of the Middle Ages: cruelty, for example, and stupidity. Such social judgments influenced conversation as well as texts, through jokes and jibes that reinforced and revived ancient images (yet remain beyond the reach of historical research).

Beauty was also a useful tool, and women without other means of influencing society deliberately made use of it. Like the sun, the throne, and the altar, beauty fascinated, and it was thus the center of complex strategic maneuvers. Those in power did what they could to make use of the most "brilliant" women, brilliance being the material equivalent of beauty (achieving it required considerable means). Female beauty was circumscribed by a very narrow definition of femininity, a soft, silent curve that still connoted a variety of threats. Over the past four centuries the threat of femininity has been minimized by euphemism. Yet beauty in a woman still evokes the thought that she may be stupid, while conversely the intelligent woman ruins her looks by knitting her brows as she thinks—unless, of course, she makes up for her ugliness by provoking laughter in "the adventurer," the masculine type that Georg Simmel contrasts with the coquette; a study of his aesthetic would also be likely to pay dividends.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER

4

A Daughter to Educate

Martine Sonnet

> How can you be content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine show and be good for nothing?
>
> —Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, 1694

BETWEEN 1500 AND 1800 educational aspirations of all kinds increased quite apart from the most vital needs of everyday life. Medieval education, largely limited to rote learning of prayers and manual skills, had no notion of a distinctive body of knowledge reserved for women. Later authorities, faced with the need to train officials to occupy positions in the church and state and untroubled by any assumption that the sexes were equally intelligent, made what they took to be a plausible distinction. The sons of the nobility and later of the bourgeoisie were made to study classical culture: the culture of the preparatory school and the university, a culture that could be understood only by those who knew Latin and that opened the way to important careers in the ecclesiastical or civil bureaucracy. Daughters of all strata of society were relegated to learning skills useful around the home: things that a girl could learn from her mother and that were useful in Christian households. There was rather little com-

munication between the two cultures—the public and the private, the men's and the women's—and for many commentators that was a problem. Men of letters at any rate wanted their future wives to be educated well enough to understand and contribute to their conversation.

From the Renaissance through the Enlightenment the sexual differentiation of educational practices tended to outstrip the social differentiation. More and more people—men and women alike—were introduced to the three R's—reading, writing, and arithmetic—owing to the development of a range of educational institutions. But this relative democratization of education did not benefit boys and girls to the same degree. For the latter the road to emancipation through learning was often blocked. What girls were allowed to study was limited and closely scrutinized. Despite these obstacles, literacy rates among women increased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, proof that an irreversible process had been set in motion.

Concerns about the Education of Young Girls

From the Renaissance on, proponents of women's education clashed with adversaries who considered it impossible, futile, or unwise. A few early feminist voices were heard, such as that of Christine de Pizan, and it would be an exaggeration to say that women's advocates preached in the desert. But in education, practice always lags prudently behind theory, and this truism is even truer when it comes to the education of women.

"A Subject That Has Yet to Be Treated"

When Jean-Louis Vivès published *De l'institution de la femme chrétienne* (On the Institution of the Christian Woman) in 1523, he was fully aware that he was dealing with "a subject that [had] yet to be treated" but that would interest some of the most important thinkers associated with the two chief intellectual movements of the sixteenth century: humanism and the Reformation.

A proponent of education for young girls, married women, and widows, Vivès was nevertheless quick to lay down limits—limits with which nearly everyone agreed and would continue to agree for a long time to come. Women were not to attend classes with men; domestic work should take priority over reading and writing; and the teaching of Latin, even to the cream of the elite, should be undertaken only with extreme caution. On these points Vivès concurred with any number of other educators, but he firmly rejected one widely held prejudice: "Most of the vices of the women of this and previous centuries," he insisted, "stem from lack of cultivation." This point would be made again. Erasmus, who shared many of Vivès' views, expressed himself with considerable sarcasm in several of his *Colloquia*. He defended education for young women on the grounds that it fostered understanding in marriage and in society, where men and women were expected to live together. Rabelais incorporated the principle of women's education into his version of a utopian community, the abbey of Thélème, where well-born men and women lived and pursued their studies in freedom and harmony.

Luther, who based his religious doctrine on the authority of scripture, logically hoped that everyone—men and women alike—would have the ability to imbibe religion at the source and therefore advocated universal instruction in reading. The Reformation thus fostered literacy. But even as Luther fought for new schools for girls and boys, he sought to limit the scope of women's education. The Reformation promoted a patriarchal model of the family in which women were subservient to their husbands. Furthermore, vernacular translations of the Bible undermined one argument for teaching women Latin. When England became Protestant, monastic libraries were broken up, depriving the fortunate few who had had access to them of an important intellectual resource.

A Counter-Reformation Priority

After the Council of Trent (1545–1563) Catholic reaction advanced into territory once occupied by its Protestant adversaries: religious education of the very young. The church launched a vast program of instruction, which sought to reach adults through preaching and missions into the countryside and children through catechism classes, which required a minimum level of literacy. Within a short time these efforts focused on children who had previously received little or no instruction, particularly in urban areas. In the 1560s Carlo Borromeo established doctrinal schools in his Milan diocese, where lay and ecclesiastic teachers offered

lessons to children rounded up from the city's streets and alleyways. Within twenty years the Jesuits had founded Sunday schools in southern Netherlands towns to provide instruction for children who worked during the week.

These experiments, which involved the teaching of boys and girls, continued, but by the turn of the seventeenth century new initiatives aimed specifically at girls were under way. Catholic reformers had begun to see how important a role little girls might play in their efforts to regain the religious allegiance of the populace. Every little girl was a future mother, hence a future teacher capable of amplifying the good word being spread by Counter-Reformation preachers. This realization gave new impetus to efforts to teach young girls to read and to study the catechism. As new congregations of nuns dedicated to the instruction of girls proliferated, what had been the privilege of a few was extended to new segments of society. Wealthier girls attended convent boarding schools, which charged tuition, while poorer children attended charity schools. In either case the aim was to educate good Christian mothers. The mold to which schoolgirls were expected to conform was one that would remain largely unchanged for three centuries. It was, moreover, a mold conceived by the elite groups that gave the new schools their financial support and spiritual guidance. "The instruction and education of poor little girls early in life is one of the principal good works that Christians can accomplish and provide and one of the greatest missions and most necessary works of charity that they can perform for the salvation of souls," according to the founders of a charitable home for poor girls from Les Halles in Paris.[1]

From the beginning of the seventeenth century some very interesting women found employment for their talents in religious orders devoted to the education of young women. Shortly after arriving from England with her Catholic recusant family, Mary Ward, aged twenty-four, established a Christian institute in Saint-Omer and, with the aid of the Jesuits, developed it into a force for the education of women. She overcame the opposition of the papal authorities, which took a dim view of uncloistered women's giving lessons in city streets. Another strong personality was Montaigne's niece, Jeanne de Lestonnac of Bordeaux. An energetic woman, she raised five children and then, widowed when she was nearly fifty, founded in 1607 the Compagnie de Marie-Notre-Dame, whose influence extended throughout southwestern France, Spain, and South America. In Paris Mme. Acarie and Mme. de Sainte-Beuve presided over the founding of two Ursuline convents, one in 1610, the other in 1621; while in Annecy Baroness Jeanne de Chantal, in conjunction with François de Sales, founded the Visitation in 1610. In Lorraine Alix Le Clerc and Pierre Fourier jointly founded the Congrégation Notre-Dame, which won approval in 1615. A little later, in 1633, Louise de Marillac, a staunch follower of Vincent de Paul, oversaw the expansion of the Filles de la Charité (Daughters of Charity) throughout the kingdom and beyond; the Daughters' mission was to care for sick paupers and teach little girls.

