted her closer to court.⁸⁸ Consequently, on the fifteenth of August, 1684, Louis announced that the school would be moved

to its new location at Saint-Cyr.⁸⁹ Louis then requested that the nuns from Father Barré's Saint-Maur Seminaire, a school that stressed the importance of household duties as well as religious and elementary instruction, move to Saint-Cyr and teach the new Dames de Saint-Louis.⁹⁰ Mme. de Maintenon, who finally had a school all her own, could now put her educational ideas to work.

Mme. de Maintenon opened her school at Saint-Cyr in 1686 for two-hundred fifty girls of "poor" but not destitute noble families, who had the necessary resources to maintain an acceptable standard of living for their rank, but lacked an unlimited source of wealth.⁹¹ Admission to Saint-Cyr required four generations of paternal nobility. Neither merit nor capability influenced the selections for entry.⁹² Mme. de Maintenon even made distinctions within the classes of nobility themselves. For example, girls having royal blood received, in addition to the school's regular instruction, a thorough grooming in the social graces. Non-royal nobility, on the other hand, received only the standard vocational program.⁹³ Non-noble girls, it will be recalled, had been accepted at Noisy, but they did not attend Saint-Cyr.⁹⁴

Because it did not begin as a regular convent and because it had the benefit of being virtually controlled by one person, Saint-Cyr at its founding had immense potential. Had it been developed by someone like Poulain de

la Barre, this giant school devoted to educating women could have become the first school to cultivate academic pursuits for women. Unfortunately, Mme. de Maintenon and not Poulain de la Barre, controlled Saint-Cyr. Consequently, Mme. de Maintenon molded the school's development in the light of her own traditional biases and influences. She never intended for the school to be anything more than a training ground designed to develop women's domestic skills. She never questioned the accepted assumptions of the day concerning women's condition; she embraced them.

Mme. de Maintenon's indubitable acceptance of women's condition instilled in her specific beliefs as to what constituted a proper education for women. She attempted to resolve how a girl, trapped within the confines of the seventeenth-century, could be "useful, industrious, content with her lot, anxious to please others, blameless in reputation, and acceptable in the sight of God."⁹⁵ She firmly believed, as did Fleury and Fénelon, that a person's sex or station predestined them to specific functions in life, which should never be challenged and to which they should be adequately educated.⁹⁶

Mme. de Maintenon desired a broader education for girls than any previous school had ever offered, but like Fleury, she insisted that the school experience be strictly vocational.⁹⁷ In other words, she saw no use for the tutored, literary educations sought by women of the "salon

society" because that kind of education detracted from women's destined duty as wife and mother.⁹⁸ Thus, in addition to the basic courses in reading, writing, and arithmetic that other schools offered, Mme. de Maintenon emphasized as the school's top priority, a virtuous devotion to "home economics." She claimed that household tasks such as needlework should be loved by women because they "calm the passions, occupy the mind, and prevent it having leisure to think evil thoughts."⁹⁹ Mme. de Maintenon deemed as unnecessary an education stressing the academic subjects because too much schooling, in her mind, gave women a bad character:

"Our girls have not to make themselves learned. Women never know anything fully, and the little that they do know usually makes them proud, disdainful, talkative, and disgusted with what is really important."¹⁰⁰

Part of what shaped a woman's good character, Mme. de Maintenon believed, was her willingness to obey men under any circumstance other than outright cruelty. Her insistence on obedience stemmed directly from her personal convictions that women's weak nature compelled them to obey.¹⁰¹ She contended that "Obedience is the lot of our sex and it is well that a girl should learn betimes at Saint-Cyr to know how to overcome herself and comply with the will on those on whom she depends."¹⁰² This injunction did not mean, however, that Mme. de Maintenon trusted men

not to abuse the authority they had. She continually warned the girls at Saint-Cyr not to trust men and to never become "familiar" with them.¹⁰³ She wrote: "Between the tyranny of a husband and that of a superior there is a vast difference. . . .There is no preliminary novitiate, and it is difficult to see how far a husband will carry his authority."¹⁰⁴ Because her own faith that women must obey never wavered, Saint-Cyr indoctrinated its students in the tenets of that same faith.

Mme. de Maintenon developed a very strict curricula for the girls at Saint-Cyr. Although neither she nor Louis XIV, the school's main supporter, wanted Saint-Cyr to become a regular convent, they both believed that reading should be restricted to religious texts. Mme. de Maintenon permitted reading from works such as St. François de Sales' Introduction à la vie devote, Thomas à Kempis' Imitation of Christ, and the New Testament¹⁰⁵ Like Fénelon Mme. de Maintenon thought reading potentially dangerous to the moral character of women and useless in training them for their life's vocation. Thus, a book not on her list could not enter the premises of Saint-Cyr.¹⁰⁶

Françoise de Maintenon also believed that excessive writing put women's character at great risk because it encouraged self-expression, which, in her mind, led to affectation and a desire to break away from the traditional domestic role.¹⁰⁷ Thus, writing skills had to be limited to

the bare basics, for "it is better that they should not write so well," for that study might give them "the taste for writing which is so dangerous for girls."¹⁰⁸ Consequently, Mme. de Maintenon forbade all writing outside of the classroom and permitted only closely monitored writing within it.¹⁰⁹

In addition to the controlled curriculum, Mme. de Maintenon's girls received an education comparable to their ages. These programs enforced a life of complete discipline, exemplifying the entire character of Saint-Cyr. Mme. de Maintenon divided the students into classes coded by the color of hair ribbons.¹¹⁰ The Red class, consisting of the youngest girls, learned reading, writing, arithmetic, memory development, and religious instruction. The next level, or the Green class, learned church singing, music, biblical history, and geography. The Yellow class participated in drawing and dance, and the eldest girls, or the Blue class, usually just read, sewed, or learned music. All classes learned needlework and household skills.¹¹¹

Not just Saint-Cyr's curricula but the rules concerning visitation also reflected the school's disciplinary character. Parents could see their daughters only during the "octaves of the four great festivals" and the visits were never private.¹¹² Mme. de Maintenon permitted monitored correspondance by mail, but she restricted the girls' movements in order to adjust them to a life that

often required submission and unquestioned obedience.

The impression thus far may be that Saint-Cyr functioned along the lines of a psuedo-prison, but that was never the case. Schools for women in the seventeenth century all followed restrictive, traditional rules. Madame de Maintenon's improvement on those rules distinguished Saint-Cyr from other schools. She professionalized discipline in order to produce the virtuous housewives whom previous schools had underrated.

In order to win cooperation and adherence to her views Madame de Maintenon knew she could not require continuous work from the girls. She not only permitted but she encouraged the playing of certain games, such as skittles, chess, and draughts. Needlework, particularly embroidery, were also popular forms of relaxation. All rough games, however, or anything involving strenuous exercise, were strictly forbidden. A young girl could occassionally break this rule without serious repercussions, but once she passed out of the Red class, her adherence to it had to be unswerving.¹¹³

Saint-Cyr had one other unique aspect; it trained teachers. As a result, the nuns teaching in Saint-Cyr itself had superior qualifications over nuns from earlier teaching orders, whose religious background, rather than their academic qualifications, determined their teaching position.¹¹⁴ Mme. de Maintenon personally instructed the

teaching trainees in her methods. When they completed their education, they vowed "poverty, chastity, obedience, and devotion to education." They wore black clothing similar to widow's weeds instead of habits and won respect as Dames de Saint-Louis.¹¹⁵

The early operations of Saint-Cyr, then, reflected the goal of its founder to produce good wives and mothers. Its unique emphasis on this vocation over a cloistered one won for Saint-Cyr popularity and support, particularly during a time when educational theorists focused on reviving the traditional role of women. Unfortunately, Mme. de Maintenon's personal convictions hindered Saint-Cyr's development and caused the school to regress. In the late 1680s, she believed that the strict discipline she had worked so hard to develop had begun to dissipate, so she reorganized Saint-Cyr along the lines of a regular Ursuline convent. Strangely enough, the apparent erosion of discipline occurred as a result of one of Mme. de Maintenon's own innovative teaching methods. She had embraced the use of dramatic form to aid in "expression, confidence, and conversational skills." Consequently, she required the students to perform plays as a way to bring these skills to the fore. The only plays she permitted concluded with a moral message that emphasized religion and virtue.¹¹⁶

