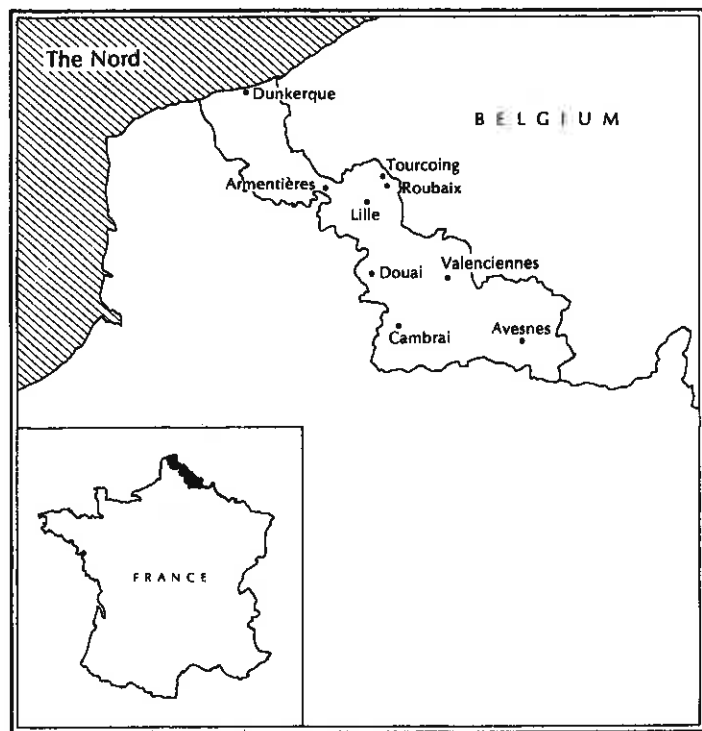




Ladies
of the
Leisure Class
The Bourgeoises
of Northern France
in the
Nineteenth Century

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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.

In sum, my investigation of the bourgeois women of northern France will proceed as if they truly inhabited a world apart. This did not prevent the political and economic concerns of modern France from impinging on their lives. On the contrary, they and their husbands constantly found themselves in a difficult position in their relation to one another. On the one hand, French men did indeed find consolation in the home with its gentle evenings of song and poetry, and with its velvet cushions and delicacies. On the other hand, bourgeois women often menaced the uneasy equilibrium of a tension-ridden industrial order. As they championed reactionary causes—especially Church and king—and as they sometimes opposed rationalism and science—especially in the education of children—men saw in their partners a hostile and disruptive force. The conservative world view of the female half of the ruling class became increasingly worrisome to intellectuals and politicians who bore the burden of sustaining a market society. From their concern grew various efforts to reform women's education and to terminate the social influence women had gained through philanthropic activity.

With varying degrees of tenacity, and certainly with unequal weapons, the women of northern France fought these efforts to curb the influence of their world view and to change its character. The battle had interesting results. The attempt by men to alter the relationship between the market world and domestic life converted a few women to feminism as a means of emphasizing the importance of the female vision of society. Other women forged a tighter and more explicit alliance with reactionary institutions that could give force to their ideas, and a still greater number retreated from any activity in public life to unalloyed privacy in the home. But whatever their choice, the women of the Nord, in challenging the champions of modernization so directly, brought into stark relief the dichotomy that existed between men and women of the bourgeoisie, and testified to their own alienation from the modern world.

Such alienation had the important consequence of removing women from the historical stage. Their encapsulation in the home made them resistant to a mode of interpreting human experience that treats of public events and thoughts in relationship to public time or chronology. Working-class women in the marketplace or feminists in the political arena more easily fill the requirements for historical narrative. But an appreciation of women's lives demands that we discuss a private world whose time was often more natural and traditional than modern. Childbirth, periods of illness, deaths, anniversaries, meals, and other household occurrences formed a sequence of events significant to women but inappropriate to a narrative shaped, say, by the course of French political debate or by economic fluctuations. In fact, viewing home life exclusively through the lens of public affairs or public time can only distort our image.⁶

Throughout this book we shall be forced, then, to move back and forth between two conceptions of time. When discussing the household, the convent, or religious rituals, the treatment of women will seem almost timeless, and grounded in repetition or even biological rhythm. But simultaneously, as men, the market, or the political events of France sought to or actually did influence the household, we must be ready to switch, as the women of the Nord often did, to sudden intrusions of public time. So too with space. The household in a certain sense was removed from the public forum, and was even immune to geographical differentiation. Homes in Dunkerque, Valenciennes, Lille, or Roubaix had a similarity that contrasted sharply with the differentiated loci of public events. So we must examine the household in its own, often hermetic, terms, yet always maintain a readiness to return to the public forum when women enter it.

The problem of distinguishing, and yet showing the relationship between the domestic and public spheres occurs repeatedly in the writing of social history. It becomes even

more intense when we introduce individual characters in a narrative. When I first studied a group of Northern women several years ago, I was intrigued by the details of their existence: the number of children they bore and how they raised them, the number of servants they employed and how they organized their households; their religious devotion and the expression of that devotion in social work and volunteer societies; school routines and the subjects they studied. My first effort in women's history consisted of relating these details for the bourgeois of Lille and of noting the divergence between their lives and those of their husbands. But it soon struck me that the difference between the historical male and the historical female was more pronounced than I had realized. The mass of details themselves yielded no "great" individual women. Few consistently worked in public or shaped important events. Nor could the life of a single woman be charted in its entirety in any historically significant way. Instead the often gossipy details contained layers of a common experience. And this situation points to a perilous course to be followed between the extremes of meaningless antiquarianism (which tempts all social historians) and ahistorical stereotyping.

If it avoids these perils, social history extends the narrative of the past in a new direction. It humanizes that story in a way that economic, political, and intellectual history have often neglected. In the case of the women of the Nord we may not find any great individual consciously acting in the public arena, but we will gain a picture of an important social group whose private way of life proceeded outside previous standards of historical significance. The story of these women offers an example of the formation of a distinctive *mentalité* within a group having close ties to nature. Beyond this anthropological task lies the historical one: to show how the world view of women unfolded in a particular social context—namely, a scientific and industrial society with a democratic political configuration. That context had a significant effect on their lives. In the first place, a complex

division of labor relegated them to the exclusive task of breeding children, where once they had complemented their reproductive charge with domestic production. Second, it surrounded them with new ideas: democracy, individualism, natural rights, and the like. Domesticity can be seen as the result of new conditions of reproduction, just as feminism is currently being interpreted as a byproduct of political modernization: that is, of natural rights applied to women as well as to men.⁷

In any book about women, even one that deals with the household, the question of feminism lurks in the wings. Such books search for signs of suffering, bonding, and the seeds of rebellion in the household, and see domesticity as a construct that fosters an awareness of lost opportunity. This book, too, grows out of an interest in finding the connection between feminism and domesticity, the two striking phenomena of bourgeois women's lives in the nineteenth century. But it seeks an explanation of why feminism followed so closely on the heels of domesticity more satisfactory than *ad hoc propter hoc*. In many ways feminism reiterated not only modern political themes, but also those of the reproductive mentality of bourgeois women.

Part I sets the scene. The Nord was one of the most industrialized regions of France; the men of the bourgeoisie adhered to the general creed of capitalism, and their wives for a brief moment shared in the process of managing the family enterprise, a subject taken up in Chapter Two. The transition from mercantile to industrial manufacturing, however, terminated the relationship between home and business, and made for a separation of the sexes and a sharp definition of functions. In Part II our narrative concentrates on the life of women after their acceptance of an exclusively reproductive life without an explicitly public orientation. We examine, first, the activities of the household and try to explain their coherence as a cultural system. This private experience of women was knitted together in various ways. First, religion provided a cosmology and metaphysics for

their mundane chores and satisfied their human craving for explanations of experience. Second, the tight fusion of domestic and religious values bred in Northern women a commitment to extend their scope beyond a single home into the households of the poor. They became vigorous ladies of charity. Home, cosmos, and society constituted a tripartite axis of the domestic vision.

In Part III we watch the propagation of domesticity. Instruction in the domestic, religious, and charitable way of life came most often from the educational system which, as the century progressed, centered on the convent. This one institution eclipsed all others by the end of the nineteenth century, and we can explain its triumph only in the context of the world created by women in the home and through the Church. Finally, the sum of women's experience found its voice in the sentimental novel, and the women of the Nord were no different from women in every industrial society in their use of this genre to give an ideological expression to domestic life in all its fullness.

The story that unfolds will not always be pleasant, and it may be tempting to explain away the reactionary, ignorant, militant, and even foolish activities of women by saying that they were the dupes of priests or oppressed by men or the victims of capitalism. Outside forces are not irrelevant, but too often they become the sole explanatory factor in women's lives. Because there is little evidence for a conspiracy theory of women's history, using this type of explanation amounts to a childlike wish to escape responsibility for one's own plight. More than sixty years ago Edith Wharton, herself a bourgeois woman, wondered "when our sex is coming out of the kindergarten."⁸ We can start that process by analyzing domestic life as, in good measure, a female creation and as evidence of the continuing ingenuity of human agency.

