

Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art

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In the late eighteenth century, French artists and writers became enamored of a set of characters whose virtues and attractions were still new to the public. These characters, the happy or good mother and the loving father, appear fully developed in Greuze's *The Beloved Mother* (Fig. 1), one of the most popular attractions at the Salon of 1765. To the twentieth-century viewer, Greuze's painting has many features suggesting not only earlier French and Dutch genre scenes and family portraits but Holy Families as well. To his French contemporaries, however, Greuze was saying something fresh and new. As Diderot so tirelessly repeated, Greuze's pictures were not simply pleasant to look at, they also spoke to present vital moral issues. Indeed, the very forms of *The Beloved Mother* energetically signal the presence of a message; gesturing figures, dramatic lights and shadows and busy, bunched-up masses of people and drapery promise the eye a drama. What occasions such excited form and moves these characters to such emotional display? Nothing more than the fact of the family, for the scene represents a most commonplace event: the entrance of a farmer into his own home where he beholds his wife and six children. Yet the content of this work was far from commonplace in 1765.

Mothers, fathers and their children were hardly new to secular art. Nor were scenes portraying the peace or the charm of simple domestic life. Chardin's *Saying Grace* (Fig. 2), painted around 1740, is such a scene. Compared to the highly detailed naturalism of Greuze's figures, however, this mother and her children seem almost doll-like, their expressions merely pert. The modest subject was not original and struck no one as especially significant. What made Chardin's reputation was not *what* he painted, but *how* he painted. He was famous not for any ideas he conveyed but for his mastery of color and light effects, his ability to suggest real atmosphere and his artful balance of volumes and voids. Chardin was appreciated as a master,

but only within the confines of genre painting, a field where no one thought to find any but the most limited concepts.¹

In Greuze, on the other hand, the eighteenth century recognized a moralist, a brilliant observer of human nature and behavior. His art, wrote Diderot, is "dramatic poetry that touches our feelings, instructs us, improves us and invites us to virtuous action."² The difference between *Saying Grace* and *The Beloved Mother* confirms Diderot's judgment. Although *Saying Grace* is based on the assumption that domestic life is pleasant, *The Beloved Mother* emphatically states that it is blissful. In almost magnified detail, it examines the very emotions of family relationships themselves (as Greuze conceived them, that is), namely, the joy of being a husband and father and the delicious contentment of being a mother so well beloved by her husband and six children. Even the grandmother and, it appears, the dogs, too, are visibly stirred by the spectacle of family love. What is new here are a mother and a father who are consciously and ecstatically happy about simply *being* a mother and a father, a husband and a wife. The parents of neither gods, saints nor kings, they exemplify a new idea: simple motherhood and fatherhood in blissful conjugal union.³ Thus wrote Diderot of this painting: "It says to all men of feeling and sensibility: 'Keep your family comfortable; . . . give [your wife] as many children as you can . . . and be assured of being happy at home.'"⁴

Even more than Greuze, Fragonard devoted his art to the ideal of the happy family.⁵ In *The Return Home* (Fig. 3), he suggests the warmth and intimacy of conjugal life. Bathed in golden, glowing light, father, mother and infant are compositionally bound into a harmonious unit, an arrangement that stresses not only the mother's position as a living, mediating link between father and child, but also the special closeness of the parents alone, who gaze lovingly into each others' eyes and tenderly touch hands. It is this strong suggestion of sexual gratification that most distin-

¹ G. Wildenstein, *Chardin*, Manesse, 1963, 17–20.

² D. Diderot, *Salons*, ed. J. Sezec and J. Adhémar, Oxford, 1957, I, 233.

³ That Greuze took this rustic mother's smile from the face of Marie de Medicis as Rubens portrayed her in *The Birth of Louis XIII* (*ibid.*, II, 35–36) only underscores the novel content of this 18th-century work. Marie's is the smile of a queen mother who has just given birth to a dauphin, heir to the throne by divine right. The work is officially addressed to subjects of that throne. *The Beloved Mother*, on the other hand, is theoretically addressed to human-kind in general and embodies more

purely secular ideas. It asserts that family relationships as such can be the sources of a happiness that is generically human.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 155.

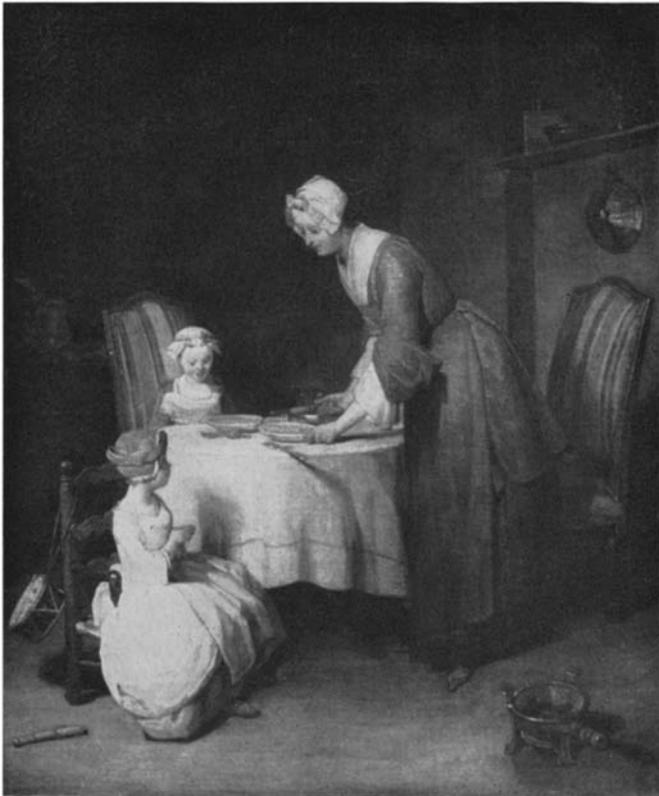
⁵ Like Greuze, Fragonard also learned from the precedents of Dutch and Flemish art. Rubens's *Helena Fourment and Her Children* is a notable example of the kind of art that anticipated and informed Fragonard's paintings of women and children. *Mother's Kisses* (Fig. 18) appears to have borrowed directly from it.



