what separated the son from the father was not a real external term, as was a husband. What separated the son from the father was control over the symbolic order. The son had to take over from the father; he had to take power in his turn. He had to become the master of the Law. You could say that, between the girl and the woman-mother, there was the man, an instance of real pure exteriority, to whom she surrendered her body; to whom, as people used to say, she "gave herself"; to whom she belonged. Whereas between the son and the man-father, there was the Law.

The girl of the traditional world gave up her own name for the man's; she became "Mrs. X." She could thus remain apart from salaried employment, run the household, be first and foremost a mother, and, more specifically, a mère de famille, a "mother of a family." In the reactionary triad "Work, Family, Homeland," the worker and the farmer, symbolically male categories, were dedicated to work; the soldier, no less a male category, was dedicated to the homeland; and the girl who had become a mother symbolized the family. The triad contained two male categories, work and homeland, as against only one female one, the family.

In the traditional world, this "two-to-one" phenomenon afflicting women was very common. Consider the French marriage law, still in effect in the early 1960s, 50 years ago — which is nothing, in terms of history. The law stipulated that the husband had the right to choose the family home and that the wife had to live in that home. But it wasn't stipulated that the husband had to live there. So he had the right to lock his wife away in the house and also the right not to be there himself. Whereas the woman only had the duty to be in the house. Two to one in the man's favor: that is really the law of the traditional family.

But what is the family? Already in Plato there were three major social functions: producing, reproducing, and defending. Work was what produced, the family was the place of reproduction, and the homeland was what was defended. Between production and defense, the girl who had become a woman, confined to the labor of motherhood, ensured reproduction. Two to one, as usual. The traditional woman was the place in between the worker and the soldier. She welcomed to her table and into her bed the mature man who worked and was her husband. She
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patriotionally mourned the young man fallen in combat who was her son. The girl had to become Mater Dolorosa. Two to one, again: the living father who controlled his wife's body and the dead son who controlled her tears.

Now, however, the traditional family is slowly but surely dying out, in our society. In the world to come, the contemporary world that's developing, a girl can choose to be a worker, a farmer, a teacher, an engineer, a police officer, a check-out employee, a soldier, or president of the Republic. She can live with a man outside marriage, have one lover, several lovers, or no lovers at all. She can get married then divorced, change where she lives or who she loves. She can live alone without being that other important, pitiful traditional figure, the old maid. She can have children without a husband, or even have children with another woman. She can get an abortion. The ugly label "unwed mother" is disappearing. For a time, people said "single mother" [mère céli-bataire], but that has already been superseded by something even more neutral, "the single-parent family" [la famille monoparentale]. And now a single-parent family can even be made up of a father and his children, with no woman at all.

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And no one will speak of an "unwed father" the way they used to speak of an "unwed mother." The negative figure of the old maid itself can become the positive figure of the independent woman.

Yes, yes, I know: there is strong resistance to all this, it's not yet a done deal in many places, and even in our democratic European countries it's not accepted everywhere. But this is what is happening, this is what is coming. It is here that our question—our so-called question, the girl question—arises. Its first formulation might be: if the girl, or the young woman, is not separated from the woman by the real function of a man and the symbolic function of marriage, whatever can the principle of her existence be? And is she disoriented, as I said earlier in this book that boys were?

My theory about boys was as follows: the end of initiation rites, chief among them being military service, means that boys have no symbolic point of support to help them become different from what they are. The Idea is lacking too much for life to be something more than just its day-to-day continuation. Hence, the temptation of an eternal adolescence. Hence, too, what we
see every day: the childishness of adults’ lives, of male adults’ lives in particular. The male subject who confronts commodities has to remain a child who wants new toys. As for the male subject who confronts the social and electoral order, he has to remain an obedient, unimaginative schoolchild whose only ambition is to be at the top of the class no matter what, and for his name to be on everyone’s lips.

But what about girls? It could be argued that girls, too, are doomed to a lack of separation, between the being-girl and the being-woman, since men and marriage no longer play the role, both real and symbolic, of separation. My hypothesis is different, however. Here’s what it is. With boys, the end of traditional initiation leads to a childish stasis, which can be called a life without Ideas. With girls, the lack of external separation (men and marriage) between girl and woman, between young-woman and woman-mother, leads to the imminent construction of a womanhood that could be called premature. Or: boys are at risk of never becoming the adult they contain within themselves, while girls are at risk of having always already become the woman-adult that they ought to actively become. Or again: with boys, there is no anticipation, hence the anxiety of stasis. With girls, the retroaction of the adult on them consumes their adolescence, or even their childhood itself. Hence the anxiety of prematurity.

