



## Essay

### GIRLHOOD IN MODERN EUROPEAN HISTORY. (PROTO-)INDUSTRIALISATION, CONSUMPTION, MARRIAGE, AND SELFHOOD, CA. 1750-1900

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My essay focuses on the roles that girls have played in the history of European modernity. I will be pointing to various ways in which girls—referring very broadly here to unmarried female youth in their teens and twenties—figured in this history: as workers and consumers active in the construction of market capitalism in Europe, as figures in the liberal political economy that enabled its implantation, and as participants (at least at the margins) of specifically European constructions of modern selfhood.

Pioneering studies of youth history focused on boys and young men.<sup>1</sup> For example, Erik Erikson's psychological framework for approaching youth historically, which he laid out in *Childhood and Society*, restricted itself to the male psyche. Similarly, Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* and John Gillis' path-breaking study *Youth in History* concentrated on boys.<sup>2</sup> Differences between male and female youth remained unexamined until more recently.<sup>3</sup> Still, youth has been a distinctive and significant phase of the female lifecycle for centuries. In European languages, young unmarried women have been referred to by evolving but specific terms such as *big girls*, *jeunes femmes*, *Backfische*, and *store piger*. Historically changing markers of crossing the boundary between childhood and youth for a girl have included leaving elementary school, starting work full time, participating in the formal ceremony of religious confirmation, being

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- 1 This section draws on the introduction to Maynes, Mary Jo; Soland, Birgitte; Benninghaus, Christina (eds.), *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750-1960*, Bloomington 2004, pp. 1-20. The essay presents arguments that are more fully developed in my book in progress: *A Story without a Hero? European Girlhood and Female Selfhood in the Age of Nascent Liberalism, 1750-1850*.
  - 2 Erikson, Erik, *Childhood and Society*, New York 1950; Ariès, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick, New York 1962; Gillis, John R., *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770 to the Present*, New York 1981.
  - 3 In addition to Maynes; Soland; Benninghaus (see footnote 1), for historical work on European girlhood see: Mitchell, Sally, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880-1915*, New York 1995; Benninghaus, Christina; Kohtz, Kerstin (eds.), "Sag' mir wo die Mädchen sind..." Beiträge zur Geschlechtergeschichte der Jugend, Köln 1999; Benninghaus, Christina, *Die anderen Jugendlichen: Arbeitermädchen in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt am Main 1999; Søland, Birgitte, *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s*, Princeton 2000; Tinkler, Penny, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing Up in England, 1920-1950*, London 1995; Alexander, Sally, *Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s*, in: Feldman, David; Jones, Gareth Stedman (eds.), *Metropolis, London: Histories and Representations since 1800*, London 1989, pp. 245-271; Fowler, D., *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyles of Young Wage-earners in Interwar Britain*, London 1995 and Langhamer, Claire, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60*, Manchester 2000.

presented at a formal ball, or adopting adult dress or coiffure, although none of these markers was universal and no girl experienced them all.

To more modern understandings, biological markers—sexual maturation, for example—might seem more obvious definers of the onset of young womanhood, but focusing on this type of boundary does not reflect changing historical experiences. First, rooting maturation in sexual development is a particularly modern construction, itself part of the historical transformation of youth. In Europe's past young women often took on adult economic responsibilities and familial roles several years before beginning to menstruate. Finally, the age of onset of menses has changed over time.<sup>4</sup> The end of youth as a phase of the female lifecycle was usually clearer. For most young women, as for young men, youth ended at the point of marriage. Yet for the significant minority of women who did not marry, or who married especially late in life, the end of youth might be fuzzy as well, unless marked, for example, by taking the veil or by giving birth outside of marriage.

During the course of the nineteenth century, the parameters defining youth in Europe were becoming much clearer and institutionally defined for both girls and boys. By the end of the nineteenth century, most girls as well as boys attended school at least intermittently until at least age twelve or thirteen. Psychologists and anthropologists—still a new intellectual presence themselves—debated in a transatlantic discourse the meaning of what they now routinely termed “adolescence” as a formative period in people's lives.<sup>5</sup> Late-nineteenth-century concern about youth initially centered largely on young men. The poor health of young men inducted into the military alarmed state authorities. The violence of street gangs in working-class neighborhoods was increasingly seen as a social problem, as were stress and suicide rates amongst male students.<sup>6</sup> However, new employment opportunities for girls, the campaigns of the women's movements for better education and vocational training for girls, and the decreasing

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4 On the history of menstruation, see Laslett, Peter, *Age at Menarche in Europe since the Eighteenth Century*, in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971-72), pp. 221-236; Brumberg, Joan Jacobs, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, New York 1997, pp. 1-25 and Hering, Sabine; Maierhof, Gudrun, *Die unpässliche Frau: Sozialgeschichte der Menstruation und Hygiene*, Pfaffenweiler 1991.

5 In her introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Family History*, 17 (1992), pp. 341-51, focused on the history of youth, Barbara Hanawalt argues that adolescence was identified and acknowledged as a life stage in the Middle Ages. However, although the medieval world recognized, defined and structured this life stage, this particular understanding differed from the more modern concept of adolescence. For an account of key debates on adolescence at the turn of the twentieth century, see John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siecle Culture of Adolescence*, New Haven 1992; Alaimo, Kathleen, *Shaping Adolescence in the Popular Milieu: Social Policy, Reformers, and French Youth, 1870-1920*, in: *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992), pp. 419-438 and Alaimo, Kathleen, *The Authority of Exports: the Crisis of Female Adolescence in France and England, 1880-1920*, in: Maynes; Soland; Benninghaus (see footnote 1), pp. 149-163.