A Topic for Literary Salons

While Catholic reformers were busy dealing with the issue of educating young girls, men and women of letters approached the matter from another direction. The subject was treated in a variety of seventeenth-century literary genres: romance, comedy, letters. What women knew became a topic for brilliant conversation in the salons. Molière stirred things up with two plays: *Les précieuses ridicules* (1659) and *Les femmes savantes* (1672). Pedantic women were mocked, but properly and decently educated women found champions. Meanwhile, the idea that the faults customarily seen in women stemmed from want of education steadily gained adherents among all who were not blinded by misogyny. Influential women of letters such as Mademoiselle de Scudéry and Madame de Sévigné pleaded in favor of a well-rounded curriculum, while any number of philosophers and writers compared the intellectual qualities of the two sexes. Did women have the same faculty of understanding as men or not? Malebranche answered in the negative: women had absolutely no gift, he argued, for science, philosophy, or elevated speculation of any kind. But in 1673 François Poullain de La Barre published *De l'égalité des sexes* (On the Equality of the Sexes), a major event in the history of feminist thought. Using the Cartesian method, Poullain demonstrated rationally that men and women shared identical aptitudes and abilities and should therefore receive the same training: "If women studied in universities alongside men or in other universities set aside for them in particular, they could take degrees and aspire to the titles of Doctor and Master in Theology, Medicine, and [canon or civil] Law. And their natural talent, which fits them so advan-

tageously for learning, would also suit them to be successful teachers."[2]

Poullain de La Barre's feminism tinged with social criticism was matched twenty years later by the Englishwoman Mary Astell, who in 1694 wrote *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Influenced by Mlle. de Scudéry and Mme. Dacier, the plea on behalf of women's education attracted more attention than La Barre's work. Writing in a warm and friendly conversational manner, Astell attempted to make women, especially upper-class women, aware of possibilities that went unexplored owing to lack of education. If men's education were neglected as badly as women's, people would find as much fault with them as with their female companions. Aware of the obstacles that marriage and family placed in the way of women's intellectual work, Astell, unmarried by choice, expressed the hope that genteel women wishing to escape the constraints of domestic life might live together in "colleges," where they could devote themselves to study in convivial independence and provide a "Learned Education" to young women of high and middling rank.

First Programs

In the final two decades of the seventeenth century French thinkers influenced by the literary debates on the education of women began to reflect on the subject in a more practical way. The first comprehensive curricula, while clear about the need for women's education, excluded subjects thought to be too abstract (such as classical languages, rhetoric, and philosophy). One reason for the heightened interest in female instruction was a change in the structure of the population: widows, of whom there were a great many, needed to be able to take care of business affairs. The acknowledgment that women needed to read, write, and count even if their social role remained confined within the traditional domestic setting was the first step in opening up access to a new culture and new powers.

The thirty-sixth chapter of Claude Fleury's *Traité sur le choix et la méthode des études* (1685) dealt with "women's studies." Women, Fleury argued, might lack industry, courage, and resolve, but their lively, penetrating minds and gentle, modest attitudes made up for these deficiencies. Women needed to be better educated if only because of the "credit and consideration they enjoy in society." Fleury proposed a curriculum consisting of religion (but avoiding superstition), reading, writing, compositions on commonplace subjects, some practical arithmetic, a pharmacopoeia, home economics, and law. To learn more would be pure vanity, but "it would be still better than if they spent their leisure time reading novels, gambling, or talking of skirts and ribbons."[3] Fénelon's *De l'éducation des filles* (1687) was slightly more permissive. Fénelon was willing to accept subjects that Fleury regarded as vain, but only on condition that instruction be carefully limited and monitored. In particular, he proposed that women be allowed to study literature, history, Latin, music, and painting. For Fénelon the most important thing was that a girl's instruction should fit her for later life, whether as a wife or as a nun.

Inspired by Fénelon, Mme. de Maintenon proposed a curriculum for the royal house at Saint-Cyr, which she founded in 1686. There, 250 girls from impoverished noble families were taught to cope with their fate, which in most cases meant serving as pious mistresses of shabby country households while maintaining an aura of gentility befitting their noble origins. Pupils entered the school between the ages of seven and nineteen and proceeded through a series of four classes, each identified by a different color belt. The "reds" were under ten years of age and studied basic catechism; the "greens," who ranged in age from eleven to thirteen, discovered history, geography, and music; the "yellows," fourteen to sixteen, worked on French, drawing, and dancing; and the "blues," seventeen to nineteen, spent most of their time on moral instruction in preparation for returning to the perilous world outside the walls of Saint-Cyr. All, from the youngest to the oldest, practiced housework and needlework. The purpose of the institution, according to Mme. de Maintenon, was to send back to their families girls who were "very Christian, very reasonable, and very intelligent."[4]

An Attenuated Enlightenment

As piety ebbed and the *philosophes* stepped up their attacks on religion in the eighteenth century, education became a fashionable topic of conversation and writing, especially after 1750. The Enlightenment believed in education, which was credited with the capacity to create a new social being, devoid of old prejudices and saturated in the new reason. As long as the education of women

was left to chance, however, the new world would remain insecure. Women were not only the mothers of the new men but also their first educators: if society was to be regenerated on a lasting basis, women would have to play a part. Catholic reformers had advanced a similar argument. In a century of pedagogical optimism, girls became, along with deaf-mutes and peasants, fodder for educational speculators.

Before 1760, when the debate got seriously under way, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's *Projet pour perfectionner l'éducation des filles* (1730) was a highly innovative proposal. What the abbé described as a "Permanent Bureau of Public Education" was nothing less than a national education ministry *avant la lettre*. The bureau would be responsible for overseeing a system of preparatory schools for girls and boys. Girls were to attend classes from ages five to eighteen (thirteen grades). For each class of 15 boarding students, there were to be three teachers, and each school was to have a total of thirty-nine teachers and 195 students. In addition to these boarding schools, the abbé envisioned a system of free day schools. He proposed a curriculum that touched on all the arts and sciences in order to allow women to sustain conversation with male companions.

