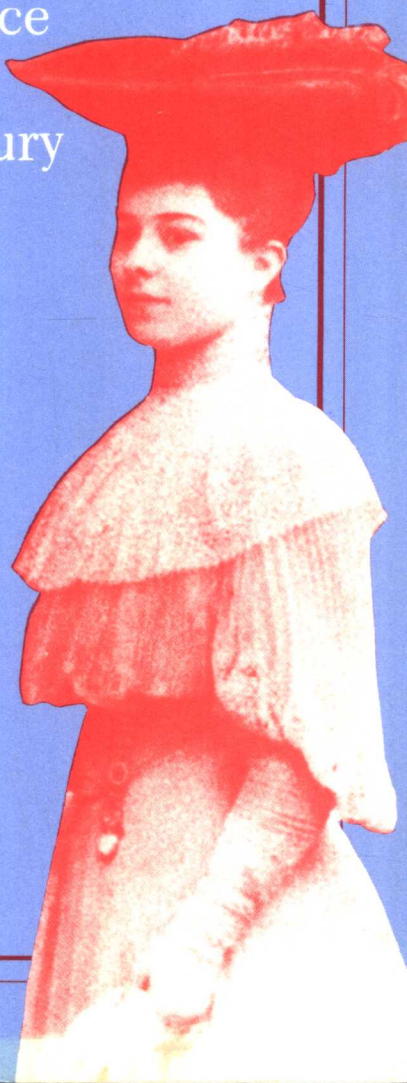


Ladies of the Leisure Class

The Bourgeoises
of Northern France
in the
Nineteenth Century

Bonnie G. Smith





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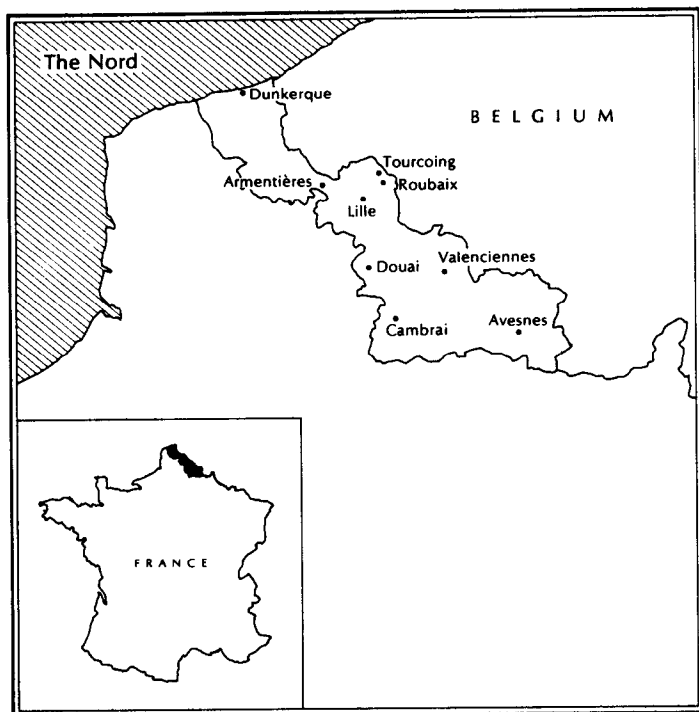
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I The Historical Context



1



Introduction: A World Apart

What is a bourgeois woman? The question first came to mind when I studied history with teachers who described the modern world in terms of class. They used the words “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat,” in particular, to define relationships in the productive or market world. Here the question first arose: How was a wealthy woman properly called bourgeois when she spent most of her life at home without any direct connection with either the market or production? In terms of class analysis, what was her place? The problem deepened as I proceeded to look at “bourgeois” attitudes. Nineteenth-century men were nothing if not industrious, rational, and committed to accumulating capital. But I envisioned the bourgeois woman as someone who probably passed many idle hours, and who was more concerned with spending money than with accumulating it. And if she were rational, why the many depictions of the bourgeois woman as preoccupied with furniture and fashion? I could not jettison accumulated wisdom in a blind defense of her scientific mindset. Outside the classroom came other meanings of the word “bourgeois.” There were the epithets: oppressors of the people, political swindlers, and the ubiquitous construction of the word bourgeois as synonymous with bad taste. But in no instance did any of these satisfy my craving for a picture of the bourgeois

woman. Conventional definitions all applied to men of the bourgeoisie.