6 See Fishman, Sterling, *Suicide, Sex, and the Discovery of the German Adolescent*, in: *History of Education Quarterly* 10 (1970), pp. 170-188; Taylor, Tom, *Images of Youth and the Family in Wilhelmine Germany: Toward a Reconsideration of the German Sonderweg*, in: *German Studies Review* 15 (1992), pp. 55-74; Berlanstein, Lenard R., *Vagrants, Beggars, and Thieves: Delinquent Boys in Mid-Nineteenth Century Paris*, in: *Journal of Social History* 12 (1979), pp. 531-52; and Haine, W. Scott, *The Development of Leisure and the Transformation of Working-Class Adolescence, Paris 1830-1940*, in: *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992), pp. 451-476.

birth rate, led to a new interest in female youth.<sup>7</sup> Between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup>, “girlhood” or “young womanhood” was acknowledged as stage in a woman’s life, a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. Yet, the specific meanings and understandings of those years changed considerably, as did the status, rights and responsibilities of girls.

### Girls at Work: Rethinking Age, Gender, and Labor in European Industrial Development<sup>8</sup>

Certainly girls had been subjects of attention for economic theorists and employers since the emergence of industrial production on a large scale. Girls’ labor, especially their extensive participation in textile industries, was critical to the economic, political, moral and cultural construction of Europe’s industrial capitalist economy between 1750 and 1850. I will focus here on a key sector—spinning. Spinning has traditionally been a female occupation in much of the world. But Europe’s particular pattern of late female marriage, apparent in many regions of Europe since the early modern era, added distinctiveness to the labor contributions of young, unmarried women in comparison with other regions of the world.<sup>9</sup> Married women did also spin in Europe as elsewhere, of course; but young unmarried women had the potential to spin full time into their twenties, uninterrupted by the increased family responsibilities brought by marriage and childbearing. This distinguished the European labor force from others.

Moreover, the established practice in many regions of Europe whereby young people of both sexes typically left home for a period of service between childhood and marriage made them uniquely available as a mobile labor force. This had particular significance when the reorganization of spinning required spinners to move away from home—whether to another household in a protoindustrial region, to a manufactory, or, eventually, to a mechanized mill. In the dynamic and competitive economies of pro-

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7 See: Dyhouse, Carol, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Boston 1981; Hunt, Felicity (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950*, Oxford 1987; and Vicinus, Martha, *Independent Women: Women and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, Chicago 1985. On state interest in children, female youth and unmarried mothers, see: Fuchs, Rachel G., *Poor and Pregnant in Paris*, New Brunswick 1992; Fildes, Valerie et al. (eds.), *Women and Children First: International Maternal and Child Welfare, 1870-1945*, New York 1992; and Schafer, Sylvia, *Children in Moral Danger and the Problem of Government in Third Republic France*, Princeton 1997. See also: Cox, Pamela, *Girls in Trouble: Defining Female Delinquency, Britain 1900-1950*, in Maynes; Soland; Benninghaus (see footnote 1), pp. 192-208. On popular perceptions of girls’ changing behavior in the post-WWI era, see Roberts, Mary Louise, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender on Postwar France, 1917-1927*, Chicago 1994; Kent, Susan Kingsley, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain*, Princeton 1993.

8 This section is based on Mary Jo Maynes, *Gender, Labor, and the History of Globalization: European Spinners in the International Textile Industry, 1750-1880*, in: *Journal of Women’s History* 15/4 (2004), pp. 47-66.

9 The demographic contrast between Europe and other world regions meant that teen-aged girls were regarded as available for employment outside the familial household (either natal or marital) to a degree uncommon elsewhere. To put the European situation in comparative perspective: in the early nineteenth century all but 20 percent of Chinese young women were married by age 20, whereas in the various regions of Europe, between 60 and 80 percent of young women were still unmarried at this age. For a more developed version of this comparison, see Maynes, Mary Jo; Waltner, Ann, *Women’s Life-Cycle Transitions in World-Historical perspective: Comparing Marriage in China and Europe*, in: *Journal of Women’s History* 12/4 (2001), pp. 11-21.

toindustrial and early Europe, entrepreneurs paid careful attention to the recruitment, training and wages of the skilled laborers necessary for the success of their products on the international market. State policy makers, in turn, saw textile industries in the new framework of economic development policy.<sup>10</sup> Economic advisers also appreciated their potential for simultaneously encouraging prosperity in agricultural and industrial sectors. Young women workers played a key role in these cameralist projects.

Examples can be found across wide regions of Europe. Brenda Collins has documented the economic significance of the women of Northern Ireland who spun in households of male weavers in the boom years of the late eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Evidence from travelers like Arthur Young and from surviving census materials documents the numeric predominance in the textile labor force of young women spinners, even if the most highly skilled spinners they described were older women. Southern Germany also produced linens in a protoindustrial system that flourished by the late eighteenth century. Hans Medick's account of protoindustrial linen production in the village of Laichingen in Württemberg suggests a slight variation on the Irish pattern. Medick suggests that rural weavers could contract for yarn with "male and female spinners in cottage industry," suggesting that the gender division of labor was far from as absolute as it seems to have been in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Still, the evidence suggests that spinning was a largely female occupation in Laichingen during the boom years of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, and weaving a male one. This division of labor changed only in the crisis in protoindustrial weaving that hit Laichingen in the early nineteenth century, manifesting itself in lower wages and underemployment, but also in the greater and changing use of female labor.<sup>13</sup>

More specific evidence about the age and gender division of labor in protoindustrial spinning in this region comes from nearby cotton producing areas of Switzerland. Ulrich Pfister analyzed evidence from the 1760s about labor patterns in two protoindustrial villages in northern Switzerland. There were nearly 300 spinners in the village of Hausen, which at that time held 161 households. Of these, 72 per cent were girls or women; 39 per cent were unmarried girls or women.<sup>14</sup> In the village of Oetwil, the protoindustrial labor force was 74 per cent female; 32 per cent of workers were unmarried women and girls.<sup>15</sup> So, even in these regions of more flexible division of labor, protoindustrial textile industries owed much of their productivity to the labor contributions of young, unmarried, female labor.