After 1760 the education question (for both sexes) became one of the central issues of the Enlightenment. The period 1715–1759 saw the publication of 51 works on education, compared with 161 in the years 1760–1790. In 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *Emile*, which was immediately condemned as sacrilegious by the Sorbonne censors and later by the Parlement. In the same year the expulsion of the Jesuits from France left the system of preparatory schools in disarray. Together, these two events stimulated imaginations and led to the publication of a number of curriculum reform proposals, treatises on education, and other works, many of which were submitted to prize competitions sponsored by provincial academies. The gazettes published critical reviews of these works along with letters from readers on the subject of education. In 1768 a gentleman named Leroux, the headmaster of a boarding school, began the first specialist publication in the field, the *Journal d'Education*. Another sign of the times can be seen in the fact that a practical guide such as *Le tableau de Paris*, by the lawyer Jèze, contained a section on education in a chapter on things "useful for life." All Parisian educational institutions for girls and boys were listed by *quartier*.

Once the need for reform of women's education was acknowledged, debate focused on the issue of where instruction should take place: in the home or in school. A related issue was who should teach and what should be taught. Criticism was aimed at convent schools, where it was said girls learned nothing and suffered from a lack of invigorating stimuli. It was absurd, some said, to entrust the education of future wives and mothers to nuns, who had no experience of marriage. Most eighteenth-century writers favored education in the home, but since only well-to-do families could provide it, the rest needed public schools.

In the introduction to her seven-volume *Traité de l'éducation des femmes* (1779–1789), Mme. de Miremont proposed a system of schooling for girls from ages seven to eighteen. There were to be just two classes, one for pupils aged seven to twelve, the other for ages thirteen to eighteen. As usual, the subjects to be studied included religion, dance, and music, but these were to be supplemented by classes in modern languages, literature, geography, history, and spelling. The training of teachers was a primary concern: they were to spend six years learning their trade.

Those who insisted that girls be educated only in the home drew inspiration from the writings of Rousseau. Scrupulously abiding by Rousseauist principles, some mothers elected to make the raising of their daughters their life's work. Mme. d'Epinay's daughter Emilie, for instance, was to be her mother's creative masterpiece. So that other mothers might profit from her experience she published *Les conversations d'Emilie* (1774), a series of didactic conversations between mother and daughter spanning the fifth to the tenth years of the child's life. Mme. Necker also took charge of educating her daughter Germaine, the future Mme. de Staël. Most of these Rousseauist mothers were themselves the products of extraordinary upbringings.

When Rousseau decided that his Emile needed a female companion, he created Sophie, to whom he devoted the fifth book of *Emile*. Her education was based on a simple principle: "All of a woman's education should relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to win their love and respect, to raise them when they are young and care for them when they are old, to advise them, to console them, to make their lives pleasant and agreeable: these have been the duties of women in all ages, which they should be taught from childhood."[5] No sooner did the question of educating women arise than it was subordinated, as Rousseau's words

make abundantly clear, to the desires of men. Women were to be granted access to knowledge not for themselves but only to make themselves more agreeable to the men in their lives. Women were made not to understand but to please and care for their husbands and children.

In England a century earlier, John Locke had proposed that women be educated well enough to serve as their children's first teachers. Later, in the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift had argued that an educated woman made a better companion for her husband than one who was not educated. Enlightened Englishwomen—"bluestockings"—were disappointed that the need to educate young girls was being justified on the basis of the supposed boons not to the girls themselves but to their families. They voiced their displeasure in the salons, and by the end of the century growing numbers of female voices were speaking out against the occupations traditionally supposed to fill the time of young girls—occupations they denounced as vain and frivolous. Rousseau's views aroused the ire of Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, Catharine Macaulay, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft was perhaps the most vehement of all in her condemnation of men's unwillingness to admit that women could rival men in learning. Yet as late as 1773 *The Lady's Magazine,* which in theory favored reform of women's education, could still say that "we can never wish that society should be filled with doctors in petticoats to regale us with Latin and Greek."[6]

In France the revolutionary assemblies charged with establishing a system of national education were obliged to face the problem of women's education. Except for Condorcet, who advocated mixed education on the grounds of equality between the sexes, the revolutionaries continued to see the domestic sphere as the proper place for women and accordingly held that women's education ought to be confined to domestic subjects. Denied political rights and excluded from office, women were offered a primary education and nothing more. Another century would pass before there was any fundamental improvement in the situation.

Educational Locales

The proper place for an education confined to domestic matters was obviously the home. Although its educational uses evolved between 1500 and 1800, the home remained the primary site for the education of women. As the idea that girls needed more or better instruction made headway, alternatives began to be suggested: convents, elementary schools, secular boarding schools. The idea of broadening women's educational horizons went hand in hand with the development of new kinds of schools in which girls could study subjects clearly distinct from those studied by boys. Girls' schools were founded to combat the perceived dangers of mixed schooling. For many people, it was unthinkable that brothers and sisters should sit on the same classroom benches and study the same subjects. Moralists and clergymen fulminated against the "mixing of the sexes," thereby encouraging the development of schools exclusively for girls.

The House

Although for a long time the household was virtually the only school for women, there is unfortunately little record of what went on there. Few tangible traces survive of what mothers taught daughters and mistresses their serving girls generation after generation. In the sixteenth century most girls learned how to live and work simply by watching what went on around them. Yet a few cases of remarkable home schooling stand out. Thomas More's three daughters received exactly the same instruction as their brother at Bucklesbury, the family's London home. Margaret was the most gifted of the four children. Lessons were sometimes informal and practical, at other times formal and theoretical. No school for women offered greater opportunity for learning than a home to which enlightened parents invited carefully selected tutors. Families influenced by Enlightenment and Rousseauist educational principles enthusiastically transformed their homes into veritable educational laboratories.

Most girls learned at home by watching their mother go about her daily chores: cooking, child care, washing, mending, sewing, weaving. This domestic instruction, which encouraged agility in little fingers, formed the subject of countless illustrations. In rural areas women had additional work to do. Taking care of the barnyard animals was traditionally a chore for the farmer's wife. Little girls took part in the work of the family, whether it was agricultural, commercial, or artisanal. Some girls served a veritable apprenticeship in the home, and when they married they took the

skills learned on the farm or in the store or workshop to their new husband's place of business: most women married men in the same walk of life as their fathers. Some adolescent girls completed their training in the home of a friend or relative. Families often took in outsiders: in sixteenth-century England it was common for boys aged fifteen to twenty-four and girls aged fifteen to nineteen to board with families other than their own, even among aristocrats and gentry. In 1546, for example, Thomas Fenton's daughter joined three female cousins and three other well-born young ladies at the home of her grandmother. In 1551 Sir Edmund Molineux's daughters were sent to live with a cousin of their father, where it was hoped they would grow up "in virtue, good manners and learning to play the gentlewomen and good housewives, to dress meet and oversee their households."[7] In the seventeenth century girls of more modest background left home and went to work in London or various spa towns as servants or shopgirls. By serving others and living in their homes, a girl was supposed to learn how to manage her own household.