The most significant play performed at Saint-Cyr and

also the one beginning its degeneration into a convent school was Racine's Esther. Most of France's nobility came to see Mme. de Maintenon's girls perform the play, which earned overwhelming praise. Mme. de Sévigné, one of the period's "précieuses," reflected the opinion of most of French "society" when she commented, "I simply can't tell you the charm of this play. . .so sublime and complete, that it leaves nothing to be desired."¹¹⁷

As the play increased in popularity, however, Mme. de Maintenon began to doubt the wisdom of allowing the girls to perform before an audience. She detested the effect that all the attention had on the girls. She believed they had become vain and worst of all by her standards, affected.¹¹⁸ Moreover, the constant exposure to men in the audience presented a threat to the girls' moral upbringing.¹¹⁹

Perhaps Mme. de Maintenon would not have deemed the effects of the play so threatening if the previous year at Saint-Cyr had not been so destabilizing. In 1688, Mme. de Maintenon had some personal problems with her long-time friend and Saint-Cyr's temporal superior, Mme. de Brinon, who had quarrelled with several confessors who had been invited to Saint-Cyr by Mme. de Maintenon.¹²⁰ These men did not think Mme. de Brinon made a suitable temporal superior. Mme. de Brinon requested the confessors' dismissals, but received an unsatisfactory response from Mme. de Maintenon. As a result, Mme. de Brinon resigned from her post.¹²¹ To

Mme. de Maintenon, the problems with Mme. de Brinon, combined with the danger presented to the character of the girls as a result of the play, threatened the strict order of discipline and domestic complacency that she wanted in the school. She decided to abandon the specific emphasis on domestic training and integrate that program within the "cloak of the convent."¹²²

The degeneration into a regular convent school meant many changes for Saint-Cyr. Dress would be drabber in the sense that neither bows, sashes, nor ribbons would be tolerated. Familiarity among the girls would be severely limited. Finally, Mme. de Maintenon decided to enforce strict periods of silence. She also restricted the academic education of the girls. The literary aspect of their instruction, which included both reading and writing, would be reduced to a minimum of religious texts.¹²³ Mme. de Maintenon made it difficult to distinguish Saint-Cyr from an Ursuline convent. In 1691 she brought in Lazarist priests to serve as "chaplains and confessors." These men exemplified Mme. de Maintenon's new emphasis on "piety, regularity, sound doctrine, and humility."¹²⁴

Mme. de Maintenon converted Saint-Cyr into a regular convent to save the school from what she saw as moral degeneration and instability. Had she not acted, she feared the next logical step would be for the girls to question the validity of their domestic roles.¹²⁵ She could not let this

possibility take root, so she continued the metamorphosis into a convent until its completion in 1694. Mme. de Maintenon had allowed herself to be ruled by the fear that women may question the validity of one single destiny because she could not remove herself from her own traditional upbringing. Her educational theories, along with those of Fleury and Fénelon, embodied the attitudes of the seventeenth century, which allowed women only enough instruction to become proficient in their domestic roles. Although they held the popular monopoly, these three were not the only theorists of the day. One other theorist, François Poulain de la Barre, addressed the "woman question," but from a very different viewpoint. Poulain's theories, and not those of Fleury, Fénelon, and Mme. de Maintenon, truly reflected the "age of enlightenment" and "scientific revolution," which debuted in the seventeenth century

FOOTNOTES

*François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, The Education of Girls, reprinted in H.C. Barnard, Fénelon On Education (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 89; hereafter cited as Fénelon, The Education of Girls in Barnard, Fénelon On Education.

¹Raymond E. Wanner, Claude Fleury As An Educational Historiographer and Thinker (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), pp. 1-2; hereafter cited as Wanner, Claude Fleury. The College de Clermont became the College Louis de Grand after 1682.

²Ibid., p. 62.

³Ibid., p. 8.

⁴Ibid., p. 168.

⁵Ibid., p. 22.

⁶H.G. Good, "Rise of the History of Education," History of Education Journal 8 (Spring, 1957), 83; hereafter cited as Good, "Rise of the History of Education."

⁷Wanner, Claude Fleury, p. 11.

⁸Ibid., p. 54.

⁹Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹Ibid., p. 40.

¹²Good, "Rise of the History of Education," 83.

¹³Wanner, Claude Fleury, p. 32.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁸ Claude Fleury, Traité du Choix et de la Méthode des Études (Paris: Auboin, Emery, Clousier, 1686), p. v; hereafter cited as Fleury, Traité.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. VI.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

²¹ Wanner, Claude Fleury, p. 208.

²² Ibid., p. 209.

²³ Fleury, Traité, p. 293.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 290.

²⁵ Wanner, Claude Fleury, p. 215.

²⁶ Fleury, Traité, p. 289.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 289.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 292.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 291.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 293.

³¹ Carolyn Lougee, "Noblesse: Domesticity and Social Reform: Education of Girls by Fénelon and Saint-Cyr," History of Education Quarterly 14 (1974), 88; hereafter cited as Lougee, "Noblesse."

³² Ellen McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question in Early Eighteenth Century French Literature: The Influence of François Poulain de la Barre," Studies On Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 116 (1973), 67; hereafter cited as McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question."

³³ Fleury, Traité, p. 292.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 292.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 292.

- ³⁶Ibid., p. 293.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 45.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 159.
- ³⁹Wanner, Claude Fleury, p. 35.
- ⁴⁰Janet, Fénelon, p. 19.
- ⁴¹H.C. Barnard, Fénelon On Education (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. VII; hereafter cited as Barnard, Fénelon On Education.
- ⁴²Janet, Fénelon, p. 3.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 6.
- ⁴⁴Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. X.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., p. XIII.
- ⁴⁶François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, quoted in Lougee, "Noblesse," 95.
- ⁴⁷Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. XVIII.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., p. XXXIII.
- ⁴⁹Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 48.
- ⁵⁰Fénelon, The Education of Girls in H.C. Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. 3.
- ⁵¹Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁵²Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁵³Lougee, "Noblesse," 88.
- ⁵⁴Janet, Fénelon, p. 22.
- ⁵⁵Fénelon, The Education of Girls in Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. 76.
- ⁵⁶Lougee, "Noblesse," 88.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 88.

⁵⁹François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, "Lettre Spirituelle #34: Dangers de la mollesse pour les combatte et les surmonter" quoted in Lougee, "Noblesse," 91.

⁶⁰Lougee, "Noblesse," 90.

⁶¹François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, Examen de Conscience quoted in Lougee, "Noblesse," 92.

⁶²Lougee, "Noblesse," 90.

⁶³Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. xxxv.

⁶⁴Lougee, "Noblesse," 94.

⁶⁵Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," 16.

⁶⁶Fénelon, The Education of Girls in Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. 6.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 69.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 43.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 48.

⁷²Ibid., p. 34.

⁷³Ibid., p. 32.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁶Lougee, "Noblesse," 98.

⁷⁷Janet, Fénelon, p. 39.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁹Fénelon, The Education of Girls in Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. 83.

⁸⁰ François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, "Advice To A Lady of Quality" reprinted in Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. 102.

⁸¹ François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, "Du sacrement du mariage: Exhortation aux nouveaux mariés," in Lougee, "Noblesse," 95.

⁸² Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 29.

⁸³ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 49.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

⁸⁹ Dubois, "The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," 12.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹¹ Lougee, "Noblesse," 101-02.

⁹² Ibid., p. 100.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 103.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹⁵ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 155.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

⁹⁸ Lougee, Le Paradis des Femmes, p. 190.

⁹⁹ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 182.

¹⁰⁰ Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon, quoted in Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 173.

¹⁰¹ Lougee, "Noblesse," 98-99.

¹⁰² Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon, quoted in Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 163.

¹⁰³ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 186.

¹⁰⁴ Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon, quoted in Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, pp. 186-87.

¹⁰⁵ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 174.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁰⁸ Françoise d'Aubigné de Maintenon, quoted in Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 77.

¹⁰⁹ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 177.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 173.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 136.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 138.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 60.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹¹⁷ Madame de Sévigné, Letter of February 21, 1689, quoted in Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, pp. 71-72.

¹¹⁸ Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 72.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 74.