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10 For an analysis of the gender presumptions behind emergent thought about the economy and state economic policy, see Gray, Marion W., *Productive Men, Reproductive Women: The Agrarian Household and the Emergence of Separate Spheres During the German Enlightenment*, New York 2000.

11 Collins, Brenda, *The loom, the land, and the marketplace: Women weavers and the family economy in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland*, in: Cohen, Marilyn (ed.), *The Warp of Ulster's Past*, New York 1997, pp. 229-52 and Collins, Brenda, *Die Heimarbeiterschaft im Leinengewerbe Ulsters während des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: Ditt, Karl; Pollard, Sidney (eds.), *Von der Heimarbeit in die Fabrik. Industrialisierung und Arbeiterschaft in Leinen- und Baumwollregionen Westeuropas während des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Paderborn 1992, pp. 241-2.

12 Medick, Hans, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen. Lokalgeschichte als allgemeine Geschichte*, Göttingen 1996, p. 69.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

14 Pfister, Ulrich, *Work Roles and Family Structure in Proto-Industrial Zurich*, in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20 (1989), pp. 83-105, pec. p. 95.

15 *Ibid.*, p.100.

In southern France, the eighteenth-century growth sector in textiles was silk. On the eve of the French Revolution silk production, based in the small filatures and weaving shops of the villages, bourgs and cities of the southeastern provinces, was worth 130 million *livres* a year, or roughly 15 per cent of the total industrial production of France. In this protoindustry, the skilled *devideuse* who unwound precious silk strands from silkworm cocoons and the *fileuse* who span it were crucial to the profitability of raw silk enterprises as well as to the quality of the eventual woven fabric.<sup>16</sup> There are no statistics on the labor force in silk spinning before the nineteenth century. The earliest evidence available, as in Ireland, dates from the era when protoindustrial spinning was already being altered by new technologies; the early evidence underscores the significance of young unmarried women's industrial work in these regions. For example, an 1839 household budget analysis from the Department of the Gard indicated that 44 per cent of the family's income came from the labor of the wife and two "post-pubescent" daughters who were engaged in spinning silk.<sup>17</sup> Censuses and marriage records underreport the occupations of women and children, but even these records show the significance of young women silk workers. In the textile bourg of l'Isle-su-la-Sorgue, the most common occupational title of brides (mostly in their twenties) in the 1820s was *couturière* (seamstress), but 10 per cent claimed to be either a *fileuse* or an *ouvrière en soie* (silk worker), a proportion that would double over the next twenty years. In the city of Avignon, one of the oldest silk centers of the Midi, about 10 per cent of brides in the late Napoleonic era were involved in silk production despite the disruptions to the trade caused by the revolution and the Napoleonic wars. With the economic revival that began during the Restoration, over 40 per cent of brides reported themselves to be either *ouvrières en soie* or *devideuses*, proportions which would rise thereafter.

The significance of young women to the process of factory industrialization grew out of their importance in protoindustrial age and gender divisions of labor. As textile production gradually and at a regionally varied pace moved from rural cottages to large spinneries in towns, young unmarried women moved as well. They comprised the majority of Europe's new factory labor force. The new technologies that revolutionized textile production beginning in the eighteenth century were developed with an eye toward a potential workforce that was imagined as young and feminine. According to Maxine Berg:

"It is evident in Britain that women and children were simply assumed to be the key workforce to be targeted with any novelty in manufacturing methods. Machines and processes were invented with this workforce in mind. New techniques in calico printing and spinning provide classic examples of experimentation on a child and female workforce. In calico printing, processes were broken down into a series of operations performed particularly well by teenage girls who contributed manual dexterity (learned at home) with high labour intensity. The spinning jenny was first invented for use by a young girl, its horizontal wheel making it uncomfortable for an adult worker to use for any length of time."<sup>18</sup>

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16 La Farelle, François-Felix, *Études Économiques Sur L'Industrie De La Soie Dans Le Midi De La France*, Paris 1852-1854, premier étude, pp. 4-5.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

18 Berg, Maxine, What difference did women's work make to the industrial revolution?, in: Sharpe, Pamela, *Women's Work. The English Experience, 1650-1914*, London 1998, p. 161.



The age- and gender-division of labor of protoindustrial textile production had not necessarily distinguished Europe from the rest of the world, for girls and women spun and wove at home throughout much of the world. What was more unusual was, first the relatively longer phase of the life cycle during which girls were available for full time labor and second the presumed mobility of the young, female labor force. Until the eighteenth century, they had mostly worked in households and small shops even in Europe. But those among them who were as yet unmarried presumably could, in a pattern that was not so different from entering domestic service, leave home for larger and more distance workplaces. Some young women, as we have seen, entered domestic service as spinners in protoindustrial household operations. Some moved into nearby towns to work in handicraft manufactories or silk reeling sheds for a few months of the year or longer. Eventually, they moved into factories whose spinning and weaving machines were powered by water or steam. And this pattern of labor force participation by young, unmarried women remained a key distinction between Central and Western Europe and much of the rest of the world until the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth summarizing the evidence about the extent to which girls and young women dominated the workforces of early textile factories. Deborah Simonton points out that early textile industrial centers in England and northern France were filled with young women:

“The image of factory and workshop labour is the ‘mill girl’, which reflected a nominal reality. Of the 260 employees at Heilman freres at Ribeauvillé, 39.2 per cent were females between sixteen and twenty-five years of age. In Manchester and Salford in 1852, 76 percent of fourteen-year-old girls were in the mills, and 82 per cent of the female textile workers of Roubaix were under thirty. In Lancashire, 75 per cent of female workers were single. [...] the factory became an alternative route, instead of service.”<sup>20</sup>

