

The Eighteenth Century According to Jeffrey Merrick

The Family in the Old Regime, According to Jeffrey Merrick

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On 8 June 1775, the young Louis XVI makes his way toward Reims cathedral with Marie-Antoinette to be crowned as a “model spouse and ruler.” On that same day, Marie Pierrette Pogny, a Parisian fishwife, is filing a complaint against her husband of 17 years. She is accusing him of battery and of squandering their hard earned money on loose women. Jeffrey Merrick knows about the King's upcoming big day, but it is the fishwife he is paying attention to. As she lays out her case, he is listening, note cards at the ready. And he is thinking about what he would call “the use and abuse of marital authority, against the background of debates about the use and abuse of royal authority.”¹

And now here is the Marquis de Bombelles a few years later—lucky enough to be in a much better marriage. He is reflecting in his diary on how Marie-Antoinette is nowhere nearly as good a wife and a mother as his own wife, Angélique-Charlotte de Mackau, whom he calls an “angel in everything she does.”² Jeff peers over the Marquis's shoulder as he spills his private thoughts on family politics—both domestic and royal. And in mid September 1775, when the Parisian municipal guard finds an unconscious woman tied to a tree along the Avenue de Vincennes, Jeff once again stands nearby, watching. He takes notes on his laptop while she recovers at the Hôtel-Dieu and tells the police plenty of stories about her fabricated family and her lowly status as the “bastard' child of ... the highest royal official in Strasbourg and his concierge.” Her first tale about being sexually abducted morphs into a different saga about a political conspiracy to kill the King and a fantasy tale involving kidnapping in Constantinople and visions of the Virgin Mary. Jeff has knack for finding human stories that are bizarre and enthralling. As he put it, “She told a story that probably sounded as strange then as it does now.”³

What interests Jeff Merrick is not just the strangeness, but also the significance: the significance of the words and actions and feelings and assumptions and inquiries and legal struggles of ordinary men and women, ordinary family members of Old Regime France. These opening stories catch Jeff in action—doing what he does so well: digging out mundane family matters to use them to pose the broader questions about Old Regime society, state, and political culture. For Jeff Merrick, it is in the quirkiness of human behavior that the truth of the Old Regime can be found. And we already know that he delights

¹ Jeffrey Merrick, “Domestic Violence in Paris, 1775,” *Journal of Family History* 37:4 (October 2012): 417-427, quotation p. 424.

² Jeffrey Merrick, “The Family Politics of the Marquis de Bombelles,” *Journal of Family History* 21:4 (October 1996): 503-518, quote on 506. Article also published in Jeffrey Merrick, *Order and Disorder under the Ancien Régime* (Newcastle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars' Publishing, 2007), 164-181.

³ Jeffrey Merrick, “The Strange Case of Barbe Melzine,” in *Order and Disorder under the Ancien Régime*, 88-101, quotations pp. 89 and 88.

in that quirkiness. His delight in revealing that quirkiness is one characteristic that makes him so good at what he does.

For Jeff, family matters are everywhere, and the family is the site, the arena, that holds the key to the Old Regime because it sits at the juncture between the royal politics of the kingdom and the day-to-day dynamics of everyone's lives. The family also holds the key because it encompasses the prime characteristic of the Old Regime world à la Jeff Merrick: the power and flexibility of tradition. As I hope to show, he has a nuanced and particular and powerful interpretation of the role of tradition within the dance of order and disorder, stability and change, at the heart of the Old Regime.

Let's start with the realm of domestic disputes between husbands and wives. Jeff has done a great job ferreting out marital separation cases. But all-important, the backdrop of the family/kingdom model is always hovering behind these legal suits or reports to the police. This model of ideal order and authority draws crucial parallels between God the father, the King as father, and earthly, familial fathers as guardians and authorities within households. To quote Jeff, this model “politicized nature and naturalized politics.”⁴ The family/kingdom model hums in the background of all Jeff's work on ordinary families and their day-to-day disputes. It is like muzak, inescapable, ambient, slightly irritating, but also everywhere, pervading Old Regime consciousness and thought patterns without that point needing to be fully articulated. If it is muzak, the family/kingdom model is also glue—a crucial glue, a kind of durable but flexible glue to Old Regime order.

