



The
GREAT
CAT
MASSACRE

*And Other
Episodes in French
Cultural History*

ROBERT DARNTON

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

THE GREAT
CAT MASSACRE
AND OTHER EPISODES
IN FRENCH
CULTURAL HISTORY

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Robert Darnton



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THIS BOOK grew out of a course, History 406, that I have offered at Princeton University since 1972. Originally an introduction to the history of *mentalités*, the course developed into a seminar on history and anthropology, thanks to the influence of Clifford Geertz, who has taught the course with me for the last six years and in doing so has taught me most of what I know about anthropology. I should like to express my gratitude to him and to our students. I also owe a great deal to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where I began writing this book as a member of a program on self-perception and historical change financed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. And finally, I would like to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation whose award of a prize fellowship made it possible for me to suspend my normal work in order to follow up and finish what must have appeared to be a risky enterprise.

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION OF *THE GREAT CAT MASSACRE*

THIS NEW EDITION of my book gives me an opportunity to address new readers, and I am happy to take advantage of it. Publishing a book is similar to throwing a stone down a deep well: you wait and wait, expecting to hear a splash, but sometimes you hear nothing. Of all the books I have written, *The Great Cat Massacre* made the greatest splash—perhaps, as some have said, because it has a catchy title. When the title caught their eye, readers apparently were intrigued. Why, they asked, should a serious historian occupy himself with such a bizarre event as the ritual slaughter of cats in an obscure neighborhood of eighteenth-century Paris? I hope that question will draw readers into the text and, more importantly, into a new kind of history.

In the 1960s, when everything new seemed to originate on the Left Bank of Paris, this history was heralded as *l'histoire des*

mentalités—the history of mentalities, or the study of the mental universe of ordinary people. Before then, historians had concentrated on the intellectual life of the elite, but they could not deny that peasants and workers had ideas, too. If some way could be found to penetrate into the worldview of the masses and study the values and attitudes of people in the bottom ranks of society, a whole new dimension of history would open up. But the problems posed by this kind of research seemed to be insurmountable. Most Europeans were illiterate before the nineteenth century. How could a historian find traces of mental activity by people who had left no written record of it?

The first attempts to find a solution to this problem produced some inferences but little in the way of rigorous argument. Historians studied chapbooks that were read aloud to peasants. They compiled statistics from wills, which suggested how the poor imagined the afterlife. They investigated exotic subjects like witchcraft, magic, banditry, and folk medicine. But they did not make systematic advances into this field of study until they began borrowing concepts and methods from a neighboring discipline, anthropology.

Anthropologists had made the worldviews and value systems of illiterate people a principal subject of their research since the beginning of the twentieth century. To be sure, they divided into rival camps and disagreed among themselves just as heartily as historians do, so their concepts could not be imported wholesale into history. But by the 1990s historians were making such effective use of so many varieties of anthropology that even the French abandoned their trademark notion of the history of mentalities and took up *anthropological history*.

The Great Cat Massacre, first published in 1984, is an early attempt to write history in this vein. I intended it for the general reading public as well as for scholars, so I did not include much in the way of theoretical discourse. I wanted to show how anthropological history could work by writing it instead of writing a treatise on how it should be written. I also adopted a particular strategy in my mode of exposition. I began with the general stock of folk tales, which existed everywhere and reached everyone, among the elite as well as the peasants, through the many dialects that proliferated in eighteenth-

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century France. By systematically studying and comparing the versions recorded by folklorists in the nineteenth century, I thought it possible to characterize an oral tradition that expressed a general orientation to the world—not a national spirit, as some of my critics have claimed, but a pattern of culture that existed on a national scale, despite regional variations. Having established this pattern as a general background, I went on in the succeeding chapters to produce a series of case studies, which covered different social groups and led ultimately to the intellectual elite among writers and readers. By proceeding in this manner, I attempted to write cultural history “from below,” just as earlier historians had treated social and economic history—that is, I began in the world of peasants and artisans and worked up into the world of the Enlightenment. But I did not try to integrate everything into a single, seamless account of eighteenth-century French culture because I do not believe that any such thing existed. Like many modern or postmodern writers, I did not worry about presenting my work in a fragmented and nonholistic way. But I did fret over the need to be rigorous—to deploy evidence in a manner that supports a compelling interpretation.