1 Greuze, *The Beloved Mother* (*La Mère bien-aimée*), 1765. Paris, De Laborde Collection (from *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LVI, 1960)



3 Fragonard, *The Return Home* (*Le Retour au Logis*, or *La Réconciliation*). Paris, Arthur Veil-Picard Collection (from G. Wildenstein, *Fragonard*)



2 Chardin, *Saying Grace* (*Le Bénédicité*), ca. 1740. Paris, Louvre (photo: Service de Documentation photographique de la Réunion des Musées nationaux)



4 After Moreau le jeune, *The Delights of Motherhood* (*Les Délices de la maternité*), 1777, engraved by Helman. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)

guishes this work from traditional Holy Families, which it resembles in so many other ways.⁶

The association of motherhood with sexual satisfaction was frequent in eighteenth-century imagery. In 1766, the poet André Sabatier published an ode to mothers in which he describes "a tender and jealous mother rocking her baby – token of her fires . . . It is Venus who charms and caresses Cupid."⁷ The same conceit enlivens a witty engraving by Moreau le jeune, *The Delights of Motherhood*, 1777 (Fig. 4). In a verdant park, a conventional setting for amorous encounters, a husband and wife play with their baby beneath a statue of Venus and Cupid. Like his counterpart above, the child reaches for an enticing object; but it is his father, not his mother, who imitates the Venus overhead. Although more playful than the Fragonard and perhaps with tongue in cheek, this print, too, portrays marriage as a state that satisfies both sexual instincts and social demands for stability and order.⁸ Greuze's painting also carries this message, although it is less overtly stated. A sketch for the mother's figure alone struck Diderot as disturbingly erotic. He observed that without "the accessories of motherhood" – as he referred to the children – her smile appears voluptuous and her languid, exposed body wanton.⁹

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What these images of happy families and contented mothers reflect is not the social reality of the eighteenth century, nor even commonly accepted ideals. Rather, they give expression to a new concept of the family that challenged long-established attitudes and customs.¹⁰ Traditionally, the "family" meant the "line," the chain of descendants who each in turn held title to estates, properties and privileges in the family name. Marriage was a legal contract negotiated between heads of families, whether kings or wealthy peasants, not between the bridal couple. The contract itemized in detail what each family would settle on the new

bride and on her husband. The lowest classes, those with title to nothing, did not marry legally. Even in the propertied classes, only the few married, and those who did were rarely consulted about the choice of their mates. Marriage was normally expected only of the oldest son, usually the sole heir, upon whom parents lavished all their interest and centered their pride. The marriage of a daughter required a dowry and would be arranged only in the absence of male heirs or when her father judged such an alliance to be in the interests of the family.

Households were rarely limited to the immediate family. From the large estate of the aristocrat to the homestead of the wealthy peasant or artisan, the domicile swarmed with unmarried relatives, apprentices, servants and retainers, all of whom were under the rule and protection of the father or legal male head. In these busy, crowded, domestic societies, human relations were largely determined by one's relative rank or status within the household hierarchy. Rules of decorum guided individual behavior in every rank. Relationships between husbands and wives and parents and children were no exception; according to later notions, these were decidedly cool and distant. However, people generally did not expect emotional rewards in conjugal and parental relationships. Fathers and husbands stood for authority, not companionship. Especially in bourgeois and peasant families, where paternal authority was absolute, the father was a severe figure. He ruled his wife – and her property – and decided the fates of his children with full legal sanction. Veneration and obedience, not love and affection, were his traditional due.

Marriage was rarely thought of as a means to personal happiness. Rather, its purpose was to perpetuate the life and identity of the family group and its holdings. This is not to say that married couples did not sometimes develop cordial relationships and even a measure of companionship – the family could engender strong bonds between its members. A seventeenth-century group portrait by Antoine Le Nain

⁶ Rembrandt's Holy Families are especially called to mind. Fragonard loved the work of this artist.