To get at marital disputes against this gluey, all-pervasive muzak of the family/kingdom model, Jeff has tirelessly and extensively mined a key source: the files of district police commissioners in Paris at four sample points: 1725, 1750, 1770, and 1775. His analysis of domestic conflict and the family/kingdom model is productively in dialogue with the work of other historians, including Sarah Hanley, Sarah Maza, and Lynn Hunt.⁵ But Jeff Merrick's archival method, using the Châtelet records, gives him a wider range of complaints and depositions and also the possibility of finding patterns in the voices of everyday subjects of the crown, most of them from artisanal, worker, or small-shopkeeper backgrounds.

He has unearthed several key trends. First and foremost is the staying power of certain kinds of traditional complaints. Again and again, women recount their tales of physical and verbal abuse. Jeff illustrates his great talent for writing about human texture and grittiness with humor, empathy, and tenderness. He finds ways to occasionally make us smile in the midst of this dire litany of marital denunciations. One husband insults not just his wife, but also her relatives as “beggars, villains, tartuffes, rabble, fleabags, 'demons from hell,' and 'vermin from mud.’” Another husband harasses his wife by playing his violin into the wee hours of the morning, and yet a third one torments his spouse by

⁴ Jeffrey Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture,” in *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*, Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, eds. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 198–219, quotation p. 201. See also multiple essays in Merrick, *Order and Disorder under the Ancien Régime*, and Jeffrey Merrick, “The Body Politics of French Absolutism,” in *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*, Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg, eds. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), 11–31.

⁵ Sarah Hanley, “Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France,” *French Historical Studies* 16:1 (Spring 1989): 4–27; Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif.: The University of California Press, 1992); and Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993).

elbowing her in her sleep to keep her awake.⁶ But for the most part, the accusations are sadder and harsher and far more violent—and sadly similar to the tales Julie Hardwick has discovered for the seventeenth century or that revolutionary historians, such as Roderick Phillips, Dominique Dessertine, or myself, have found in divorce cases of the 1790s.⁷

Jeff traces a staying power not just in the nature of the abuse, but also in some gendered assumptions about ideal male and female behavior, such as women's need to be sexually virtuous and men's need to avoid either weakness or the excesses of passion or tyranny. Both husbands and wives seek respectability and responsibility in a spouse. If Jeff sees pervasive continuities in gender ideology, he also exposes key evolutions. For example, by 1775, a distinct increase in demands for marital separations took place at the police commissioners' office. Women have become, as Jeff aptly puts it, “more streetwise and assertive.”⁸ So have men in defending themselves. Because he came to families by way of royal constitutional conflict from his book *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*, this unique perspective and his archival work enable him to make a compelling interpretation.⁹ It is not just that royal politics hinges on sexual order and domestic analogies, but he makes a more surprising and original point: the opposite is true as well. Domestic disputes correlate with and even mirror public politics. There is a change in day-to-day practice, not just in rhetorical presentation. As political confrontation amplifies in the years surrounding the Maupeou crisis, so too, in the police archives, legal confrontations between couples increase, as wives denounce domestic tyranny by men, and husbands berate scandalous/disorderly behavior by women.¹⁰

And Jeff Merrick makes another striking find: the use of political language among both husbands and wives intensifies in marital separation cases in the 1770s. Marie-Jacqueline de Beynac, the Countess of Beaumont, for example, mastered this verbal strategy. She reproached her husband for all kinds of abuses of authority: he had an “imperious and tyrannical temper,” and he exercised “nothing but the

⁶ Jeffrey Merrick, “Marital Conflict in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Order and Disorder under the Ancien Régime*, 182-205, quotation p. 187. See also his “Domestic Politics,” and “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture” in *From Deficit to Deluge*.

⁷ Julie Hardwick, “Seeking Separations: Gender, Marriages, and Household Economies in Early Modern France,” *French Historical Studies* 21:1 (Winter 1998):157-80; Julie Hardwick, “Early Modern Perspectives on the Long History of Domestic Violence: The Case of Seventeenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 78:1 (March 2006): 1-36; Roderick Phillips, *Family Breakdown in Late Eighteenth-Century France: Divorces in Rouen, 1792-1803* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Dominique Dessertine, *Divorcer à Lyon sous la Révolution et l'Empire* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1981); and Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, Calif.: The University of California Press, 2004).

⁸ Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture,” 211.