I stress interpretation because I understand history, like all the human sciences, to be interpretive by its very nature. It makes sense of how other people made sense of the human condition. To study a cultural episode like the massacre of cats is similar to going to a play: you read the actions of the actors in order to understand what they are expressing. You don't reach a conclusion comparable to the bottom line of a bank account or the verdict of a judge, because interpretive history is necessarily open-ended, capacious enough to admit many nuances. But open-endedness does not mean that anything goes or that an interpretation cannot be wrong. To interpret *Hamlet* as a slapstick comedy is to get it wrong, even though other interpretations can be both valid and divergent—those, for example, that construe *Hamlet* as a play about psychological forces as opposed to those that see it as a drama about power in the body politic.

I have borrowed these ideas from Clifford Geertz, a master anthropologist with whom I taught a seminar on history and

anthropology for twenty years. But they also fit the views of Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and younger scholars such as Keith Basso and James Clifford. For all their differences, these anthropologists stress the multivocal character of symbols, and they understand rituals as complex patterns of behavior, which express multiple meanings.

I stress the complexity and multiplicity inherent in symbolic expression because some of my critics have failed to take account of that fundamental point. Roger Chartier, for example, argues that symbols link signifier to signified in an unambiguous, linear manner, as in an example he took from an eighteenth-century dictionary: the lion is the symbol of valor. I would agree that the figure of a lion can suggest valor, but it can also convey strength, ferocity, royalty, and other qualities, including various combinations of them, all at the same time. Anthropologists have demonstrated again and again that ordinary people manipulate symbols in this manner. So there is nothing extravagant about the notion that cats symbolized witchcraft, sexuality, and domesticity—or that the ritual murder of them was meant simultaneously as a trial, a gang rape, a rebellion of the workers against their boss, and a carnivalesque kind of street theater, which the workers later repeated in the form of pantomime. Not all of the men who staged the massacre understood it in the same fashion. It had a wide range of meanings that could be construed and combined in several ways. To reduce them to one conclusion, as in the ending of a whodunit mystery story, is to misunderstand the way humans make meaning in general and how workers were able to twit their bosses in the eighteenth century.

Put so abstractly, the issue may sound like what we call an *academic question*—one of those debates that interest academics but have little to say to ordinary persons in the workaday world. But I believe that the cat massacre and the attempt to decipher its meanings can interest everyone outside of academia who is curious about the human condition and the way human beings construe it. One way is through joking. Although it seems strange to us—and downright repugnant to the cat lovers among us—the cat massacre was the funniest thing that ever happened to the workers in the rue Saint-Séverin. If we can get the joke, we

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should be able to shed some of our modern worldviews and enter into the alien mental world of ordinary persons who lived two centuries before us. That kind of contact is an experience that makes this kind of history rewarding. If my readers enjoy this experiment in anthropological history, I hope they will pursue it further, for history and anthropology have continued to reinforce each other, and now, a quarter of a century after *The Great Cat Massacre* first appeared, they have combined to create a fertile field of study that looks more promising than ever.

The Great Cat Massacre
And Other Episodes in
French Cultural History

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK investigates ways of thinking in eighteenth-century France. It attempts to show not merely what people thought but how they thought—how they construed the world, invested it with meaning, and infused it with emotion. Instead of following the high road of intellectual history, the inquiry leads into the unmapped territory known in France as *l'histoire des mentalités*. This genre has not yet received a name in English, but it might simply be called cultural history; for it treats our own civilization in the same way that anthropologists study alien cultures. It is history in the ethnographic grain.

Most people tend to think that cultural history concerns high culture, culture with a capital *c*. The history of culture in the lower case goes back as far as Burckhardt, if not Herodotus; but it is still unfamiliar and full of surprises. So the reader may want a word of explanation. Where the historian of ideas traces the filiation of formal thought from philosopher to philosopher, the ethnographic historian studies the way ordinary people made sense of the world. He attempts to uncover their cosmology, to show how they organized reality in their minds and expressed it in their behavior. He does not try to make a philosopher out of the man in the street but

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to see how street life called for a strategy. Operating at ground level, ordinary people learn to be “street smart”—and they can be as intelligent in their fashion as philosophers. But instead of deriving logical propositions, they think with things, or with anything else that their culture makes available to them, such as stories or ceremonies.

What things are good to think with? Claude Lévi-Strauss applied that question to the totems and tatoos of Amazonia twenty-five years ago. Why not try it out on eighteenth-century France? Because eighteenth-century Frenchmen cannot be interviewed, the skeptic will reply; and to drive the point home, he will add that archives can never serve as a substitute for field work. True, but the archives from the Old Regime are exceptionally rich, and one can always put new questions to old material. Furthermore, one should not imagine that the anthropologist has an easy time with his native informant. He, too, runs into areas of opacity and silence, and he must interpret the native’s interpretation of what the other natives think. Mental undergrowth can be as impenetrable in the bush as in the library.