No hard and fast line can be drawn between the older imagery of the Holy Family and that of the secular, 18th-century one. The suggestion of conjugal love – one of the main features of the latter – is not unusual in representations of the Holy Family, and both kinds of families supplied images of exemplary mothers, fathers and children. Philippe Ariès discusses this aspect of Christian imagery in Renaissance and post-Renaissance art in *Centuries of Childhood*, New York, 1962, 339–364. In 17th-century France, for example, Le Brun's *Saying Grace* (*Le Bénédicité*) was thought to be a picture of the Holy Family, which, in turn, was regarded as a model family (*ibid.*, 360–62). However, by their nature, pictures of the Holy Family are to some degree devotional. The image of the child around whom this family is organized cannot be entirely dissociated from his unique and extraordinary mission. The idea of the family that Fragonard painted, on the other hand, whatever it borrows from older, religious art, is completely secular. In contrast to the transcendent purposes of the Holy Family, the exclusive concern of this family is the individual happiness and well-being of its members. The image of the Holy Family, in so far as it is a picture of a family, could suggest this Enlightenment idea, but only to a point, beyond which it risked loss of its traditional Christian content. At the same time, the complete expression of the new ideal demanded ordinarily conceived human beings without special destinies: man in general. The terms of the new ideal were in fact those of 18th-century secular philosophy, and the iconography of the happy family thus reflects the contemporary secularization of French culture.

⁷ In R. Mercier, *L'Enfant dans la société du XVIII^e siècle (avant l'Emile)*,

Dakar, 1961, 101.

⁸ The print, which appeared in the album *Monument du costume*, is part of a series of prints illustrating the life of a fashionable woman. A few scenes later she has tired of the delights of motherhood and is pursuing those of adultery.

⁹ Diderot, *Salons*, II, 151. The model for this figure was Mme. Greuze, whose adulterous affairs were a source of continual vexation for her husband.

¹⁰ The traditional attitudes and family relationships to which I refer, sketched in this and following paragraphs, generally date from the 17th century and persisted through most of the 18th century. Moreover, this picture of family life is drawn from French society primarily. It will not necessarily hold for either the rest of Europe or for earlier periods in France. I have relied mainly on the following sources: Philippe Ariès' pioneering book, *Centuries of Childhood*, which largely inspired the present article, treats the Middle Ages to the 18th century, with emphasis on the 17th century; D. Hunt, *Parents and Children in History, The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France*, New York, 1970; W. D. Camp, *Marriage and the Family in France Since the Revolution*, New York, 1961; L. Delzons, *La Famille française et son évolution*, Paris, 1913; G. Duplessis, *Les Mariages en France*, Paris, 1954, 12–27; J. Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. Eversley, London and Chicago, 1965, 101–143; Mercier, *L'Enfant*; E. Pilon, *La Vie de famille au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1941; and R. Prigent, ed., *Renouveau des idées sur la famille (Institut national d'études démographiques, XIV)*, Paris, 1954, 27–49 and 111–118.



5 Antoine Le Nain, *Portraits in an Interior*, 1649. Paris, Louvre (photo: Service de Documentation photographique de la Réunion des Musées nationaux)

(Fig. 5) represents a convivial-looking family group. It is, however, a portrait of an old household, not the modern conjugal family of Fragonard's *Return Home*. Seated on the right are the old father and his wife, above whom stands either an unmarried daughter or a female relative. On the left stands the next generation, the son (or son-in-law), who will be the next head of the household, and his wife and children. Seated near them is a young boy playing a pipe, an apprentice or a servant and as such a member of this wealthy bourgeois household. If this painting has a voice, it is that of the old father, whose will is the will of the group. It speaks of family pride and loyalty, of prosperity and orderly succession. It also appears to speak with respect and affection of the wife. However, neither patron nor artist intended to suggest individual happiness or conjugal love, concepts that were not available to them. Even so, the work expresses what in the seventeenth century was a progressive bourgeois ideal in that it finds conscious, positive values in marriage and the family society.¹¹

The more widespread view of the marital relationship in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was negative.¹² The figure of the husband was a popular butt of jokes and mockery, and wives were generally thought of as deceptive, crafty and willful: the cuckolded husband and his faithless spouse were stock characters in stories and prints. Among the wealthy, bachelorhood was often a chosen state. Even in the later eighteenth century, when forced or arranged marriages were under increasing attack by moralists, parents persistently opposed marriages of love and continued to arrange the traditional, "sensible" match that

furthered family interests without regard to the individual emotional and sexual needs of their children. The right of parents to choose the mates of their children could be ignored only rarely. At the risk of disinheritance, couples occasionally managed elopements, but the more popular – and acceptable – alternative was adultery. Especially in the cities and among the rich, women felt little compunction about breaking life-long vows that had been forced upon them. Their husbands, who did exactly the same thing, had neither the grounds nor the inclination to complain. For the fashionable woman, marriage in effect meant independence. After presenting her husband with one or two children, she had ample leave to pursue her own pleasures. So-called "natural" children were produced in abundance – and often acknowledged – at all levels of society.

Illicit love was openly celebrated in French eighteenth-century art, often by the same artists who illustrated the joys of conjugal love. In fact, in the second half of the eighteenth century, both libertine and moralizing subjects enjoyed a marked – and equal – increase in popularity.¹³ Baudouin's *The Indiscreet Wife* (Fig. 6), engraved in 1771, and L.-L. Boilly's *The Favored Lover* (Fig. 7), executed in the more sober forms of the 1790's, are typical of these *scènes galantes*, in which only forbidden pleasures are pursued and enjoyed. The charming adulteresses and soubrettes who abound in these scenes were not banished from the stalls and shops of printsellers by pictures of happy mothers and beloved wives. The competing views of individual happiness that these two kinds of scenes present had at least one thing in common: directly or indirectly, they both opposed the conventional

¹¹ This progressive attitude is the subject of Ariès, *Centuries*, 339–404.