¹²² Ibid., pp. 76-77.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 77.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

CHAPTER TWO

POULAIN DE LE BARRE AND THE REJECTION OF TRADITION

"Since prejudice is based only on the past,
only examination would eliminate it."
François Poulain de la Barre*

The theories of François Poulain de la Barre reveal more than any other writer how certain prejudices have influenced the development of women's education. His belief that an equal education for both sexes meant a free, egalitarian, and fully productive society, led him to alter radically the traditional approach to women's education. He tried to convince the populace that their attitudes towards women were based on false assumptions of inferiority, which reasonable investigation did not support. Because of these theories, Pierre Bayle dubbed Poulain the most significant feminist of the seventeenth century.¹

Poulain argued that the "woman question" addressed the most fundamental problem in "human wisdom" because the plight of women represented the inequalities of European life as a whole.² Since women have historically been the

most downtrodden group in the world, Poulain hoped that by proving them equal to men, he could force society to abandon all its other prejudices as well. Poulain could never recognize another human being as his master, so he could not understand how others did so.³ He truly believed his views would interest everyone because they applied to all people.⁴

Historians know very little about Poulain's early life. Born in Paris, in July, 1647, he obviously grew up in a moderately wealthy family because he received a good education. He studied literature and Aristotelian philosophy throughout his youth and as a young adult studied theology at the Sorbonne.⁵ He originally had planned to pursue a doctoral degree at the Sorbonne, but after enrolling he began to see that the emphasis on rote learning impeded independent thought.⁶ He quickly became very discouraged with this scholastic emphasis at the Sorbonne and believed he had wasted his time. He quit the college while in his late twenties to search for answers that the school could not provide.⁷

In 1680, at the age of thirty-three, Poulain de la Barre became a priest. He moved to Flamangrie to work in the diocese of Laon, where he remained for eight years.⁸ During his years as a priest, Poulain realized how little his scholastic and formalistic education had prepared him for living or working in the real world. Although he had been adequately educated in Latin, his inability to

communicate well in the French of his congregation limited his preaching.⁹ Consequently, he had to reeducate himself for the modern world by an informal pursuit of knowledge.

In 1688, three years after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Poulain renounced Catholicism and converted to the Protestant faith.¹⁰ He embraced Protestantism because he believed that it expounded rationalistic and reformist tenets. Moreover, Protestantism did not suffer from the centuries-long doctrinal traditions of Catholicism. Poulain believed that its less restrictive principles would allow him to serve God through his own conscience rather than through the unswerving dictates of the Church Fathers.¹¹

No concrete record exists to prove that Poulain's Protestantism influenced his feminist views. In the first place, Poulain published his two most significant works on women, Equality of the Two Sexes and The Excellence of Men Against the Equality of Women in 1673 and 1675 respectively, thirteen years before his conversion. Even so, an inference can be made. Poulain's acceptance of the Protestant faith seemed to be the logical step for a man whose theories questioned the validity of prejudice not proven through analysis. He understood that Protestant tenets did not grant women equal status with men. Yet he believed that the Protestants approach to God, because of their lack of an age-old doctrinal base, presented a greater possibility for the eventual acceptance of his views than Catholicism did.

The Catholic Church represented for him the essence of a tradition that sanctioned the prejudices that he opposed. Its doctrine allowed no room for questioning and its education strove primarily to perpetuate the faith rather than to encourage investigation or independent thought. Consequently, Poulain embraced the Protestant religion as a way to reject the "blind acceptance" he saw prevailing in the Catholic Church of the seventeenth century.

After his conversion, Poulain left Flamangrie and returned to Paris, where he tried to earn his living as a tutor. Poulain found little work during this period, for as a Protestant at a time when Protestants had few rights, he had only limited possibilities. He had already published his books, it will be recalled, but no record exists as to how this affected his financial status.

Poulain's questionable financial situation and the uncertainty of his position as a Protestant in Catholic France, motivated him to leave Paris after only a few months and move to Geneva.¹² Shortly after settling in Geneva, Poulain married Mlle. de Chablais. They had one son, Jean-Jacques, who later became a Swiss country priest, and according to some sources, one daughter, whom they named Jeanne-Charlotte.¹³

For the next eighteen years, Poulain lived a rather secluded and frugal life. He tried to earn money by publishing, but the radical views espoused in his books

prevented him from earning a satisfactory living.¹⁴ He supplemented his meager income by giving French and philosophy lessons, until 1716 when the Swiss Republic offered Poulain the position of Headmaster at a high school in Geneva.¹⁵ He held this post for seven years until his death in 1723.

If Poulain's conversion to Protestantism represented his spiritual rejection of tradition, the theories of René Descartes provided the scientific justification for his decision. Descartes' theories emphasized reason and use of the "critical spirit," types of analysis not commonly practiced during Poulain's stay at the Sorbonne.¹⁶ For Poulain the most significant aspect of Cartesian method was the dual use of reason and evidence in an investigation of truth.¹⁷ Descartes had rejected the scholastic logic of "extension" and "denotation" and substituted a logic based on proof.¹⁸ This required one to examine accepted beliefs with a "pure mind," a mind open and unprejudiced by custom. Descartes defined prejudice as the "uncritical acceptance of data from the senses or imagination, acceptance of unmethodical studies."¹⁹ Only the "pure mind" sought truth.²⁰

Descartes associated prejudices with familiar words, which often dominated reason because of customary use.²¹ These prejudices, Descartes contended, began at birth because "the senses and imagination" confused the mind,

which was "so clearly linked to the body."²² An example of this influence one could argue, would be the sight of an object generally perceived as weak. The senses become convinced of the object's actual weakness because they have been trained to rely on initial perceptions. If seen often enough, the object would eventually become permanently associated with weakness in the mind of the beholder, a weakness based not on reasonable investigation, but entirely on the senses. If one applied this theory to women, which Poulain would do, the senses would perceive a weaker physique on women as opposed to men and thus assume a general weakness that may not actually exist. The assumption would persist, however, until the word "women" became customarily associated with the word "weakness." Thus, for Descartes, separating the senses from the function of the "pure mind" would eliminate the prejudices of assumption.

Cartesian philosophy also created a very simple method of discovering ultimate truth--the method of deductive reasoning, which Poulain de la Barre fully embraced. All opinion and accepted "fact" had to be questioned; it must all be "put into the melting pot of suspicion" until proven true.²³ Poulain, however, placed the premise of innate equality among human beings outside the realm of Cartesian analysis. He did not perceive his unquestioned acceptance of this premise as a contradiction to Descartes' advocacy of

truth. For him no "natural" confirmation of inequality existed. The attempts to prove women as lesser beings than men had been made by society. So although Poulain embraced the major tenets of Cartesian investigation, he did not consider himself a philosopher. He had simply found a scientific justification for proving the equality of the sexes: "Just as it is necessary to use logic in assessing our own existence, it is equally vital to use logic to prove our beliefs valid."²⁴ Poulain did, then, what Descartes had never done; he put Cartesian theory into practice in order to challenge the long accepted assumption of female inferiority.²⁵

Poulain published several works, but some of them conveyed no feminist theories. His first book, for instance, De l'education des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les moeurs, (1671), dealt with women but only in a pedantic manner. He examined the education attained by the précieuses in society and found it unsatisfactory and frivolous. In order to compensate, Poulain encouraged women to increase their scientific knowledge by learning the use of Cartesian methods.²⁶ The book did not investigate the problem of prejudice against women, nor did it communicate Poulain's feminist opinions.