From eighteenth-century autobiographies (and with due allowances for the biases inherent in the genre) we learn that some families preferred home education even when schools were available. Well-to-do parents kept their daughters at home and strictly supervised their tutoring. Those with the competence, time, and desire did the teaching themselves; others relied on professional tutors. Girls educated in this way did best when brothers were also kept home and educated along with them. They picked up odd bits of what their brothers learned and in some cases were allowed to study alongside them.

Keen on education and the humanities, the parents of young François-Auguste, Baron de Frénilly, who was born in 1768, established a veritable family academy for him, his sister, two female cousins, and Mlle. Necker. Classes were held on Sundays and combined with outdoor activities and intellectual games. After lunch the pupils were permitted to fly kites in the park. Later they were expected to expound historical texts "in the manner of Livy, Sallust, or Tacitus, whichever one pleased."[8] No school of that period would have proposed such an exercise to young ladies. Frénilly's parents then examined the work of their son and his four female classmates. They also encouraged them to stage plays.

Mme. de Chastenay, born in 1771, received a remarkable education from a female instructor, responsible for teaching history, music, and drawing, and two male assistants, one responsible for mathematics, the other for teaching Latin to all the children of the household.[9] Mme. de Boigne, born Mlle. d'Osmond in Versailles in 1781, owed her unusually extensive learning to her father, the Comte d'Osmond, a court noble who assumed full responsibility for his daughter's education. During the Revolution he immigrated to England, where he found plenty of time to devote to his daughter's studies: "During this period of retirement, my father concerned himself exclusively with my education. I regularly worked eight hours a day on the most serious subjects. I studied history and developed a passion for metaphysics. My father did not allow me to read these subjects on my own, but I could do so under his supervision . . . He included in my studies a number of works on his favorite subject, political economy, which I very much enjoyed."[10]

The education of Manon Phlipon, the future Mme. Roland, was typical of that received by other gifted Parisian children before the Revolution. Her father, an engraver, and mother paid for excellent private instruction at home, and this schooling was completed by a year in a convent school. Manon, born in 1754 and sole survivor of seven children, learned to read at age four. By the time she was seven she was taking lessons all day long from a series of tutors in writing, geography, dancing, music, and drawing. Because of her success as a student, Latin was added to her curriculum. When she entered the boarding school run by the Congrégation Notre-Dame, the sisters congratulated themselves on being sent such an accomplished young lady. Their one remaining task was to prepare their new charge for first communion, but Manon also continued to take music and drawing lessons from private tutors, who met with her in the convent parlor.[11] This use of the convent to supplement a course of home instruction was considered advanced and enlightened.

The Convent

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries convent schools had served a very different purpose. The standard image of that period is that girls were sent away while still very young to spend their entire childhoods behind cloister walls. The reality was quite different. In the first place, only the very wealthy could afford to send their daughters to live at convent schools, which cost fabulous

sums. Most girls were thus spared the cloister simply because their parents could not afford it. Far more attended primary day schools than were sent away to convent boarding schools.

In 1750 it cost between 400 and 500 livres per year to send a girl to a boarding school in Paris.[12] Combined with the cost of personal needs and private lessons, the bill could easily come to 1,000 livres a year. Such a sum represented two-thirds of the annual income of a skilled mason. As a result, students in boarding schools were a privileged minority: in 1760 the fifty-six boarding schools for girls in Paris accounted for 22 percent of the city's schools but served only 13 percent of its students. And surviving student records show that the upper classes were disproportionately represented. In a school such as that of the Ursulines on rue Sainte-Avoye, where the tuition was relatively "modest," 10 percent of the students came from the old nobility and 34 percent from the families of royal officers. The higher the tuition, the greater the share of blue-blooded pupils. In the great abbey schools (Penthémont, Abbaye-aux-Bois, and Port-Royal), and in those run by Visitandine and Benedictine sisters, the majority of students were daughters of men with titles.

Although the convent schools served relatively small numbers, their qualitative impact was great. Dating from the Middle Ages, convent education was the earliest form of instruction outside the home. The pedagogical role of convent schools evolved throughout the early modern period. Until the seventeenth century convents provided families with a place to which they could send daughters for retreat, surveillance, and initiation into the cloistered life. Many convent boarding students in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries went on to become novices. Daughters chosen to become nuns, usually for financial reasons having to do with dowries, went straight from the boarding school to the novitiate without having a chance to breathe the air of the outside world. The women's orders thus relied on their schools as a source of new vocations.

In the early seventeenth century this situation began to change as certain orders began to specialize in teaching. Families who chose to send their daughters to schools run by these orders planned to keep them there for only a limited time. More and more girls passed through the convents as a prelude to a secular rather than a religious life. As a result, the convents became increasingly susceptible to worldly influences. They ceased to function as a closed universe in which pupils were encouraged to discover vocations at a very early age in order to replenish the nuns' ranks. Private tutors came to the cloister to give special lessons, as in the case of Manon Phlipon. The Sisters of the Calvary, who kept a school in Paris near the Jardin du Luxembourg, showed remarkable perspicacity and insight into their clientele when they issued this statement in 1789: "We have allowed ourselves to be convinced that the girls entrusted to us were born for the world, and we strive not only to instill in them a sense of their duties in society but also to teach them the knowledge and skills they will need to distinguish themselves."[13]

The transformation of the educational role of convents began during the Reformation, whose importance in fostering new interest in the education of women we saw earlier. Among the orders specializing in education, the Ursulines stand out: their schools relatively quickly covered a wide geographic area. Nuns of the order took the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but they also promised to devote themselves to teaching. In France the remarkable proliferation of Ursuline schools in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attests to a real demand for such institutions. The order was founded in 1535 by Angela Merici in Brescia, Italy. In 1572 a convent was established in Avignon, and from there the order spread into southern France in the early seventeenth century: convents were founded at Chabreuil in Dauphiné in 1599, Aix in 1600, Arles in 1602, Toulouse in 1604, and Bordeaux in 1606. By 1620 there were sixty-five Ursuline convents in France, and on the eve of the Revolution the order had convents in some three hundred cities, with a particularly high density along the Rhone and Saône, in Brittany, and in the southwest.[14]

The organization of classes varied with the educational mission of the women's orders. Religious communities that took in boarding students not with the intention of teaching them anything in particular but because education was a source of income generally placed all pupils in the same class, with approximately thirty students of all ages mixed together. But nuns whose vocation was teaching grouped their pupils in several classes, usually three: "little," "medium," and "big." Housing a hundred or so young girls required a lot of space. While other convents made do with a classroom and a dormitory, the Ursulines and the Congrégation Notre-Dame developed more elaborate facilities. Boarding stu-

dents had their own dining hall and infirmary and in some cases a parlor and kitchen. The school, no longer a mere outgrowth of the convent, boasted its own rooms and personnel.[15] In the specialized convents more of the sisters took part in the supervision of students than elsewhere.