Simonton’s observation is borne out by evidence on the mechanization of textile production in Ireland, southern Germany and southern France, although regional variations in the process of mechanization and the nature of young women’s employment are instructive. For example, the major mechanized cotton spinning (later also weaving) mill of southern Ireland—the Portlaw mill near Waterford on the south coast—recruited girls as an ideal labor force. In 1835 64 per cent of the mill’s workers were female; fully 42 per cent were females under the age of 21. While as the plant grew and added machine divisions, the number of adult males employed there rose, among the textile operatives, young women remained dominant through the 1870s. Female operatives, mostly between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one, comprised between 48 per cent and 60 per cent of the labor force in cotton spinning and weaving between 1835 and 1874.<sup>21</sup>

As in Irish linen and cotton mills and factories, in those of southern Germany also attracted a labor force that was young and female. According to Elisabeth Plössl, there were over 16.000 female textile operatives in Bavaria by the time of the first industrial census of 1875, and textiles work accounted for nearly all of female industrial employment.<sup>22</sup> By 1895, the state’s 28.000 female textile operatives comprised 30 per cent of

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19 The significant exceptions to this claim would be the slave trade and probably some forms of indenture.

20 Simonton, Deborah, *A History of European Women’s Work*, London 1998, p.139.

21 Hunt, Tom, *Portrait of an Industrial Village and Its Cotton Industry*, Dublin 2000, pp. 59-61.

22 Plössl, Elisabeth, *Weibliche Arbeit in Familie und Betrieb. Bayerische Arbeiterfrauen, 1870-1914*, Munich 1983, pp. 145-146.

the female wage labor force. In that year roughly three-quarters of that labor force were single women; 61 per cent of wage earning women were unmarried and under that age of thirty.<sup>23</sup>

Mechanization affected silk spinning processes far less dramatically than in cotton, flax or wool. Even with mechanization the demand for skilled *fileuses* remained strong. The labor force in some 400 silk reeling filatures and spinning mills of the Midi totaled more than 20.000 workers in 1840, of whom over 90 per cent were women and children.<sup>24</sup> The *fileuse* maintained her centrality to the quality of silk yarn.<sup>25</sup> In the dynamic textile sectors of early industrial Europe, then, family-economic systems that not only incorporated the labor of young unmarried women but imagined it as mobile and flexible were integral to the historical process of economic development.

### Fashion and Self Fashioning: Young Women as Consumers

Young women's self-fashioning, especially through their consumption of those very same textiles they helped to produce, also contributed to the construction of modern European market culture. Of course here class differentials clearly come into play. Lower-class girls were both wage laborers and consumers, whereas middle- and upper-class girls participated in the market mainly as consumers and with far greater resources. Clothing was an obvious marker of family status. Girls from upper-class families had to learn how to adorn and present themselves; their debuts into society and their marriages served as rites of passage and moments of display and transfer of wealth and prestige. Increasingly this meant acquiring commercialized tastes and skills in "the marriage market."<sup>26</sup>

The socialization of rural and working-class girls centered less on preparation for their role as consumers than as producers and reproducers. However, lower-class girls in many regions of Europe were by the early nineteenth century beginning to resort to the marketplace not only for wages but also as consumers. While eighteenth-century textile workers in Europe's proto-industrial regions might have brought a couple more dresses into marriage than other lower-class girls, and could afford to dress up their appearance

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23 Ibid., p.165.

24 La Farelle, *Études Économiques*, pp.15-18.

25 According to Eduard Perris, director in the 1840s of the state subsidized model filature of the Department of Landes, despite the introduction of steam and the growth in scale of silk reeling operations, "of all the influences affecting the filature, that exercised by the fileuse is the most powerful and noticeable. [...] she holds in her hands both the fortune of the mill owner and the reputation of the business. [...] Two fileuses, unequally skilled, unequally attentive, unequally docile, spinning from cocoons of the same sort, can sometimes produce silk worth 40 fr. a kilo for the one and 80 fr. a kilo for the other." Perris, Édouard, *Traité De La Culture Du Mûrier, De L'Établissement Des Magnaneries Et De L'Éducation Des Vers à Soie, Suivi De Quelques Considérations Sur La Filature Et L'Emploi De La Soie, Ainsi Que De La Filoselle*, Mont-de-Marsan 1840, p. 445.

26 See Davidoff, Leonore; Hall, Catherine, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Chicago 1987; Budde, Gunilla-Friederike, *Des Haushalts "schönster Schmuck". Die Hausfrau als Konsumexpertin des deutschen und englischen Bürgertums im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, in: Siegrist, Hannes; Kaelble, Hartmut; Kocka, Jürgen (eds.), *Europäische Konsumgeschichte. Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums*, Frankfurt am Main 1997, pp. 411-440. On women, gender, and consumption more generally see de Grazia, Victoria, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, Berkeley 1996 and Tiersten, Lisa, *Marianne in the Market. Envisioning the Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Berkeley 2001.

with the help of silk scarves, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries girls of all classes drew on a huge array of material goods for their projects of self-fashioning.<sup>27</sup> Examining girls' consumption practices thus reveals another side of girls as historical actors whose social position changed with new employment opportunities, changing family practices or new opportunities for participation in public life.