Look at most girls in modern society. They are no different from women; they are very young women, that’s all. They dress and are made up like women, they speak like women, they know about everything. In the women’s magazines that cater to these very young women, the topics are exactly the same as in all the other magazines: clothes, body care, shopping, hairstyles, what you need to know about men, astrology, jobs, and sex.

Under these conditions, what results is a sort of girl-woman prematurely constituted as an adult, with no need of anyone. This is the cause of the total decline of the symbol of virginity. The symbol of virginity is fundamental in traditional societies: it designates the proof in a girl’s body that she has not yet encountered the sexual mediation of a man and that she is therefore not yet a woman. A girl is a virgin: that’s symbolically all-important. But in contemporary society this symbol has been eliminated. Why? Because,
even if she's empirically a virgin, a girl today is already a woman. She bears in herself the retroactive action of the woman that she will only become because she already is that woman, without the man's having anything much to do with it. We could also say that the poetic figure of the girl, which informs so many wonderful English novels, is irrelevant now: contemporary magazines for girls, which teach them how to please men without running any risk and how to dress to turn them on, have wiped out poetry of that sort. The magazines are not at fault: all they do is address in every girl the contemporary woman she has already become and whose cynicism is, so to speak, innocent.

That's why girls are able to do with impeccable talent anything they're asked to do as children or as adolescents, given that they are now, all on their own, far superior to all that. If boys are forever immature, girls, on the contrary, have always been mature. Let me give just one example: academic success. A real gulf, in girls' favor, has opened up, especially in working-class communities. While school has been an unmitigated disaster for young males from the banlieues, their sisters are not just succeeding but are doing better than girls from affluent neighborhoods, who are themselves head and shoulders above the stupid rich boys. I myself have often seen poor young men of Arab origin, hauled from their working-class neighborhoods before the courts by the police, and the female lawyer, or even the judge, might have been their sister. Or else, given their sexual misery, these boys may have caught an STD, and the doctor treating them could easily be their sister or their female cousin. Wherever social and symbolic success is involved, the girl-woman will now triumph over the boy who is unable to get beyond his adolescence.

Which, by the way, shows that social deprivation is by no means the problem. The girls are just as badly off as the boys in the poor neighborhoods, or even worse off, because they often have to manage the household and take care of the younger kids. Working on a corner of the kitchen table, they are jubilant, knowing that the homework expected of them is mere child's play for them, definitive women as they are.

You could say it's because they want to escape the oppressive world they were born into. Well, of course! But the whole point is that they can. And it's only because the free woman they want...
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to become is already within them in all her force, as fierce and self-assured as need be. While the boy, not knowing what he is, is unable to become what he can, the girl-woman can easily become what she already knows she is.

As a result, the girl question, as opposed to the boy question, no longer exists as such; only the woman question does. This woman that girls are prematurely, who is she? What is the figure of her?

Turning to contemporary figures of femininity now, I'd like to show what the real gendered mechanism of modern capitalist oppression is. It is no longer a matter, as in the world of tradition, of a direct subordination, at once real and symbolic – husband and marriage – of the woman-mother to the man-father. Instead, it's about promoting the imperative “Live without Ideas” everywhere. But the ways in which this imperative operates differ depending on whether it's boys or girls who are being made to submit to it. That life can be life without Ideas, or the stupid life – the subjectivity required by globalized capitalism – is obtained from young males by the impossibility of the becoming-adult, the eternal consumerist and competitive adolescence.

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It is obtained from young females, on the other hand, by the impossibility for them of remaining girls, of basking in the glory of being a girl, and by a premature becoming-woman driven by the cynicism of social becoming.

What does contemporary society, in the clutches of the capitalist monster, want? It wants two things: for us to buy the products on the market if we can, and, if we can't, for us to just keep quiet. For both these things we need to have no idea of justice, no idea of a different future, no free thought. But all true thought is free. And since, in our world, the only thing that matters is something that has a price, we need to have no thoughts, no ideas. Only then can we obey the world that tells us: “Consume if you can afford to; otherwise shut up and get lost.” Only then will we have a totally disoriented and repetitive life, since the compass that Ideas provide will have disappeared.