There is a way to connect the bourgeois woman with the marketplace world that shaped nineteenth-century history, and historians have made sympathetic efforts to locate her in that environment. They have seen her as the bearer of its children, the consoler of its hard-pressed businessmen, and occasionally as volunteer nurse binding up social wounds through charitable activities. In addition, the clothing with which she adorned herself and the decorative objects she strewed throughout her home contributed to the perpetuation of modern society by softening its increasingly stark contours. The bourgeois woman was also the leading consumer of industrial goods, and, increasingly guided by advertising, she developed a complementary relationship with her male counterpart. While the bourgeois man directed production, she was responsible for the purchase of commodities.

Such an analysis, for all its merit, does not exhaust the substance of bourgeois women's lives, however. It ignores their remoteness from production, and even their explicit dislike for industrial society and its attendant social change. Bourgeois women mistrusted market values and the world beyond the home. Instead of adopting an individualistic, rational, and democratic world view, they abhorred it. Instead of working to amass capital or to contribute to either the economic or political advance of industrial society, they devoted their lives to their families, and, as often, to the Church. Although physically part of an industrial society, bourgeois women neither experienced its way of life nor partook of its mentality. They inhabited and presided over a domestic world that had its own concerns.

To penetrate this world and its concerns I have chosen as a case study a group of women who lived in the French department of the Nord during the nineteenth century. As wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers of men engaged in the professions or in running businesses and heavy indus-

try, these women constitute a sample of several thousand who could be investigated in terms more or less applicable to bourgeois women in most industrial societies.

To begin, I have looked at the simple, obvious characteristics of their lives. Specifically and primarily, the bourgeois woman of the nineteenth century engaged in reproduction, and her body experienced reproductive cycles more regularly and palpably than did the bodies of men. Menstruation, pregnancy, parturition, lactation, and menopause relentlessly ordered the configuration of female life. It does not require biological determinism to appreciate how deeply rooted in nature woman's activity is. Simone de Beauvoir treated this theme minutely in *The Second Sex*, and it would be foolhardy (especially in a study of French women) to disregard her insights. De Beauvoir's work begins with female biology and leads to an explanation of why men have viewed women as lacking humanity. Along the way she examines the various stages in women's lives as at least partially modulated by their physical fluctuations. It is interesting to connect de Beauvoir's thesis with another pioneering work, Alice Clark's *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. Clark argued that the home of that era was slowly losing many of its productive functions, and historians hastened to join her in calling the modern home "functionless." Others began to look at the psychological workings of the home or at its "spiritual" nature in an attempt to impute vigor to domestic life. Yet, Clark's depiction linked to de Beauvoir's theory suggests that the home constituted a reproductive arena, an area charged with the content of women's physical lives.

The biological charge to reproduce does not, however, preclude cultural activity. This is the conclusion of Sherry Ortner's article that seeks out and locates the cultural activities in the socialization of children.¹ Explicitly building on de Beauvoir's work, she argued that in this capacity women transmitted a civilized tradition, but that the private setting for this activity hid their contribution and perpetu-

ated the affinity of women and nature in men's eyes. Despite an admirable effort, Ortner failed to build on de Beauvoir's insight when she characterized women as merely transmitters of culture, as robots, one might say, in service to the exterior world of male values and standards. Indeed, one might expect a different turn from a feminist anthropologist, for the home remains unexamined, even in a tentative way, as a source of an indigenous and autonomous culture.

In fact, the culture of the home has been so obtrusive that it already has its name. During the nineteenth century the domestic world of reproductive women overflowed with artifacts and produced patterns of behavior, the sum of which has been labeled "domesticity." Domesticity flowered from this period until the present day. Bourgeois women, in particular, suddenly released from much of the productive activity that had accompanied their reproductive life, began to fashion a home life for themselves, their husbands, and their children. Initially the prerogative of the upper classes, domestic habits and thoughts became common to rich and working-class women alike, as fewer and fewer married women participated in the industrial work force on a sustained basis. As a result, by the twentieth century women found themselves almost exclusively concerned with interior decorating, fashion, cuisine, etiquette, needlework, and child-rearing; and by extension, these occupations came to be considered intrinsic to the female personality, arranged and systematized as they were into a symbolic expression of women's biological mission and the reproductive course of their lives.