¹² See especially Hunt, *Parents*, 68–74; and Pilon, *La Vie*, 55–69.

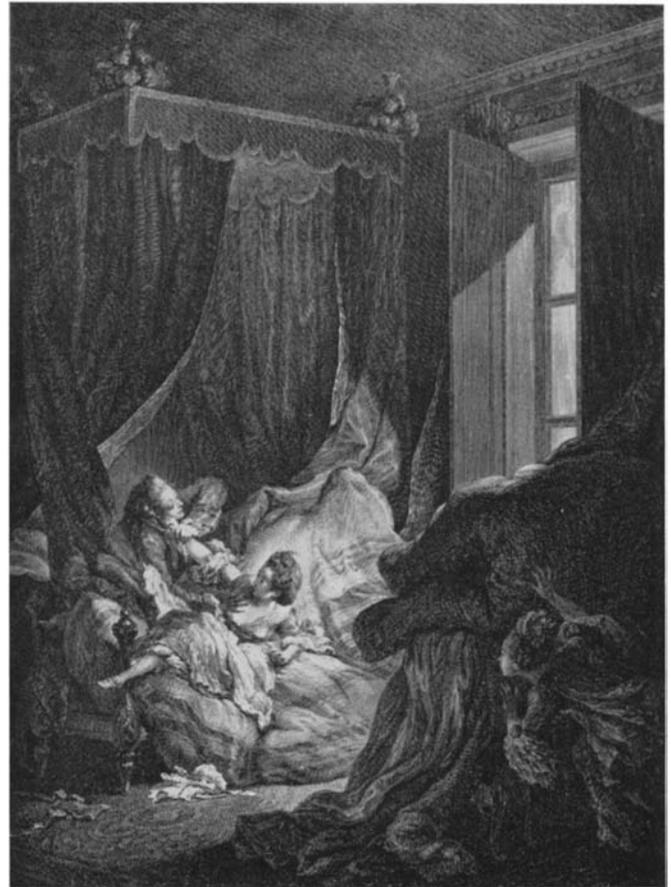
¹³ E. Dacier, *La Gravure en France au XVIII^e siècle; La Gravure de genre et de*

moeurs, Paris and Brussels, 1925, 33; J. Adhémar, *La Gravure originale au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1963, 158; and L. Hautecoeur, *Les Peintres de la vie familiale*, 45f.

eighteenth-century marriage that at best ignored individual needs and at worst frustrated them.¹⁴

The new ideal of the family also challenged popular notions of children and child-rearing. The modern view of infancy and early childhood as attractive and important stages of life is an Enlightenment discovery that was still new in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ It had yet to overcome vestiges of older attitudes that regarded small children sometimes as greedy and willful creatures in need of severe constraints, sometimes as defective adults, and sometimes as charming little pets to be spoiled or ignored as one pleased. Babies and very young children were still received with a certain measure of indifference, if not hostility. Through most of the eighteenth century, the tasks of nursing and caring for babies were regarded by both men and women as debilitating, obnoxious and coarsening. The arrival of an heir brought honor to the mother, but tending to its infant needs and earliest education was the work of servants. French families with any means at all customarily handed their infants to peasant wet nurses, popularly regarded as disreputable, who kept them for about four years.¹⁶ At this point children entered their homes for the first time, often to an indifferent reception. At seven, they were put into adult clothes and – if they were boys – sent away to school or an apprenticeship. Children could grow up barely knowing their parents. These attitudes and customs were still sufficiently alive at the end of the century to draw these angry words from Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the follower of Rousseau: “If, with us [as opposed to wise and gentle savages], fathers beat their children, it is because they love them not; if they send them abroad to nurse as soon as they come into the world, it is because they love them not; if they place them as soon as they have acquired a little growth in boarding schools and colleges, it is because they love them not; . . . if they keep them at a distance from themselves at every epoch of life, it must undoubtedly be because they look upon them as their heirs.”¹⁷

Authoritarian or libertine, these traditional family relationships increasingly struck the eighteenth century as rigid, immoral and against the laws of nature. As the century wore on and as enlightened segments of the bourgeoisie and then the aristocracy adopted the new ideal of the family, the old ways were increasingly rejected or attacked. Many parents, remembering the coldness of their childhood homes, developed more affectionate relations with their children, kept



6 After Baudouin, *The Indiscreet Wife* (*L'Épouse indiscrète*), engraved by Delaunay in 1771. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)



7 After Boilly, *The Favored Lover* (*L'Amant favorisé*), engraved by A. Chaponnier. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)

¹⁴ Both the thesis and the antithesis – that a woman's happiness lies in marriage, motherhood and sexual fidelity on the one hand and in libertinism and illicit love on the other – continued to delight the fashionable public well into the 19th century. See M. Melot, “La Mauvaise Mère,” *Etude d'un thème Romantique dans l'estampe et la littérature*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 6, LXXIX, 1972, 167–176, for an analysis of how 19th-century art struggled with the contradictions raised by these conflicting feminine ideals. Romantic continuations of 18th-century *estampes galantes* and the absorption of aristocratic tastes and social patterns into 19th-century bourgeois culture are major themes in my “The Persistence and Re-emergence of the Rococo in French Romantic Painting,” Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1969.