But one thing seems clear to everyone who returns from field work: other people are other. They do not think the way we do. And if we want to understand their way of thinking, we should set out with the idea of capturing otherness. Translated into the terms of the historian’s craft, that may merely sound like the familiar injunction against anachronism. It is worth repeating, nonetheless; for nothing is easier than to slip into the comfortable assumption that Europeans thought and felt two centuries ago just as we do today—allowing for the wigs and wooden shoes. We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock.

There is no better way, I believe, than to wander through the archives. One can hardly read a letter from the Old Regime without coming up against surprises—anything from the constant dread of toothaches, which existed everywhere, to the obsession with braiding dung for display on manure heaps, which remained confined to certain villages. What was proverbial wisdom to our ancestors is completely opaque to us. Open any eighteenth-century book of proverbs, and you will find entries such as: “He who is

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snotty, let him blow his nose.” When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view.

This book attempts to explore such unfamiliar views of the world. It proceeds by following up the surprises provided by an unlikely assortment of texts: a primitive version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” an account of a massacre of cats, a bizarre description of a city, a curious file kept by a police inspector—documents that cannot be taken to typify eighteenth-century thought but that provide ways of entering into it. The discussion begins with the most vague and general expressions of world view and becomes increasingly precise. Chapter 1 provides an exegesis of the folklore that was familiar to nearly everyone in France but was especially pertinent to the peasantry. Chapter 2 interprets the lore of a group of urban artisans. Moving up the social scale, chapter 3 shows what urban life meant to a provincial bourgeois. The scene then shifts to Paris and the world of the intellectuals—first as it was seen by the police, who had their own way of framing reality (chapter 4), then as it was sorted out epistemologically in the key text of the Enlightenment, the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie* (chapter 5). The last chapter then shows how Rousseau’s break with the Encyclopedists opened up a new way of thinking and feeling, one that can be appreciated by rereading Rousseau from the perspective of his readers.

The notion of reading runs through all the chapters, for one can read a ritual or a city just as one can read a folktale or a philosophic text. The mode of exegesis may vary, but in each case one reads for meaning—the meaning inscribed by contemporaries in whatever survives of their vision of the world. I have therefore tried to read my way through the eighteenth century, and I have appended texts to my interpretations so that my own reader can interpret these texts and disagree with me. I do not expect to have the last word and do not pretend to completeness. This book does not provide an inventory of ideas and attitudes in all the social groups and geographical regions of the Old Regime. Nor does it offer typical case studies, for I do not believe there is such a thing as a typical peasant

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or a representative bourgeois. Instead of chasing after them, I have pursued what seemed to be the richest run of documents, following leads wherever they went and quickening my pace as soon as I stumbled on a surprise. Straying from the beaten path may not be much of a methodology, but it creates the possibility of enjoying some unusual views, and they can be the most revealing. I do not see why cultural history should avoid the eccentric or embrace the average, for one cannot calculate the mean of meanings or reduce symbols to their lowest common denominator.

This confession of nonsystematism does not imply that anything goes in cultural history because anything can pass as anthropology. The anthropological mode of history has a rigor of its own, even if it may look suspiciously like literature to a hard-boiled social scientist. It begins from the premise that individual expression takes place within a general idiom, that we learn to classify sensations and make sense of things by thinking within a framework provided by our culture. It therefore should be possible for the historian to discover the social dimension of thought and to tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again until he has cleared a way through a foreign mental world.

This kind of cultural history belongs to the interpretive sciences. It may seem too literary to be classified under the *appellation contrôlée* of "science" in the English-speaking world, but it fits in nicely with the *sciences humaines* in France. It is not an easy genre, and it is bound to be imperfect, but it should not be impossible, even in English. All of us, French and "Anglo-Saxons," pedants as well as peasants, operate within cultural constraints, just as we all share conventions of speech. So historians should be able to see how cultures shape ways of thinking, even for the greatest thinkers. A poet or philosopher may push a language to its limits, but at some point he will hit against the outer frame of meaning. Beyond it, madness lies—the fate of Hölderlin and Nietzsche. But within it, great men can test and shift the boundaries of meaning. Thus there should be room for Diderot and Rousseau in a book about *mentalités* in eighteenth-century France. By including them along with the peasant tellers of tales and the plebeian killers of cats, I have abandoned the usual distinction between elite and popular culture, and

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have tried to show how intellectuals and common people coped with the same sort of problems.