It needs to be said that relatively low wages that women earned relative to men did preclude economic independence. Nevertheless, there are tantalizing shreds of evidence that suggests that the "industrious revolution" may have had the effect of moving material wealth toward young women. What is some of that evidence? I can only suggest it briefly. Pertinent evidence for southern Germany is to be found in the work of Hans Medick. Protoindustrial weavers' relatively successful pursuit of material improvement, at least until the crisis of the early nineteenth century, represented a real challenge to older notions of status. The old order was reasserted through such vehicles as sumptuary laws as late as the beginning of the eighteenth century. But the rich inventories that the state government required of brides and grooms form the evidentiary basis for Medick's claim that by the end of the eighteenth century "it appears that there was a partial breakdown of the rules according to which the culture of appearance based on wealth and dress reinforced a hierarchical social ranking."<sup>28</sup> The absolute value of the clothing that the village's poorest young women brought into marriage increased even more rapidly than that of men, although those of wealthier brides rose even more dramatically. Even if the worth of young women's wardrobes still reflected wealth and status, consumption of particular items and fabrics had clearly been "democratized" over the course of the eighteenth century. Items made from these fabrics—even if they were small items like kerchiefs or scarves—were increasingly worn by the poorer classes, especially the women.<sup>29</sup>

Similar indications exist for the silk-producing households of southern France. When La Farelle was comparing budgets of such households in 1852 with their predecessors of ten or fifteen years earlier, he attributed their greater prosperity to the contributions of "the feminine sex." The families all sent "the mother, the oldest daughter, sometimes the mother and two daughters" into the filatures where they were paid 1 fr. 25 as apprentices—from age sixteen to twenty—and from then on 1 fr. 50 as fileuses. Moreover, the family's expenditure on food was now lower than before. Still, overall costs to the family were not lower than previously since allocations for clothing have gone up "if not for the father and mother, at least for the daughters, who retain a more or less considerable portion of their earnings from the filature to this end."<sup>30</sup>

As was true elsewhere, Irish young women factory workers apparently also kept part of their wages for their own use. Betty Messenger again provides some evidence from her interviews. One woman told her:

"I remember my first pay. I brought it home to my mother. She spat on it for luck [...] All our mothers done it when we were young [...] spit on your first pay for luck. Out

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27 For a discussion of the quest for aesthetic experiences among the lower classes see: Maase, Kaspar, "... ein unwiderstehlicher Drang nach Freude." Ästhetische Erfahrung als Gegenstand historischer Kulturforschung, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 8 (2000), pp. 432-444. See also Medick, Hans, *Weben*. For later eras see: Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood and Sjøland, Becoming Modern*.

28 Medick, *Weben*, pp. 387-8, 427.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 406.

30 La Farelle, *Études Économiques*, pp. 9-10.



of seven and six, I got the sixpence. Well, we went to a dance and that left fourpence. Well then, bought a tuppence worth of cherry lips. They were a wee scenty smell, so that when you danced with a fella and leaned up to talk with him, there was a lovely smell [...] and then, the other tuppence done you for Wednesday night, for the barn dance.”<sup>31</sup>

Working girls’ habits as consumers constructed and eroded social and cultural boundaries and concern about girls as consumers shows up in popular culture and government policy. For example, the prolific writer Ellen Swift, whose stories first appeared between 1780 and 1800 or so, but which were re-issued continually until at least the 1860s, about and addressed to young working women. One very interesting “morality tale” “Money: How to Spend It—A Word for the Times!” circulates new ideas about consumption and status:

“[...] dear me, how cheap everything is, prints and calicoes 5d. and 6d., they never used to be that price when I was young; but the shop folks say that there’s talk of war and things rising, so girls, now is your time for laying by. Ah me! high wages and low prices, such things were not in my days. My first dress was bought for me to be married in, and for many a year I kept it for my best. Now both young and old can have a print for everyday, and a stuff for Sundays; and if folks will only keep to things fir for their station, they’ll be able to meet harder times without shame [...] while those who go wasting money on finery only learn folly and proud notions.”<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein, French economist François-Félix de La Farelle wrote in 1852 that “we have been able to observe these young craftswomen, for some time now, wearing on Sunday this precious thread (silk) that they spin on the other six days.”<sup>33</sup> These and other cultural indices point to the active participation of young women in the realm of modern consumption, and by implication, in the realm of social self-construction of which consumption was a visible marker.<sup>34</sup>

Concerns about young women’s consumptions habits and fashions increased toward the end of the nineteenth century in the context of larger concerns about changing gender ideals, family forms, female sexuality, and reproduction. Debates about female adolescence or women’s education often focused on morality and reproductive health. As was true of industrial production, consumption cannot be overlooked as a site of girls’ agency, however limited, and as a locus of gender and class anxieties that swirled around them in modern Europe.

### Marriage: Constructing Choice

There is evidence of increasing agency for young women as producers and consumers; but in familial realms things are more ambiguous. It was the process of marrying, or not marrying, perhaps more than any other realm of activity, that put girls in a situation where they squarely faced their own life destiny. As a life-cycle transition moment, marriage normatively marked the end of girlhood, or youth, and the beginning of socially sanctioned female adulthood. But, in contrast with its legal and political significance

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31 Messenger, Betty, *Picking Up the Linen Threads: A Study of Industrial Folklore*, Austin 1975, p. 41.

32 Anonymous (Swift, Ellen), *Money: How to Spend It. A Word for the Times! Addressed to Young Women by the Author of “Old Peter Pious” etc. etc.*, London n.d., p. 9.

33 La Farelle, *Études Économiques*, p. 4.

34 Bourdieu, Pierre, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris 1979.

for men as a marker of full adulthood, for a woman marriage signaled a new relationship of subservience to a husband. This gender difference went to the heart of the contradiction between liberal assertions of individual autonomy and the unfree legal status of the married woman.

Debates over arranged marriages and the discourse on “love” in such diverse sources as advice manuals, laws, novels, letters, and feminist or Utopian socialist tracts can be understood as attempts to address the inconsistencies between the institution of marriage and female adult selfhood. Marriage is doubly important, then, in the investigation of the contradictory and contested nature of female selfhood in this era. On the one hand marriage strategy was increasingly a site of the exercise of agency by young women, an analog in the private realm of the political agency of the individual in the political realm or economic agency in the marketplace. On the other hand, the institution of marriage throughout Europe continued to entail the legal surrender of many dimensions of female selfhood and of autonomy.