⁹ Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Jeffrey Merrick, “Marital Conflict in Political Context: Langeac vs. Chambonas, 1775,” in *Family, Gender, and Law in Early Modern France*, Suzanne Desan and Jeffrey Merrick, eds. (University Park, Penn. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 137-182; Merrick, *Order and Disorder under the Ancien Régime*, chapters 9 and 10; Merrick, “Domestic Violence in Paris, 1775”; Jeffrey Merrick, “Domestic Politics: Divorce and Despotism in Late Eighteenth-Century France,” in *The Past as Prologue: Essays to Celebrate the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of ASECS*, Carla H. Hay and Syndy M. Conger, eds. (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 373-86; Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture.”

most exaggerated despotism.” Like a despotic king, he ordered her to carry out trivial demands just to display his “right and authority to give orders.” In fact, trivializing, power-wielding tyrannical kings are dancing in the background all the time. The Countess recounts that her husband's own uncle allegedly “reprimanded his nephew for always seating himself in the 'armchair of authority' and his wife on 'the footstool of obedience.’” Importantly, husbands were just as good at wielding this language of family/kingdom model. They faulted their wives for assembling under the “banner of revolt” or for producing the same kind of scandalous sexual disorder that a Madame du Barry had acted out.¹¹

Again and again, Jeff deftly lays out the constant intertwining of the domestic and the public political uses of the family/kingdom model as the language of the realm for speaking about order and disorder. In one of my favorite examples, according to the *Correspondance secrète*, one wife snuck away to Reims without her husband's permission to watch Louis XVI's coronation ceremony. She told her husband that if he lost his temper at her, he would be “a very bad Frenchman and a subject unworthy of the ruler God has given us.” Her husband retorted that the new king “had no intention of allowing wives to disobey their husbands, especially if they ran off, as she had done, with their husbands' money in their pockets and in the company of other men.”¹²

I have summarized Jeffrey Merrick's work on marital disputes briefly here so that I can unpack the originality and subtlety of his analysis. Here is a crucial point: he skillfully uses the family/kingdom model to understand both the tenacity of tradition and its capacity for incremental but significant change. His analysis brilliantly helps us to understand the complex and interconnected forces that enabled the status quo—in both politics and personal lives—to resist change and to persist, although sometimes taking a different shape or form. Here, I think Jeff takes a page from Bourdieu.¹³ That is, he is interested in social reproduction, in how the habitus replicates itself and has staying power.

But at the same time, Merrick also offers us a very subtle model of how change occurs. It is not cataclysmic; it is not destructive. Instead, in his account of the Old Regime, changes and shifts occur within the framework of tradition and through the language of tradition. The family model lends order and prescriptive norms to state and society, but it also becomes a language for *challenging* that order. The model reinforces notions of authority, but it also places limits on that authority. Both defenders and critics of the social and political order wield a shared idiom, and they edge interpretations of the family/kingdom model in one direction or another, perhaps toward affection, perhaps toward more authoritarian bonds, for example. All kinds of people are using this flexible and multivalent rhetoric: accusing wives, defensive husbands, lawyers on both sides in marital disputes, libellistes, gossip sheets like the *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète*, and also angry parlementaires and defenders of the crown.

Here's another crucial contribution of Jeff's approach: it demands that we rethink the sources of modernity. It encourages very subtle understandings of the origins of “modern” forces, like the growth of affection or the attack on despotism. Jeff uses “modern” in quotation marks. As he highlights the capacity of the family/kingdom model to subvert the status quo, he boldly suggests that this paradigm was as important as the Enlightenment, the classic Old Regime “modernizing” force, or force often seen

¹¹ Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Culture,” 212-214.

¹² *Correspondance secrète, politique et littéraire* 18 vols. (London: Chez John Adamson, 1787-1790) I :423 (1775), as quoted and discussed in Jeffrey Merrick, “Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late Eighteenth-Century France: The *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète*,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1:1 (July 1990): 68-84, quotation p. 79.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990, orig. ed. 1980).

as modernizing. To give but one example, when the Prince and Princess of Monaco go head to head over adultery, disorder, and domestic despotism, their depositions and complaints on both sides are “loaded with the language and concepts used to defend Parlement, provinces, and privilege against despotism... [This] language... penetrated Parisian society more widely and deeply than the Enlightenment did.” Or again, as Jeff argues in his article, “Patriarchalism and Constitutionalism in 18th-Century Parliamentary Discourse,” the anti-Maupeou magistrates “did as much as the philosophes to transform the members of the King's extended family from childlike subjects into adult citizens.”¹⁴