¹⁵ Ariès, *Centuries*, 15–49; and Hunt, *Parents*, Chaps. 6 and 7.

¹⁶ See especially Hunt, *Parents*, 100–109; and Mercier, *L'Enfant*, 31–37.

¹⁷ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Studies of Nature* (*Études de la nature*), trans. H. Hunter, Philadelphia, 1808, 413.



8 Etienne Aubry, *Fatherly Love (L'Amour paternel)*, 1775. Birmingham, University of Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts (photo: Institute)



9 Etienne Aubry, *Farewell to the Nurse (Les Adieux à la nourrice)*, 1777. Williamstown, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (photo: Institute)



10 Greuze, *The Nursemaids*. Kansas City, Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Nelson Fund (photo: Museum)



11 Debucourt, *Grandmother's Birthday* (*Les Bouquets, ou la fête de la grand-maman*), 1788, colored print. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)



12 Debucourt, *New Year's Visit* (*Les Compliments, ou La matinée du jour l'an*), 1787, colored print. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)

them at home longer and took more pains to find them compatible mates in marriage. After at least two centuries of ridicule, marriage began to enjoy a degree of popularity.¹⁸ Enlightened thinkers of the eighteenth century – men such as Buffon, Holbach, Rousseau and the Encyclopedists – almost unanimously regarded marriage as the happiest, the most civilized and the most natural of states, the institution that could best satisfy and conciliate social and individual needs. They generally agreed that in the marital relationship husbands should have final authority, but they also believed that only relationships based on mutual consent could work. Accordingly, the more they praised marriage the more they attacked the tyranny of greedy fathers who forced their children into unhappy marriages or threw their daughters into convents rather than give them dowries. To the material interests of the family they opposed the rights of the individual to personal happiness.¹⁹ Their greatest anger, however, was reserved for the indifference and severity with which children of all classes were treated.

French philosophers, doctors and educators of the eighteenth century advanced concepts of child care and education that radically reversed common notions and practices. Profoundly influenced by Locke and English philosophy, they argued that the moral and psychological make-up of the adult is largely if not wholly shaped by his childhood environment.²⁰ Fénelon, Buffon, Rousseau and other French thinkers popularized the idea that the nature of childhood is essentially different from that of the adult. Since children cannot reason, they explained, rules, constraints and punishment may actually harm them; rather, good education flows from an understanding of the nature of children and of the way their minds work. They advised parents to build upon and channel a child's need for affection and approval, his natural tendency to learn by imitating and his love of free play and movement. The custom of favoring the oldest son and heir while neglecting the other children was vehemently denounced. Above all, they attacked the custom of sending babies off to wet nurses for the first few years of their lives as immoral and unnatural; only loving parents and especially nursing mothers could provide the kind of care and environment in which a healthy and virtuous child could grow. They promised the parents who would adopt these innovations a rich reward; awaiting them were pleasures and emotional satisfactions without parallel in other human relationships.

The promotion of these new ideas – the idea of childhood as a unique phase of human growth and that of the family as an intimate and harmonious social unit – became a major activity, a veritable cause, of Enlightenment writers.²¹ In

novels, on the stage and in educational, medical and philosophical treatises, the new ideals of the happy and healthy family were dramatized and explained. Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* and his *Emile*, published in 1761 and 1762 respectively, lyrically plead them and probably did more to popularize them than any other works. Diderot's *Salons*, Greuze's *The Beloved Mother* and Fragonard's *The Return Home* equally belong to this Enlightenment campaign.

Artists other than Greuze and Fragonard also gave expression to the new ideas – some from personal conviction, some with an eye to the market. The painter Etienne Aubry (1745–1781) won critical praise from moralists when he took up these issues in the 1770's.²² His scenes of family life explore questions of child-rearing with seriousness and dignity. They are rendered with a graceful naturalism that was influenced by Greuze's style but relies less on dramatic devices. His *Fatherly Love*, 1775 (Fig. 8), sold as a Greuze in 1961, shows a gentle, rustic father about to pick up his youngest son. His own father and wife watch with pleased and approving smiles. Here is an ideal environment for the young, where adults of both sexes show love and affection to all their children. In his portrayal of the paternal role, Aubry was more advanced than Greuze, whose noble old patriarchs (as in *The Ungrateful Son*) are apologies for the traditional, authoritarian father.²³ In another painting, *Farewell to the Nurse*, 1776 (Fig. 9), Aubry again argues for fatherly love and close ties between parents and children. On the right a wealthy father who has left his baby with peasants holds himself apart and aloof from the moving scene before him. He stands in marked contrast to the peasant, who openly expresses his paternal attachment to the baby. Meanwhile, the unhappy baby squirms to get out of the arms of his natural mother and into those of his wet nurse. Aubry teaches that environment and social behavior mean more than simple blood ties and that good parents nurse and keep their children at home. In *The Nursemaids* (Fig. 10), Greuze gave the same lesson, but with a more conventional argument and without his usual sympathy for rustics. Unlike Aubry's good peasant woman, this is a slovenly, crabby-looking nurse, surrounded by ill-behaved children. Neither she nor her companion seem to care about the children in their charge, some of whom must be their own. The point again is that the environment makes the child and the child makes the man. These badly behaved youngsters can only become morally weak adults. Rousseau had stressed this idea in *Emile*, where he claimed that the whole moral order of France had degenerated because the wealthy refused to nurse and raise their own children.²⁴

Although the exemplary parents of eighteenth-century

¹⁸ Prigent, *Renouveau*, 34–49; and Duplessis, *Les Mariages*, 14–15.