By the late eighteenth century, systems of marriage whereby daughters exercised little or no initiative in marital matches had come under attack throughout Europe. Advice manuals, novels, memoirs, marriage contracts, court testimonies, and other sources pretty much agreed in their condemnation of coerced unions. And even when uncoerced, the practical but loveless arranged match was regarded by many as a relic of a benighted past. But changing ideas about and practices involved in marriage and spousal choice incorporated the era’s contradictory notions of selfhood and reflected the special problems implicit in young women’s subordinate status in a particularly pointed manner. Moreover, as in other realms of activity, so too in marrying, starkly different norms, expectations, possibilities, and understandings distinguished different social and cultural milieus.

Enlightenment era discourses about marriage and gender relations were far from straightforward. This ideological framework is critical for analyzing changing patterns of and understandings about marriage, and the place of consent and cooperation in the processes through which girls came to decisions about marriage. Although well documented discourses of gender polarization may have attempted to reconcile the potentially egalitarian impulses of the companionate marriage with continued male dominance in the political and economic realms, they could not make these contradictions go away. These contradictions pushed themselves to the surface on many occasions; the focus here is their place in discussions of and negotiations around marriage.<sup>35</sup>

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35 For feminist critiques of Enlightenment political theory see: Pateman, Carole, *The Sexual Contract*; Landes, Joan, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca 1988; and Hausen, Karin, *Family and Role Division: The Polarization of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century*, in Evans, Richard J.; Lee, William Robert (eds.), *The German Family*, London 1981, pp. 51-83. Carole Pateman argues that the “sexual contract” between men and women that complemented the “social contract” among men undoubtedly undermined women’s claims to political selfhood. For a summary of Enlightenment conflicts over gender, see Goodman, Dena, *Women and the Enlightenment*, in: Bridenthal, Renate; Stuard, Susan; Wiesner, Merry (eds.), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 3rd edn., Houghton Mifflin 1998, pp. 233-262. On women’s activism during the French Revolution, see Levy, Darlene Gay; Applewaite, Harriet B., *A Political Revolution for Women? The Case of Paris*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 265-292. For some classic views on the ongoing feminist debates around these issues see Butler, Judith; Scott, Joan W. (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York 1992.

Even as the new understandings of marriage circulated in treatises, fiction, and prescriptive literature, a contrary spirit prevailed in law; ironically some changes in the realm of law between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth as often as not undermined the prerogatives of individuals. The most relevant provisions pertain to two arenas of law: questions of whose consent was required for a valid marriage to take place, on the one hand, and the changes in a woman's legal status resulting from marriage, on the other. With the exception of French legislation of the Revolutionary period, not all of which survived the Napoleonic codifications, virtually all of the interventions in marital law were in the direction of placing more constraints upon individual choice. These took various forms. Some, including sixteenth and seventeenth-century reforms in Central Europe and France and eighteenth-century England and Ireland gave more authority to parents over their children's marriages or to religious or secular authorities who could variously require or forbid a marriage irrespective of the consent of one or both parties. In eighteenth-century Geneva, for example, there was one forced union for every non-contested marriage. In nineteenth-century Basel the ratio was one-to-three.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, regulations prominent in many regions of Central Europe in the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries were specifically designed to make it more difficult for poor couples to marry by requiring means tests.

Moreover, no reforms of this era altered the legal incapacity that marriage brought to women in particular. Throughout most of Europe a woman lost her separate legal identity upon marriage and was not considered capable of legal actions in her own name. No significant improvement in the legal position of married women occurred in Great Britain until the Married Women's Property Act passed in 1882. In Germany serious discussion of reform of marriage and family law came only after unification in 1871 and implementation of significant changes took several decades longer.<sup>37</sup> In France, the French Revolutionary Constitution of 1791 passed the first of several important reforms of marriage law, but it is noteworthy that the Revolutionary reforms really did nothing to improve the legal status of married women other than to facilitate the dissolution of a bad marriage through more readily available divorce.<sup>38</sup> While this is not insignificant, the point remains that even in the context of radical revision of family law in the situation of Revolution the revocation of a woman's legal individuality at marriage was left unreformed. The French Civil Code was clear in its assertion of a patriarchal rule in the household of the married couple and of the women's subordinate status within marriage. Thus in the wake of the "bourgeois revolution" in France, as elsewhere in Europe, marriage still meant the termination of a woman's legal status as an individ-

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36 Head-König, Anne-Lise, Forced Marriages and Forbidden Marriages in Switzerland: State Control of the Formation of Marriage in Catholic and Protestant Cantons in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, in: *Continuity and Change* 8 (1993), pp. 444-452. See also Watt, Jeffrey, Marriage Contract Disputes in Early Modern Neuchatel, 1547-1806, in: *Journal of Social History* 22 (1988), pp. 129-147.

37 Gottlieb Planck, member of the commission that codified family law in Germany in the 1870s and 1880s after unification, argued regarding marriage law that "the prevailing principle of laws governing marriage not be the individual freedom of the spouses; rather, marriage is to be regarded as a moral and legal order independent of the wills of the two spouses." (quoted in Ehmer, Josef, Marriage in: Kertzer, David I.; Barbagli, Marzio (eds.), *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century*, New Haven, Connecticut 2002, pp. 282-321, quotation p. 283.)

38 Bonfield, Lloyd, Family Law, in: Kertzer; Barbagli (see footnote 36), pp. 109-154, pec. p. 121.

ual. She had in deciding to marry, apparently and despite Kant's postulation of the theoretical impossibility of such an act, freely consented to give up her own freedom.

Many of the problems so central to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment literary discourses around marriage—angst over reconciling interest and attraction, the dilemma of navigating the complexities of courtship in a world of changing social hierarchies, anxieties about feminine virtue and respectability in the face of uncertain and changing codes regarding female self-presentation, the contradiction between a wife's moral agency in the home and her political subservience—reflected the specific personal and historical dilemmas of men and women of the European propertied classes. At the same time, though, marriages among the poor or propertyless in this era also involved complex strategies and delicate balances; economic marginality imposed its own enormous constraints and dilemmas. But the dilemmas were different in ways that are telling. Marital choices, despite the increasing intrusion into them of the language of nascent individualism, demonstrate the embeddedness of individual choice and conscious or unconscious limits upon it in the dynamics of what Pierre Bourdieu has called *habitus*—that is, systems of “internalized predispositions that mediate between abstract and largely invisible social structures and the everyday activities of individuals” that are learned from childhood on through social and cultural interactions in specific milieus.<sup>39</sup>

Connections between the negotiations around marriage and understandings of selfhood, especially of female selfhood, varied across both time and milieu. Social-historical evidence suggests that patterns of who married whom continued to reflect class structure rigidly in the nineteenth century as modern capitalist class formation introduced and required new techniques for marshalling economic and cultural resources including those that marriages entailed.<sup>40</sup> These highly “modern marriages of convenience” among the new industrial elite co-existed uneasily with new cultural values and an economic ideology that increasingly emphasized individual choice—especially in the face of evidence that parental and social controls over marriages and other sexual unions among the propertyless were foundering in this era.

Novels were one site where young women—as readers and often as authors—could wrestle with such contradictions. As Nancy Armstrong has noted, “fiction carried on the work of an earlier political theory [...] by invoking the sexual contract;” fictions helped to make it possible “for the individual to think of himself as a particular kind of self.”<sup>41</sup> Armstrong suggests that the novel helped to disseminate, via popular culture, a language of selfhood that many Enlightenment thinkers had posited via political theory. Armstrong focuses on English fiction, but the woman's novel, introduced as a genre in English in the mid-eighteenth century, was quickly translated into and imitated in other European languages. The path toward marriage and the choice of a marriage partner was an obsessive focus of plot in these novels by or directed toward young women. Fictional representations of the contracting self at this moment of decision contributed to the construction of the modern individual as a cultural, psychological, and material reality, and also—importantly for the discussion at hand—did so in a manner that invited feminine participation and identification.

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39 Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline to a Theory of Practice*, New York 1977, p. 72.

40 The historical evidence is summarized in Ehmer, *Marriage*.

41 Armstrong, Nancy, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, New York 1990, pp. 31, 35.

Novels of marriage strategy set largely although not exclusively in families of property, problematized the tricky negotiation. As typified for example in the novels of Jane Austen, the young heroine's mission was to find the best possible spouse. The young female agent at her clearest appears as she who resists seduction (an old story of course but rejuvenated in new social, cultural and spatial terrains), but also, on the other hand, as she who resists inappropriate matches or marriages of mere convenience while holding out for her preference. A rhetoric of "choice" is increasingly prominent, even taken for granted. Still many of the trappings of arrangement and practicality also continue to be taken for granted; moreover, the construction of female agency in fiction is generally formulated in terms of the cultural presumption that for respectable young women the goal of strategic action was not so much to choose well as to connive to be well chosen.

Of course not all authors who circulated variations of the marriage plot were Austens. Girls of less means no doubt often had to settle for the cheap knock-offs. Some of these came from the pens of moralizers like the anonymous authors of *The vain cottager; or The history of Lucy Franklin. To which are prefixed a few hints to young women in humble life, respecting decency and propriety of dress* (1806) or *Flowers, flounces, and followers. More words to young women* (no date, but ca. 1780-1800) who published in increasing numbers toward the end of the eighteenth century. Others like "Thomas Richardson" skirted the edges of propriety in the name of virtue. Heroines of these novels were generally of the cardboard variety, but in these texts, too, the moral agency of young women facing their future prospects in new situations was a central question.<sup>42</sup> For all of their differences, writers like Austen and Richardson agree on the moral significance and cultural resonance of young women's decisions, and their role, along with a minority of male collaborators, in the mission of disciplining sexual impulses and reconstructing gender relations on grounds of autonomy, understood as expressed consent, rather than brute force.

The novel and adjacent fictional accounts of marriage became extremely popular among young women readers on the Continent as well. In her book *The Other Enlightenment. How French Women Became Modern* Carla Hesse writes the biographies of two French women writers to open up the question of female selfhood in the era of the French Revolution. "During the French Revolution," Hesse argues, "male authors succeeded in redefining themselves as Lockean individuals [...] The legal identity of married women writers, by contrast, evolved over the same period along Kantian, as opposed to Lockean lines. It was a dual identity, recognized as at once morally autonomous and juridically subordinate. Free to write, they were not free to make their writings public, or to create independent public identities."<sup>43</sup> Still, Hesse argues that the practices of the literary marketplace, as reformed in the Revolutionary era, opened new possibilities for women. Despite clear institutional limitations, women writers whose lives she studied "used the cultural resources of modern commercial society to [...] [stake—MJM] a successful claim for themselves as modern individuals in the public

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42 Richardson, Thomas, *The Milliner's Girl, or, Authentic and Interesting Adventures of Fanny Bilson, a Country Clergyman's Daughter: Describing the Circumstances Which Induced Her to Leave Her Father, Her Journey to London, and Remarkable Occurrence at the Inn: With Her Preservation From Ruin, and Further Particulars of Her Life to Her Marriage*, Derby n.d., pp. 3, 17, 21.

43 Hesse, Carla, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Princeton 2001, pp. 74.



world.”<sup>44</sup> For example, Isabelle de Charrière used her novel *Trois Femmes*, first published in 1795, to explore the contradictions of female moral agency.

Letters, for those eras and milieus where personal letter writing was a common practice, document young women’s self-construction in a particularly pointed manner.<sup>45</sup> Legal case records are another rich arena for exploration of female agency in marital choice in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For example, Margaret Darrow analyses records regarding marriage contract cases of the ecclesiastical court of eighteenth-century Montauban, France. These are often requests for dispensations—for example, to allow a cousin marriage. The typical story before 1770 was that woman in her weakness had succumbed to male lust and there was now a scandalous situation that needed to be rectified through an otherwise disallowed marriage. Affection or passion might be used to explain the behavior, but not to justify the marriage. After 1770, over a third of the couples testified that because of their mutual affection they cannot imagine marrying anyone else. It was also common in the later era to note parental approval, which she takes to mean that this was no longer simply taken for granted (as silence on this issue in earlier cases must have implied).<sup>46</sup> She argues that “parental consent remained crucial to marital plans. However, in the city [of Montauban—MJM] popular attitudes began to assume that young people would take the initiative in matchmaking.”<sup>47</sup>

#### Sources and Historical Agency in the History of Modern European Girlhood<sup>48</sup>

Feminist political theorists such as Carole Pateman and Joan Scott have pointed out that the modern individual enshrined in emergent European liberal theory of the Enlightenment and Revolutionary eras, the implicit subject who exercised agency in political life and in the marketplace, was presumed to be a propertied adult European male.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the language of liberalism was universal, which opened the way for others—young men, the propertyless, women, and even slaves—to claim the rights it promised. Moreover, new economic, political and cultural sites where European modernity was constructed, as have been described here, often invited the participation of a wider circle. Women, even young unmarried women, presented themselves as participants through their paid labor in new industries and as consumers; through their writing and reading of the expanding number of prescriptive, political, and fictional texts; and through their presence in some of the political organizations and social movements that the era spawned. As young, female, and propertyless, girls did not fit the model of the individual posed by liberal theory; moreover, they were subject to formal laws and family dynamics that disempowered them. Nevertheless they were vividly present in histo-

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44 Ibid., p. xv.

45 On letter writing and self construction see Goodman, Dena, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of letters*, Ithaca 2009.

46 Darrow, Margaret H., *Popular concepts of marital choice in eighteenth century France*, in: *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985), pp. 261-272, pec. pp. 266-267.

47 Ibid., p. 268. Jeffrey Watt found evidence of a similar shift in self-expression in his examination of marital dispute in Neuchatel, Switzerland, although in a quite different marital regime. Watt, *Marriage Contract Disputes*, p. 131.

48 This section draws on the introduction to Maynes; Soland; Benninghaus (see footnote 1).

49 Pateman, Carole, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford 1988; Scott, Joan, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge 1996.

ry—both as real historical actors and as subjects of representation in the European cultural imagination.

As is true for all histories “at the margins,” the study of the history of female youth brings a number of methodological challenges. Central among these, as the previous discussion makes clear, is the problem of silences and unevenness in the historical record. Not surprisingly, sources from the twentieth century are more plentiful than those from the eighteenth century, and some aspects of girls’ history have left more records than others, but in general, the evidence is limited and piecemeal. One glaring characteristic of the documentary sources, a problem shared more broadly among historians of childhood and youth, is that much of the available evidence has been produced by adults. Even autobiographies and memoirs, categories of sources that promise recollections of lived experience, typically provide us only with accounts of female youth as recalled by adult narrators. With the exceptions of limited sets of letters, diaries, school essays and court testimonies, girls have left few records of their thoughts. More generally, girls’ lives have typically been less well documented than boys’ lives. Until the twentieth century, formal education beyond primary school was, for example, largely the preserve of boys and young men, and the few girls from affluent families who did acquire some education beyond the most basic literacy often did so at home with the help of private tutors. Similarly, sons of middling and poor families were far more likely to be placed in formal apprenticeship than were daughters. The penal system has also produced important records chronicling the background and life course of those boys and young men who ended up in trouble with the law. Unfortunately, at least for historians, the clientele of the penal system has always been largely male, although some recent innovative work on European girlhood is based on female prison and asylum records.<sup>50</sup>

These caveats must influence our reading of the historical evidence about girls that we do have. Obviously, then, much of the history of girlhood is necessarily, because of the nature of the sources, not the history of girls but rather of the ways in which adults tried to shape young women through laws, schools, apprenticeship, sermons, advice, and other means. The discourses and definitions of authorities and other dominant players are of course invaluable. Yet at the same time these discourses are profoundly problematic, tied as they are to particular forms of definition, particular (and highly gendered) notions of private and public concerns. Girls’ increasing visibility is both the cause and result of their being regarded as a “social problem,” in contrast to the more normal and respectable girls who kept to the private realm. Thus, historical documentation, or the lack thereof, is a product of the very historical processes under examination and reflects dimensions of the history of girlhood itself, with its regional, chronological, and class variations.

By most usual criteria, girls have acted from positions of relative powerlessness, marginality, and invisibility. How, then, are we to understand the role of girls in history? And how does a focus on girls’ roles in history push us to reconsider how we understand historical agency, the ability of even relatively powerless people to make a difference? Clearly, many ordinary understandings of agency and power simply do not apply. What historians of women discovered in their earliest forays into writing women into

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50 See, for example: Clark, Anna, *Wild Workhouse Girls and the Liberal Imperial State in Mid-Nineteenth Century Ireland*, in: *Journal of Social History* 39 (2005), pp. 389-409 and Cox, *Girls in Trouble*.

the past—that it was impossible to do so without changing the story—is also true for girls. Prodding at historical agency through the history of girls underscores the inadequacy of prevailing notions of historical agency. The paradox of thinking about girls as agents goes right to the heart of contradictions in modern European conceptualizations of the individual and agency as epitomized by the rational (male) adult acting autonomously to further his individual visions and interests. The effort to document and analyze the contributions of girls in history calls into question conventional notions of historical agency and explanation even as it suggests ways of seeing girls' roles in creating a particularly European modernity.

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