4

Domesticity: The Rhetoric of Reproduction

The domestic woman, especially the woman of wealth, is a more familiar figure than her business-oriented ancestor. By 1870 her portrait is finished, revealing a carefully corseted lady in a plaid taffeta dress, slightly gathered across the stomach, full in back, her lacy shawl arranged to display a white collar attached with a cameo; a small veiled hat on her head, a plush purse dangling from her gloved hands.¹ She is about to make her afternoon visit—in fact, several of them. The children have been dispatched, some to school, some to the care of servants; she has drawn up an *ordre du jour* for the household staff, attended mass, written letters and entries in her diary, presided over the noon meal. In the evening she will sit with her family listening to one of the children read from the Comtesse de Ségur's *Évangile d'une grand'mère*;² while listening she will embroider a cushion and eventually summon the servants for evening prayers. This daily ritual is punctuated by visits from the seamstress, knitting for the poor, mending, making lists of repairs, purchases, and projects, and preparing an occasional lavish entertainment at which she and others of her female guests will play the piano and sing.

From the nineteenth century on, people have looked at this portrait and read from it the meaning of the home and

the role of woman. The soft folds, delicate lace, plush cushions, and caressing voices contributed to the vision of the home as haven; men returning from work and children from school passed from the outside world with its demands and pressures to the refuge of the home; while one world ruthlessly suppressed personal and psychological needs, the other encouraged and even fulfilled them, providing sustenance and refreshment for industrial society's managers and young trainees. Yet such a picture, taken as it is from a male perspective, does not depict what the home meant to the woman who never left its confines.

Alternatively, the home has been read not as the opposite of the market world but as its complement; one, the world of consumption, the other of production. The tafetta dress, the cameo, the china and silver, even the Comtesse de Ségur's little book had all sprung from the machine. In this view, the home is seen as a repository for industrial goods, and the taffeta-clad lady becomes the parasitic consumer who fortifies the market economy with her spendthrift habits.³ Thus, the home and, indeed, the domestic system as a whole, had an economic function of increasing the profits of capitalists everywhere. Within the domestic system, however, deployment of cushions, pianos, china, and books in a room have no economic significance, nor does the arrangement of a cameo on a dress have any connection with the market. While purchase or exchange may be an economic act, consumption is not. The artifacts of the home were not equivalent with the artifacts of the market for the woman who manipulated the cushions and cameos; they were not the same to her as balance sheets, gross national product statistics, or any other mathematical calculation; and no market indicator will ever recapitulate the lush but systematic interior of the household.

This view of the home, in which the signs of domesticity are equated with industrial order, has been buttressed by Thorstein Veblen, whose interpretation has come to dominate explanations of the lavish home and its equally lavish

woman.⁴ In his view, the attractive bourgeoisie and her attractive children and home, like trophies of war, indicate male social position and acquired power. The excess of goods, domestic personnel, and the like not only satisfied the normal human craving for security and comfort, but were used by upper-class men much as the barbarian used his trophies to distinguish himself from others. Only the barbarian's use of physical force separated him from the modern male of the leisure class. In all other ways, and especially in the use of goods and women as symbols, modern man perpetuated primitive traits: domesticity—conspicuous consumption—was above all else a sign of family wealth.

Veblen's interpretation is intriguing, not so much for the scorn with which he treats men's psychological cravings as for his suggestion that artifacts in the home may convey meaning. He has not misread a plush reality from the plush surfaces of the home; he understands that the surface is not reality itself, but symbolic of reality. However, for Veblen, that reality is a male one. The artifacts of the home reveal the attitudes of the bourgeois man. But the taffeta-clad lady eludes him, as she eludes Veblen's epigones, who can only depict her as a puppet of her husband's needs for signs of power.

One may extend Veblen's thesis of the symbolic content of domestic artifacts by realizing that they were themselves a female creation, expressive of female realities. It was the bourgeois woman who bought the velvet cushion and embroidered it, who decided on the lacy black shawl, who played the piano at evening social gatherings for which she had supervised the meal planning, table decoration, and seating arrangements. What message did women convey in their choice and use of symbolic devices? Were they testimonials to some power women had acquired either politically or in the market?

If we are not to make the same mistake as Veblen and others, that of falling into a false or incomplete explanation

born of our own preconceptions, we must regard the artifacts of the home as modern anthropologists have for several generations regarded tribal artifacts and rituals. The use of beads, feathers, animal fur, strips of leather, indicates organized symbolic systems; in these systems expressions of hunting, agricultural, kinship, and religious organization are observed. In other words, artifacts express meaning, but a meaning that resides in social organization and patterns of activity. So, too, we must examine the "inner physiology"⁵ of the home, for only by understanding the underlying mechanisms of domestic life can we unravel that tangle of lace, drapery, lavish entertainment, household staff, and needlework to arrive at the truth of what the home meant to the woman who created and organized it.

Beneath the artifacts of women lay the reality not of economic activity but of reproduction, and concern for perpetuating the family. In the nineteenth century, the home became the exclusive focus for the legitimate procreation of the human race. Within its confines men and women engaged in sexual intercourse; women gave birth to children at home and nurtured them there in the hope that they would survive the perilous course of childhood; they nursed the sick and closed the eyes of the dead. Because women preserved the ties of blood within an encapsulated space, they tended to see the home as a microcosm, a holistic universe to which the industrial world was a subordinate support system. As industry extracted more and more of the productive functions of the home, the latter's reproductive essence stood only more purified and enhanced. We must look, therefore, at the reproductive experience of women for explanations of domesticity, just as we might look at farm life for insight into peasant rituals and modes of expression.

Considering reproduction involves recognizing that it is a natural act, and that a person who acts on nature, who produces or has control of natural forces, may think differently from one who is nature's victim. Whether one manipulates a tool or is manipulated by the weather, floods, or

blight shapes a state of mind. In this respect, the bourgeoisie who devoted her life exclusively to reproduction, who was, so to speak, at nature's call, will have a different outlook from her ancestors who had some ability to act upon the world in their business life.

Yet to understand the bourgeoisie, the social context in which she reproduced is important. Just as the worker produces in a social relationship with the industrialist, the bourgeoisie procreated within a matrix of institutions, with the advice, consent, and cooperation of different people. In approaching this woman, the tendency has been to see her unsympathetically and even ahistorically as a culpable reproducer of babies to insure the transmission of private wealth. This interpretation locates her within a social milieu, but it ignores the effect that this context for reproduction had on her own mentality. The demands of society, its institutions, even the bourgeois woman's relatives, all helped create the taffeta-clad lady of the Nord, and they influenced the way she in turn constructed and interpreted the domestic world.

Reproduction

When the young women of the Nord married, they did so without illusions of love and romance. They acted within a framework of concern for the reproduction of bloodlines according to financial, professional, and sometimes political interests. Instead of leaving themselves victims of the personal whims of the young, the bourgeoisie of the Nord arranged marriages out of their need to conserve wealth within the region, in order to finance the expansion of industry, and to forge social solidarity. That system operated successfully, for example, in generations of the Scrive family. Antoine Scrive-Labbe, the daring innovator in textiles, contracted alliances for his children among his business associates in textiles. As the family's interests expanded into other financial endeavors, so marriage partners came from

more diversified fields (see Table 1). Regionalism, for the most part, remained the norm.⁶

Children reaching an eligible age expected their parents, often in concert with other relatives, to undertake the search for marriage partners. Usually the bridegroom's family initiated the discussion, and within each cluster of families one member often served as broker for all related children. In the family R., for example, an uncle in the clergy arranged marriages for his brother, for his nieces and nephews, and finally for his grandnieces and grandnephews.⁷ Custom dictated an initial meeting between these representatives, followed by a dinner or other social engagement between the families and the two children. The subject of marriage never arose at such an event. If the two families remained interested, they then pursued detailed inquiries into the religion, morality, and health of even distant generations. The presence of madness or congenital disease might disrupt a proposed alliance. Or, if the young man were known for profligacy of any sort, again a rupture might ensue. Any of these considerations paled, however, in the light of overwhelming financial assets or social position. The parents of Louise R., for example, although they thought her too young to marry at the age of eighteen, agreed to a proposal of marriage into a highly successful sugar-refining family because of its many advantages, and the marriage took place within a few months.⁸

Given this economic rationale, people throughout the Nord ridiculed, in fact inveighed against, marriages occasioned by love. Fortunes remained too tenuous, bankruptcies occurred too often for the *coup de foudre*, the lightning bolt of love at first sight, to be seen as anything other than one more gratuitous—and avoidable—disturbance.⁹ The northern novelist, Mathilde Bourdon, devoted several of her works to the disasters ensuing from such a lack of common sense and family feeling. Girls must look only to the guidance of their parents, she thought, and divert their eyes from members of the opposite sex.¹⁰

Her warning derived from concrete instances of well-known disruptions of the social order resulting from the fact of falling in love. In the first place, initial meetings of families did not always work smoothly; thus the girl who engaged her heart to a young man before parental approval was certain risked a cruel deception that might spoil her for another venture. Then again, children who thought for themselves might produce a family scandal of enormous proportions. In the middle of the century, for example, two cousins, grandchildren of the wealthiest man in Lille, fell in love during their summers together on their grandfather's estate. Their request to be married, although approved by their respective parents, brought opposition from uncles and aunts who refused their consent for financial reasons. This seemingly innocent request ultimately tore the family apart to such an extent that the police were summoned to keep the children from seeing one another. Quickly the errant daughter was married to a wealthy invalid and subsequently became a nun, while the young man, later a highly successful national politician, never married. Such was the strength of money, such the power of family considerations in the matter of marriages.¹¹

Few ever protested this system; instead, most people cited its advantages. What could better assure a successful union, they maintained, than the careful selection of partners by parents who shared financial, political, and social connections? Marriage bound a community in important ways that the romantic young might neglect to consider. Stunning examples of the success of this system reverberate throughout the history of northern France. The Barrois-Virmot union in the late eighteenth century produced through the united efforts of husband and wife an enormous family fortune and a series of most affectionate letters written while the husband went off on sales trips.¹² In the late nineteenth century, the careful marriage of Germaine Bernard to Paul Feron-Vrau, which combined the religious and political predilections of the two families, resulted in a common leadership

in Christian factory management, Catholic politics, and urban religious fervor.¹³

This practical rationale for marriage seemed to gain almost complete assent from Northern children. Throughout the century, fewer than three percent of Northern women married out of birth order—an indication of parental control of marriages. Consistently they married by 21, again an indication that parents conceived of and enforced an appropriate age for such a union. Only the generation that came of age during World War I married significantly later (see Table 2). Little room existed, however, for much personal choice on the part of women even had they desired it. Convent-educated and closely chaperoned, they had little contact or experience with men. Such ignorance encouraged submission to parental domination. Although the young women had the final say in such matters, although they received an evening to consider the marriage proposal, such an evening usually passed in prayer and resulted in assent.

Young women prayed on the occasion of marriage proposals because they viewed marriage as a solemn duty rather than a joyful stage of life. Few young people in the Nord married for any reason other than that their parents wished it and had deemed it time for such an event. For men, organizing a household meant an end to the liberty of bachelorhood. For young women, it marked a separation from the warm atmosphere of their parents' home and the beginning of responsibility. Like Marie D., they soberly, if briefly, examined the suitor with whom they would spend their lives: "after exchanging a certain number of words, the mother went to find her son who impressed me as being young, even though he is almost twenty-eight years old. I would have preferred someone much older than I and he gave the effect of being younger, or was that just an idea. . . . I ascertained however that he spoke easily and intelligently and with the greatest simplicity." That same afternoon the young Monsieur D. proposed, and, encouraged by

the company of aunts and cousins present at the meeting, Marie D. accepted the proposal the next day. "I believe I have found," she wrote to another relative, "gathered together all the conditions for a completely intimate happiness, placed, in addition, under the most Christian auspices so that there can be no better guarantee."¹⁴

Only a short betrothal period separated proposal from marriage. During that time a couple might exchange visits to begin an acquaintance, for like Marie D. and her fiancé, or like Jules Toulemonde and Adèle Dazin of Roubaix, often they had never met before. Sometimes, if separated, they wrote letters: "It's you and only you who always appears before my eyes. Ah, if I could hope that your thoughts wander in the same way, with or without permission, I wouldn't ask for more."¹⁵ This kind of intimacy was probably rare and reserved for letters; in public the couple addressed each other as Monsieur and Mademoiselle until their wedding. And, in any case, the betrothal served less to produce intimacy than to prepare a household. A fiancée passed the time busily readying her trousseau, labeling dozens of linens with intertwined initials, assembling a year's wardrobe, and gathering other necessities to last decades of married life. Although young women also made and received courtesy calls connected with their approaching change of status, these only supplemented the more essential task of furnishing a home. For the household had to stand ready from the outset for the important role of receiving children who were expected to arrive as quickly as possible.

The Catholic Church's doctrine on reproduction as the primary purpose of marriage could not have accorded better with the needs of the Northern bourgeoisie. Children guaranteed that the family enterprise, including all its financial and production secrets, would remain free from outside influence and scrutiny. Until the late nineteenth century, when managers played a greater role, family firms demanded a minimum number of children to handle different aspects of the trade. Parents, then, soon after marriage,

began questioning newlyweds about the imminence of a new heir. Any delay in pregnancy brought handwringing, plaintive letters to relatives, and disguised speculation about possible sterility.¹⁶

Such speculations often started after four or five months of marriage, for throughout the century the typical bourgeoisie delivered her first child within eleven months (see Table 3). Moreover, Northern women seemed to take to heart the commitment to produce offspring: right through the first decades of the twentieth century they gave birth to large numbers of children. In the 1840s, when women were still active in the family business, the average number of children born into each family was five, but by the end of the century women bore an average of seven children (see Table 4). Yet, curiously, as women produced more and more children, the business necessity decreased: mergers had occurred and new business techniques had been adopted to release the *patronat* from the pressing need for numerous heirs. In fact, the increasing number of offspring at this time engendered a scramble for positions and the entry of many sons of the bourgeoisie into allied fields such as law, medicine, and notarial practice.¹⁷ The dowering of large numbers of daughters also taxed family resources.

How, then, to explain the attachment of a utilitarian-minded bourgeoisie to such an impractical phenomenon, especially when the option existed of limiting their families? The Nord was notorious for its large clans of dozens of children. Was it a kind of luxury the wealthy allowed themselves—these tribes, like the Bernards, which in the twentieth century held reunions for hundreds, even thousands, of members who were no more distant than second cousins?¹⁸ Was the Nord scrupulously following the dictates of the Church on matters of reproduction and sexuality? Or did the transition to an exclusively domestic life shorn of productive function play its role as well? For the women of the Nord had borne fewer children, and cared for smaller families, during the days when they worked alongside their

husbands in business. This control of births appeared in families managing both secure and unstable enterprises. Those women who began their reproductive lives after 1870, who never entered the factory or kept business accounts, had begun reproducing with a vengeance, one would almost say. By that time the development of Northern industry had brought an amount of wealth and comfort that converted their function to an exclusively sexual and reproductive one. It should not be surprising, then, that within this framework of both necessity and possibility they made the most of their reproductive charge independently of the changes that had occurred outside their domestic domain. The social order now allotted them this exclusive role, the Church encouraged it, their bodies permitted it, and domestic symbolism enhanced the bearing of children within a system of female rites and rituals that constituted a language of reproduction.

Women of the bourgeoisie gained a certain kind of power from the reproductive act. The social order, though it might command them to reproduce, was by that command placed at their mercy. For economic and psychological reasons, if for nothing else, the cult of the heir glorified the woman who reproduced the father's image, the receptacle for his capital, his eternal life in a mortal world. From the moment of betrothal, attention focused on the woman, her trousseau, her wedding attire, and her radiant smile. Thereafter the mother in the Nord held center stage in the family. It was to her house that grown children flocked unfailingly on Sundays—a practice that continued long after a father's death. "At home my son obeys me," claimed one woman of her illustrious son,¹⁹ while another man complained that Northern society reeked of matriarchy in which women decided all questions of marriage and vocation, parental largesse, and parental love.²⁰

Because of this psychological, social, and physical dependence, what could have been more natural than the accretion of power to the woman, reproducing a bourgeoisie that could not escape her force? She was entrusted with its

life in the most literal sense, and she carried out that charge in a multitude of ways. One example is Madame B., who, while delegating many household tasks to servants, maintained close track of her eight children. She kept a notebook on the strengths and weaknesses of each, wrung from them their most intimate thoughts, heard their lessons, rewarded and punished their actions. In all genuine modesty, Mme B. viewed herself as a guardian angel charged with surrounding her children with her presence so she might protect and mold them through her example as a Catholic woman. To "purge them of all evil thoughts and actions," she rewarded the obedient at the end of each week and punished the disobedient by withholding her love in the form of a goodnight kiss. Mme B.'s power over her children, then, consisted both of this knowledge of their most intimate thoughts and of the ability to reward and punish. It did not derive from teaching them the love of science and hard work.²¹

In addition to weaving this psychological net, Mme B., like all women of the Nord, held the cord of life, or at least she stood as its most visible representative. Not the man who ran the factory and produced the income, but the woman with domestic knowledge seemed to spell the difference between life and death. For their families women provided the connection with food, clothing, and shelter as well as the human components of love and socialization. Each child knew that his mother, in that age of frequent illness and precarious mortality, would spend long hours at a sickbed, and that she shared information on cures and remedies with her friends and relatives. She would know about Bordeaux wine, veal stock, or pomades for their maladies, and would be skilled in the use of leeches or cupping glasses.²² Even when carrying a mending bag or correcting a servant, women of the Nord symbolized victory in the struggle for human survival. When combined with their nurturing skills, even peripheral signs invested them with vital power.

These marital, reproductive, and household patterns offer certain insights into the position of women in industrial society. In the first place, their position lacked autonomy. They neither made decisions about their marriages nor could they, because of their exclusively reproductive role, claim an economic position of their own. Although the dowries of Northern women usually were part of a *communauté des biens*, husbands administered family funds. Thus, in a market world, and from a psychological point of view, they were dependent. Reproductively, however, they had enormous power and a central role when it came to the perpetuation of life. They increased that power by producing larger families, but also by multiplying their attentions to human problems as they knitted their children's socks, cared for them in illness, and provisioned the household with all the necessities of life with a domestic vigor unknown to the preceding generations of business-oriented women.

This same ambiguous position informs the world of domestic artifacts; power and fragility both are expressed in fashion, interior decoration, and cooking, as is the centrality of reproduction itself. Women lived with pregnancies either imminent or actual, and as well with the attendant cycles of reproductivity: menstruation, lactation, menopause. Reproduction and sexuality were the source of their power, and also the font of their weakness, for childbirth killed many bourgeois and reduced the vigor of countless others. The women of the Nord had cause to express a convoluted attitude toward reproduction and toward nature, attitudes that also dominate the arrangement of symbols in the domestic interior.

The daily activities of the Northern bourgeoisie brought her close to nature. Her days were spent involved in the physical problems of her family—nourishment, illness, shelter, life, and death. In addition, women felt their companionship with the natural world through reproduction. While the market society moved toward mastering nature and pro-

ducing "man-made" goods, its women remained caught in nature's cycles, concerned with the ravages it could work on them and their families. Nature could be their enemy; it could also serve as the source of female glory. In any case, it was central. Thus, we find the recapitulation of nature and of natural themes in domestic life, a concomittant stress on mastering a natural foe, while at the same time articulating, and even enhancing, its dominance as the focal point of the home.

As we enter the Northern bourgeois home and observe its daily life, we can regard its operations as part of a symbolic system. Each activity had its functional aspect, but as the thrust of human, as opposed to animal, activity tends toward cultural creativity, so we find webs of meaning, networks of communication, and expressions of human concern overlying many domestic undertakings. This gave household procedures a multiple significance of which women were often acutely aware.

Language

Bourgeois women recognized the descriptive importance of their demeanor, dress, and domestic interiors. "The furnishing of a room," wrote Julia Bécour in one of her novels about bourgeois life in Lille, "describes a person."²³ But not just any person or member of the family. Rather, it was the bourgeois woman herself, the *maîtresse de maison*, who acquired a reputation or definition from her household. Clever, neat, seductive, matronly, or even egotistical—any of these qualities and more were read from the arrangement or selection of domestic artifacts.

Increasingly throughout the century, the necessities consumed in the household acquired a thick layer of symbolism. At the beginning of the century bourgeois women working in business with their husbands preferred simple food—in fact, thought of it in utilitarian terms, if they thought of it at all. After their installation in the home, however, they

took new interest in *cuisine soignée*. Not that women in the Nord did more cooking; indeed, except for making a cake for a special occasion, most of them did none at all. They purchased many of their desserts for parties at Meerts in Lille, for example, or hired extra cooks for large social events.²⁴ New wealth, of course, paid for the hands that fashioned roses from truffles or leaves from angelica. But while truffles, lobster, vol-au-vents created by other hands garnished their dinner tables, the praise accrued to the reputation not of the cook, the pastry chef, or the *charcutier*, but to that of the mistress of the house. That elegant cuisine eventually permeated all layers of domestic society attests to its ultimate importance as a symbol of domesticity. Cooking was a transformation of the natural into a sign of life-giving capacity, and some women chose it as such. Since it was a sign, little did it matter whether they had performed the transformation directly. A clever enhancement and repression of nature, an enhancement and repression in a very physical state, formed part of their reflection. Society saw them and they saw themselves in the glazed salmon and in the carefully chosen strawberries that graced the table.

So, too, with the gleaming furniture, polished silver, thick carpets, or brocaded drapes. Once coated with wax for protection, lustrous furniture carried an important message about a *maîtresse de maison*. In her youth, a Northern woman learned the formulas for household maintenance—three solutions for removing candlewax from linen tableclothes, or the use of angelica to sweeten a chamberpot—that were then performed under her supervision and to her credit. The shining interior of a home mirrored the character of its woman. As the nineteenth century progressed, the necessity grew for constant redecoration and rejuvenation of the home. Mme S. renewed her interior with carpeting, drapes, objets d'art, dessert forks, fancy needlework displays, portraits, paper flowers, and liqueur glasses, among other things. In Douai Mme Demont greeted summer by

draping the foyer in green wool and pompoms to simulate moss and flowers. Other women ushered in seasons with new chair coverings, draperies, and furniture rearrangement. Basic items of furniture, purchased at marriage, were expected to last a lifetime, but they were revitalized with a constant replacement of linens and dresser scarves to disguise their declining years, and perhaps, to add to the image of freshness, youth, and fertility of the housewife.²⁵

No woman in the Nord ever went without her needlework. While Mme Demont and her mother sat by the window and watched passersby, the former worked at needlepoint coverings for the chairs; the latter knit her son's and grandson's socks, all in grey yarn, which supposedly wore better. Most women, with the help of a seamstress, made all their daughters' clothing. Others carried a bag of knitting or mending over their arm, and when the morning rounds were over or when a spare moment arose, took it out to work on. Mme R., daughter of a wealthy textile manufacturer and wife of a prosperous lawyer, was one of these women devoted to mending on all occasions.²⁶ Her attentions certainly served a utilitarian purpose, but why did she do a task that any one of her ten servants might have done? In one way she made a small saving of some symbolic importance, but in another sense she spoke through mending of her attachment to being female. By the end of the nineteenth century domestic symbolism was the only imperative underlying these activities: factories and workshops produced clothing that the Northern bourgeoisie could easily afford, and most households contained small armies of servants.

When visitors joined the family circle, or when women were themselves guests, sewing continued, but in the form of fancywork. They made especially delicate household linens, embroidered small flowers on silk to line baskets sold at the charity bazaar, worked beads onto small purses for a friend. Here domestic symbolism was compounded, for not only did the appearance of busy hands speak about a woman's daintiness and generosity, but each work itself

might contain a message. Anemones represented innocence and candor; a red geranium, melancholy; a white lily, innocence; a lily of the valley, the return of happiness. The combination of white and green meant proven virtue, while pink stood for tenderness and brown for humility.²⁷ Speaking a symbolic language of their sex, women of the Nord conveyed to their audience its oblique message through their activities.

It was fashion, however, that served as the most insistent and increasingly popular way of drawing attention to a woman's presence and of speaking about that presence. Novelists in the Nord used clothing as a convention for swiftly delineating their characters' personalities and stamping them as good or evil, and women themselves captured eyes not only with clever tricks of lace and ribbon, but with the sheer mass of hoops, crinolines, and bustles. Fashion formed a communication system among women, and even among men and women, a system that became the quintessential expression because it surrounded the female form itself. As fashion seduced women by its potency, observers noted the displacement of fancy needlework in the Nord by the whirring sounds of the sewing machine.²⁸

The trend was new. In 1790 Mme Barrois-Virnot, co-manager of the family wholesaling fortune, had replied to her husband's suggestion of a new dress from Paris that she had no need for anything so elaborate. A century later such simplicity of taste and utilitarian considerations had succumbed to a fondness for a series of ornate garments. Although the bourgeois woman might limit herself to five or six dresses, those five or six were sometimes refurbished daily to fit the latest style or a sudden whim. With the help of the nefarious machine, women and their seamstresses turned skirts, added flounces or lace, recut bodices, or redesigned sleeves. Although not in the habit of buying all their clothes in Paris, they might treat themselves to one extraordinary frock from the capital. Because they lived in the provinces, the bourgeois of the Nord received patterns

from the *Journal des Modes* to follow the latest styles.²⁹ Provincial life did not stop them from spending enormous sums on jewelry, hats, lace, and sumptuous fabrics.

Some women in the Nord rejected the proliferation of garments and the emphasis on fashion. Always a good indicator of the feelings of the most conservative women, Mathilde Bourdon often spent a few lines in her books cautioning readers on the perils of fashion, and turned an entire work into a diatribe against the sewing machine. It was not, however, that Bourdon discarded clothing as a symbolic system, but rather that she recognized its importance. "You can tell at a glance," she wrote, "a woman's character by her clothing."³⁰ Thus, Bourdon inveighed against the statements that excessively dressed women made about themselves.

In harmony with Bourdon, an alumnae group of the Sacré-Coeur boarding school asked its members to avoid the whirl of fashion: "Don't follow *la mode* servilely." They demanded of each member of the Children of Mary a commitment to "simple elegance" in dress. Indeed, their photographs display an adherence to this principle: dark silk garments, hair pulled back neatly.³¹ Yet even then, among women noted for their austerity, appear false curls on some, and tiny, almost invisible tucks and lace insets, rippled sleeves, and ribboned caps. Each asserted herself with clothing, however disguised. Dark silks, hair sleeked back, a certain kind of jewelry meant "simple elegance." Other women, posing corseted and décolletée, intricately coiffed, used the same language to offer a different message.³² Following *la mode* displayed a knowledge of female language, showed an obedience to the female code, and demonstrated an ability to speak by its rules; but it may be noted that resistance to a particular vogue implied the same acknowledgment of its symbolic potency as did acceptance.

The suspicion with which the alumnae of Sacré-Coeur regarded fashion had another significance, for these women recognized therein a challenge to the integrity of female

symbolism. Increasingly *la mode* had fallen under the domination of industry and industrial values, and those alumnae protested the rhythm of ceaseless change demanded by capitalist control of fashion. Refrain from rushing to Paris, they urged; find a nearby dressmaker who knows you and your character.³³ An interloper from the world of money and men had placed its foot on the threshold of the home, and this interloper seemed to be drawing many women away from the fullness of their domestic responsibility. Yet other women, seduced by the new offerings of industry—hundreds of yards of lace or hats laden with cherries, feathers, ribbons, lace, and a veil—rushed toward the connection with a world that offered all the tools for their sexual embellishment. How could one resist the rich profusion of raw materials of domestic symbolism that opened the possibility for great female artistry, that provided the opportunity to garnish their bodies with all the signs of reproductivity? By the end of the nineteenth century, women of the Nord were thus of two minds about fashion. Denouncing its inroads, one group continued to use the metaphor of clothing to make statements about their "simple elegance." Another faction followed its dictates scrupulously and reveled in the abundance of possibilities for making statements. The latter group found its reward in local social columns. Mme Salembier's costume of black silk incrustated with black lace on white taffeta and a black straw hat garnished with white lilacs received detailed treatment in the account of her daughter's wedding.³⁴ A single image was multiplied as others copied it.

Being *à la mode*, however, entailed enormous expense, and seemed to stand in sharp opposition to the bourgeois sense of thrift and utility. At base it conflicted with the interests of self-financing for industry, of legacies for heirs, and of domestic economy. Mme S. spent many times her food budget on hats and dresses, while Mme T.'s new brooch cost more than her husband's wardrobe for three years.³⁵ Simultaneously, the women of the Nord professed a com-

mitment to thrifty household practices. They made savings by mending and remending stockings and linens, limiting the amounts of food or wine consumed at their tables, and drilling into their children economical habits. Moreover, they gave the impression of venerating their account books more, even, than their children. "Dear friends," Marie Toulemonde wrote to her sisters in the convent, "Mother doesn't have time to write to you, but she loves you all the same and charges me to give you a big hug. Unfortunately for you, Saturday is the day for accounts . . . and this afternoon we will be driven from our rooms for the usual cleaning."³⁶ The account-book ritual followed a set order: a notation of every household expenditure went into a particular envelope according to the nature of the expense—food, household, personal expenses of each family member, small treats and pleasures, charity, and the like. On a fixed day each week the *maitresse de maison* recorded these expenditures in appropriate columns in her account book, and at the end of each month she totaled them and compared the sums with her cash balance. "My mother did this religiously," recalled one elderly Roubaisienne, "and she became panic-stricken if the figures failed to tally. Although she claimed that my father would be furious, he hardly ever looked at the book and then only perfunctorily."³⁷ This obsessive attitude toward an account book on the part of the wife of one of the wealthiest men in the Nord, owner of a newspaper, chairman of the board of directors of mines and of banks, paralleled the view of most Northern women, who were determined to leave a patrimony as large as they had received.

Although one can not fault their sincerity in this profession, in fact the account book had almost no impact on inheritance, nor were Northern women utilitarian in their expenditures. At the beginning of the century, when domestic and business funds were joined, when the wife had charge of accounts, and when household savings affected the amount of capital available for entrepreneurial devel-

opment, domestic economy played a significant role. Savings from self-imposed restrictions on luxury of any sort—wine, food, clothing, vacations—were devoted to amassing capital, and at that early point women were as active as their husbands in imposing such austerity. In a sense, the privations fit a functional way of life that ignored the kinds of symbols later surrounding domesticity: fashion, *cuisine soignée*, piano lessons, and painting on leather meant nothing to a Mme Barrois, Mme Motte-Bredart or Mme Vrauaubineau. The balance sheet and its sums of gold signaled success to them, and told of that success to their peers.

For the late nineteenth-century women, however, domestic austerity played almost solely a symbolic role in lives rich in symbolic content. It inflicted small sacrifices that would produce compensating luxuries. It allowed for fashion, new carpeting, more silver—all the symbolic refurbishing of the female space. But financial exigencies, budgetary restrictions, and concern for where each penny went had little real influence on expenditures. When Mme S. ran short of money, she simply added more to her account. When the totals failed to tally, she entered the shortage (and often it was considerable) as "missing." Women did gain credit, however, if they showed particular skill, and an ability to combine "thrift with charm" spoke about them in much the way that fashion or needlework did.³⁸ By this time the notion of domestic economy was a sham, relating to nothing substantial in actual economic practice. All garnish, all symbol, the well-kept account book stood for the presence of a woman concerned with her family and her domestic charge. In the anachronistic perpetuation of this relic of women's economic power, the emptiness of real economic content only served to highlight a woman's reproductivity. When husbands checked their wives' balance sheets, they smiled, not at their economic earnestness, for their wives spent fortunes. Men smiled at the femininity of women with so little economic sense. Remembering his mother in this way, Fernand Motte wrote, "my mother, still astonishingly

young and beautiful, had very refined tastes; she loved clothes, beautiful furniture, and lavish dishes. Especially she knew nothing about the value of money, and in minutes she could organize, like a maestro, the waltz of our money."³⁹ In the case of many such women the account book and all its contradictions rivaled the use of a bow, a jewel, a modulated voice as a female sign.

Even—perhaps especially—the servant system, which seemed to mushroom in the nineteenth century, acquired an evocative capacity in contrast to the utilitarian concerns that had earlier determined the use of help in bourgeois households. For example, Mme S. provides an example of a woman in the 1840s who employed servants according to her need. With one child she relied on one live-in domestic, and supplemented her services with dayworkers such as a seamstress, a laundress, cooks, and serving maids when the necessity arose.⁴⁰ By the end of the nineteenth century, however, several servants became the norm as dayworkers were incorporated into the home, and as their number came to include not only the usual cook and housemaid, but in addition live-in gardeners, ladies' maids, valets, and chauffeurs.⁴¹ Although some might propose that this specialization of labor in the household duplicated that in industrial society, another factor was at work. Numerous servants provided an enlarged image of their mistress. She was all places at once, caring for family matters.

A faithful servant acted as a maternal surrogate in many situations: walking the children to school, dressing, bathing, feeding, and sick-nursing them. Because this proximity influenced the next generation of the family, it was important to find domestics of high moral character. They performed the household functions of cooking, cleaning, sewing, laundering, and ironing, which motivated the search for servants who also had a certain dexterity, cleverness, and skill. But each of these qualities was doubly imperative, because the correct performance of tasks (or the incorrect performance) reflected the image of the housewife, and

served to determine her reputation. Even in those areas that suggest the necessary and substantial—in cooking, sewing, or cleaning—servants expressed the symbolism of the household. Each task in the home carried a double import by serving simultaneously functional and metaphorical purposes. Cooking, sewing, and cleaning fed, clothed, and sanitized family members, but they also created domestic symbols: shining furniture, glazed salmon, bows, flounces, and pleats. With the help of servants a bourgeois woman could arrange, polish, and adorn her home and herself; each adornment expressed and heightened the female presence. Thus, servants helped focus attention on the central female figure in the domestic world.

This reciprocity, this partnership between servant and mistress, perpetuated a traditional "moral economy" within the household, quite distinct from the cash tie binding employer and employee in the labor contract. Centuries of custom lay behind domestic work-life. The tie between housewife and servant rested on notions of duty (*devoir*), obligation, and correct behavior, and to that extent resembled old-régime corporatism. The relationship was not a contract between equals but a partnership of unequals, not a temporary arrangement for individual self-interest but a mutual dependency aimed at the good of the whole. Like the head and the hand working together to benefit an individual, the servant and mistress cooperated for the good of the family of which each was a member. The bargain between them was not exhausted by a certain number of hours' work and a salary, but only by the achievement of the general welfare, a goal that made the relationship almost unlimited. The personal nature of the bonds sometimes alleviated the worst features of this authoritarian structure. Yet when confronted by the attractions of contractual labor, this type of familial relationship became "the servant problem."

This telescoping of the servant into her mistress, intensifying as it did their reciprocal relationship, was typical of other hierarchic patterns of social organization. Children

were included in their parents, reflected them, and, it was hoped, glorified them, just as inhabitants of a kingdom served the purposes of their superiors and eventually those of the king. In Christian doctrine, human beings had received a graded allotment of talents to be used to glorify the Father at the pinnacle of the hierarchic chain. In this sense each individual was affiliated with a higher being, but could not equal his superior. The servant affected the magnificence of the bourgeois woman, but could never rival her mistress because of the qualitative differentiation that determined the organization of family members.

Because the relationship was close both in ideal and in practice, choosing their servants preoccupied Northern women. Although the "servant problem" did not arise until the twentieth century, a suitable servant was sufficiently rare to provoke an endless quest. Convinced of the debilitation of the urban population, families in the Nord sent frantic letters to relatives in the countryside asking for healthy, robust, moral, and tractable domestics. Or they would trade servants, especially wet nurses, who were always difficult to find. One woman wrote to her mother in the country: "Maria wants absolutely to have a nurse from the Aveyron; I proposed finding a woman near Bergues, Blanche spoke to her about the wife of Péronne; she won't listen to any of this and has charged me to beg you to find one; for my part I would be very grateful. The age of the milk doesn't concern Maria; . . . but if you can't find anyone better she will take the nurse of little Henry despite the portrait Blanche has drawn of her character." In the case of nurses, women relaxed their standard of morality to the end of obtaining an unmarried rural mother, a first offender, whose milk would be good.⁴² When the services of the *fille mère* had been secured, however, her morality, like that of all servants, became the charge of the bourgeois woman.

The charge to scrutinize household help closely and carefully appeared in both domestic manuals and novels. Nov

elists, particularly, emphasized this urgency with stories of disaster falling on young wives remiss in their duties toward servants: a child's mortal illness, a household thrown topsy-turvy, a young housemaid turning to crime could all result from a lack of supervision.⁴³ All evidence indicates that Northern women performed this task scrupulously. They organized, as in the city of Lille, prayer groups for the female domestic help,⁴⁴ but to even greater efficacy, they bound their servants to the family by providing the servants' children with education, by furnishing clothing, and by nursing and burying faithful domestics.⁴⁵ In return, servants performed an endless round of tasks and were expected to behave according to a rigid code of behavior.

Dire warnings on servants' conduct were given for reasons other than actual threats to the smooth functioning of the home. The message conveyed by servants about their mistress had an important content, and so care must be taken in their selection. Above all else, servants perpetuated the reproductive motif of domesticity through demonstrations of "morality," that is, through their sexual restraint. They constituted a ubiquitous definition of the reproductive woman in the sense that a negative defines a positive. While a servant could replace her mistress in most areas, there was one task exclusively in the domain of the lady of the house. She alone could reproduce legitimate heirs. The picture of the idle upper-class woman coddled by toiling domestics thus signified and fortified her reproductive splendor. She existed only to reproduce, while her opposite—the nonreproductive and productive—self existed in others. The household staff projected her presence in all their activities, including their incapacity in the sexual and reproductive sphere.⁴⁶ The servant, in the long run, was not just functional; she served as the negative metaphor for reproduction.

Fashion, too, presented the dominant message. Especially the shape of the dress echoed female fertility. Empire styles had often been sexually revealing in disposing of petticoats

and conforming to the lines of women's bodies, as did the tight hose of men. As ideas of equality for women were firmly disposed of, as industrialization worked its division of labor, male clothing became asexual and utilitarian, while the shape of female clothing changed dramatically. Reproductive contours appeared in the form of ever-widening skirts. Only in pregnancy, when breasts and abdomen swell to reach spherical proportions is the female figure uniformly round. This roundness was duplicated in the skirts of the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. Following that, the spherical shape receded to the back of the skirt. With that change around 1870, an opposition of pregnant contours appeared in the higher waistline, which metaphorically accommodated the elongated and impregnated uterus and in the dramatic roundness in the bustle. By the end of the century, symbolic fullness shifted to the upper half of female garments. A new kind of corset continued to emphasize the rounded *derriere*, while flattening the stomach, but it also created the illusion of breasts swollen with milk. Yards of fabric suddenly appeared on sleeves, which were spherical over the upper arm. The women of the Nord followed these changing styles while their husbands remained wedded to bourgeois garb: utilitarian, spare, stripped of the sexual emphasis in previous male clothing, and virtually unchanging for almost two centuries.⁴⁷

The women of the Nord thus accentuated their reproductive function in two ways. They indulged in large-scale, even conspicuous procreation; and they highlighted reproduction by giving it a central place in domestic symbolism. The relentless translation of reproduction into a domestic language system had the effect of removing the activities of women from natural history and making them clearly cultural. By speaking through the accoutrements of her environment, a woman could be reproductive and sexual in a symbolic way long after she had ceased to reproduce life; or she could opt never to engage in reproduction except through domestic symbolism. In many industrial countries

domesticity flowered simultaneously with the limitation of childbirth, and perhaps even as a function of birth control. But in the Nord the vigorous bourgeois worked through both explicit reproduction and metaphor.

The quality of the reproductive experience was described metaphorically by these women. For one thing, it gave them power, and domestic symbolism highlighted the power of women. Full skirts, bodices, huge sleeves gave substance to female claims to importance by increasing their physical size to at least double that of men. Women wearing hoop skirts, crinolines, bustles, or trains filled the social space and made people aware of their presence. Women were so powerful that sometimes doorways could not let them pass; they overflowed the small chairs, cushions, and footstools of mid-century. As skirts became less voluminous, women's furniture became more massive. At the *fin de siècle*, women of the Nord began filling their homes with huge buffets, cupboards, armoires, and larger sofas and chairs. Because women saw themselves reflected in objects, they multiplied those objects as testimony to force: magazines, plants, little comforts became popular ways of presenting a forceful image through sheer increase in number.

Yet objects so thoroughly reflected women that they had to tell of weakness as well as strength. Pictures of the Northern bourgeoisie show her dressed in voluminous clothing, but her dress at mid-century has embroidery and tiny tucks in the bodice that give a delicate air to the bulk. She has an abundance of miniscule false curls escaping from her bonnet. In 1870 her semibustled overskirt is ringed with small bows; the sleeves of her dress are tightly fitted to make the arms slim, and they end in a row of intricate pleats at the wrist. She wears, too, a small half-hat with a wisp of veil, a tiny feather, a narrow ribbing. At the end of the century her massive upper torso is weakened with shirred fabric, her skirt banded with slender ribbon, and the imposing hat undermined by fluttering ostrich feathers, a cluster of grapes, more veil and ribbon, and a final fragile en-

casement in the sheerest of tulle. This emphasis on fragility terminated in the hobble skirt, but throughout the century layers of clothing reduced the importance of the body itself while simultaneously creating mass. The corset also made a woman tiny and insignificant. And the sum of all garments testified to female imprisonment, to an unliberated ego, and was voluntarily worn by all women to testify to this aspect of their lives.

Women repeated the motif of weakness in meals, interior decorating, and needlework. They worked small, pretty objects such as purses, slippers, handkerchiefs, baskets, and linens for themselves, their relatives, friends, or fiancés. Such intricacies, so the story went, could only come from the gentle hands of woman, and they contributed to her mystique. Observers also noted the tendency toward delicacy in cuisine. The truffle or the rough angelica stalk assumed innumerable fragile forms in bourgeois kitchens. Mme S. always chose the airy, light vol-au-vent and purchased tiny, though luxurious, pastries for her dinner parties. Nothing remained bulky or unrefined by female hands; instead, the number of courses in meals increased to demonstrate substance, while each course exposed a feminine daintiness. This transformation was accompanied by a more complex table setting and adornment. Tables were laden with a greater number of tiny utensils: individual but small table lamps, salt cellars, bone dishes, finger bowls. The hostess directed the ensemble with minute, barely perceptible gestures: she inclined her head, rang a small silver bell, touched a utensil, or placed her forefinger to her lips to give commands.⁴⁸ Each sign perpetuated the juxtaposition of power and fragility.

Every large piece of furniture had its delicate counterpart. Bureaus, tables, buffets, and mantles carried their array of small objects, ranging from clocks and candlesticks to Sèvres china statuary and extraneous pieces of silver. Between them lay delicate doilies, embroidered scarves, or some other piece of fragile fabric. Chairs and sofas had their

coverings in florals, stripes, and brocade (which though strong had a delicate relief), and their fringes, flounces, and trims duplicated the rhythms of female dress. They might have, like all household linens, an extra layer of dainty embroidery. When more massive furniture appeared, the women of the Nord increased the tiny objects—especially plants, books, and vases of flowers—to maintain the balance of oppositions. The entire treasure of delicacies might not appear simultaneously. Some, like those of Mme Demont of Douai, were carefully stored in tissue and boxes to emphasize that they were too inordinately fragile to tolerate customary display.⁴⁹

Servants also contributed to the convoluted feminine metaphor. Like the aristocrat's retainers, they expanded a woman's presence. In their obedience to her orders and even whims they provided a demonstration of her power. Conversely, however, servants gave repeated testimony to female fragility. They performed the mean tasks of life, and thus expressed her delicacy. Too refined to touch a soiled child, she could kiss it goodnight.⁵⁰ Others kept her gardens in order, so that she could pick the flowers—or *faute de mieux*, she made artificial ones.⁵¹ In the Nord the bourgeois woman abstained from handling fowls, roasts, and vegetables for meals. She did, however, supervise the delicate tasks of making fruit preserves or liquors, and her only culinary forte—if indeed she had one—was fashioning an intricate, dainty dessert.⁵²

Because weakness and power grew from the reproductive charge, and because that charge itself grew from their biology, women also expressed their closeness to the natural world in domestic symbolism. They decorated their homes in floral motifs and repeated it in their clothing. Anniversaries, weddings, birthdays as indicative of natural cycles were occasions—from the female perspective—for floral symbols of nature.⁵³ They chose flowers for embroidery or as a pattern to decorate cakes or refashion food. Sometimes small fruit—especially grapes and cherries—substituted for

flowers on hats, dresses, linens, or needlework. A women's group in the Nord selected the daisy as its emblem.⁵⁴ At these happy signs of plant life, however, they stopped. For although nature surrounded them, it did so in a threatening way by regulating and even endangering their lives.

The women of the Nord endured natural regulation, bodily changes, and perils in complete ignorance. Sent off to boarding school as preadolescents, or to visit a relative when childbirth approached, teen-aged girls often thought the babies were purchased, found, or mysteriously delivered. The fears, mystery, and even secrecy surrounding sexual and physical life led by all women in the nineteenth century can never be overemphasized. Northern bourgeois women went to the marriage bed ignorant of the sexual act. If she was bold, a mother might prepare her daughter for the event in the following manner: tonight your husband is going to do something to you. He has the right. If it becomes too terrible, pray to Jesus Christ. Many women were uninstructed in the results of sexual intercourse, or they made no connection between that and pregnancy. When pregnancy did occur, women generally faced the prospect of childbirth in secret terror. Again a mother might give her daughter a generalized or vague description of what would happen, or the doctor offered as instruction the command to make a fist, to scream as loud as possible, and to push. Besides that slim knowledge, women knew that others had died in childbirth: Mme B. on the birth of her tenth child; Mme O. at twenty-two in the delivery of her first; Mme R. seven days after the birth of her third daughter. Stories of suffering and pitiful agonies passed down through families in whispers. No one thought of revealing miscarriages, and pregnancies went hidden from public view as women remained at home at least from their sixth month.⁵⁵ Women tried, in short, to tame the natural by hiding it.

For every expression of the reproductive and natural there was an attempt to disguise its potency in the shrouds of metaphor. The corsets, bustles, and petticoats produced

accentuated hips. They also masked them in an envelope of fabric and converted the reproductive woman into a composite of lace, silk, feathers, and jewels. Through the use of artificial materials and a set of rules, in this case the rules of fashion, nature (woman) became convention. Doilies and dresser scarves also spoke and hid, while the rules of etiquette regulated and stylized, and thus transformed the sexual encounters of men and women on social occasions. The sexual symbolism of the home is perhaps most famously illustrated by the Victorian ladies who recognized the sexual potency of table legs and covered them from sight. Thus, while desiring to speak of reproductivity and of nature, women tried also to make it invisible. Despite its reproductive centrality, the bed lay down hallways, under canopies and drapes, and behind closed doors. Women sought to erase that centrality of the natural by placing water closets severely out of view, or by insisting that their children shower in their clothes so that sensuality would never escape.⁵⁶

Concealment was not their only weapon. When the women of the Nord took a truffle and disfigured it, when they had a fowl dismembered and covered with sauce, they had worked a transformation on nature. By transforming it into a human sign, they thereby conquered their enemy. The same process occurred when they deformed their own bodies with corsets, covered them with layers—and imprisoning layers at that—of fabric, lace, jewels, feathers, and false fruit. The natural body emerged as a tamed artifact. Women created elaborate chignons. They rearranged the wood, cloth, and glassware in their homes as a sign that they, not nature, were in control. In this way domesticity became the cultural expression of women, for like most people they attempted to modify the natural situation in which they found themselves. From this attempt developed a system of signs—preverbal signs—articulating their concerns and expressing the scheme of their lives: reproduction, family, power, weakness, and weddedness to nature.

Adding a bustle to a dress converted the natural into the conventional, and human conventions have formed the network of communication among people from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. But the first layer of meaning in such symbolic systems has usually commenced with the struggle to differentiate between the human and the natural world.

When nature seemed to have its way, however, they nursed their sick families, made broth and poultices, and even applied leeches themselves. But wherever possible they sought to prevent invasions of nature that could bring chaos and worse. The women of the Nord were renowned for the cleanliness of their households despite the soot and smoke from factories. Servants scrubbed, polished, and waxed every surface inside the house, doused sidewalks with water, and swept doorsteps.⁵⁷ In addition, the bourgeoisie knew a hundred formulas for avoiding cockroaches, mice, and other small animals. Precautionary also was the advice of Mathilde Bourdon, counselor of Northern women: "Make sure," she warned women who spent hundreds on baubles and lace, "that nothing is wasted . . . that nothing spoils . . . that nothing deteriorates." Beware, she said, of nature.⁵⁸

Natural chaos could appear in other ways. Mme L. believed that if she removed the ordering support of her corset, her flesh would dissipate, spread, and dissolve.⁵⁹ Natural functions had to be ordered to master them. Sexual life was confined to the central bed, in a specified room. So too the water closet had its own fixed location. Other techniques, like an inflexible etiquette and the recurring, single placement of utensils regulated eating and the social intercourse of human beings. Bourdon summed it all up: the home was not a place for *laissez-faire*, but for order.⁶⁰ Only that prevented the disasters which, as women knew, nature in all its many guises could bring.

In this way domesticity transcended functionalism and

moved into ritual. Saturdays in the Nord were for house-cleaning, whether necessary or not; another day was for laundry, for mending, for visiting. A late nineteenth-century Mme Motte religiously kept her account book, though her son said that she had absolutely no sense of money. When the fashion column announced that English embroidery on garments had been dethroned,⁶¹ women followed its advice and ritualistically gave such dresses to the cook. Schedules, fashion, corsets, etiquette, polishing acquired a life of their own and shaped a woman's life. They formed the sum of domesticity, but domesticity itself became a magical rite serving to master nature. Once it was installed as an efficacious system, one could not accept the bustle and then dispense with proper table arrangement, *haute cuisine*, and waxed furniture. All parts of the ritual had to be included if it was to work its magical triumph over nature. Leave one part out, the magic was broken. Here the high priestesses moved in—the Catharine Beechers, Mathilde Bourdons, or Lady Campbells—both to reiterate the formulas and to make their warnings. Bourdon especially liked to juxtapose examples of the success that followed the proper adherence to ritual and the disaster awaiting women who threw aside their schedules, who ignored servant morality, or who broke the rules of etiquette.

After these wanderings through the domestic world, let us bring the components together to see how they functioned as a type, however primitive, of linguistic system.⁶² Language begins by drawing attention to the speaker. A yell, a discourse, even a few words said in a modulated voice say "I exist." Certainly the women of the Nord performed this first charge of language well as they filled domestic space with signs of their existence. Truffles, draperies, cleanliness, polish, and lace meant that a woman ruled the household. Observers gave her due praise for being a woman, so feminine, and so committed to duty.

In recognizing the hand of woman in the house, such observers also were witnesses that domesticity met the sec-

ond requirement of language: it conveyed meaning. Domesticity expressed the feminine, and we have seen precisely what the feminine experience consisted of. It meant reproduction and concern for the family. Reproductive contours distributed themselves throughout the household; so did those of the family. The latter was the focal point of all interior order. In the decoration of a home the dining room contained a buffet along the walls with the table and chairs at the center, around which the family would congregate. In the *salon*, commodes, clocks, and small tables appeared on the periphery, and the chairs and small sofas for the family were grouped around a central point. A bed occupied the focus of a bedroom, with dressers and armoires along the walls. Although a woman might play with the details of this arrangement, no one thought to upset the centrality of family—a family that owed its existence to the reproductive act of woman. Meaning continued to accrue as women described the quality of the reproductive experience. It made them powerful, massive, and in a way, invincible. But it also exposed them to danger, so that women were fragile as a daisy, delicate as a piece of lace.

Northerners continued to understand. Men went off to their clubs in the evening to escape the female accent in the domestic sphere. Sometimes they feigned a business appointment to shorten Sunday dinner at their mother's, and then they met at the hunt club.⁶³ Likewise, men recognized female delicacy, gentleness, and weakness—especially its novelty—in the 1850s. One Northerner wrote that while some men praised the businesswoman of yesterday, he preferred the women of mid-century “who like certain Asian birds nourish themselves on flowers,” and who “had a secret intuition of heavenly things . . . and a divine mission to fill.”⁶⁴ Domesticity came to be seen a divine mission, and often women referred to themselves, like Mme B., as guardian angels; they also encouraged others to make the comparison to things heavenly. In fact, however, women of the Nord operated in the fleshy, sexual, painful, repro-

ductive world. They agonized in childbirth, watched children die, experienced the regular discomforts of being female. In this case also domestic artifacts performed a function—the transformative one—of language. For by naming things, one tames them, or at least makes the first step in bringing nature within the human sphere. From that proceeds classification and ultimately scientific study and, with each procedure, a new sense of mastery. Domestic women everywhere were taking at least the first steps in this process when they engaged in converting natural things to human signs.