Traditional society is completely different, because it imposes a belief, and therefore an Idea. What's oppressive about it is not that you have to live without Ideas but that there's one obligatory, usually religious, Idea. Its imperative is “Live with this Idea and no other,” whereas the...
contemporary imperative, let me repeat, is: "Live without any Ideas." That’s why people have been talking about the death of ideologies for the past 40 years.

Basically, the traditional imperative is “Be a man just like your father, a woman just like your mother, and never change Ideas,” whereas the contemporary imperative is instead: “Be the human animal that you are, full of little desires and without any Ideas whatsoever.” But the ways of conditioning the individual animal differ – at any rate, now – depending on whether you’re of the female sex, a girl, or of the male sex, a boy.

We could say that the boy will live without any Ideas because he wasn’t able to undergo the maturing of a thought, while the girl will live without any Ideas because she has undergone far too soon and without any mediation a maturing process as fruitless as it is ambitious. The boy fails to have any Ideas through lack of Man, the girl, through excess of Woman.

Let’s exaggerate things a bit. What might the world become under these conditions? It might become a herd of stupid adolescent boys led by smart career women. We’d then have something perfectly suited to the opaque and violent world being offered us: in terms of Ideas, there would only be things.

But let’s get back to the figures of femininity as they have prematurely emerged in the place where the girl has disappeared. The circle of the figures of femininity, as constructed for thousands of years by male-dominated society, has four poles.

First, there’s the woman as productive and reproductive domestic animal. The woman is thus considered to be situated between symbolic humanity governed by the Name-of-the-Father and pre-symbolic animality. This figure naturally includes motherhood, and it is the material basis of the other three figures. Second, there’s the woman as seductress, the sexual, dangerous woman. Third, the woman as symbol of love, the woman of self-giving and passionate self-sacrifice. And last but not least, the woman as holy virgin, intercessor, and saint.

This is how what might be called the traditional female square is composed. The woman is Servant, Seducer, Lover, and Saint.

The striking thing about this abstract yet rich construction is that its active unity is less one
isolated term than a pair of terms. Examples abound and have informed most of the literature about women, regardless of whether it was written by men or by women. There is always a woman split between two figures. Thus, the servant, the housewife-mother, is only thinkable if she is combined with the seductress, whose lowest form is the whore. That is why they say that a man can only relate to women in terms of the Mother-Whore dichotomy. But the dangerous seductress is only such to the extent that she is coupled with the female lover’s fervor. This is the source of the countless female opposites in literature, where the whole plot depicts the conflict between pure and impure love, desire and love, or the sublime lover confronted with her powerful rival, the loose woman, or the woman of ill repute. But the lover herself borders on the sublime, and if she gives of and sacrifices herself, it may also be in order to lose herself in God through what could be called an upward-leading virginity. It is not for nothing that Goethe ended his sublime Faust with the line: “The eternal feminine leads us on high.” The truth is, the servant is only a woman because her virtual double is the seductress; the seductress is only powerful because she lands on love’s shores; and the lover is only sublime because she comes very close to the female mystic.

But then there’s a reverse movement, leading back to the starting point: the sublime female mystic confirms the mother’s everyday selflessness, and, as a result, religious and moral prose flows effortlessly from the mystical to the domestic, conveyed by the female figures. The most important of these in our world is obviously the Virgin Mary, sublime to the point of being quasi-divine and at the same time the archetype of the mother, the tender mother of the baby as well as the Mater Dolorosa of the crucified son. The return of the saint’s sublimity to the mother’s domesticity ultimately changes the square of figures into a circle. By what means does it do so? By the fact that each figure is a figure only insofar as it is in an eccentric relation to another one. So “woman” always means an instance of duality. Even a saintly wife is only so because she was once asked to seduce, she consented to sex, and so she, too, is dangerous, and remains forever so. Otherwise, if she were only innocently and faithfully the domestic wife, why would she have to be locked away, covered up, shielded from other
men's gazes? But isn't it this dangerous woman hidden under the veil of the faithful wife who, fired by passion, sneaks away to meet a lover she'd give her life for? And if that lover leaves her, isn't she tempted to devote herself to the saving God in some out-of-the-way convent? But in that case, isn't she the sublime new figure of what the absolutely devoted wife already was, day after day?