Poulain's other known publications did not focus on women at all. His Doctrine of Protestants on the Freedom and Right to Read the Bible (Geneva 1720) dealt strictly

with Protestantism, while his contribution to the New Historical Dictionary, published posthumously in 1772, explored the pros and cons of bilingualism in French and Latin.²⁷

The remainder of Poulain's works, however, attacked society's traditional prejudices towards women. Although not his first book, The Equality of the Two Sexes or The Woman as Good as the Man, most clearly stated his feminist views. In this work, Poulain declared himself an enemy of "all anti-feminist prejudice."²⁸ He demonstrated, through the use of Cartesian methods, that "women are as noble, as perfect, and as capable as men."²⁹ He did this not by extolling women's traditional virtues, such as motherhood, but by destroying the assumptions that perpetuated their secondary status.³⁰ The book intentionally made use of a rhetorical device by presenting a challenge to anyone who disagreed with Poulain's views to respond to him in print. He welcomed the opportunity to prove the superiority of "scientific principle" over the inability to distinguish the "true and evident from what is false and obscure."³¹

Unfortunately, scholars never responded to Poulain. His contemporaries did not take his feminist views seriously because they stood completely outside the context of the seventeenth century.³² The intellectual world, including the censors, undoubtedly laughed at Poulain because they believed he had written his unrealistic analysis of women

for reasons of pure jest.³³ Although his work was not well received, he published in 1675 another work on the same subject, De l'excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des femmes. He used the proleptic approach of countering his own viewpoint in order to promulgate his theories. Part One reiterated Poulain's defense of women, Part Two extolled the preeminence of men, and Part Three restated Poulain's feminist theories, stressing the congruity between virtue and sexual equality.³⁴ He published a second edition with a new preface fifteen years later in 1690, and a third in 1692, but still he remained obscure.³⁵ Even the argumentative challenge of the book failed to win any scholarly rebuttals. Poulain's works, always overshadowed by the more traditional treatises on women's education and by a society completely unprepared for them, have been housed in old book collections in musty museums scarcely touched for three hundred years. Yet only Poulain had the best interests of women, and consequently, all of society at heart, for by proving the erroneousness of innate female inferiority, he hoped that he would lead society to question its assumptions that categorized human beings into a "ranking system." Unfortunately, Poulain did not convince the populace. Poulain demonstrated that women, if given the opportunity, could aspire to anything they wished. Unfortunately, the majority of the seventeenth-century world chose to ignore that possibility and insisted instead on

affirming women's historic domestic role.

Throughout his works, Poulain argued against the habit that "what is universally received and practiced is taken as fact."³⁶ Thus, since women always performed what society believed to be inferior roles by comparison to men, it must be because they were not as capable as men. By the same token, if women had been commonly seen in roles of authority, such as "marching along the streets followed by officers. . . .playing the part of a counsellor, pleading before judges, and speaking before states," society would believe women as capable as men.³⁷ Custom, then, developed prejudices, which in turn reinforced customs. Poulain questioned why men seemed so susceptible to custom and concluded that most of them actually believed that they had been given "superior advantages by nature."³⁸ This belief, because of its attraction to the sex it favored, has dictated and controlled the relationships between men and women since time immemorial.

When men first recognized the physical advantages they possessed over women, they began to use force to maneuver themselves into positions of authority. This process began slowly, Poulain argued, with men assuming leadership over the clan and dominating the community's religious hierarchy.³⁹ As society "progressed," wars became more frequent between men. Women, because of their beauty and

their inability to withstand men physically, became part of the "booty" in the peace settlements.⁴⁰ Men's physical prowess also made their peacetime lives appear more significant than women's. Physical labor, which men performed, forced them outdoors and into society.⁴¹ Women, on the other hand, because of their inability to do the same physical work as men and because of the fact that pregnancy often prevented them from doing strenuous work, tended to perform the domestic chores.⁴² Thus, women learned to be dependent on men to bring them food, to build them shelter, and to protect them from other men. Both sexes quickly accepted these positions as natural.

With the rise of the Church and its exclusion of women from authoritative roles, the dependency of women received powerful reinforcement.⁴³ The Church and everything it represented became the most influential entity in a person's life. Its refusal to allow women any active participation now seemed as if God himself had sanctioned women's passive existence, thus further entrenching their secondary position.⁴⁴

Travel also influenced the customary subordination of women, Poulain declared. As men roamed the world, they encountered foot-binding in China and female "slavery" within Muslim lands. Women's acceptance of this treatment further ingrained in men's minds the belief that they were naturally lesser beings than men.⁴⁵

Having established how male domination over females occurred, Poulain then explored why men of the "modern" era sought to continue the custom. The answer most commonly submitted, Poulain found, was men's belief that God had created women instinctively dependent and that "to suggest otherwise, would be a paradox."⁴⁶ Women had proven their "inability" to assume leadership roles, to achieve scientific success, or to lead battle simply by their passive acceptance of male authority over them.⁴⁷ No capable being would have acquiesced. For Poulain, this argument made no sense. Not all women accepted dependency, he claimed, and those that did, learned their behavior. Furthermore, not all men evinced strength and independence. Some men were slaves, others beholden to landlords, and all were subjects to kings or queens.⁴⁸ Finally, Poulain turned the words of men back upon them. Men, he declared, "acknowledge dependence and servitude to be contrary to the laws of nature."⁴⁹ If dependency and willing subordination were truly synonymous with women, then her creation itself would be "contrary to the laws of nature," so any thinking person, Poulain argued, should see the ridiculousness of claiming an innate dependency in all women.⁵⁰ The real reason for female dependence: laws--laws developed from, and entrapped in, customs that continually reaffirmed men's superior position at women's expense.⁵¹ If one considered the denial of female rule under the Salic Law, the

restriction of her entry into the universities, the limitations of divorce laws, and the practice of primogeniture, then women have not been made dependent "by any other law but that of the stronger."⁵²

Instinctual dependence marked only one of men's justifications for their own superiority. A belief in women's "natural inferiority" emerged from the first assumption. This "inferiority" extended most conspicuously into the intellectual sphere. Men claimed women were "frivolous and superficial" thus, incapable of intense scholarship.⁵³ If this represented an accurate description of women, Poulain countered, it did so only because women had no access to the classical/humanist educations men received. A British contemporary, Mary Astell, confirmed the pervasiveness of the prejudicial attitudes towards women when she reiterated Poulain's complaints in Essay in the Defence of Women, published in 1696.⁵⁴ She argued that women's intellect exhibited the same capabilities as man, and "just as a She-Ape is as full of, and as ready in Imitation as a He," a woman, if not denied the right by custom or prejudice, can learn as well as a man.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the reality of seventeenth-century life overshadowed this view, for all positions of leadership in churches, politics, or the military eluded and excluded women. Their only permissible vocation was that of housewife and motherhood.

The fact that women had children and often stayed in the home because of them only reinforced the customary belief in their "natural inferiority." Pregnancy prevented them from contributing anything significant to society in the public sphere. Men believed the contribution of children to be "less noble" than leading battle. In other words, having children deserved less praise than "killing the race."⁵⁶

For Poulain, then, laws and customs perpetuated the secondary status of women and not anything "natural" or "instinctive." Moreover, spoken language contributed to the impact of these customs by turning them into deeply inculcated prejudices. Words such as "soft" and "effeminate" became derogatory terms for a man because they denoted female qualities. Yet, if one referred to a woman as "strong" or "bold," the woman would feel complimented, for man-like qualities earned admiration.⁵⁷ Mary Astell expanded on this view in her essay's discussion of traditional female vices. Vanity for instance, which had been consistently seen as a woman's sin because of her concern over physical appearance, received significant attention from Astell. She did not deny this vice in women, she simply put it in perspective by comparing female vanity to that of men. Astell contended that men began wars only because they valued "their own assessment of a situation."⁵⁸ Yet the word "vanity" always brought to mind

a female image. For Mary Astell, then, as well as for Poulain, language conveyed invalid images of the sexes, which unfortunately, influenced prejudice as much as history and law. Prejudicial language must all be eliminated and restructured.⁵⁹

In order to omit injurious language from the nation's vocabulary, women's traditional thinking had to be altered just as radically as men's. Poulain knew that most women accepted their position in society just as indubitably as men did. He believed that women had abandoned themselves to a kind of "corruption" that allowed men to "hold everything as theirs that is good."⁶⁰ By "corruption," Poulain meant women's acceptance and approval of the same prejudices men believed. Worse yet, women had turned those tenets of their subordination into virtuous traits, for the good woman, echoing the thoughts of Fénelon, "spins, confines herself to her home, keeps quiet, believes, and obeys."⁶¹ Not only did every aspect of seventeenth-century life reinforce this, but the Bible, always an influential factor, repeatedly portrayed women as lesser beings than men. Poulain asked, "can we seriously give them an advantage that they didn't ask for and that they never gave themselves?"⁶² He decided that he must. Women had to be convinced, just as men did, that only custom and prejudice prevented them from attaining all that men could. Poulain wrote:

"I can discover no greater difference between the spirit of a dull and ignorant man, and one who is delicate and ingenious, than between the spirit of the same man considered at the age of ten years, and at the age of forty years: and since there appears no more between that of the two sexes, we may affirm, that their difference is not on that side, the constitution of the body; but particularly the education, exercise, and the impressions that come from all that does surround us."⁶³

Thus, Poulain undertook to lead men and women away from their erroneous beliefs about themselves and their society. He did this by exposing the assumptions of such influential authorities as the Bible and the ancients as completely contrary to reason. Moreover, he objected to the standard education offered to women during his lifetime. The methods that Poulain used to destroy the validity of prejudicial attitudes speak for themselves about the revolutionary character of this man. He advocated the first truly progressive education for women in the history of seventeenth-century theory.

