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Meghan K. Roberts, *Sentimental Savants: Philosophical Families in Enlightenment France*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. v + 214 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-2263-8411-5; \$45.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-2263-8425-2.

Review by Tracy L. Rutler, The Pennsylvania State University.

The 2017 French presidential election recently came to a close. Emmanuel Macron was elected president of the French Republic and much of the world collectively exhaled after a tense campaign season. To say that this election was emotionally charged and tumultuous would be an understatement. While most of the scrutiny centered on the scandals of the Front National (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen, one element of Macron's life emerged in debates again and again: his marriage to his former high-school teacher and their unconventional family. One such critique came from Jean-Marie Le Pen, former leader of the FN and Marine's father, who declared at a May Day rally that Macron had no business thinking about the future of France because he had no children. Hours later, Macron rebutted that he did, in fact, have children, and even grandchildren *de cœur*. His speech ended with an impassioned critique of Le Pen for his complete misunderstanding of what it means to be a family: "C'est une filiation qui se construit, c'est une filiation qui se conquiert, c'est une filiation qui ne vous doit rien et c'est une filiation que vous n'aurez pas." [1] In public discourse, for better or worse, the family often becomes an apparatus meant not only to mold and shape our opinions of public officials, but also to reassure us that they are sensible and emotionally attached individuals, capable of thinking of others when doing their jobs. Yet, this was not always the case.

Meghan K. Roberts's compelling book, *Sentimental Savants: Philosophical Families in Enlightenment France* takes us back to a time when the mention of family relations as a testament to one's character was a novel, and sometimes jarring, affair. Although the time period studied in this monograph is sketched out roughly as the "Age of Enlightenment," the historical markers of time are less important than the cultural milieu from which the main problem of the book arises. She articulates her central questions in the first pages of the introduction: "Was the ideal man of letters, as tradition held, a celibate bachelor married to Philosophy? Or was he a man of the world, married, possibly with children?" (p. 1) The argument that follows informs us that philosophers may have been both, but in the eighteenth century at least, men and women found themselves taking up households more and more frequently—and they were liking it. By devoting much attention to the lives of scientists, including detailed accounts of their experiments, this book contributes to the history of science, and I learned a great deal about both the scientists and the history of inoculations and farming in France. By focusing on how public feelings about families changed over the course of the eighteenth century, the book also contributes greatly to the growing field of history of emotions.

Roberts's interest in the family as a locus for the production of knowledge as well as self-image emerges from looking back to previous centuries when being brilliant meant being single. Indeed, historians and literary critics have long perpetuated the myth of the bachelor scientist who is able to devote all his

passion and energy to the craft. In *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, for example, Robert Darnton expressed surprise at the French philosopher Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard's decision to leave bachelorhood and take a wife, writing, "Philosophes did not generally marry."<sup>[2]</sup> *Sentimental Savants* is a beautifully written and well-researched book that disrupts this myth. Roberts argues that a new type of *philosophe* began to emerge in eighteenth-century France, one who embraced the social comfort of the family. These men and women of letters, she argues, understood marriage and family not only as beneficial to scientific and philosophical production, but also as essential to the creation and maintenance of one's reputation. Amidst a growing appreciation of sentimental fiction, and of *sensibilité* more broadly, these savants felt a duty to present themselves as good and compassionate heads of households.

It is always a pleasure to read a book that is so thoughtful in its layout and engaging in its style. It is divided into five chapters with a brief introduction and conclusion. Each chapter contains a set of concluding remarks that sum up its argument succinctly and persuasively, and the subheadings within the chapters will make it easy to excerpt for use in the classroom. In the introduction, Roberts writes that hers is a book about stories (p. 5). The "stories" to which she refers are those that philosophers told about themselves. In other words, more than just how these philosophers lived the Enlightenment, she focuses on the way they presented themselves to the public. Whether or not their marriages were truly blissful or tumultuous, in letters between husbands and wives, or wives and other philosophers, the stories these philosophers told about themselves and their children were clear: their marriages were happy, their pairings beneficial, and their children important. Tales of familial bliss were crucial in constructing the image of a sociable and sentimental savant.<sup>[3]</sup> Central to Roberts's claims are notions of sensibility and sociability, and, in this, *Sentimental Savants* extends the important work begun by such scholars as Daniel Gordon and Dena Goodman.<sup>[4]</sup>

Chapter one considers the emergence of sociability in France, examining eulogies, love letters, and *Encyclopédie* articles (among other sources) to demonstrate how the "man of feeling" was born. Chapter two opens with a discussion of the rising importance of companionate marriage for philosophers in the eighteenth century. One notable case is that of Marie-Anne and Antoine Lavoisier. (In fact, a portrait of the couple by Jacques-Louis David, commissioned by Marie-Anne, David's dutiful student, adorns the cover of the book.) Married to Antoine at the young age of thirteen, Marie-Anne was educated first by her father, then by her husband, and was raised to be the perfect mate. Madame Lavoisier's talents as an artist, combined with her savvy in her husband's public relations, made of her rather private yet incredibly talented husband a sensational scientist. Similarly, we read of Suzanne Churchod Necker, wife of the famous finance minister Jacques Necker, who boosted her husband's reputation by reading letters about the importance of his work in her salon. The overtly symbiotic nature of these relationships highlights, as Roberts points out, the "patriarchal nature of family workshops" (p. 52). Although Marie-Anne lived a fairly full life after her husband's death, she never regained a sense of intellectual collaboration and fulfillment. The "épouse philosophique" was, after all, a wife first and not an independent philosopher.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its seamless weaving of the history of emotions with that of science. Nowhere in the book is this fortuitous union more evident than in the third chapter, in which Roberts examines debates surrounding smallpox vaccinations and the invaluable role of children in these debates. Inoculating a child was a risky operation and a traumatizing experience for most parents. By publicizing the inoculations of their own children, however, scientists and *philosophes* simultaneously demonstrated that they were good fathers and that inoculation was an important, life-saving process. These public displays of affection were meant to instill confidence in other parents. One notable individual examined in this chapter is an unlikely inoculation advocate, Charles-Marie de la Condamine. Condamine was not a doctor or medical scientist, but rather a geographer, an explorer, and a mathematician who had no children of his own. Condamine appealed to enlightened parents' love for their children by pairing two very unlikely notions, love and reason (*amour éclairé*). Rather than feeling