Nonreligious Boarding Schools

Convents were not the only available resource for families that wished to send daughters to boarding school. Yet systematic inquiry is difficult, whether we are interested in English boarding schools, French *pensions*, or other private schools. What we know of these institutions comes from private correspondence, memoirs, diaries, and even the brief advertisements they placed in the press. Boarding schools were private commercial enterprises that operated independently and often went out of business or moved suddenly. Compared with the convent schools, long-lived like the church itself, nonreligious schools suffered from all the hazards and vicissitudes of ordinary business.

The boarding schools that began to appear in Protestant England in the seventeenth century were a secular extension of the convent school tradition. By 1650 any city worthy of the name boasted a boarding school whose mission was to transform the daughters of the merchant class into young ladies suitable for marriage to gentry. The primary emphasis was on grooming, comportment, and the fine arts. The first London boarding school opened its doors in 1617, and at times during the seventeenth century there were as many as fourteen such institutions in the city. The schools in the suburbs of Hackney, Putney, and Chelsea enjoyed the greatest reputation. One Sunday in 1667 Samuel Pepys chose Hackney and its boarders as the destination of one of his walks. By then the school had already become a much-sought-after institution, serving roughly one hundred students at any given time and referred to as "the ladies' university of the female arts." From the capital the vogue for boarding schools spread to other cities such as Manchester, Exeter, Oxford, and Leicester. By the end of the seventeenth century these institutions were being widely criticized for dispensing a superficial education. Most continued on their established course, but a few took steps toward offering more substantial instruction. At Tottenham High Cross in 1673 Mrs. Bathsua Makin, once a governess of young aristocrats but now specializing in the education of young women, offered an innovative curriculum including ancient and modern languages, natural science, arithmetic, astronomy, history, and geography. In the next century other schools imitated her model, including Mrs. Lorrington's school in Chelsea (around 1760) and the very prominent Abbey House School, which Jane Austen attended along with some sixty other pupils in 1796–1797.[16]

The French *maisons d'éducation* appeared somewhat later than the English boarding schools. They filled a need that arose in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the educational practices of convent schools and *collèges* came under attack. Numerous private schools for girls and boys then sprang up in the cities. These institutions offered parents a model closer to that of family life and respectful of new values, including the increasing emphasis on hygiene, nature, and privacy. The ideal of private education was patterned on the well-run household headed by a man and his wife: pupils were encouraged to exercise in the fresh air and eat well, and courses were designed to improve body, mind, and morals. A valuable source of information on these institutions is the travel diary of Henry Paulin Panon Desbassayns, a merchant from the island of Réunion, in the Indian Ocean, who came to Paris in 1790–1792 to place his two sons and two daughters in private schools.[17] He visited seven girls' schools before choosing one run by M. and Mme. Roze on rue Copeau. Madame kept an eye on everything that went on, while Monsieur taught music. Panon, who hoped that his daughters would learn quickly and well, visited them often and observed lessons in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, English, piano, dance, music theory, elocution, and drawing. But the Roze school was not all work: the families of students were regularly invited to concerts, suppers, fireworks displays, and evening dances. Education was conducted in an atmosphere of conviviality.

Elementary School

Elementary schools served by far the largest number of students, urban and rural, paying and nonpaying. At this level gender differences were probably less significant than elsewhere. Girls learned the truths of religion and the rudiments of reading and writing in much the same way as boys. Rural elementary schools frequently offered mixed classes without arousing much protest.

But in the cities repeated condemnations of mixed education and of male teachers for female students indicate that parents were unwilling to accept mixing in the classroom even when boys and girls had abundant opportunity to mingle outside. Because mixing was perceived as a threat to morality, girls' schools dotted the urban landscape.

Although we will probably never know exactly when the first such school came into existence, one thing is certain: in 1357 the cantor of Paris' Notre-Dame Cathedral also served as director of the "*petites écoles* of the city, suburbs, and environs of Paris" and employed 25 schoolmistresses to teach girls and 50 schoolmasters to teach boys. The cathedral was the only institution permitted to operate schools that charged tuition. Gradually the number of schoolmistresses increased, and by 1672, when new elementary school statutes and regulations were issued, the number of female teachers equaled the number of males. The 1672 edict listed 166 school districts in the capital, each with a schoolmistress for female pupils and a schoolmaster for male pupils. This parity was maintained as long as the cathedral continued to operate the school system; each time a new school district was added, both a male and a female teacher were hired. By 1791 there were 201 schoolmistress positions, all held by laywomen, mostly unmarried except for a few married to colleagues.

Like Paris, other episcopal cities had systems of fee-charging elementary schools run by the cathedral. Lyons's school districts were similar to those of Paris: fifty male and fifty female teachers served the city's population. In 1789 Grenoble had thirteen fee-charging girls' schools and fourteen for boys. The cathedral chapter in Amiens employed eighty schoolmistresses and eighty-two schoolmasters between 1715 and 1780. In Paris classes were held in the schoolmistress' residence; the number of students that could be accommodated was limited by the modest quarters in which a teacher could afford to live. Perhaps twenty pupils could crowd into a room that would revert to domestic use once class was over. When classes were held in a separate school building, it was possible to accommodate about fifty girls in one class.

Even though elementary schools charged fees, they were much more affordable than boarding schools. Parents in Paris in the eighteenth century paid 3 livres 10 sols per month to send a son or daughter to one of the Notre-Dame schools. Thus the annual cost of education was 38 livres 10 sols per student. Such an expense was within the relatively modest means of urban dwellers with sufficient income to forgo what the child might be able to earn if not in school. Nine out of ten female elementary school students in Paris (and probably in the chief provincial cities as well) came from the commercial and artisan classes (there were more daughters of master craftsmen than of journeymen).[18] Although one might occasionally encounter the daughter of a gardener or coalman or barrister or royal geographer, these classes were barely represented. The geographic distribution of the fee-charging elementary schools corroborates this assertion: most were located in the center of the city and its working suburbs where shopkeepers and artisans lived and worked.

In the wake of the Catholic missionary effort pushed by the Council of Trent, free elementary schools proliferated in France in the seventeenth century, giving young girls new opportunities to obtain an education. Teaching orders dedicated to the education of women opened charitable day schools alongside their boarding schools; some devoted themselves exclusively to teaching the poor. Other free schools came into being after 1650, founded by a new generation of priests, better trained than their predecessors, in conjunction with parish-based charitable organizations. The new institutions greatly expanded the network of urban girls' schools. Each charity school class comprised from 40 to 100 pupils. The largest day schools in Paris served as many as 500. The free schools were financed by rents, gifts, and bequests made available by wealthy Christians looking for a way to reconcile their material well-being with their spiritual concerns. Some schools financed themselves in part with the proceeds from the sale of students' needlework.