FOOTNOTES

*François Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man or The Equality of Both Sexes, translated by A.L. (London: n.p., 1677), pp. 3-4; hereafter cited as Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man.

¹Pierre Bayle called Poulain de la Barre a "serious" feminist because of his advocacy of a university education for women. He did this in a footnote on Lucretia Marinella (a Venetian feminist of the seventeenth-century) in A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical. This information was obtained from Michael Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," Journal of the History of Ideas 35 (July-September, 1974), 499; hereafter cited as Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man."

²Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," 502.

³Henri Piéron, "De l'influence sociale des principes cartésiens. Un précurseur inconnu du féminisme et de la Révolution: Poulain de la Barre," Revue de synthèse historique (October, 1902), 175; hereafter cited as Piéron, "De l'influence sociale des principes cartésiens."

⁴François Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence des hommes, contre l'égalité des sexes (Paris: n.p. 1675), 4; hereafter cited as Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence."

⁵Henri Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe oublié: le cartésien Poulain de la Barre," Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France 20 (1913), 853; hereafter cited as Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe oublié."

⁶Ibid., p. 853.

⁷Ibid., p. 854.

⁸Ibid., p. 855.

⁹Ibid., p. 854.

- ¹⁰ McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 68.
- ¹¹ Henri Grappin, "A propos du féministe Poulain de la Barre," Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France 21 (1914), 388; hereafter cited as Grappin, "A propos du féministe."
- ¹² Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe oublié," 855.
- ¹³ Grappin, "A propos du féministe," 388.
- ¹⁴ Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe oublié," 855.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 856.
- ¹⁶ Piéron, "De l'influence sociale des principes cartésiens," 169.
- ¹⁷ L.J. Beck, The Method of Descartes, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 153; hereafter cited as Beck, The Method of Descartes.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 106.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 147.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 63.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 59.
- ²² Ibid., p. 58.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 59.
- ²⁴ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 104.
- ²⁵ Piéron, "De l'influence sociale des principes cartésiens," 152.
- ²⁶ Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe," 857.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 856.
- ²⁸ Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," 500.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 503.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 500.

35. ³¹Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ³²McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 74.
- ³³Ibid., p. 74.
- ³⁴Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe oublié," 859.
- ³⁵Grappin, "A propos du féministe," 387.
- ³⁶Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 274.
- 6-7. ³⁷Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, pp.
- ³⁸Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 109.
- 17-18. ³⁹Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, pp.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 19.
- ⁴¹Grappin, "Notes sur un féministe oublié," p. 864.
13. ⁴²Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 17.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 17.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., p. 9.
- ⁴⁶McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 69.
7. ⁴⁷Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 73.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., p. 73.
- ⁵¹Ibid., p. 10.
- ⁵²Ibid., p. 11.
- ⁵³McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 74.

⁵⁴Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," pp. 507-08. There is no record to indicate that Mary Astell knew Poulain de la Barre either personally or as a theorist.

⁵⁵Mary Astell, Essay In Defence of Women (London: n.p., 1696), p. 33; hereafter cited as Astell, Essay In Defence of Women.

⁵⁶Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," 506.

⁵⁷McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 70.

⁵⁸Astell, Essay In Defence of Women, p. 89.

⁵⁹Seidel, "Poulain de la Barre's The Woman As Good As The Man," 507.

⁶⁰Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 124.

⁶¹François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, "Advice To A Lady of Quality" in Barnard, Fénelon On Education, p. 102.

⁶²Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 115.

⁶³Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p. 85.

CHAPTER THREE

A JUSTIFICATION OF FEMALE EQUALITY

"Men think that it concerns the honor of our sex to take the place in all; and I believe it to be justice to render to every one that which is their right."

Poulain de la Barre.*

Poulain de la Barre conceded that differences existed among all people. As a matter of fact, he firmly approved of distinctions based on merit for that lent the differences credibility and worth.¹ Only one valid distinction need exist between men and women: the unique contribution each made to procreation. Society unnecessarily imposed all the others. Thus, sex and not merit became the determining factor deciding ruler and ruled.

The abuse of this power relationship by the physically stronger male conditioned both men and women to accept a "natural" subordination of women. By the late Middle Ages and into the "modern" period, that subordination had surpassed even the "instinctual" justification discussed earlier. Their secondary status had become proof that women were, in fact, less perfect human beings than men. Women's

inferiority logically arose from a "natural indisposition on their part."² The fact of their creation, men argued, suited them only for home, family, and submission.

Needless to say, Poulain vociferously rejected this viewpoint. To assume that nature intentionally created women less perfect than men proved only that men's idea of perfection reflected their own perception of what it should be. Women may truly be "less perfect" than men in society, Poulain suggested, but only because they had been relegated to roles of passivity and dependence. In other words, men thrust imperfection upon them, the fact of their creation did not.³ This "divinely instituted" imperfection, however, provided the ultimate justification for women's apparent physical, intellectual, and moral inferiority.⁴ Moreover, female "imperfection" reinforced the desire of educational theorists such as Fleury, Fénelon, and Mme. de Maintenon to entrench them within their traditional domestic roles.

Poulain indirectly dealt with the traditional approach to women's education by devoting a significant portion of his work to discussing what he believed to be the accepted reasons in the seventeenth century for women's "inherent inferiority." His refutation of these theories forms the central core to his work. One popular argument, Poulain noted, justified women's "willingness" to be dominated by associating their "physical weaknesses" with their body temperature. This theory, espoused by a man known only as

Monsieur de la Chabre, maintained that men and women naturally had different body temperatures, which gave men significant advantages over women. Not only did women have a "weaker voice," "less muscle," and a "smaller head," but they had less heat than men as well.⁵ Their lack of heat caused women to be "less robust, vigorous, or healthy" than men. Instead, their cold temperatures made them "weak, timid, and light-headed."⁶ Men not only had the physical advantage over women, but their heat-induced attributes allowed them to develop admirable characteristics, such as "courage and forcefulness."⁷ Chabre's advocacy of "temperature related characteristics," Poulain argued, logically explained the reasons for effeminate men. Such men suffered from abnormally cool temperatures, which allowed weakness and other "female" qualities to predominate.⁸

As ridiculous as an argument connecting body temperature and perfection appeared, Poulain's point rang clear. People during the seventeenth century cast judgments ill-founded in science, logic, or plain common sense. Both male and female bodies, Poulain wrote, contained the same internal structure, the same ability for movement, the same senses, and blood that flowed in the same direction and underwent the same fluctuations in temperature, leaving both sexes (he incorrectly assumed) with average temperatures of ninety-eight point six.⁹ Poulain conceded that most women

did not share men's muscular strength. That fact may have made them incapable of lifting heavy objects, but it did not predestine women to be less perfect than men. The physical differences were superficial; they had nothing to do with the true capabilities of either sex. The only significant difference lay in their reproductive organs. In this small thing, Poulain contended, men found significant fault. Women, they said, got pregnant. In the seventeenth century, this process could not usually be regulated at will. Thus women could not control a unique, fundamental function of their own bodies.¹⁰ For Poulain, women's ability to become pregnant did not indicate an imperfectly created being. Nature had intentionally designed women's bodies for pregnancy and in that capacity, their bodies performed just as perfectly as men's did in feats requiring brute strength. Furthermore, pregnancy did not incapacitate or prevent women from controlling their life's destiny. African women, Poulain pointed out, not only worked while pregnant, but often delivered their babies themselves and resumed work almost immediately afterwards.¹¹ The real issue, Poulain believed, did not concern pregnancy at all, but the European male's unwillingness to see childbirth as an equally perfect, albeit different, task.¹²

Men also tended to associate pregnancy with any intellectual incapacities women may have demonstrated. Men believed that women existed in a perpetual state of

sickness throughout every pregnancy and this "constant infirmity" in women damaged their "health, force, and spirit" making them "naturally incapable of assuming a high role in society."¹³ Their physical concerns outweighed any desire for scholarly pursuit. The biological facts of creation, these men insisted, predetermined women's intellectual inferiority.