I am trying to get at a particular beauty of Jeffrey Merrick's insights into the malleable nature of tradition: in his understated and sly way, he does a superb job of disrupting our unquestioned assumptions about modernity and tradition. He reminds us how intertwined these categories are. In his recent article “Gender in Prerevolutionary Political Culture” in Kaiser and Van Kley's new edited volume on the origins of the Revolution, Jeff argues that subjects and spouses challenged “abuses of authority without necessarily rejecting 'traditional' ways of thinking and without automatically embracing 'modern' ways of thinking associated with the philosophes.”¹⁵

He helps us avoid too simplistically choosing which actors or positions are enlightened or progressive. For example, in that piece, he adroitly points out that in marital separation cases, we too easily align victimized wives with the new and forward-looking, and we too easily assume that husbands' attacks on rebellious wives are speaking an “older” language. Instead, he writes, “Taken together, they demonstrate the durability and flexibility of tradition.” Those wives are not “claiming rights for the female sex.” On the contrary, even as they attack marital tyranny, they are working as hard as they can to prove that they have fulfilled traditional gender roles, “recycled and updated by Roussau.” Even Rousseau, that touchstone for scholars seeking new gender ideology, is partly mired in “the repertoire of traditional stereotypes about the female sex.”¹⁶

Now I would like to turn to look more closely at another strongpoint of Jeff Merrick's version of the late Old Regime family in both domestic and royal politics: his analysis of affection as a growing value within households—both conjugal and parental affection. Jeff's analysis of the escalating centrality of affection carries all his trademark subtlety and his power to convince. Two key points—points of ultra-Jeffness, as I call it—first, the sentimental family does not simplistically displace the traditional, patriarchal family. It grows up within it. This argument is very convincing, as I will try to show. And second, he shows splendidly how it operates in the dual, interconnected registers of public and private, kingdom and household.

Let's go to the article “The Family Politics of the Marquis de Bombelles” to get a snapshot of Merrick's insightful analysis here. He first upsets our class assumptions about sources of the affectionate family. The Marquis does not at all fit the stereotype of the forward-looking member of the bourgeoisie who embraces the sentimental, conjugal family. Instead, though his journal continually expresses affectionate emotions toward his wife, children, and siblings, he is very much an old-style aristocrat. And his sentimental language mixes continually with old-fashioned plans and strategies for advancing

¹⁴ Merrick, *Order and Disorder*, 227-228; and Jeffrey Merrick, “Patriarchalism and Constitutionalism in Eighteenth-Century Parliamentary Discourse,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 20 (1990): 317-30, p. 328.

¹⁵ Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture,” 199.

¹⁶ Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture,” 216-17; Merrick, “Domestic Violence in Paris,” 424.

his family lineage. He tries to arrange marriages for his sisters, and he helps one of them get a *lettre de cachet* to exile her wild and spendthrift husband to the provinces. Bombelles embodies that complexity of Old Regime families that Jeff captures so well. On the one hand, the Marquis participates in what André Burguière calls “the invention of the couple.” On the other hand, he still has—as Jeff puts it—“a residual sense of collective lineage.” Also, Bombelles's affective family is not necessarily egalitarian—it is paternalist, moralizing, and benevolent, and it does not blur gender roles or generational duties. Nor does it chase an inappropriate and elusive equality. Old hierarchy co-exists with the affectionate model.¹⁷

Bombelles is also a fascinating character for thinking about royal politics. Though he does not theorize the family-kingdom paradigm across different nations and political structures à la Montesquieu, he articulates this model continually in his critical observations about Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, and the moral problems of the court. He compares the dysfunctional royal family to his own, more effective and affective one. The Marquis faults Marie-Antoinette as a bad mother, stunned that the queen's daughter would express dislike and disrespect toward her own mother—so different from Bombelles' own family.¹⁸

And he shares Louis XVI's moral and benevolent values, but worries that the king is too weak to carry them out with any success. Elsewhere, Jeff has encapsulated the familial authority problem of the Old Regime monarchy neatly. As he wrote early on, back in 1990 in his piece, “Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late 18th-Century France: The *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète*,” “Paternalism displaced *patriarchalism* in conceptions of the family and the monarchy.” But neither model seemed to work very well to produce the dreamed-of order. Jeff Merrick sums it up dexterously in the same article, “The old king [Louis XV] represented the abuse of patriarchalism, and the new king [Louis XVI] represented the failure of paternalism.” As Jeff observes so neatly in the Bombelles piece, all these notions of authority have an “inherent ambiguity...about the use and abuse of authority.”¹⁹ In turn, a double whammy emerges of increasing political opposition in the kingdom and increasing models of affections in the household, that is, in both domestic and royal households. That double whammy undermines the stability of Old Regime authority structures from within.