¹⁹ This issue was dramatically developed at the end of the century. The Revolutionary National Assembly, carried away by liberal idealism, swept the old marriage laws off the books and legislated new ones, favoring consensual matches, restricting paternal authority and allowing for easy divorce. Napoleon's Civil Code of 1804 reversed almost all of these laws – laws that ran counter to the traditional interests of the bourgeois family – and reinstated marriage along the old lines (Delzons, *La Famille*, 1–26).

²⁰ See especially Mercier's study, *L'Enfant*, for 18th-century theories of child-rearing.

²¹ Prigent, *Renouveau*, 34–49; and Mercier, *L'Enfant*, 145–161.

²² Florence Ingersoll-Smuse, "Quelques tableaux de genre inédits par Etienne Aubry (1745–1781)," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 5, XI, 1925, 77–86; and Diderot, *Salons*, iv, 260–61 and 291.

²³ This ennobling of authoritarian fathers is a conservative element in the art of Greuze and a response to contemporary criticism of the traditional paternalistic role. David's *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, and *Brutus*, 1789, similarly idealize the traditional authoritarian father and husband. While the women in these pictures are shown to be ruled by their emotions and family feelings alone, male virtue consists in conquering these sentiments with the aid of reason, a faculty women were thought to lack.

²⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *His Educational Theories Selected from Emile, Julie and Other Writings*, ed. R. L. Archer, Woodbury, New York, 1964, 73.



13 F.-H. Drouais, *Group Portrait*, 1756. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection (photo: Museum)



14 Prud'hon, *Venus, Hymen and Cupid*. Paris, Louvre (photo: Service de Documentation photographique de la Réunion des Musées nationaux)

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art were usually represented as rustics, artists also explored the rewards of parenthood among the more affluent, as in a set of colored engravings by Debucourt (Figs. 11 and 12), executed in the late 1780's. Here, good parents have become happy grandparents, and the fuss they make over their grandchildren is thoroughly modern. *Grandmother's Birthday* was dedicated to mothers, while *New Year's Visit* was dedicated to fathers, who traditionally blessed their families on January 1.

Commissioned portraits of real families increasingly reflected the new concept of conjugal love and family harmony. A family portrait by Drouais (Fig. 13), dated 1756 when these ideas were still relatively novel in France, goes to some lengths to assert them. The aristocratic couple who commissioned this work and who unquestionably suggested or approved its every detail had a very exacting idea of how they wanted themselves represented. It is their conjugal relationship, their affection for each other, and not their separate identities or ranks that they chose to emphasize. The prominent clock tells the late morning hour, and the scene is set in the wife's dressing room, an hour and a place usually reserved for intimates. An inscription gives the date as April 1, a sort of Valentine's day on which gifts and love letters were exchanged – the paper in the husband's hand must be such a letter. Like the family in Fragonard's *Return Home*, the mother is situated in the center of the gracefully related group – between her attentive husband, towards whom she inclines her head, and her daughter, over whom she leans and fusses. Thus did bourgeois concepts penetrate aristocratic culture. Increasingly, women of noble rank would have themselves painted in their roles as mothers and wives.

Even the prestigious heights of art, the realm of mythology, responded to the new interest in conjugal love, letting this essentially middle-class idea enter through the front door of aristocratic culture. In the late eighteenth century, Hymen, the god of marriage, enjoyed a new popularity and increasingly joined Venus and Cupid in pictorial representations. Prud'hon's *Venus, Hymen and Cupid* (Fig. 14) reverses the logic of conventional wisdom. Tradition taught that love, because it blinds and impairs the judgment, is the enemy of sound, advantageous marriage. But in Prud'hon's painting the three divinities smile in happy accord. The very classicism of their forms seems to confer upon their union the sanction of antiquity. Moreau's *Delights of Motherhood* (Fig. 4), with its reference to Venus, conveys the same idea – that sexual gratification, marriage and parenthood come in a single package suitable for elevated tastes. A verse by Helvétius, published in 1772, went even further. It argued that sexual desire is heightened when Hymen and Cupid work as partners:

Enchained to both Hymen and Cupid,
Happy loving couple, what a blessing is ours . . .
I was scorched by Cupid who was consuming my soul;
Hymen, far from quenching the flames, fanned them up.²⁵

²⁵ In Prigent, *Renouveau*, 37.

²⁶ Ariès, *Centuries*, 404; Camp, *Marriage*, 99 and 126; Prigent, *Renouveau*, 111–14; and H. Bergues, P. Ariès and others, *La Prévention des naissances dans la famille, ses origines dans les temps modernes (Institut national d'études démographiques, xxxv)*, Paris, 1960, 311–327.