This particular argument exemplified the pervasive premise that whoever dominated in size and strength also reigned superior in the intellectual sphere. This concept made absolutely no logical sense, for if it did, abnormally strong men would be superior to all other men. Even more ridiculous, bigger and stronger animals would dominate men. A man of "true reason," Poulain claimed, would never use strength as a justification for superiority.¹⁴

Men who believed in female intellectual inferiority, but were reasonable enough to realize that it had nothing to do with biology tended to focus their "proof" on women's incapacity for serious study. In addition to women's concern with the "trivial and superficial" discussed earlier, men believed that women were incapable of concentrating on any academic subject for extended periods of time because of their innate concern with their own appearance.¹⁵ This contention found its "validity" in the physical beauty of women. Women spent so much time on their dress and face, the argument discerned, that their intellect

never evolved at a rate comparable to men.¹⁶ Their inherent concern over their own beauty determined their intellectual inferiority. For Poulain, this belief topped even the pregnancy argument in absurdity. Not only did it have no scientific validity, but it bypassed all common sense. He discussed both ridiculous contentions, however, in order to restate the importance of an equal education.

Women's "intellectual inferiority," if it existed at all, did so only because men had access to higher education and women did not. This fact had nothing to do with the innate capabilities of either sex. The female brain demonstrated the same response to stimuli as the male brain.¹⁷ If women could not discuss politics or religion proficiently, it had nothing to do with an inherent inability to do so. Poulain asked, "How many clowns are there that might have been great doctors had they been sent to school?"¹⁸ If anything, women made the best use of what little opportunity they did have. Because of their ties to the home, for example, women learned to take charge of household affairs, such as the collecting of rents and the overseeing of servants, long before and probably better, than men ever did.¹⁹

The belief in women's physical and intellectual inferiority led logically to an assumption of spiritual deficiencies. Accordingly, Poulain exposed what he believed to be the most commonly heard affirmations on the subject.

Men, he claimed, saw women as the "instrument of the Devil" and the "downfall of man." They found their justification of these suppositions in the most influential source in the world, the Holy Bible. Ecclesiasticus stated: "the iniquity of man comes from woman and the iniquity of woman comes from woman."²⁰ Moreover, Proverbs admonished men to keep away from "the evil woman."²¹ Such statements, Poulain argued, led men to question women's spiritual worth.

Poulain, however, pointed out that if women deserved blame for inherent evil, then they must also possess a natural goodness because one did not exist without the other.²² Men and women demonstrated equal capabilities for "error and truth, vice and virtue." God made both of them and consequently, both were equally responsible spiritual beings.²³ It was on this point, however, that Poulain believed he faced his most ardent opposition. Many people, he claimed, did not believe in equal spiritual responsibility for both sexes because they did not believe that God had created women in His image.²⁴ The adherents to this belief used The Bible to prove its validity. Poulain thus felt compelled to attack their interpretations of God's word in order to counter the erroneous prejudices prevalent towards women in the seventeenth century. He focused on several prominent sections that had often been employed to demonstrate imperfection in women.

Those who used the Bible to "prove" female imperfection

often pointed to the segment on creation. They argued that Adam existed before Eve and thus had the distinction of being created directly in God's image; Adam reigned as God's most perfect creation. Women not only had second class status in the numerical order of creation, but worse, had been created from the rib of man. Thus, according to St. Paul: "Man is in the image and the glory of God and woman is the glory of man."²⁵ As if he had not made clear his point of view, St. Paul further remarked: "For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man."²⁶ Poulain believed that men continually alluded to passages such as these to justify the claim of female subordination, thus deepening further the seventeenth-century prejudices and restrictions against women. The Bible never stated the reason that God created a man before a woman and so the assumption had no validity. To Poulain, Adam's creation first was inconsequential; it did not mean a divine justification for male superiority.²⁷ Poulain logically suggested that if being created first meant perfection, then animals, whom God created before Adam, would be superior to men.²⁸ Moreover, if God had not created women in His own image simply because He created them second, then all other men would have to be in the image of woman, since Eve came before all other men, who in turn, came from her.²⁹ Finally, in order to expose the fallibility of inherent

female inferiority Poulain argued that Eve's creation occurred from Adam's mid-section. God did this intentionally, so that the sexes would live in equality: side by side. If God had intended for men to dominate women, then He would have created them from Adam's feet.³⁰

If the act of creation left some doubt about the validity of women's imperfection in the minds of logical men, woman's crime in the Garden of Eden easily convinced them of her natural inferiority. Satan, contemporaries argued, had used the woman to defy God by enticing her to taste the fruit of the Tree of Life. Man's perfection made him more capable of resistance. Tertullian, the Church Father, summed up the accepted view when he wrote: "Woman, you are the devil's doorway. You have led astray one whom the devil would not dare attack directly."³¹ Eve's crime, reinforced male superiority. According to the Bible, God told the woman that "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee."³² Poulain took umbrage at men's interpretation of this event as an indication of a lesser perfection in women. Unmarried women, for instance, would not be included in God's punishment, but even if one argued that God meant for women to be beholden to fathers and brothers the contemporary interpretation would still be wrong. God's decree had been a punishment imposed on women. It had been issued in the context of a law; thus it had nothing to do with any innate female deficiencies.

Moreover, a woman could always exercise the free will given to her and choose to ignore the command; she was not inherently imperfect because of it. Thus, Poulain declared, men had no legitimate biblical reason for seeing women as creatures inferior to themselves.³³ Even so, statements such as St. Paul's that "the head of every man is Christ; and the head of every woman is man" and Timothy's decree that women should "never teach" or "usurp authority over the man," have continually allowed men to interpret these words as a biblical justification of their own superiority.³⁴

In his analysis of the Bible, however, Poulain neglected to attack it blatantly as a chauvinistic work in itself. Instead, he blamed man's interpretation (emphasis mine) of God's Word for the pervasiveness of prejudice towards women. Poulain never assessed the possibility that the writers of the Bible actually saw women as inferior because then he would have been obligated to argue that God's Word was intrinsically wrong. Poulain could not separate himself far enough from the seventeenth-century's religious influences to even consider attacking the Bible itself. Instead, he chose to remind his readers that The Bible's writers had originated from a culture that still sanctioned barbaric rituals, slavery, and torture. They believed that by subordinating women, who were not only the main objects of men's passions, but also physically incapable of revolting on their own behalf, they could

preserve an ordered and controlled society instead of one ruled equally by both sexes.³⁵

The real danger, however, occurred when men used the Bible's words to justify all of history's restrictions against women. The powerful language used throughout its texts, combined with the fact that it came from the most influential source in the world, caused many contemporary women to believe in their own inferior status. The words of the Bible had been continually influenced by tradition, the prejudices of their writers, and improper translations.³⁶ God, Poulain claimed, had left everyone "the liberty to judge as well as He can of the natural and true state of things."³⁷ Men, Poulain charged, had twisted this right to suit their own interests at half of the population's expense. God, then, remained innocent in Poulain's works.

Poulain also believed that the general language used throughout the Bible fostered the growth of male prejudices. All of the dominant roles, including the God of all humankind, were male. The words "Father," "Lord," or "King" appeared throughout, while "Mother," "Dame," or "Queen" were mentioned (if at all) only in subordinate fashion.³⁸ Poulain insisted that representing God as a man had done more to influence the development of prejudice than anything else in the world.³⁹ Women had fallen captive to this way of thinking for they lacked significant models of their own sex in positions of power. Humans had been created by a

male God, who had created a male first, and then after He destroyed the world, He allowed another man to rebuild it. Finally, the world would be saved by still another man, who in turn presented His teachings to twelve male apostles.⁴⁰ No mention of the role of women ever emerged through these powerful images.