The presence of a domestic culture and the accessibility of domestic artifacts suggest, it seems to me, a more direct study of women than the approach taken by conventional economic or political history. Scholars have traditionally found that the biological functions of women have made a historical treatment of women's lives difficult. Because neither discourse nor a record of intellectual, political, or economic achievement exists as evidence of their reproductive

activities, scholars remove women from the historical stage and relegate their study to the natural sciences. In addition, the attachment of academics to rational (or even irrational) discourse as the only valid source of information has moved them to dismiss women's involvement with fashion and interior decorating as signs of mental inferiority and of the triviality of their minds. I share the concern for rational discourse to the point of attempting to put into words what women expressed through their system of domestic artifacts. The possibility that fashion and housekeeping habits have an expressive content demands that we consider them in order to increase our knowledge of the home as an internally coherent, symbolic form. Not only is it interesting to uncover different modes of speech, for instance; it is crucial if we remember what nineteenth-century men never failed to recognize: the culture of the home often stood in opposition to the imperative of industrial progress.

Recently, demographers in family reconstitution studies have attempted to recover the reproductive past, as well as the history of many inarticulate groups, through statistics. For all that this fruitful method has extended our knowledge, it does not fully illuminate the substance and meaning of the domestic universe. Aside from the incongruity involved in describing with numbers women who never thought in mathematical terms, statistics may mislead by assigning false significance to the sheer quantity and spacing of children of marriages. Although the bourgeois women we will meet in this study cared deeply about their children, reproduction and other bio-sexual determinants remained central to their lives whether they had one or ten children. Each expressed that centrality through a system of domestic symbols (a preverbal language, perhaps) that then reversed itself to form a set of rules and cultural standards binding all women. Although statistics are often helpful in charting behavior, insofar as they contain their own symbolic expression, they obstruct our view of this type of reversible cultural equation.

Along with reproduction and domestic life, women's religious practices provide another access to their culture. The bourgeois woman was nothing if not devoted to the Church. Like the fact of reproduction and domesticity, however, this circumstance has often failed to enlighten, and has even blocked investigation. Secularism, once blessed with a measure of humility, has tended to construe religious faith as the opiate of womanhood. Faith has earned more epithets than understanding; and thus, in contrast to the lucid rationalism attributed to modern men, women are called "fanatic," "superstitious," and "ignorant." Sometimes, as in Ann Douglas's work, *The Feminization of American Culture*, religion acquires a rational connotation when it is seen as an instrument of social power for the otherwise impotent woman.² But what is gained by this in terms of historical respectability for religion is lost for the anthropological investigation of the domestic mind. By modernizing religion and fashioning it to her own devices, Douglas misses its importance as a cosmological system, its decidedly anti-modern thrust, and the congruence between domestic ritual and religious rites. Because women maintained a traditional and preindustrial way of life, and because religion had long offered an explanation of the universe based on preindustrial experience, we should expect, rather than distort or modernize, the coupling of domesticity and faith. Indeed, it might be necessary for us to face, as did Freud and many anthropologists, the persistent adherence of women to the Church with curiosity instead of with blatant or ill-disguised contempt.

Modern historians have fairly well established that the nineteenth-century bourgeois man not only tended toward freethinking but also supported republican and democratic government. From a narrowly construed class perspective, women should have moved in a similar political direction. Yet our still rudimentary knowledge of the nineteenth-century woman suggests quite the opposite. For example, most politicians, when confronted with the suffrage movement,

opposed the vote for women out of fear that they would support the forces of reaction. This consideration particularly moved French republicans whose power depended on preventing the revitalization of monarchism—a cause widely supported by women. There is a contemporary, though perhaps trivial, indication of the dichotomous political tendencies separating the political views of men and women: while men read *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, women satisfy their monarchist instincts in the pages of *Jours de France*. Despite such evidence, both sexes have been placed under the bourgeois umbrella.

A similar lack of discrimination provokes charges that men and women of the bourgeoisie equally “oppressed the proletariat.” Because women generally had little economic contact with the working class, the source of this oppression is found in their charitable activity, which allegedly blinded workers to the source of their misery. This interpretation confuses the possible effect of women’s volunteer activities with the social vision prompting their efforts. Embedded in the word “charity” and in its practice was an interpretation of the social order as a static and hierarchical construct. Women sought to maintain these distinctions through charity, whereas men hoped by similar activities to achieve a certain measure of social homogenization, or at least to present it as a political goal. The intent of modern social welfare (beginning in the nineteenth century) to bring everyone to a minimum standard of living contrasts sharply with women’s desire to perpetuate social hierarchy.

In theory, static hierarchy died at the hands of French revolutionary politicians. In its place they substituted a creed of liberty and equality. Bourgeois women, however, scorned both revolutionary doctrine and democratic institutions: “‘liberty,’ we all know what that means,” they warned.³ They clung instead to rigid, even aristocratic notions of place and status, all the more surprisingly when many of their husbands had amassed their fortunes because of new mobility and opportunity. Their retrograde views

were less manifestations of stubbornness than of the sustained connection between women and family. Family depended on fixed patterns of authority, and to women aristocratic government and hierarchic social order best reproduced their familial experience. Because this experience so molded their opinions, women saw the entire universe shaped in this hierarchical way through a chain of command that originated with God, passed through kings, and eventually reached to parents. Thus, when bourgeois women performed a charitable act, they envisioned it as an act in the spirit of hierarchy (*noblesse oblige*). Among their own kind etiquette performed a similar function of denoting place in this type of ordering by blood.