To respect the laws of competition and not insult the mistresses of the fee-charging schools, the free schools were theoretically reserved for girls whose parents could not afford to pay tuition. In reality, however, free tuition was not enough to spur interest in education among people whose more vital needs were not yet assured. The people who paid for their daughters' education and those who received charity were more alike than one might think. People from both groups were stable residents of urban parishes who lived on the fruits of their labor. The most notable difference was that among the parents of charity students there were proportionately more wage earners and journeymen and fewer master craftsmen than among the parents of tuition-paying students. The

promoters of free schools were aware that their student bodies were less homogeneous than they professed. The Ursulines ordered mistresses of free classes to "take care not to place children of the better sort next to the poorest and dirtiest pupils so as not to disgust them. This should be done with discretion, however, so that the poor do not feel despised."[19] The Daughters of Saint-Anne in Paris' Saint-Roch parish in principle taught only indigent pupils, but only one of its seven classes, called the "transient class," was reserved for "poor girls who, forced by their parents and by the necessities of life to work, cannot attend school regularly but come when they can."[20] It thus appears that parents who could afford to pay tuition sent their children to schools not intended for them. The enduring conflict between administrators of free and nonfree schools shows that the student population could not be increased indefinitely even with the offer of free schooling.

Nearly a century later than in France, through the efforts of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, founded in May 1699, charity schools for both boys and girls sprang up in towns throughout England, Ireland, and Wales. The Society's pious philanthropists, concerned to instill discipline in children running loose in city streets, enabled youngsters to attend school long enough to learn their ABC's and to receive a dose of religious and moral instruction before being sent out to work as apprentices or domestics. The Society encouraged the founding of new schools and helped administer them. In 1729 some 5,225 students attended 132 London schools, and in 1733 it was estimated that more than 20,000 students were attending charity schools throughout the country. In London the feminist Mary Astell joined theory with practice by persuading the governors of the Chelsea Royal Hospital to establish a school for 30 indigent girls in 1709. This school differed from other charity schools in that the bulk of class time was not devoted to exercises of piety; nor were students required to pay their way by working for outside employers.[21]

Everywhere girls in the countryside fared less well than those in the city, where families had a choice between charity or fee-charging schools. Villages that could barely afford the expense of one school tolerated mixed classes. Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, who attended primary school in rural Auxerre, later described classes of boys and girls together. The smaller the village, the more tolerant the ecclesiastical authorities, although bishops continued to recommend that classes for boys and girls be held at different times or be separated by partitions, or else that girls be excluded from schooling after the age of nine. For country girls mixed classes were often the only educational opportunity available. If a bishop with puritanical Jansenist leanings or a parish priest anxious about the morals of his flock decided that it was best to avoid mixed classes, the almost inevitable result was that girls received no education. Just such a sequence occurred at Montigny-les-Arsures in Franche-Comté in 1784. The villagers adamantly refused to open a second school, pointing out that "everybody knows that in the country girls rarely attend school after the age of ten. It is not necessary for them to learn to write," and in any case "there is far more danger to morality in sending girls to tend livestock in the heath . . . with adolescent boys."[22]

Although villages commonly hired lay schoolmasters to teach boys' classes, they seldom hired schoolmistresses for the girls. The 390 rural parishes of Doubs employed 3,000 schoolmasters in the eighteenth century but only 66 schoolmistresses. Nearly all rural girls' schools were religious schools run by the regional or national teaching orders, some of which established seminars to train mistresses for rural schools. The Filles de la Charité, founded by Vincent de Paul in Paris in 1633, served as a model for other orders. Sisters of the order wore a characteristic white winged hat that soon became a common sight throughout the country as they fanned out into rural areas to teach poor girls and care for the sick. In 1678 the Dames de Saint-Maur also established a seminar in Paris to train teachers for provincial schools, especially in the Protestant south.

The example of the Filles de la Charité was imitated in countless dioceses and regions. After 1630, and in large numbers between 1660 and 1730, religious organizations dedicated to the training of teachers, many of them secular and limited to a particular locality, sprang up in many places. The great disparities between rural girls' schools in different regions can be attributed to the influence of such groups. Wherever such teaching congregations were active, girls' schools were found even in small villages. The Vatelotes, for example, founded by Canon Vatelot in Toul in 1725, staffed 124 schools in Lorraine in 1789. In western France the Filles de la Sagesse, founded by Grignion de Montfort in 1719, operated 66 schools in lower Normandy and Saintonge on the eve of the Revolution. The Auvergne and Velay regions were served by the Béates, the Demoiselles de l'Instruction, and the Soeurs de

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Most convents placed greater emphasis on obedience to the monastic rule than on education, and the result was less time available for instruction. Girls were required to rise, depending on the convent, between 4:00 and 7:00 and to go to bed between 7:45 and 9:30. At most they had only five or six hours to devote to their schoolwork. The more imbued a convent was with the spirit of the rule or, like Port-Royal, marked with Jansenist rigor, the greater the amount of time devoted to the liturgy and the less to learning. In the strictest establishments profane learning was a mere filler between religious services, prayer meetings, meditation, and hours devoted to pious reading. General education in the convent was constantly interrupted by the pealing of bells calling nuns and pupils to prayer.

The daily schedule in an elementary school was very different, even if daily attendance at mass was part of the regular school day. Schools that charged little or no tuition could impose their

Saint-Joseph. The Lyons region was home to the Soeurs de Saint-Charles, founded by Charles Démia. And Carmelite tertiaries taught in nearly all the parishes of the Vannes diocese in Brittany in the eighteenth century. Despite all these efforts, however, some areas went unserved.

It is interesting to consider the ratio of educational supply to educational demand in prerevolutionary France. In Paris, the city with the most cultural advantages, there were places for 11,200 female students in 265 schools: 2,700 in 153 fee-charging schools, 7,000 in 56 free grammar schools, and 1,500 in 56 convent boarding schools. The population of Paris at the time was between 600,000 and 800,000, and there were anywhere from 49,500 to 66,000 school-age girls (ages seven to fourteen). Given the number who did not attend school or who attended school elsewhere, together with the fact that students spent at most two or three years in school, it follows that there was room in the capital's schools for one in three potential students.[23] This was the educational situation—at its best—before the Revolution.

Learning and Manners

Although the quantity of education for women increased between 1500 and 1800, the quality did not. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, more girls were attending school than ever before, but they were not learning any more than in the past. No matter what school a girl went to, there was little danger that she would emerge a scholar. Convent schools and elementary schools offered a limited curriculum and devoted little time to academic subjects. Only rigorous home schooling could produce women as well educated as boys who attended preparatory schools. The average girl was not to be overburdened with academic curiosities. It was enough that her head be filled with pious notions and needlework.