Equally powerful images of female imperfection developed from other institutions. The university dominated Poulain's list of pernicious institutions that exhibited bigotry towards women. Of all the men who believed in women's inferiority the "learned" scholars and scientists upset Poulain the most. They of all people, should have based their conclusions on reason.⁴¹ Instead, they insisted on promulgating the tenets of ancient scholars such as Aristotle, whose "very ashes and rottonness are at this day, held in so great veneration."⁴² The contemporary scholars rarely subjected the position of the ancients concerning women to Cartesian analysis. Instead, they allowed the ancient scholar's arguments to reinforce their own traditional prejudices.

Poulain decided to analyze the early philosopher's conception of women in an attempt to persuade scholars to look anew at their own present attitudes. He began with Plato, who had questioned women's biological make-up. Plato did not think that women and men had been produced from the same substance. He referred to women as "beasts" in the

sense of a creature and not in a human capacity. Moreover, Plato continually echoed the Orthodox Jewish prayer when he thanked the gods that he had not "been born a woman."⁴³ If Plato felt relief in his maleness, Aristotle, Plato's student, exuded outright animosity towards women. Aristotle believed women to be "monsters," unordinary creations of nature, outside of the perfection for which nature strove.⁴⁴ Instead, nature had created "half-men," or "imperfect males," by mistake.⁴⁵ Still one more ancient philosopher, Socrates, had only harsh comments about women. He wrote: "Women are a beautiful temple built on a base of garbage." He meant that a "good and pretty head" were incompatible in women.⁴⁶ Moreover, Socrates did not even respect the beauty he attributed to some women as a virtue, for in women, "beauty and grace meant vanity and deceit."⁴⁷ The viewpoints of these scholars galled Poulain thoroughly. Instead of representing the pillars of truth and logic, their opinions embodied only prejudice and tradition.⁴⁸

When he considered the superstitions, heresies, and wars that men produced as compared to any evil that women may have caused, he concluded that the wrong sex had been universally condemned.⁴⁸ Poulain advocated, then, that all men who considered themselves "learned" re-educate themselves in a manner that would free them from prejudicial influences and allow them to approach all subjects with a "pure mind."⁵⁰ True scholarship rejected the philosophy of

the ancients and adopted reason, observation, and a full examination of one's premises.⁵¹ Only this approach would eliminate inequality and convince both sexes of woman's equal capability with man. The resulting refutation of tradition would in turn allow women full access to the education that they by right deserved.

Women's lack of a "male" education, Poulain wrote, denied them the right to attain prominent roles in society. Furthermore, since men often perceived their own classical/humanist education as the "handmaiden to virtue," women without that type of education possessed no virtue.⁵² Since his contemporaries equated virtue with education, Poulain felt he had to define what actually constituted virtue in order to demonstrate that women's capability for virtue equalled that of men.⁵³ In doing so, he exposed the true reason men denied women a "male" education: they desired to perpetuate the status quo and their own dominant roles.

Virtue, Poulain argued, implied a desire to do good for oneself and for others, an honest intention to improve life. It did not simply mean an understanding of the concept. All humans, Poulain believed, had an innate desire to do good, yet they frequently allowed other, more base inclinations to take over their lives, such as the proclivity for cruel wars and tortures that men had historically forced on other men. Society justified these acts because they deemed men's

acquisition of glory a virtue.⁵⁴ Poulain, however, did not perceive men's preoccupation with heroism as a manifestation of true virtue. Men's enterprises, such as war, territorial gain, and state-building demonstrated only self-interest, whereas women continually gave of themselves to husbands and children, rarely securing anything in return. Women, because of their position as mothers, had a more natural, virtuous character.⁵⁵ Women would never attempt to dominate society as men had because they had suffered centuries of discrimination. What Poulain overlooked, unfortunately, was the possibility that women may some day attain the "glory" he claimed men possessed. He offered no analysis of the idea that the repercussions of a woman in power might be just as pernicious as those of men. He presented men's historical desires as innate to them rather than entrenched in the custom that he argued had so consistently determined women's development. He never addressed the fact that if women demonstrated an equal perfection with men, then they shared all of men's imperfections as well. The inconsistencies of Poulain's analysis of virtue, however, did not undermine the validity of his premise: custom and prejudice had indeed influenced women's treatment in society. Society could only combat these customs by examining the validity of their attitudes and by allowing women the same educational opportunities as men.

If society could perceive women without the hindrances

of prejudice or custom, Poulain believed, then the education he advocated could never be considered outrageous. Poulain's first educational and vocational innovation focused on the church. Women, Poulain argued, had the same soul as men, the same love of God, the same faith, and the same potential for salvation. Thus, why should women not be preaching in the churches or performing the duties of priests, such as communion and confession.⁵⁶ Women, he claimed, could guide themselves and their children, so they should certainly be able to lead a congregation. They should be permitted entrance into the priesthood and educated accordingly.⁵⁷ Poulain insisted that "if men were accustomed to seeing women at the pulpit, they would no more be a threat than men are to the sight of women."⁵⁸ Only ingrained prejudice prevented their entrance into the Church.

Poulain also advocated a "male" education for women in the military, an area utterly prohibited to women. Poulain argued that "her eyes can learn from a map," as well as any man's, but even more radically, that she could

"invent strategems to surprise the enemy, charge him, outflank him, give him false alarms, draw him into ambush by a feigned flight, give battle, and be the first to mount a breach to encourage the soldiers."⁵⁹

If women could lead the army then they could logically lead the nation. There had been queens in Europe, Poulain

pointed out, but men had always tried to dominate them. He referred to the English example, specifically, the many attempts by various Parliamentary members to have Queen Elizabeth marry. In France female regents had only served men, who needed to ensure that the Crown would remain within the family. Poulain contended that a kingdom required "no more vigilance and application" than what a woman already devoted to her family.⁶⁰ For Poulain, public and private management necessitated the same skills.

In summarizing his educational theories for women, Poulain claimed "there is nothing too high for women."⁶¹ He believed that they could perform any task if only society would allow them to do so. Thus, the traditional "male" education of Latin, science, and theology should be given to women. The convent methods of education of the seventeenth century only perpetuated prejudice and custom, ignorance and acquiescence. Poulain demonstrated to society how illogical it was to force half of its population into roles of submission by attacking what he believed to be the contemporary arguments against women's equality. In doing so, he exposed these contentions as absurd bigotry. Poulain de la Barre was the only French theorist of the seventeenth century to advocate a truly progressive and adequate education for women. For his efforts, he obtained obscurity; for his feminism, he obtained neglect.

FOOTNOTES

108. *Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ¹Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 63.
106. ²Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ³Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 58.
- ⁴McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 71.
- ⁵Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 144.
- ⁶Ibid., p. 144.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 144.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 150.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 144-45.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 160.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 270.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 272.
- ¹³Ibid., 159.
75. ¹⁴Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ¹⁵Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, pp. 152-53.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 155-56.
107. ¹⁷Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 26.

- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 53.
- ²⁰ Ecclesiasticus 42:13 (Apocrypha).
- ²¹ Proverbs 6:24.
- ²² Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p. 177.
- ²³ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 65.
- ²⁴ McNiven-Hine, "The Woman Question," 71.
- ²⁵ Corinthians 11:7.
- ²⁶ Corinthians 11:9.
- ²⁷ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 16.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 15-16.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 13.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 19.
- ³¹ Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 110.
- ³² Genesis 3:16.
- ³³ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 45.
- ³⁴ Corinthians 11:3 and Timothy 2:12.
- ³⁵ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 216.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 239.
- ³⁷ Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p. 187.
- ³⁸ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 61.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 61.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 217.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 319.
- ⁴² Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p. 179.

- ⁴³ Ibid., pp. 179-80.
- ⁴⁴ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 247-48.
- ⁴⁵ Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p. 181.
- ⁴⁶ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, pp. 250 and 254.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 251.
- ⁴⁸ Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, p. 77.
- ⁴⁹ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, p. 320.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 321.
- ⁵¹ Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, pp. 80-81.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 48.
- ⁵³ Ibid., pp. 110-11.
- ⁵⁴ Poulain de la Barre, De l'excellence, pp. 293-94.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 310 and 316.
- ⁵⁶ Poulain de la Barre, The Woman As Good As The Man, pp. 124-25.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 123.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 125.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 129.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 127.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 93.