All these subjects receive full treatment in subsequent chapters, but I introduce them now in order to suggest a line of argument. The bourgeois woman lived in an atmosphere and acted according to precepts entirely at odds with the industrial, market, egalitarian, and democratic world—the world, that is, of her husband. In addition, she had little use for the primary article of faith of the nineteenth century: rationalism. The women we will meet believed that scientific knowledge was chimerical, especially when it challenged the proper ordering of things, including family, society, and political authority. For them science had a substantial value up to a point, but when it made little gods of men or when it placed the laws of nature above the will of God, then human society had gone astray. Most women in France, most bourgeois women, in this case, acquired their antiscientific values at the convent, that institution whose close parallel to domestic structures we shall attempt to uncover. However, their line of argument against science was not merely obstructionist, for it rested on an epistemological commitment to the inaccessibility of certain mysteries—particularly those of birth and death, which remained hidden in the mind of the Creator. This will lead us to explain the intellectual darkness pervading a nineteenth-century woman's acquaintance with sexual matters,

which sprang less from a male conspiracy of silence than from a theory of knowledge. Although their ignorance in this regard may have met with male approval, women championed their own innocence because of its positive connotations.

Women did more than merely champion innocence; they turned it into a cult. We have heard much recently about "the cult of true womanhood" built on a reverence for domesticity and the virtuous woman.⁴ It is tempting to assign the origins of this cult to men who wanted their womenfolk home and sexually faithful to them. Although there is a male contribution to the insistence on chastity as a component of legitimate private property, such an interpretation does not explain the firm commitment of most middle-class women in most industrial countries to the cult of their own virtue.

Used loosely in descriptions of women's beliefs, the word cult has a precise philosophical and psychological purport. Freud, Cassirer, and several generations of anthropologists have contributed to the establishment of a connection between cult and mythical, prescientific attitudes toward man and nature. They see in particular the creation of or adherence to cults as indicating, in Freud's interpretation, a desire to merge the personality in a concept larger than the individual; or, in Cassirer's view, a lack of distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Piaget also has isolated one stage of mental development in which the individual identifies with the whole of the universe and collapses its enormity into the self. Any of these interpretations allows for the growth of a religious attitude or for the adherence to a cult, for the individual comes to worship personal qualities that he or she projects on the whole of creation.⁵

In the past this particular state of mind has led to the generation of myth. The mythical mind anthropomorphizes nature by combining human qualities and events of nature in a mythical god or goddess. The person comes to worship these fictional creations and uses them to explain a myriad

natural or human events. Entire categories of phenomena find their meaning in the activities of a larger-than-life being who, nonetheless, has human attributes.

I will suggest in the final chapter on the women of the Nord that the domestic novel plays a similar myth-making role in creating the cult of womanhood. Several hundred of the novels they wrote offer stories of larger-than-life heroines, and, it should be added, heroines whose story is duplicated so consistently in each novel that they come to form a single woman—an archetypal figure. I say this to differentiate between the mythical figures in the domestic novel and the human characterization offered in the great novels of the nineteenth century. The heroine's virtue confronts obstacles that test our credulity; her plight, unlike that of, say, Rastignac in *Père Goriot*, is to our eyes exaggerated to the point of being ridiculous. Yet the suffering heroine was a figure with whose image women could (and still do) identify, and in whose situation they somehow found themselves reflected. So, too, mythical heroes met dragons and demons, held the world, the skies, and the seas in their dominion, endured and triumphed. And in a prescientific age they exacted belief.

But how could modern women—how can they still—find the articulation of their world view in the plight of the virtuous heroine? The question leads us back to our starting point in the reproductive life of women. Freud, Cassirer, and Piaget have pointed to the genesis of religious belief in the mind still embedded in nature and in a subjectivity undifferentiated from the objective world, a failure to distinguish between itself and the universe. Our women of the Nord led lives embedded in reproductive functioning after the home ceased to be the place of production. No longer transforming nature, they emphasized their connection with it. While men abandoned their mythical or religious deities, women not only maintained their relationship with the Christian God, but invented a new cult of the virtuous heroine who ruled a domestically constructed universe.