An Incomplete Education

Even convents dedicated to teaching found that the first obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge lay in the established habits of their students' families. Families that paid dearly to send a child to boarding school expected their wishes to be respected. Students could be removed from school at the family's discretion, no matter what the educational consequences. Teachers had a hard time planning curricula for classes in which students could range in age from four to eighteen and for which there was no notion of a school year. School schedules and calendars from the period are revealing:[24] boys generally returned to boarding school each fall and spring, but their sisters might enter or leave school at any time. Only the Ursulines imposed something like a preparatory school calendar. Most girls, moreover, remained in boarding school only a year or two, whereas their brothers were sent away for from three to eight years. With educational careers so brief, no real curriculum could be followed. Like the future Madame Roland, the girls who were sent to convent schools in the years just before the Revolution attended classes for at most two years and for the purpose of preparing themselves for communion.[25] Later, Mme. Campan would write that after 1760 "nearly all girls spent only a year in the monasteries, and that year was devoted to in-depth study of the catechism, to retreat, and to first communion . . . The custom of leaving girls behind convent gates until the age of eighteen had long since been abandoned."[26] The number of students in the convent schools gradually declined; in the capital few were full after 1750. At the same time the number of preparatory school students also declined. The enlightened families of the social elite had clearly become disaffected with the boarding-school formula.

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calendars on their pupils' families, which lacked the influence enjoyed by parents who paid high tuitions to convent schools. In schools that charged tuition girls commonly spent three to four years in class between the ages of six and ten; in free community schools the duration of schooling was three years; and in free parish schools it was two years. For financial reasons teachers in schools that charged tuition could not afford to be too strict about the ages of their pupils or the number of years it took them to learn to read. In contrast, the charity schools were concerned to educate the largest possible number of students and therefore always rushed students through so as to make room for others. In some cases a girl had to wait until she turned eight before she could be admitted to a free school. The sponsors of charity schools were always interested in yield, measured in numbers of saved souls. Students were therefore grouped into two or three sections, based on their ability to read (and, where applicable, to write).

Day school students enjoyed three to four weeks' vacation in the fall, but, depending on the need for children's help with the harvest, rural schools often recessed for longer periods in late summer. Rather than regular school vacations during the school year, numerous religious holidays were observed, and in the middle of every week there was a day or day and a half of rest. In schools devoted to work training, the pupils' day went well beyond the six to seven hours of religious and general classes. The girls of Saint Agnes' School in Paris worked from 7:00 to 11:00 in the morning and from 12:30 to 6:00 in the afternoon. For them, already workers though still students, class time was already regulated by the hours of the marketplace. The time devoted to learning needlework and to prayer infringed on other class time, so that girls just touched on subjects their brothers were free to study in depth. People were still fearful of teaching girls too much, of overwhelming them with vain and superfluous knowledge. Evidence that suspicion still surrounded the instruction of women can be seen in the brevity of the treatment of certain subjects, the curtailment of the curriculum to the bare essentials, and a general attitude of toleration rather than encouragement.

Strict Supervision

The curriculum of girls' schools in prerevolutionary France had three main components: religion with a strong dose of morality, the three R's, and needlework and sewing. This basic program was modified in various ways by the different types of schools and, in convent schools, occasionally supplemented (at least for those pupils who could afford to pay for private tutors).

What little girls learned at school was first and foremost to "love, know, and serve God." Religious instruction far outweighed all other subjects, which seemed, in comparison, peripheral. When the priest of Saint-Louis-en-l'Ile parish in Paris went looking for a schoolmistress in 1716, he sent the mother superior of the Filles de la Charité a job description that ended: "I do not mention catechism and Christian subjects because these, as you know, must take priority over everything else."[27] Lay as well as religious teachers were under orders to devote most of their energy, authority, ambition, and concern to this part of the curriculum.

Religious instruction centered on learning prayers, introductory study of sacred texts, and preparation for confirmation and first communion, bolstered by daily attendance at mass. Indeed, school life was imbued with piety. The daily schedule was punctuated by prayer before and after each class and recess period. Nine out of ten titles in the book cabinet could be classified as "works of piety," and classroom walls were covered with edifying images. Nor was the presence of religion limited to these outward signs: audible, visible, memorizable. It was also implicit in the very gestures and comportment of the students, whose spontaneous, childlike expressions were strictly repressed. It was not easy to distinguish between instruction in morality and polite behavior and instruction in religion proper: in the education of young girls, the three were intimately associated. One manual, *Conduite chrétienne, ou formulaire de prières à l'usage des pensionnaires des religieuses Ursulines* (Christian Conduct, or a Formulary of Prayers for Pupils of the Ursulines), enjoyed remarkable success. It was used in many secular as well as religious institutions and was reissued in countless editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including an 800-page edition in 1868. The book instructs students how to act and what to think when waking in the morning, going to bed at night, and even during bouts of insomnia. In short, it reflects the omnipresence of religion in the school day and curriculum.

Religious instruction even encroached on time theoretically set aside for secular learning. Children were taught to read by scanning prayers syllable by syllable and practiced writing by copying out pious proverbs. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were really secondary concerns, inducements to children to continue in school.

Many school programs described the religious curriculum at great length with a laconic addendum: "The students will also be taught to read and write."

Reading was above all a tool of religious instruction: it helped out when memory failed and kept students from stammering incomprehensible, misshapen verses. Girls were therefore taught to read. Reading reinforced the Christian teaching they received from their mothers. Reading for other purposes was suspect, however, and educators frequently warned against misuse of the skill. When novels for young girls first appeared around 1750, they found champions among private governesses and enlightened mothers but not in the schools. Pious books were one thing, but novels were possibly licentious, and both secular and convent schools kept a close watch on student reading. Any new book that came into the cloister had to be submitted to the scrutiny of the mother superior.

An innovation introduced in girls' classes at Port-Royal around 1650 and soon widely adopted was to teach reading from French rather than Latin texts. Logic won out: since girls did not stay in school long, it made no sense to teach them to read any language but the mother tongue. Although "French and Latin" programs continued to exist on paper, few girls completed them. The Ursulines, an exception, continued to give priority to reading in Latin because of their interest in classical culture, the culture of the preparatory schools.

Although schools were supposed to teach both reading and writing, the latter sometimes fell by the wayside. For one thing, some teachers were not sufficiently masters of the art to teach it to others. For another, writing was the second phase of the curriculum, to be commenced after reading was fully mastered, and some students never got that far. The methods for teaching writing varied according to the uses that pupils were expected to make of the skill. Pupils of the Ursulines were taught to write individually and with great care by a trained specialist, whereas pupils in charity schools learned as best they could by imitating examples of letters written on posters. They never received the kind of training that was available to students of Notre-Dame, which included copying "the formulas of promissory notes, receipts, acknowledgments of merchandise delivered, and other such acts as may be useful for them to know in different walks of life."[28]

In most cases the brief introduction to reading, writing, and arithmetic that a girl received in class had to be supplemented outside or the skill learned would be quickly forgotten. True mastery came only with frequent practice and help from a more advanced companion. Without the opportunity for such practice and help, the time spent in class might easily prove to be wasted effort.

By the time a girl left grammar school she was supposed to have acquired a taste for work. In class work took concrete form: there were always needles, thread, and fabric around, and students practiced embroidery, lacework, tapestry, sewing, knitting, mending, and every other form of needlework. The meaning attached to such work varied, however, with the nature of the school. In the case of well-born girls at convent boarding schools, work with needle and thread was valued as a healthy occupation, a substitute for the work the devil might otherwise find for idle hands. The work was redemptive. In the charity schools, the skills learned in class were supposed to help a girl to find a trade, hence to lead a respectable life. The spiritual and moral salvation of poor girls depended on their finding a livelihood.