In traditional representation, a woman is in one place only insofar as she is also in another. So a woman is that which passes between two places. But the truth is, the power of the Two is even greater. Indeed, each of the figures is itself split in two.

The simplest example of this is the exchange of women in traditional societies, either the so-called "primitive" ones, which anthropologists used to study, or the ones in our own history. In either case, it's a question of the woman as a higher domestic animal. We know that in some groups a man can only acquire a wife in exchange for a substantial payment, such as two or three cows, some fabrics, etc. In other groups, on the contrary, a man won't marry a woman unless she comes with a substantial payment. This is the dowry system. What explanation is there for the fact that women and money can circulate either in the same direction or in opposite directions? In the case of the dowry, the woman passes from one family to another with a trousseau and money. In the case of pure exchange, the woman passes from one family to another provided that money passes from the beneficiary family to the donor family. The explanation can only be that the acquisition of a girl has two opposite senses, reflected in the two directions in which money circulates. In the first sense, she is a force of labor and reproduction that the higher domestic animal. In the second, she is of course still a reproductive force but one that has to be taken good care of. This is why the dowry system was, and still is more or less discreetly - imperative in wealthy milieux, where the woman must show off, display her elegance and culture, and preside at social functions where her clothes must never be inferior to another woman's. That's expensive. An African peasant woman, by contrast, will not just bear children but work hard in the fields. That brings in a little money. Let's say that the acquisition of a wife is suspended between the domestic animal in the sense of labor and the domestic
creates the Two and the passing-between-Two, a woman becomes the model of the new One, the One that stands boldly and brashly before the competitive market and is both its servant and its master. Contemporary woman will be the symbol of the new One, erected on the ruins of the Name-of-the-Father.

As a result, three of the ancient figures of the feminine – dangerous seduction, the amorous gift, and the mystical sublime – disappear. To be sure, the woman-One is naturally seductive, because seduction is a major weapon of competition. Women bankers and board chairwomen pride themselves on their ability to remain women, precisely in the sense of the seductress. The danger that such seduction represents, however, is one of the One’s weapons; it is by no means its double or a threat to it. Seduction is in the service of power. That’s why it must not be associated with the self-abandonment of love, which is a weakness and a kind of alienation. The woman-One is free, she’s a tough fighter, and if she decides to get into a relationship, it will be based on a contract with mutual benefits. Love becomes the existential form of the contract; it is just one deal among others. And lastly, the

woman-One couldn’t care less about the mystical sublime. She would much prefer to run real organizations.

Basically, the idea is that not only can women do everything men do, but, under the conditions of capitalism, they can do it better than men. They’ll be more realistic than men, more relentless, more tenacious. Why? Precisely because girls no longer have to become the women that they already are, while boys don’t know how to become the men that they are not. So the One of individualism is stronger in women than in men.

If we were to indulge in a little science-fiction, perhaps we could simply predict the extinction of the male gender. You’d just have to freeze the sperm of a few tens of millions of men, which would amount to billions of genetic possibilities. Reproduction would thus be guaranteed by artificial insemination. All the males could then be exterminated. And, just as with bees or ants, humanity would only consist of women, who would do everything very well, given that the symbolic order would be minimal, being only the order required by the actual situation of capitalism.

After all, what capitalism requires is a life consisting of work, needs, and satisfactions. An
animal life, in short. And it has been proven that what an animal life needs most is females, the males existing only for reproduction. But humanity has perfectly mastered artificial reproduction, without the need for mating or males. So, for the first time in human history, the end of the male gender is a real possibility.

However fictitious this prospect may be, it clearly shows that the crux of it all today is the reproduction of the human race, its modalities and its symbolism. This is the second problem of femininity today. I said that the figures of the Seducress, the Lover, and the Saint were directly threatened with extinction. But what about the figure of woman as a servant? The problem here is that if we admit that women can do everything that men do, the converse, for the time being, is not true. There is one thing that men absolutely can’t do, and that’s give birth to a baby. Accordingly, the woman remains a servant, naturally not of one man but of the whole human race. If, like men, but for reasons of personal convenience, she declared herself to be incapable of reproducing, incapable of childbearing, then the human race would just have to expect to become extinct. In this sense, for the time being, even the woman—One of capitalism remains a servant: a servant of humanity.