conflicted about a fierce devotion to science or the love of their children, Condamine argued that the two went hand in hand. Still, skeptics such as Jean Le Rond D'Alembert argued that parents need not surrender their children in the name of science. What was good for the state, he argued, might not be good for the individual. Advocates on both sides of the debate maintained their positions in the name of the love of children. In this sense, the family became "an object of study...Savants used the family as a sort of laboratory in which they could test and demonstrate their ideas for the public's benefit" (p. 101). In other words, not only were scientific processes shaping the discourse of familial love and duty, but the family itself was also shaping scientific processes.

Loving parents did not just care about their children's physical health. They cared about their mental acumen as well. Beginning with a discussion of the inextricability of politics from childhood education, chapter four offers several case studies to demonstrate how educational reform also emerged from the domestic sphere. Savants such as Emilie du Châtelet, Denis Diderot, Louise d'Épinay, and the Marquis de Condorcet took vastly different approaches to the education of their children, although each felt compelled to undertake this instruction herself or himself rather than leaving it to religious institutions. These thinkers described the intimate parent-child bond borne of the educational relationship as one of the most fulfilling in life. Although Roberts touches upon the differences in education for boys and girls, this chapter might have benefited from a deeper discussion of the causes and effects of such separation. The final case (Condorcet) offers readers a glimpse of what a feminist education might have looked like, but it feels more like an exception than an example followed by others.

The final chapter in the book constitutes quite a departure from those preceding it. Focusing on Antoine Lavoisier's time spent at his farm, *Fréchines*, this chapter pays close attention to the paternal relationship he developed with the peasants working the land. Roberts explains the shift in perspective, writing that "the experimental farm might seem to bear little relation to the domestic experiences discussed in previous chapters, but both were undergirded by shared assumptions and ideals. In eighteenth-century France, the family was a popular social metaphor" (p. 137). While it is true that the family was a powerful metaphor, the relation of farm to man to father figure seems a bit of a stretch. Her discussion of the metaphorical family also involves a comparison of *Fréchines* to Clarens, the fictional farm of the Wolmar family in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. She argues that Lavoisier's treatment of peasants imitates Julie's nurturing treatment of servants in her idyllic paradise. Roberts reinforces this parallel by treating both Rousseau's sentimental novel and Lavoisier's heart-felt letters as different versions of the "stories" philosophers told about family and nature. Although the relation of savants to servants is clear in both accounts, I found the readings of Rousseau fairly cursory and felt that the time spent on literary analysis detracted from, rather than bolstered, her argument. That said, although I found the connection of this chapter to the others rather flimsy, I did learn a tremendous amount from it and found it a pleasure to read. By the end, I found myself wishing that this could be the first chapter of a second book, and I hope that this gives us a glimpse of Roberts's future work.

What I found most innovative and intriguing about this book was that rather than focusing on the changing apparatus of the family, it instead scrutinized changing perceptions of the family. Its analysis of the mutually beneficial relation of perception to practical change mirrors the arguments Roberts makes about companionate marriage and blends reason and emotion in a manner that would have made any sentimental savant proud. In the introduction Roberts writes, "I have chosen to focus on biological families united by marriage because that was the household that prompted the most discussion" (p.11). I would argue, however, that to take her at her word here would be a disservice to the vastly important work she does in the book. She does devote much space to couples such as the Lavoisiers, or to parent-child teams such as Denis and Angelique Diderot, but her manner of scholarship, which examines letters to and from friends, scientists, men, women, wives, children, fathers, and mothers from around the world, in fact demands that we continue to think about what constitutes family in the first place. The exquisitely crafted last sentences of chapter five sum up this sentiment quite nicely. Discussing Lavoisier's legacy, she writes, "it was important to note for posterity that he was not just a brilliant

chemist. He was also a man whose death caused peasants to weep” (165). Sentimental images of public personae were constructed in the eighteenth century, much as today, through stories of intimate bonds. *Sentimental Savants* allows its readers to peer into the spaces in which the bonds are created and to see their impact on scientific and philosophical advances in Enlightenment-era France. It will be of tremendous interest to those working on eighteenth-century intellectual and cultural history, histories of science and emotions, and, more broadly, to anyone interested in reading about the relational nature of knowledge production.

## NOTES

[1] Emmanuel Macron, campaign speech presented at La Villette in Paris, France in May 2017.

[2] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 4.

[3] Roberts chooses to use the general term *savant* rather than *philosophe* or *homme* or *femme de lettres* in order to cover the wide range of intellectual and cultural activities of her objects of study.

[4] See Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

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