The educational and psychological functions of the new family help to explain its profound appeal to the feelings and imagination of the eighteenth century. For it appeared as a forceful idea just when modern bourgeois culture was beginning to take shape, and it answered particular needs which that culture created. The commercial, financial and professional activity of the *ancien régime*, although limited to a small sector of the population, was expanding enough to change people's life-expectations and experience. As economic opportunities increased, it made sense to more people to limit the size of their families and to educate more of their children for higher positions in the world than the ones to which they were born.²⁶ The large traditional family was not geared to the new society; its logic presupposed stable social and economic conditions. Accordingly, it passed on its means intact to a single heir and taught its members family, not individual, identity, collective, not personal, ambitions. In contrast, the new family, a small and harmonious social group, could direct its unified energies toward all its children's futures. More child-centered, it was better organized to equip its sons with the mental skills and psychological strengths of the new man – the independent, mobile, reasoning citizen of the enlightened age. Rousseau, arguing the necessity of modern education, wrote, "If no one could be dislodged from his present station, then existing modes of education would, in some respects, be sound; a child would be brought up for his station, he would never leave it and he would never be exposed to the difficulties of any other. But we [must] consider the instability of human affairs [and] the restless and changeful spirit of the age, which reverses everything with each new generation."²⁷ And again, "In the case of the rustic we think only of the class; each member does the same as the rest. . . . In the case of men living in civilized communities, we think of the individuals; we add to each everything that he can possess over and above that possessed by his fellows; we let him go as far as he can to become the greatest man alive."²⁸

The new family, more intimate than the old, also served the psychological needs of adults. The emerging world of business was less personal and more active than the old and affected the quality of daily life. People developed a new consciousness of private *versus* public life and a pressing new need for a secure and tranquil sanctuary removed from the impersonal and competitive relations that increasingly marked commercial and civic affairs. The home, the family, came to be looked upon as a haven, a place of intimacy, warmth and personal well-being opposed to the harsher world outside.²⁹ These associations helped to make the new ideal of the family such an attractive and emotionally resonant subject for the eighteenth century, even though – or perhaps because – most people still lived in traditionally arranged domestic situations.

The unifying element of the new family was the wife-

²⁷ Rousseau, 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁹ Ariès, *Centuries*, 398–400 and 404–06.



15 After Freudeberg, *The Contentments of Motherhood* (*La Complaisance maternelle*), engraved by Delaunay. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)



16 Fragonard, *The Joys of Motherhood* (*Les Délices maternelles*). New York, Wildenstein Collection (courtesy Wildenstein)



17 Fragonard and Marguerite Gérard, *The Beloved Child* (*L'Enfant chéri*). New York, Charles Dunlap Collection (courtesy Wildenstein)



18 Fragonard, *Mother's Kisses* (*Les Baisers maternels*), ca. 1777. Preguy, Baron Edmond de Rothschild Collection (from Wildenstein, *Fragonard*)



19 Prud'hon, *The Happy Mother*, sketch, ca. 1810. London, Wallace Collection (reproduced by permission of the trustees of the Wallace Collection)



20 After Augustin de Saint-Aubin, *The Happy Mother* (*L'Heureuse mère*), engraved by A. F. Sergent-Marceau. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Library)

mother. From her primarily was to flow that warmth and tranquility that Enlightenment bachelors like Diderot so ardently eulogized as the central attraction of family life. She is Rousseau's Julie and Sophie, the happy mother of Fragonard and Greuze and the virtuous wife of numerous eighteenth-century playwrights and novelists. Pretty, modest and blushing, her happiness consists in making her husband happy and in serving the needs of her children. Indeed, everything in her make-up, including her personality, is determined by her situation in the conjugal family, a situation from which eighteenth-century writers deduced the "nature" of woman. She is coquettish for her husband, whose physical and emotional needs she fulfills and to whose will she gladly submits; she is thrifty, skilled in the domestic arts, and a good mother and nurse to her children. She is the traditional bourgeois wife, but with a difference: she has been educated to find personal and emotional fulfillment in the execution of her duties. This is the difference between the good wife of old and the happy mother of eighteenth-century art and literature. The latter is psychologically trained to *want* to do the very things she must do in a middle-class family society. According to Rousseau, this is the goal of women's education: since it is their natural lot to be subject to the will of men, girls should become accustomed from the first to restrictions and constraints. Their own fancies must be crushed in infancy so that they will become habitually docile and feel that they were "made" to obey.³⁰ Needless to say, in the eyes of Rousseau and his followers, the aristocratic woman, who organized her life around her own pleasures rather than around the needs of her husband and children, violated the laws of nature. So did the intellectual woman, the *femme-philosophe*. Wrote Rousseau: "From the lofty elevation of her genius, she despises all the duties of a woman and always begins to play the man. . . . [She] has left her natural state."³¹

Julie, the heroine of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, is the perfect embodiment of the new feminine ideal. Although she married a man she was not in love with (out of love and duty to her parents), she is a contented wife and mother. Her husband is enlightened to the laws of nature, and Julie finds pleasure in winning his approval. She organizes her life largely around the needs of her children, nurses and personally cares for her own infants, and undertakes the complete education of her daughter, who by imitation will become like Julie. The education of her son, however, is another matter; when he reaches the age of reason he is handed over to his father. "I nurse children," says Julie, "but I am not presumptuous enough to wish to train men. . . . More worthy hands will be charged with this noble task. I am a woman and a mother and I know how to keep my proper sphere."³² Thus does

Julie contribute to two major functions of the conjugal family: the creation of active, independent males and of submissive, service-oriented females.³³