I realize there are risks in departing from the established modes of history. Some will object that the evidence is too vague for one ever to penetrate into the minds of peasants who disappeared two centuries ago. Others will take offense at the idea of interpreting a massacre of cats in the same vein as the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie*, or interpreting it at all. And still more readers will recoil at the arbitrariness of selecting a few strange documents as points of entry into eighteenth-century thought rather than proceeding in a systematic manner through the canon of classic texts. I think there are valid replies to those objections, but I do not want to turn this introduction into a discourse on method. Instead, I would like to invite the reader into my own text. He may not be convinced, but I hope he will enjoy the journey.

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Mother Goose tales, from the original illustration
to Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'oye*

PEASANTS TELL TALES: THE MEANING OF MOTHER GOOSE

THE MENTAL WORLD of the unenlightened during the Enlightenment seems to be irretrievably lost. It is so difficult, if not impossible, to locate the common man in the eighteenth century that it seems foolish to search for his cosmology. But before abandoning the attempt, it might be useful to suspend one's disbelief and to consider a story—a story everyone knows, though not in the following version, which is the tale more or less as it was told around firesides in peasant cottages during long winter evenings in eighteenth-century France.¹

Once a little girl was told by her mother to bring some bread and milk to her grandmother. As the girl was walking through the forest, a wolf came up to her and asked where she was going.

“To grandmother's house,” she replied.

“Which path are you taking, the path of the pins or the path of the needles?”

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"The path of the needles."

So the wolf took the path of the pins and arrived first at the house. He killed grandmother, poured her blood into a bottle, and sliced her flesh onto a platter. Then he got into her nightclothes and waited in bed.

"Knock, knock."

"Come in, my dear."

"Hello, grandmother. I've brought you some bread and milk."

"Have something yourself, my dear. There is meat and wine in the pantry."

So the little girl ate what was offered; and as she did, a little cat said, "Slut! To eat the flesh and drink the blood of your grandmother!"

Then the wolf said, "Undress and get into bed with me."

"Where shall I put my apron?"

"Throw it on the fire; you won't need it any more."

For each garment—bodice, skirt, petticoat, and stockings—the girl asked the same question; and each time the wolf answered, "Throw it on the fire; you won't need it any more."

When the girl got in bed, she said, "Oh, grandmother! How hairy you are!"

"It's to keep me warmer, my dear."

"Oh, grandmother! What big shoulders you have!"

"It's for better carrying firewood, my dear."

"Oh, grandmother! What long nails you have!"

"It's for scratching myself better, my dear."

"Oh, grandmother! What big teeth you have!"

"It's for eating you better, my dear."

And he ate her.

What is the moral of this story? For little girls, clearly: stay away from wolves. For historians, it seems to be saying something about the mental world of the early modern peasantry. But what? How can one begin to interpret such a text? One way leads through psychoanalysis. The analysts have given folktales a thorough going-over, picking out hidden symbols, unconscious motifs, and psychic mechanisms. Consider, for example, the exegesis of "Little Red Riding Hood" by two of the best known psychoanalysts, Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettelheim.

Fromm interpreted the tale as a riddle about the collective unconscious in primitive society, and he solved it "without difficulty" by decoding its "symbolic language." The story concerns an

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adolescent's confrontation with adult sexuality, he explained. Its hidden meaning shows through its symbolism—but the symbols he saw in his version of the text were based on details that did not exist in the versions known to peasants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus he makes a great deal of the (nonexistent) red riding hood as a symbol of menstruation and of the (non-existent) bottle carried by the girl as a symbol of virginity: hence the mother's (nonexistent) admonition not to stray from the path into wild terrain where she might break it. The wolf is the ravishing male. And the two (nonexistent) stones that are placed in the wolf's belly after the (nonexistent) hunter extricates the girl and her grandmother, stand for sterility, the punishment for breaking a sexual taboo. So, with an uncanny sensitivity to detail that did not occur in the original folktale, the psychoanalyst takes us into a mental universe that never existed, at least not before the advent of psychoanalysis.²

How could anyone get a text so wrong? The difficulty does not derive from professional dogmatism—for psychoanalysts need not be more rigid than poets in their manipulation of symbols—but rather from blindness to the historical dimension of folktales.