"To enable girls to earn a respectable living" is a constant theme in the writings of charity school founders. Pupils were taught, in the words of the sisters of Saint-Maur, "minor trades in keeping with their capabilities," or, in the formula preferred by Orphanage of Baby Jesus in Paris, "the minor branches of learning appropriate to girls." From these minor trades girls could expect to earn modest incomes after leaving school, but there was no danger that they would rise above their original station in life. Former pupils might become working girls, but they could not afford to purchase a costly certification as mistress of a craft. Furthermore, since skill in a trade was acquired gradually, a girl's level depended on the length of time she stayed in school. Many pupils never got beyond the most elementary skills, which were also the least remunerated. The occupational training afforded to poor girls thus left charity school sponsors with clear consciences yet did not interfere with the laws of strict social reproduction. Furthermore, as there was strong demand for textiles and clothing in the cities, training students to enter that sector of the economy satisfied the growing need for labor.

The girl who boarded at a convent school was not expected to earn her living by needlework; if all went well, she could hope to marry well and take charge of a substantial household. For this she required a more diverse preparation, and the boarding schools

attempted to fill this need. In a prestigious school such as Abbaye-aux-Bois, young ladies who would never be expected to dirty their hands at home learned from lay sisters what running a household entailed. Thus Hélène Massalska, the future Princess de Ligne, worked successively in the abbey's nine different "obediences": the church, the sacristy, the parlor, the apothecary, the laundry, the library, the dining hall, the kitchen, and the sisterhood.[29] The duties of the mistress of a noble household were likely to be just as varied. While charity school students prepared for working life, convent school girls prepared for a life of managerial responsibility.

Convent school girls supplemented their regular lessons with private instruction in the arts and other subjects. The parents paid for these extra lessons out of pocket, thus bringing aristocratic educational methods into the cloister. Convent rules reflect suspicion of these subjects, which were regarded as frivolous and unnecessary, but parental wishes were respected. Even in an institution as strict as Port-Royal, seven private instructors gave lessons in the parlor in 1773: five male teachers taught dance, music, harpsichord, harp, and guitar; and two women taught geography and drawing. Counting both regular and private lessons, Hélène Massalska and her classmates in the "blue class" (ages seven to ten) at the Abbaye-aux-Bois attended classes in catechism, reading, music, drawing, history and geography, writing, arithmetic, dance, and harp or harpsichord one after the other, with each class lasting from thirty minutes to an hour. Students also performed plays regularly. After its success at Saint-Cyr, Jean Racine's *Athalie* made the rounds of other prominent girls' schools. The arts, especially music, were prized everywhere. Some musicians derived a regular income from the convent schools, and much of their effort went to composing collections of pieces "for the use of young ladies brought up in houses of religion." From inventories of property seized from convent schools in Paris during the Revolution we know that the harpsichord and the pianoforte were the favorite instruments.

Measuring Knowledge: Signatures

One way of evaluating how much female students retained of what they learned at school is to examine signatures on notarized documents. It is of course a delicate matter to say just how much the ability to sign a document can tell us about the ability to comprehend its contents or to read and write in general, but a signature indicates at least some ability to wield a pen. We have figures from throughout France for two periods a century apart: 1686–1690 and 1786–1790. And the first lesson to be drawn from them is to beware of statistics, which are always misleading. Any attempt to arrive at a mean conceals important disparities between regions, between urban and rural areas, and between men and women.

The figures reveal, first of all, that northern France—broadly speaking, the section of the country lying north of an imaginary line drawn between Saint-Malo and Geneva—was more literate than southern France. In 1786–1790, 71 percent of the men and 44 percent of the women residing north of this line signed their marriage licenses, compared with only 27 percent and 12 percent in the south. A century earlier, literacy had reached the 20-percent level almost everywhere in the north but in few places in the south. In both of these regions, however, two other differences stand out: literacy was invariably higher in urban than in rural areas, and the literacy rate for men was always higher than that for women, at all times and in all segments of society.

If the men were everywhere ahead of the women, nonetheless the literacy rate for women increased more rapidly than that for men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the eighteenth century particularly, women made significant advances. In enlightened northern France, where men had begun to write in the seventeenth century, women made up for their handicap by advancing more rapidly than their mates. In southern France, where economic and cultural conditions were less favorable, the rate of increase of women's literacy matched that of men's. Male literacy was invariably a precondition for women to begin improving their reading and writing skills. François Furet and Jacques Ozouf rightly observe that it took "several generations for literacy to pass from one sex to the other."[30]

Thus the development of a system of girls' schools obviously had an impact on the increased literacy rate for women in the eighteenth century, although it has been estimated that roughly 20 percent of those counted as literate acquired the ability to read, to write, or both, outside the schools. In Paris, where we know

when girls' schools opened and where signatures on estate inventory documents have been counted, the benefits of schooling (available to some 11,200 female students annually) are strikingly apparent.[31] During the reign of Louis XIV, 61 percent of working-class men were able to sign their spouses' estate inventories, compared with only 34 percent of women. Under Louis XVI the comparable figures are 66 percent and 62 percent. This spectacular advance for women reflects the efforts of the capital's schoolmistresses. Neighborhood schools proved beneficial, particularly to those groups that had some cultural background. Knowing how to read made life easier in a city such as Paris. But despite the capital's cultural advantages, some dark spots remained: only 16 percent of the female delinquents who appeared before the judges of the Châtelet were able to sign their depositions.

The tendency to higher literacy in urban than in rural areas and in the capital than elsewhere was not unique to France. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, where literacy on the whole came sooner and with less pronounced regional variations than in France, the same trend obtains. By the end of the eighteenth century 60 percent of English men and 40 percent of English women could sign their names, compared with 47 and 27 percent respectively in France. As early as 1690, 48 percent of Londoners could sign their names, compared with only 20 percent in the rest of the country.

There is no need to multiply dry statistics to explain why female literacy always lagged behind male literacy: society considered education for women less important than education for men. Child mortality was still a serious problem in this society, and the reproductive role of women, vital for survival, inevitably influenced the way the issue of women's education was approached. It was imperative that young women grow up to be mothers, and since their destiny was to raise children it made sense to instill in them, so that they might in turn teach their children, society's fundamental religious and moral values. In the end girls were taught to read because reading was a way of reinforcing the lessons of religion, and that was as far as society's requirement went. The need for more advanced instruction was evident to a few farsighted individuals but was not widely accepted. By the end of the eighteenth century the mortality rate had declined, the influence of the church had been reduced, and the Enlightenment had done its work. Only then did increasing numbers of parents begin to rethink their daughters' futures. But as long as equality between the sexes remained an illusion, not even the most talented teachers could open full access for women to learning.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER