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## ROUSSEAU'S *ÉMILE* ON MOTHERHOOD, IN THE CONTEXT OF ITS TIME

by Nancy Senior

In this paper I shall discuss some of Rousseau's remarks about mothers and small children in *Émile*, and situate them in the context of changing ideas on child care.

Rousseau's famous plea in *Émile* for mothers to nurse their children is based on two kinds of considerations: theoretical and practical. In the first, he maintains that sending children out to nurse is unnatural. In the second, which is our concern here, he shows the bad results of the practice. The children are not well cared for by nurses who have no reason to love them, and attachments are not formed between mothers and their children, and between fathers and their families.

This plea reached some ears, and launched a fashion for aristocratic women to nurse their children. But they represented a small proportion of those involved in the wetnursing phenomenon, and in terms of numbers the effect was small, for reasons which we shall see.

In Book II of *Émile*, Rousseau makes a magnificent critique of words, that is, of the all-too-human tendency to use words and to reason without a firm basis in experience that would give meaning to the words. He speaks of the problem in relation to children, but the same remarks apply to adults. We too risk making errors in our understanding of writers of the past if our knowledge of facts is lacking. In order to understand many aspects of Rousseau's work, we would do well to take his advice, and learn about the historical circumstances in which we lived and wrote. After all, when he says that one should do the opposite of customary practice, it is not pure contrariness on his part; he has specific practices in mind.

Unfortunately — or fortunately, considering infant mortality rates — we cannot have direct experience of eighteenth-century childcare practices. We have to use contemporary reports and

the findings of more recent scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

It is well known that many children in eighteenth-century France were not nursed by their mothers, but were sent out to nurse. The custom was particularly widespread in large cities, where it affected children of all classes and economic conditions. According to Maxime de Sarthe-Lenoir, Lieutenant-Général de Police for Paris, of the twenty or twenty-one thousand children born each year in Paris, less than one thousand were fed their mothers' milk, and about the same number were fed in their own homes by hired nurses. That leaves the great majority, about nineteen thousand a year, who were sent to nurses in the country.<sup>2</sup> The situation in Lyons, the second largest city, was similar, as reported by its Lieutenant-Général de Police, Prost le Royer.<sup>3</sup> Of six thousand children born each year, a few were fortunate in that their parents could afford good nurses. The rest were placed anywhere the parents could find to send them. Apparently the number nursed by their mothers was negligible.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the children placed by their parents, many others were abandoned immediately after birth, and taken to foundling homes. Rousseau's own children are perhaps the most famous in this category. Despite the efforts of the foundling homes, nurses were in short supply for the children, and their chances of survival were low.<sup>4</sup>

Even for children whose parents accepted responsibility, conditions were not good. Except in the wealthy classes, parents usually looked for a nurse only after the child was born. In Paris

1. Some of the most important studies are:

Philippe Ariès, *L'enfance et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, (Paris: Plon, 1960). Translated as *Centuries of Childhood*.

Roger Mercier, *L'Enfant dans la société du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle (avant l'Émile)*, (Paris: Thèse complémentaire ès Lettres de l'Université de Paris, 1961).

Lloyd de Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood*, (New York: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1974).

Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Familles: parenté, maison, sexualité dans l'ancien régime*, (Paris: Hachette, 1976). Translated by Richard Southern as *Families in Former Times*, (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Elisabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

The entire 1973 issue of the *Annales de Démographie Historique* is devoted to children in history, especially in France. The articles by Antoinette Chamoux are especially useful.

2. *Détail de quelques établissements de la ville de Paris, 1780*.

3. *Mémoire sur la conservation des enfants, 1778*.

4. See Mercier and Chamoux. This is also discussed by Dominique Risler in *Nourrices et meneurs de Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale microfiche, 1976). Unless a nurse in the country could be found immediately, the mortality rate could be as high as 90 per cent.

they could go to the official Bureaux des Recommanderesses, which served as intermediaries. Sometimes the nurse came to the city looking for work; in other cases the children were taken to the nurse in her village by *meneurs*, who worked for the Bureaux and also served as contacts between the nurse and the parents.

Hired nurses were mostly quite poor. Only someone in difficult circumstances would be willing to wean her own child early, or farm it out to someone else at a lower rate. There were of course some nurses whose own child had died, but that was not usually the case. And there were some whose child died as a result of being weaned too early, while the paying guest got the mother's milk.

In the course of the eighteenth century there was a great outcry against the practice, and various writers — moralists, doctors, etc. — painted a frightening picture of the conditions in which the children lived. Rousseau describes the child, wrapped so tightly in the *maillot* (swaddling clothes) that it can hardly breathe, much less move. «Au moindre tracas qui survient on le suspend à un clou comme un paquet de hardes, et tandis que sans se presser la nourrice vaque à ses affaires, le malheureux reste ainsi crucifié.» (O.C., IV, 255)

According to Rousseau, the use of the *maillot* is a result of sending children out to nurse; its purpose is to save the nurse the trouble of watching the child. The original cause is the selfishness of mothers, who for frivolous reasons want to be rid of their children. He says, of the *maillot*:

D'où vient cet usage déraisonnable? D'un usage dénaturé. Depuis que les mères méprisant leur premier devoir n'ont plus voulu nourrir leurs enfants, il a fallu les confier à des femmes mercenaires, qui se trouvant ainsi mères d'enfants étrangers pour qui la nature ne leur disait rien, n'ont cherché qu'à s'épargner de la peine. Il eût fallu veiller sans cesse sur un enfant en liberté: mais quand il est bien lié, on le jette dans un coin sans s'embarasser de ses cris. (IV, 255)

Sometimes, says Rousseau, the mother pretends to want to nurse her child, but she is not sincere.

J'ai vu quelquefois le petit manège des jeunes femmes qui feignent de vouloir nourrir leurs enfants. On sait se faire presser de renoncer à cette fantaisie: on fait adroitement intervenir les époux, les médecins, surtout les mères. Un mari qui oserait consentir que sa femme nourrit son enfant serait un homme perdu. L'on en ferait un assassin qui veut se

défaire d'elle. Maris prudents, il faut immoler à la paix l'amour paternel. (IV, 256)

The impression that one gets in reading these passages by Rousseau is that the practices are recently adopted by women out of the hardness of their hearts. It is natural for mothers to love their children and to care for them, but women in his time are unnatural. What are we to make of this view, and to what extent should we accept it?

In recent years the family and its evolution have been the subject of much study. The great pioneer in the field is Philippe Ariès, in *L'Enfance et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*. I shall refer to this book later, but would like to concentrate for the moment on a more recent one by Elisabeth Badinter, entitled *L'Amour en plus* (*Histoire de l'amour maternel, XVII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*), published by Flammarion in 1980.

Badinter agrees with Rousseau that the reason for sending children out to nurse was the indifference of their mothers. She disagrees with his assumption that this is unnatural, and maintains that maternal love is not an instinct, but a cultural phenomenon. According to her, women prefer their own interests, that is, what is good for themselves. In the eighteenth century, children were not valued; caring for them did not bring economic advantage (which was necessary in the case of the poor), or prestige (important for the rich). Being considered of so little importance, the children were sent away from their parents, who cared very little what happened to them, and were often relieved when they died.

Badinter contrasts this hardness of heart with the devotion that is expected of mothers now, and traces how, from the eighteenth century on, intensifying in the nineteenth, a great attempt was made to persuade mothers that they would be healthy, happy, and respected, and would find fulfilment in devoting themselves to their children. Maternal love was described as a total, self-sacrificing (one might say today, somewhat masochistic) devotion to the children, in which the mother gives up all other interests and activities. More respect came to be attached to the job of mothering, and it did indeed become then best interest of the mother to attend to her children full time when possible, especially as women were excluded more and more from other activities. As a result, mothers did in most cases become very attached to their children, but this state of affairs was no more "natural" than the one that preceded it.

To reinforce the argument, she recalls that some women today, despite all the propaganda in favour of motherhood, do not want children, and some do not love the children they have. If maternal love were instinctive, it would be universal and infallible.

Badinter and Rousseau agree, then, about the motivation of eighteenth-century French mothers who sent their children to nurse, though they disagree about the naturalness of the behavior. Must we accept their judgment, and conclude that the great majority of these women were totally lacking in concern about their offspring?

Badinter will take nothing less than total self-sacrifice as evidence of the naturalness of mother love, but we may accept a more modest definition. The tendency to take care of one's children when they are small, especially to feed them, is, I believe, as natural as any human behavior can be said to be. If it were not, the human species would not be here today. This does not mean that everyone must want children, but only that normally, when women have them, they will, if not prevented from doing so, care for them and be concerned about their welfare. This does not exclude great variations in the way it is done. As Ariès says, «On a toujours aimé ses enfants, n'importe où et n'importe quand, mais pas n'importe comment.» He goes on to explain how the ways in which parents love and care for their children are culturally conditioned. The passionate love we have for our children today, and the importance we attach to their education, are, in his opinion, a recent development. But he never questions that taking care of them and taking pleasure in them are natural. Indeed, in one study of madness in the seventeenth century, one of the most common symptoms complained of by the sufferers was an inability to take pleasure in their children. This was considered both by patients and physician to be proof of a disturbed mind. I think we may safely say that the assertion we sometimes hear nowadays — that parents in the past did not love their children — is an exaggeration.

Why then did they send them out to nurse? The hiring of wetnurses was not a recent invention; it goes back to ancient times, when it was practiced by the upper classes. In France in earlier centuries, too, it was mostly the rich who used their services. But by the eighteenth century, as we have seen, the custom was almost universal in large cities. Let us consider some of the possible reasons.

In the case of the poor, economic necessity was probably the

most pressing reason. Women of the poorer classes had to work, and their conditions of working and living made nursing a child difficult. Prost le Royer writes:

Il serait sans doute à désirer, que les femmes de notre peuple allaitassent leurs enfants. Mais comment les ramener à cette première loi de la nature, au milieu de la corruption des villes, avec l'embarras des manufactures, la cherté des loyers, le rétrécissement et l'infection des domiciles? Comment une femme, chargée de vêtir, d'approvisionner, et de nourrir une famille déjà nombreuse, et travaillant elle-même pour subsister, pourra-t-elle avoir un nourrisson?

According to this writer, it was usually the working-class father, rather than the mother, who did not want to be bothered by babies.

Families living in more fortunate circumstances would be freer to make decisions based on what they thought best. In order to find out what was considered the proper way to care for small children, I have made a study of eighteenth-century and earlier books on the subject, written mostly by doctors, and addressed to other doctors, to midwives, and to parents. Many of these books, both before and after the publication of *Émile*, express views very similar to those of Rousseau, while others have opposing views on some matters.<sup>5</sup>

In almost all the books, mothers were told that it was their duty to nurse their children. Practically every writer includes in his book an eloquent plea to do so (borrowed from earlier writers, with the same terms repeated from one book to another). It is a commonplace to compare women to fierce jungle beasts, with the beasts coming off best in the comparison. Lionesses and tigresses and other beasts, we are told, will lay aside their ferocity in order to nurse their young. But you, human mother, who seem made by nature to be so gentle, you prove to be more cruel than all the beasts. A mother who refuses to nurse her child is not very different from a murderess.

But there is another side to the advice given, as I maintain in an article in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (summer 1983). The same authors also give practical advice about how to feed and care for the child, often a repetition of the prescriptions of Hippocrates, Galen, Soranus, Oribasius, Arab physicians, and so on

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5. Many of the same books have been studied by Marie-France Morel, in «Théories et pratiques de l'allaitement en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.» *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 1977, p. 393-426. Morel's point of view is different from that expressed in this paper.

for centuries. And here is the catch. There are so many necessary conditions, and so many possible obstacles and difficulties mentioned in the books, that a reader — particularly a young woman without experience — might well conclude that she could not nurse her child.

In the first place, in order to nurse the child, the mother must have enough milk, and the milk must be of a proper quality. Several writers mention the danger of spoiling, even in the breasts. In addition, milk was considered to transmit the passions of the nurse. If the mother was calm, placid and without passions, if her way of life was above reproach, she might be a good nurse. But as one writer, Vandermonde, says, this is hardly ever the case any more. «Il est aussi pernicieux à présent aux enfants de sucer le lait maternel, qu'il leur était profitable autrefois d'en faire leur nourriture.» Another authority, Brouzet, states that few mothers have «le degré de santé, de loisir, et d'équanimité que nous avons exigé.» City women especially led the wrong kind of life, according to the authorities.

The next requirement was that the mother or nurse have breasts of the required size and shape. She should have a «poitrine large et carrée» or «large et ample» (because with small breasts she might not have enough milk); and there are long and detailed descriptions of all the possible imperfections in the shape of the breasts and nipples that might make nursing impossible.

If the mother did decide to nurse, she was warned by many writers that it would be bad for her health and beauty. However, other writers of the late eighteenth century tried to refuse this common belief, and asserted that nursing mothers are healthy and beautiful.

Finally, other possible inconveniences of nursing were mentioned, such as restriction of social life, loss of sleep for the mother (and father), and sexual abstinence, which was considered necessary.

If the parents were not discouraged by all this, they might still be influenced by the belief, mentioned by many writers as well as by Rousseau, that the country was a better and healthier environment for children.

Finally, if despite all arguments to the contrary the mother was determined to nurse her child, she was told to wait a period of time that varied from one day to several days before beginning. It is recognized now that delay makes the beginning more

difficult, but in the eighteenth century and before, this delay was considered necessary because the first milk (colostrum) was thought to be bad for the baby. Also, the contents of the child's intestine must be voided, or else they would cause the milk to spoil. In the meantime, the child was given some purgative, which might be as mild as honey and water, or might be oil of sweet almonds, syrup of chicory, *mithritate*, or *thériaque*. Some but not all books written late in the century recommend instead that nursing be begun immediately, since it had been discovered that colostrum is a purgative.

In my opinion, the authors of these books sent a double message: mothers should nurse their children; but they will probably not be able to do it properly. It is no wonder if some of those who had the choice decided to have the job done by a woman who had done it before, and who could be expected to succeed again.

Rousseau, when he talks about sending children to nurse, does not go into practical considerations, nor does he mention the poor, who were a great majority of the people affected. But he knew quite well the pressures of poverty on parents, because that is one of the reasons he gives for not keeping his own children. In *Émile*, he speaks only of the small number of rich society women who had a choice. He does not mention either the poor woman like Thérèse in the *Confessions*, who «obéit en gémissant» when the decision was made for her, or the more fortunate women who would have nursed their children if they had been really, effectively encouraged to do so. He describes only the husband manipulated by his wife, not the father who does not want to be bothered by the presence of an infant. By laying all the blame on mothers, Rousseau is greatly oversimplifying the question, perhaps for personal reasons.

Other practices that Rousseau describes (and he gives the impression that they too, like wetnursing, are recent aberrations), are also centuries old. Many go back to ancient Greece; some are mentioned in the Bible. Books about the care of small children recommend them, with each author repeating almost the very words of his predecessors. In the eighteenth century, opinion was beginning to change, and some of these practices fell into disrepute among the enlightened. But even then, there was no consensus about some matters.

One of the most ancient customs was the swaddling of newborn babies. At one time people thought that babies who were

not swaddled would not stand upright, but would go on all fours like animals. By the eighteenth century, this belief was no longer common, but many people did still believe that their limbs would not grow straight without swaddling. (This concern makes more sense when we recall the prevalence of rickets.) Also, as Rousseau mentions, it was feared that babies might hurt themselves if their limbs were free. And finally, swaddling kept babies warm in unheated houses. From many contemporary descriptions, including the one Rousseau quotes from the *Histoire Naturelle*, it would appear that they were often wrapped very tightly in the eighteenth century. Doctors more and more condemn the practice, though in fact it is continued to be widespread. Laurence Wylie in his *Village in the Vaucluse* (1964) mentions watching very devoted mothers swaddle their babies, and remarks that it looked like a lot of work. The daughter of my son's *nourrice* (meaning today babysitter, not wetnurse) was swaddled under doctor's orders when she was born in Paris about ten years ago, though, as her mother said, «C'est exceptionnel».

One finds in eighteenth century and earlier medical books various other practices that to us may seem cruel and harmful, but which were considered beneficial for children. Rousseau mentions that midwives knead the heads of newborn children. Babies' heads are sometimes misshapen at birth. It was long recommended in the most respectable books that the head should be shaped into, as one author says, «une forme plus décente.» In the course of the eighteenth century more writers said that this should be left to nature, and would correct itself in time.

Some of the earlier books mention the salting of newborn babies. They were covered with a large amount of salt, and then swaddled. The next day or so the swaddling and salt were removed, and the baby was washed. This was considered to be good for the skin, but it had become rare in eighteenth-century France, which explains why it is absent from the *Émile*. One practice that was still often observed, but surprisingly not mentioned by Rousseau, is the cutting of the *filet* (the membrane that attaches the tongue to the bottom of the mouth). It was thought that in many cases if this were not done, the child would not be able to suck. The midwife or doctor cut it, midwives sometimes using their fingernails. Sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century books mention this, some approvingly,

but by the latter part of the eighteenth century it was generally condemned, and some writers warn of the danger of choking.

All these things were done in the sincere belief that they were necessary. Even today in France, people are told to lay their babies in their beds first on one side, then on the other, so that the face will not grow out of shape. French shoes for babies learning to walk are not low and soft, like moccasins; they are little boots with very firm support. One advertisement for babies' shoes compares their feet to soft wax, which must be molded into the proper form.

Clearly, the idea, defended by Rousseau and other writers, of letting nature take its course, of allowing internal mechanisms to determine the development of the child, has not yet won completely over the older idea of molding the formless young growth into the right shape. This does not mean that parents love their children less; they are in fact very concerned about them, and do a lot of work that we might not think necessary. Their conception of child care and education is just different.

In the same way, many eighteenth-century practices that we consider to have been harmful to children were not the result of indifference, but of a concern, however misguided, for their welfare.

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