That’s why the conversation is so often focused on this one topic today: childbearing, reproduction. These are all the so-called “social” issues that we’re constantly hearing about: abortion, infanticide, the responsibility for childcare, sexual consent, homosexual couples, surrogate mothers, and so on. It is also why bourgeois feminism manifests a sort of hostility to motherhood, the last refuge of the old servant figure. This can be seen, for example, in the writings of Élisabeth Badinter,¹ who demands that we put an end to the idea of a “maternal instinct” and affirm that a woman exists fully and completely even if she doesn’t have children and doesn’t want to have any. That position is perfectly consistent with the contemporary girl—woman, because if a girl is already a woman, the converse is also true: every woman can be a girl, with no desire for children. That may be a completely legitimate option. But you have to admit that it can’t be a rule, because the problem is, when a rule is formulated, the

consequences of its universalization, as Kant put it, always have to be considered. However, the universalization of the refusal to bear children amounts, quite simply, to the end of the human race. This is such a dim prospect that everyone, of course, ultimately prefers for women to remain the servants of humanity. Once again, this divides the One of the capitalist feminine into a creative duality and thereby raises a very difficult subjective problem for it.

At this point, I feel like saying: let contemporary capitalist societies deal with this problem that they've created, after all. My still very unclear view of things is that we've got to both accept the end of the traditional figures and reject the figure of the woman-One as capitalism's reserve army. Women will break out, have already frequently broken out, of the imaginary and symbolic circle made up of the four figures of the Servant, the Seductress, the Lover, and the Saint. But many of them are in no way resigned, on the basis of this negative freedom, to the opposite fate of the woman-One of capital. They know that this contemporary figure destroys the capacity of the Two and replaces it with an abstract unity of servitude. They know that, as a result, childbearing, detached from strong symbolizations, will only subsist as irreducible domestic service, as creativity without any glory. They see that the prospect, even if only a fantasy, of men's extinction would forever make them slaves of themselves and unleash their latent ferocity. What must be affirmed above all, whether you're a man or a woman, is that, to the extent that it exists at all, the woman question cannot be determined by the demands of contemporary capitalist societies. We need to choose a completely external starting point. And this is probably why, for the first time, there's no escaping the fact that the feminine, as newly clarified, is linked to a philosophical gesture. Because the new starting point can be neither biological nor social nor legal. It can only be a gesture of thought linked to the creation of symbols. A gesture linked, therefore, to the adventures of philosophy, and one that is all the newer given that this female creation of symbols will have to include childbearing in a dimension different from reproductive animality.

Let's assume that the order of symbol creation, or the order of the Law, is no longer absolutely dependent on the Name-of-the-Father. We then have a thinking of truths free of all
transcendence. God is really dead. And since God is dead, the absolute One of male closure can no longer govern the entire order of symbolic and philosophical thinking. A sexuality of this thinking is inevitable. How, then, does this sexuality function in the real domains of these truths without God, without paternal guarantee? These are the questions we need to begin with.

Concretely, what is a woman who engages in the politics of emancipation? What is a woman artist, musician, painter, or poet? A woman who is brilliant in math or physics? A woman who, rather than being some mysterious goddess, takes equal responsibility for thought and action in a love relationship? What is a woman philosopher? And, conversely, what do creative politics, poetry, music, cinema, mathematics, or love become — what does philosophy become — once the word "woman" resonates in them in tune with the power of symbol-creating equality?

These questions are being worked on, because women are working on them, in a new in-between place that can be described as: neither Tradition nor the dominant Contemporary. Women will pass between the two and subvert the One that they are being urged to become. This is a unique tension. Indeed, women should be much more wary today of what capitalism is offering them in the way of liberation than they should be of men. I don't know what women will invent, given the predicament they're in. But I trust them absolutely. What I'm sure of, without really knowing why, is that they'll invent a new girl. She will be the girl who is determined to become the new woman, the woman that women are not and must become, the woman who is fully involved in the creation of symbols and will also include childbearing in it. The woman who will thereby induce men to share fully in all the consequences, henceforth universally symbolized, of reproduction. So childbearing and childcare will never again mean being a servant. Men and women will share in a new universal symbolization of birth and all its consequences. This girl, as yet unknown but who is coming, will be able to proclaim, is probably already proclaiming somewhere, to the sky empty of God:

Beautiful heaven, true heaven, look how I change!2