I would like to look at one last aspect of Jeff's interpretation of Old Regime families: his analysis of the role of women in producing domestic moral glue. Intriguingly, he does not approach this question in a predictable way by exploring wives within households. Instead, the issue pops up partly in his historical work on same-sex relations with a woman here and there who violates both sexual and moral order, like the jaunty, cross-dressing actress Mademoiselle de Raucourt, who according to the *Correspondance secrète*, “declaims like she loves..., always in the wrong way.”²⁰ Or quite often, the issue of women's ideal, domestic role emerges in Jeff's frequent analysis of masculinity and fatherhood. Take, for example, his article, “Prodigal Sons and Family Values in Eighteenth-Century France.”²¹

¹⁷ Jeffrey Merrick, “Family Politics of the Marquis de Bombelles,” 508. André Burguière, “Les fondements d'une culture familiale,” in *Histoire de la France*. Volume IV : *Les formes de la culture*, André Burguière, ed. (Paris: Le Seuil, 1993), 25-118.

¹⁸ Merrick, “Family Politics of the Marquis de Bombelles.”

¹⁹ Merrick, “Sexual Politics and Public Order,” 69 (emphasis mine) and 84; and Merrick, “Family Politics of the Marquis de Bombelles,” 504.

²⁰ *Correspondance secrète, politique et littéraire* 8: 180, as quoted in Merrick, “Sexual Politics and Public Order,” 72-73.

²¹ Merrick, “Prodigal Sons and Family Values in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Journal of European Studies* 33:3 (June 2003): 107-118.

Here, he probes how moralizing sermons, several plays, and one poem make use of the Biblical story of the prodigal son. Jeff teases out how the prodigal son story evolves into a secular morality tale. And he shows how it has a new message about family dynamics. Here is his nutshell version: “They transform the parable about paternal/filial love that transcends nature into a romance about male/female love that enacts nature.” To be more specific, in a play by Voltaire and a poem by Daillant de la Touche, the prodigal son story no longer tells the tale of a repentant son and a wise father who has the spiritual and social ability to reintegrate the wayward son through forgiveness. Instead, in both cases, a woman reincorporates the sons. She is not a vice-ridden Biblical woman, but a moralizing, civilizing eighteenth-century woman who uses the power of heterosexual love to produce moral cohesion and reconciliation and marriage. She makes a well-socialized adult man of the prodigal son. Jeff aptly notes the shift away from the universalized Christian male who is doomed by his sinful nature and saved by spiritual forces. Instead, the prodigal son becomes the “universalized (male) human who follows social dictates out of adolescence and on to matrimony.” While he disciplines his desire, the woman fulfills her destiny. The story is no longer an allegorical condemnation of human sinfulness, but instead becomes a secularized celebration of benevolent emotions within heterosexual family structures and their power to produce normative behavior and personal happiness.²²

To sum things up, Jeff Merrick's analysis of the Old Regime family operates on multiple, intertwined fronts at once: social, emotional, and political — as prescriptive norm and as practice. And if the everyday family serves as a microcosm of royal, paternalist politics, and vice versa, I have also tried to show that in Jeff's work, the family powerfully becomes a microcosm of his much larger and very compelling interpretation of Old Regime society as a whole — a world in which tradition has definite durability, but also a flexibility and a capacity for self-critique and change. To his credit, Jeff does a masterful job of writing about the Old Regime without always looking down the road to 1789. This is a deliberate and conscious strategy, and not so easy to do, living as he puts it, “under the long shadow of 1789.”²³ More power to him. But I also want to emphasize that his particular take on tradition and long-term change is extraordinarily useful for those of us who study the revolutionary moment and beyond. He fills Old Regime history with nuanced layers of understanding — layers that are not necessarily easy to see if you are always asking why everything explodes and falls apart. One of Jeff's lessons, of course, is that some things do not entirely fall apart. They reinvent themselves, drawing on both tradition and revolution, with a resilience and roots deep back in time.

How lucky for all of us that Jeffrey Merrick walked into the police archives in search of quirky stories about feisty fishwives and happily married marquis because he emerged with insights and methods for understanding tradition and change that reach far beyond Old Regime family and politics.

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²² Merrick, “Prodigal Sons and Family Values,” 116.

²³ Merrick, “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture,” 218.