CONCLUSION

PROGRESS DENIED

"The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown. . . .these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

Poulain de le Barre developed his feminist theories during a century known for its inadequate attention to women's education. What little instruction did exist for women, as provided by the teaching orders and the little schools, simply continued the tradition of educating women for a domestic future. The leading theorists on the subject did nothing to remedy this situation. Instead, they advocated educating women only enough to enable them to perform more proficiently their roles as wives and mothers.

Poulain, however, endeavored to alter the seventeenth century's approach to female instruction. Prejudice and an innate reluctance to break with custom impelled society, in Poulain's view, to limit women to traditional roles.

Society had not, unfortunately, been guided by reason, but rather by fallacious arguments that perpetuated hostility towards women. These contentions had emerged from such influential authorities as the Bible and the ancient philosophers. Poulain's analysis the Bible, whose texts have often been used to condemn women, demonstrated the paradoxical nature of his theories, so out of context in an era of universal female subordination. While most of his contemporaries insisted that nurturing the next generation of males constituted woman's destiny and developed their educational programs accordingly, Poulain attacked these tenets of a woman's existence, accusing men of using custom to perpetuate the status quo. Unfortunately, Poulain de la Barre's theories went unheeded and traditional prejudices persisted, as illustrated by Fleury, Fénelon and Mme. de Maintenon. These traditional theorists intended for women to master domestic skills exclusively. Thus, the only conceivable vocation for a woman in the minds of theorists who defined her "place" in terms of domesticity was that of the good wife and mother. Fleury, Fénelon, and Mme. de Maintenon purposely limited women's education to subjects that enabled them to fulfill only that role. Moreover, all three advocated a structured religious education. They wished to convince women that God had determined their present existence, which the theorists believed should never be challenged. Not one of the three traditionalists ever

considered an alternative program of instruction for women.

Nowhere does the absurdity of anti-feminism become more evident than in the century of liberté, égalité and fraternité. The men of the eighteenth century, who had felt the impact of the enlightenment which began in the seventeenth century, made no effort to confer upon women any of the rights they so ardently advocated for themselves. If anything, female subordination became even more conspicuous within the context of increasing male liberties. The salons functioned until the outbreak of the revolution, but they served only to perpetuate the interests of the nobility, not to advance the role of women in society.¹ The women who presided over them often had sound literary educations that they had received from tutors. Some even had a modicum of scientific expertise. Madame Necker, for example, had a knowledge of geology and physics, which she had obtained from her father.² For the most part, however, the salon women knew their place. They never challenged the academic opportunities reserved for men.

Unsurprisingly, education for women remained as restricted in the eighteenth century as during Poulain's lifetime. Worse yet, it received no governmental attention and won only minimal positive consideration from educational theorists. Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, for example, wrote of the "murderous" education forced on women, since they were taught only to "conceal their true feelings, thoughts, and

opinions in order to survive in a society dominated by men."³ D'Alembert always hoped the "enlightened" thinkers would support a proper academic education for women, thus rescuing them from their passive roles. Only one, Condorcet, paid any positive attention to the subject at all. Condorcet came closest to Poulain in his accusation that men refused women the right to an equal education only to promulgate their own authority. He even contended, "Either no individual of the human species has any true rights, or they all have the same ones."⁴ He too went largely unheeded.

Unfortunately, men with attitudes similar to Condorcet's rarely surfaced. More common were those of men like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who enunciated the prejudices towards female education that characterized the eighteenth century. His views not only perpetuated the traditional biases of the seventeenth century, but propounded virtual stagnation. Rousseau's attitude towards women stemmed from his belief that by their very existence they threatened the "authority and prerogative" of men.⁵ The ideal woman for Rousseau, so reminiscent of Fénelon, was the virtuous mother and housewife. He created this "female ideal" in the character of Sophie, who appeared in the last chapter of his educational treatise, Emile. His recommendation that women be educated in "only such things as are suitable," reiterated the traditional vocational education suggested by

Fleury, Fénelon, and Madame de Maintenon in the seventeenth century.⁶

Rousseau argued that "Nature herself has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man's judgment." This supposition implied that all women be educated in accordance with men's wishes.⁷ "Girls should be attentive and industrious" and "accustomed to restraint."⁸ Only religion, needlework, and household duties should be formally imparted to women. They would learn, Rousseau insisted, everything else they required through their husbands and their experience as mothers for "the world is woman's book."⁹ And her world, one can infer, was limited to a domestic sphere. Rousseau echoed the accepted view of the popular educational theorists of the seventeenth century. Nor did any popular philosopher adopt a positive approach to the problem of women's education or to the plight of women in society. Options for alternative destinies for women remained buried in the neglected work of Poulain de la Barre.

Even worse than the prejudicial approach of men like Rousseau, however, was the closure of institutions designed to educate women by the men of the French Revolution. Madame de Maintenon's Saint-Cyr managed to survive until the revolution, having changed very little from its conventual reforms of 1694, thanks to the nuns who adhered faithfully to her program.¹⁰ On March 16, 1793, at the height of

revolutionary fever, however, Saint-Cyr received its closing orders from the Committee of Public Instruction.¹¹

Not only Saint-Cyr suffered the backlash of the revolution. The revolutionaries forcibly closed all convents and little schools, and disbanded all teaching orders. Thus, they destroyed the few institutions that did exist to educate women. Even the salons fell into ruin during the Revolution. Most of them had already closed by 1793 as the nobility either emigrated from France or died under the "blade of reason."¹² No one bothered to apply the feminist theories of Poulain de la Barre to the struggle for liberty during the revolution. Although the Declaration of the Rights of Man had stipulated that "no portion of the people could be allowed to exercise the power of the population as a whole" men in the century of freedom continued to manipulate the lives of women, stifling any attempts they made to apply the revolutionary ideals to themselves.¹³ When women did attempt to eliminate the contradictions that existed between the revolutionary ideals and their application, their pleas went unheeded. Olympe de Gouges, for instance, wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Women in which she advocated full equality for women.¹⁴ The unchanging situation, however, demonstrates how little she, or others like her, influenced the flow of the revolution. The revolutionary leaders never intended for women to transcend their traditional roles. If anything at all, they

would simply fulfill those roles more proficiently along the lines advocated by Rousseau.

As a result of the destruction of women's instructional opportunities and the persistence of traditional prejudices, the subject of women's education disappeared into the shadows of obscurity. It remained there until after the Restoration, when new teaching orders, such as the Society of the Sacred Heart, arose once again to educate women for domestic chores.¹⁵ Finally, with the onset of the industrial revolution and the resulting movement of women into the work force of the factory, the issue of adequate academic public education for women received serious attention.¹⁶ As for the feminist theories of Poulain de la Barre, the nineteenth century followed the example of the two preceding centuries; they remained hidden in books that nobody read.

FOOTNOTES

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quoted in Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), p. 104.

¹Lougee, Le Paradis des femmes, p. 212.

²Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 70.

³Richard Brooks, "Rousseau's Anti-Feminism in the Lettre a d'Alembert and Emile," Literature and History in the Age of Ideas: Essays on the French Enlightenment Presented to George Remington Havens, edited by Charles Garfield Singer Willaims, p. 216 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975); hereafter cited as Brooks, "Rousseau's Anti-Feminism."

⁴Jean-Antoine Condorcet, quoted in Candice E. Proctor, "The Question of Women and Equality in Revolutionary France" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Idaho, 1982), p. 166; hereafter cited as Proctor, "The Question of Women and Equality."

⁵Brooks, "Rousseau's Anti-Feminism," 213.

⁶Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile translated by Barbara Foxley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, LTD., and New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 327; hereafter cited as Rousseau, Emile.

⁷Rousseau, Emile, p. 328.

⁸Ibid., p. 332.

⁹Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁰Barnard, Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr, p. 106.

¹¹Ibid., p. 127.

¹²Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p. 72.

159. ¹³Proctor, "The Question of Women and Equality," p.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 177.

76. ¹⁵Barnard, Girls At School Under the Ancien Regime, p.

258. ¹⁶Proctor, "The Question of Women and Equality," p.

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