The image of the mother fulfilling herself as she tends to the needs of her children was a compelling one to eighteenth-century writers. Indeed, the cult of motherhood conquered male writers before it significantly changed the lives of women. The joys of maternity became a fashionable literary theme, its every aspect eloquently told in prose and poetry, from the sensual rewards of breast-feeding to the unequalled pleasure of receiving a child's caresses and kisses.³⁴ Even pregnancy was exalted. As one writer declared in 1772: "A woman is almost always annoyed at being pregnant, [but] this state should be regarded by women as the most beautiful moment in their lives."³⁵ The notion that motherhood is the *only* emotionally fulfilling role for a woman was fully developed. As another of these male authorities assured his readers: "The sensations experienced by a woman when she becomes a mother are of a kind superior to anything she feels in other circumstances."³⁶

Among the favorite arguments for motherhood advanced in this literature was the appeal to Nature, whose laws could be read in the mores of peasant or exotic cultures, or in more virtuous eras of the past.³⁷ French women were exhorted to imitate happy rustic mothers, noble savage mothers or the mothers of antiquity, all of whom nurse or nursed their own young. The campaign for motherhood, however, found its most urgent voice when it turned to the population problem. Frenchmen in the eighteenth century mistakenly but fervently believed that the French population was shrinking and in danger of extinction.³⁸ At the same time, the use of contraceptive practices was becoming widespread among middle- and upper-class women, whose subculture was bent on avoiding the debilitating physical effects and the economic burden of the large, biological family. Although evidence indicates that some fathers privately welcomed this trend, male public opinion was scandalized. The idea that women might exercise choice in this area, that they might choose to limit or avoid childbirth, alarmed respectable men of letters who produced a torrent of pamphlets extolling the joys of motherhood, proclaiming it the only natural state for women, and condemning the immorality and selfishness of those who would deprive the state of its population.³⁹ In this light, Diderot's verbal paraphrase of Greuze's *The Beloved Mother*, addressed as it is to men only, deserves to be quoted more fully: "It preaches population, and portrays with profound feeling the happiness and the inestimable rewards of domestic tranquility. It says to all men of feeling and sensibility: 'Keep your family comfortable, give your wife children; give her as many as

³⁰ Rousseau, 218–227.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

³² *Ibid.*, 46.

³³ It should be noted, however, that the virtuous ideal embodied in Julie was in some ways a step up for women, whose capacity for virtue of any kind was still widely doubted and whose contribution to society was largely ignored (see Hunt, *Parents*, 72–73). Moreover, at least in principle if not in substance, Julie demonstrated that individual happiness was a female as well as a male pursuit.

³⁴ Mercier, *L'Enfant*, 97–105.

³⁵ In Bergues, *La Prévention*, 283.

³⁶ In *ibid.*, 282.

³⁷ Mercier, *L'Enfant*, 118–122.

³⁸ Bergues, *La Prévention*, 311–327. In fact, the population of France was growing. See W. L. Langer, "Checks on Population Growth: 1750–1850," *Scientific American*, cccxxvi, February, 1972, 92–99.

³⁹ See Bergues, *La Prévention*, 253–307, for a collection of these texts.

you can; give them only to her and be assured of being happy at home.’’⁴⁰

The call to motherhood, however, probably had deeper roots in the psychological needs of the time than in concerns for population size. In any case, artists portrayed it more frequently than they did the theme of the larger family. Along with the writers, they explored its every facet. Young rustic mothers, their nursing breasts virtuously exposed, became a staple of the printseller; Freudeberg's *The Contentments of Motherhood* (Fig. 15) is typical. From Fragonard's atelier came a whole series of happy and good mothers. Two of these, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Fig. 16) and *The Beloved Child* (Fig. 17), celebrate with Rococo exuberance the pleasures of a peasant and a fashionable mother respectively. *The Beloved Child* is probably in large part the work of Marguerite Gérard, Fragonard's student and sister-in-law and a specialist in this genre. Another Fragonard, *Mother's Kisses* (Fig. 18), painted in his boldest, most spontaneous style, treats a theme that writers also liked: the joys of a mother who receives the fervent embraces of her children, an experience, claimed the moralists, justly denied to women who ship their infants off to be tended by others.

The image of the happy nursing mother – an image of generosity and charity with a long history in religious art – was also popular. Among the paintings that David sent to the Salon of 1781 was *A Woman Nursing Her Infant* (now lost), which was duly praised by Diderot.⁴¹ In Prud'hon's *The Happy Mother* (Fig. 19), the theme is treated with unusual subtlety. In a still, shadowy wood, a hazy light picks out the motionless figures of a nursing mother and her infant. The child asleep, the mother watching him, each seems to experience a perfect contentment and tranquility. The dark shadows, the simple, harmonious composition, the highlighting of bare flesh – everything in this work suggests feelings of intimacy and sensual satisfaction shared by mother and child. In contrast to Prud'hon's poetry is a print by Augustin de Saint-Aubin of exactly the same subject, *The Happy Mother* (Fig. 20), executed around the turn of the century. This extraordinary mother, who apparently can nurse two infants at a time, displays her maternal attributes with the clarity and the frontality of an archaic goddess. The message that motherhood is happiness is nowhere more blatantly stated.

With images such as these, the cult of motherhood and the concept of the conjugal family found vehicles of popularization. Expressions of a new, child-centered culture – still a minority culture in 1800, they would become familiar ideals throughout French society in the course of the following century.

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⁴⁰ Diderot, *Salons*, II, 155.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, IV, 378.