The domestic system, however, only took them to a certain point, for they stopped at the level where artifacts have power in themselves, primarily the power to master nature. Had the women of the Nord been asked why they diligently directed the polishing of tables or the concoction of fancy dishes, why they embroidered so fastidiously, why they kept their account books so religiously, they might not have answered. But they surely would have repeated the warnings in books of advice: think what happens to those who neglect their schedules, their polishings, their hems, their manners, their mending. Signs were powerful; women were not.

Language, as a cultural edifice, cannot be solipsistic. On the contrary, it rests on human beings using signs in identical ways to insure communication. Cookbooks, etiquette books, child-care manuals, fashion magazines all developed in the nineteenth century to perform this function. They announced the basic rules and formed a corpus of information about presenting domestic symbols. Here, of course, we enter a treacherous terrain. Are not the rules set by someone out there in the market? Was Worth, for example, not pulling the strings of fashion? Was *La Bonne cuisinière* not directing the use of truffles, or Mathilde Bourdon the gentle nod of the hostess to dismiss her guests? Were bourgeois women not victims, albeit privileged ones, of outside manipulators who alone set the rules and decided the content of domesticity?

I think not. The so-called arbiters of fashion, interior decorating, cooking, child care, and the like certainly made decisions in prewar France. But consider the nature of these supposed transformations they could work in domestic life. Throughout our time span they failed to affect the enduring emphasis on reproduction and nature or the opposition of fragility and mass. This synchronic structure of domesticity was impregnable so long as women's lives remained embedded in nature and reproduction, so long as the contradictions in their position survived. Instead the arbiters played with diachronic aspects of female language and, in fact, worked for the repetition of the perpetual female theme—reproduction. They helped women execute those constant small alterations that said, "I am fresh and fertile"; thus the notion of fashion in any genre of domesticity could only arise at the intersection of reproduction and the market. By announcing the rules, experts created nothing new in itself. Instead, they made for greater homogeneity among women so that the latter might communicate across families, cities, countries, continents, and eventually classes. Mathilde Bourdon could point to a woman's clothing as a mirror of her character and intelligence, and be read throughout France, England, and the United States, only because an acceptance of domestic artifacts as signs preceded her writing.

In another sense, however, only the intensity and homogeneity of signs were new. Women for millennia had announced such physical alterations as coming of age with a change of costume and other rituals. They had used charms, chants, and rites to protect and talk about themselves, to regulate relationships with other human beings and with nature and nature gods. But what did it mean when "modern" women performed similar rituals, when they saw themselves in luxurious draperies or a waxed buffet, when they invested objects and routines with qualities, or even magical powers? To some it meant that women were childlike. Misogynists particularly liked to point to such behavior as in-

dicative of women's trivial-mindedness, of their inability to deal with abstractions, and ultimately of their inferiority. Dismissing the charge of inferiority, we should perhaps think about the childlike aspects of women's mode of communication.⁶⁵ For example, language in its most sophisticated form is a logical construct that can be used to deal with contradictions, assert definitions, and ultimately demonstrate truths among human beings. Women's symbolic use of domestic artifacts displayed some of these characteristics of assertion and social communication, but in the long run it fell far short of fulfilling its charge as language. Instead of resolving contradictions, it merely expressed all of them unconsciously and simultaneously. Feelings of power and fragility, the oneness with and fear of nature appeared without comment in the home. There was no logic in the domestic ordering of artifacts to establish priorities among these assertions, to establish the truth of women's condition, or to explore reality. Rather, each woman fused heterogeneous and contradictory elements in an arbitrary way without creating a grammar of domestic signs that could work toward defining the female condition sharply and fruitfully. Neither an inductive nor deductive process of reasoning could result from efforts that were syncretistic and transductive rather than logical.

The absence of abstracting potential in women's symbolic system reduced its expressive power. The language of domestic artifacts limited women in the kinds of statements they could make about themselves; they could not reveal, for example, a complicated intelligence. Through these symbols they expressed merely that they were women and that their condition was complicated. They could not use their system to investigate nature, society, or the world of abstract thought. Instead, their language remained fixed on themselves, and although endowed with some communicative force—one could read a woman by her clothing—it in fact worked with a high degree of solipsism. That is, a woman and her symbols formed a mutual reflection of each

other, and only projected outside themselves on occasional moments of social intercourse. Thus little separation existed between the exterior and interior of women, between the subjective and objective worlds. The mind projected its feelings, fears, and desires onto things—fragility into a piece of lace, power into enormous skirts, and the like. This same tendency has been noted in primitive rituals, but also in the solipsistic babbling of infants and children who appear to be communicating, but who in fact perpetually assert their existence through a stream of egocentric speech.

But why should this be so? Why should adult women display such retrograde or infantile states of mind? We can only suggest a return to the starting point in reproduction. Women, by inhabiting a new world constructed exclusively on biology, began repeating in their adult lives the childhood experience or that of other people who lack control over nature. Biological rhythms, physical demands, pain, and insecurity occupied their thoughts the way hunger, wetness, and the struggle for motor competence occupy those of the child. In this situation, physicality and state of mind are difficult to separate sufficiently for there to arise any distinction between subjective and objective worlds. The self is the world; the world is the self; women's mind, reproductive body, and domestic artifacts similarly remained one.

While solipsism produced domestic expressions that many outsiders found comforting or read in a multitude of ways, that expression turned back to tyrannize women. It became their law, a set of rules increasingly codified in cookbooks, the manuals for etiquette and child care, and fashion magazines. The obedience given by women to their own creation likewise arose from the undifferentiated encapsulation of the self in nature. Again, examples from child psychology illustrate the situation of women. The child is dominated by physical forces, most of which consist of his own natural needs, but some of which may include parents or even acts of nature—rain, wind, sun, and the like. He or

she invests those forces of whatever kind with extraordinary authority. The same process of finding the power of laws in one's own perceptions—that is, in egocentricity—has been attributed to primitive symbolism, as well. Symbols or rituals invented by the human mind themselves determine human actions, set prohibitions, or provide standards for those who have no notion that they originate in the human mind.⁶⁶ In the case of bourgeois women, the symbols that expressed the power of reproduction similarly acted as inflexible guidelines for the fledgling ego. Their safety lay in obeying the so-called arbiters of fashion, etiquette, or decorating; in religiously keeping their account books; or in adhering scrupulously to schedules they, themselves, had drawn up.

In the long run, taffeta-clad ladies represented themselves more than they did their husbands' social position. In all domestic activities they created a female mode of expression born of a tie to nature that was new in the sense of taking them outside the realm of production. Women of earlier generations had expressed themselves differently because, like men, their biology was mixed with other concerns. But the industrial division of labor demanded specialization and brought to women a new closeness with nature. Small innovations can institute major changes in mentality: the industrial worker shares little of the artisan's way of life, though they may appear similar. So too peasants and agricultural day laborers are different breeds. In nineteenth-century France, the portrait of a bourgeois lady conjures up images from other civilizations, historical moments, or stages in life. For all that similarity, however, this lady was neither an old-regime aristocrat nor a child, but rather a bourgeoisie, who articulated in a domestic way her dependence, weakness, and importance to an industrial society.

Unconsciously, perhaps, she recognized the insufficiency of such human efforts at transforming the world around her. Domestic rituals did not always succeed in working

Domestic System

their magic, nor did they always endow her with strength. Moreover, the domestic language failed to render the full range of human feelings, and with a burst of energy women of the Nord turned to the Church. They placed their destinies in the hands of the supreme authority of an institution whose creed had long promised relief from an imperfect world. In its own way, Catholic doctrine provided a cosmology in perfect harmony with the domestic way of life.

5

Cosmos: Faith versus Reason

In 1879, an out-of-town feminist, after a visit to the Nord, sketched another portrait of the woman of the Nord. This time the lady was dressed in black, with a rosary around her neck and rosary beads moving from her fingers. After morning mass she spent her time reading such spiritual works as the *Lives of the Saints* and the *Imitation of Christ*, and noting her own progress in a diary. For worthy causes she conducted collections at the parish church; sewed, like Christian women in history, priestly vestments and altar cloths; and she led her family and servants to the performance of their religious duties not only through her own pious conduct but through active persuasion and cajoling.¹

The women of the Nord were domestic, even if they were also among the most faithful Catholics. The superficially opposing portraits surprise us, for we have already seen ladies resolving the contradictions of the flesh and spirit. Just as they could be powerful and worldly, they were worldly and spiritual in the same way. They looked to the Church, and in so doing conserved the domestic system.