Fromm did not bother to mention his source, but apparently he took his text from the brothers Grimm. The Grimms got it, along with "Puss 'n Boots," "Bluebeard," and a few other stories, from Jeannette Hassenpflug, a neighbor and close friend of theirs in Cassel; and she learned it from her mother, who came from a French Huguenot family. The Huguenots brought their own repertory of tales into Germany when they fled from the persecution of Louis XIV. But they did not draw them directly from popular oral tradition. They read them in books written by Charles Perrault, Marie Cathérine d'Aulnoy, and others during the vogue for fairy tales in fashionable Parisian circles at the end of the seventeenth century. Perrault, the master of the genre, did indeed take his material from the oral tradition of the common people (his principal source probably was his son's nurse). But he touched it up so that it would suit the taste of the salon sophisticates, *précieuses*, and courtiers to whom he directed the first printed version of Mother Goose, his *Contes de ma mère l'oye* of 1697. Thus the tales that reached the Grimms through the Hassenpflugs were neither

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very German nor very representative of folk tradition. Indeed, the Grimms recognized their literary and Frenchified character and therefore eliminated them from the second edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*—all but “Little Red Riding Hood.” It remained in the collection, evidently, because Jeannette Hassenpflug had grafted on to it a happy ending derived from “The Wolf and the Kids” (tale type 123 according to the standard classification scheme developed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson), which was one of the most popular in Germany. So Little Red Riding Hood slipped into the German and later the English literary tradition with her French origins undetected. She changed character considerably as she passed from the French peasantry to Perrault’s nursery, into print, across the Rhine, back into an oral tradition but this time as part of the Huguenot diaspora, and back into book form but now as a product of the Teutonic forest rather than the village hearths of the Old Regime in France.³

Fromm and a host of other psychoanalytical exegetes did not worry about the transformations of the text—indeed, they did not know about them—because they got the tale they wanted. It begins with pubertal sex (the red hood, which does not exist in the French oral tradition) and ends with the triumph of the ego (the rescued girl, who is usually eaten in the French tales) over the id (the wolf, who is never killed in the traditional versions). All’s well that ends well.

The ending is particularly important for Bruno Bettelheim, the latest in the line of psychoanalysts who have had a go at “Little Red Riding Hood.” For him, the key to the story, and to all such stories, is the affirmative message of its denouement. By ending happily, he maintains, folktales permit children to confront their unconscious desires and fears and to emerge unscathed, id subdued and ego triumphant. The id is the villain of “Little Red Riding Hood” in Bettelheim’s version. It is the pleasure principle, which leads the girl astray when she is too old for oral fixation (the stage represented by “Hansel and Gretel”) and too young for adult sex. The id is also the wolf, who is also the father, who is also the hunter, who is also the ego and, somehow, the superego as well. By directing the wolf to her grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood manages in oedipal fashion to do away with her mother, because

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mothers can also be grandmothers in the moral economy of the soul and the houses on either side of the woods are actually the same house, as in "Hansel and Gretel," where they are also the mother's body. This adroit mixing of symbols gives Little Red Riding Hood an opportunity to get into bed with her father, the wolf, thereby giving vent to her oedipal fantasies. She survives in the end because she is reborn on a higher level of existence when her father reappears as ego-superego-hunter and cuts her out of the belly of her father as wolf-id, so that everyone lives happily ever after.⁴

Bettelheim's generous view of symbolism makes for a less mechanistic interpretation of the tale than does Fromm's notion of a secret code, but it, too, proceeds from some unquestioned assumptions about the text. Although he cites enough commentators on Grimm and Perrault to indicate some awareness of folklore as an academic discipline, Bettelheim reads "Little Red Riding Hood" and the other tales as if they had no history. He treats them, so to speak, flattened out, like patients on a couch, in a timeless contemporaneity. He does not question their origins or worry over other meanings that they might have had in other contexts because he knows how the soul works and how it has always worked. In fact, however, folktales are historical documents. They have evolved over many centuries and have taken different turns in different cultural traditions. Far from expressing the unchanging operations of man's inner being, they suggest that *mentalités* themselves have changed. We can appreciate the distance between our mental world and that of our ancestors if we imagine lulling a child of our own to sleep with the primitive peasant version of "Little Red Riding Hood." Perhaps, then, the moral of the story should be: beware of psychoanalysts—and be careful in your use of sources. We seem to be back at historicism.⁵

Not quite, however, for "Little Red Riding Hood" has a terrifying irrationality that seems out of place in the Age of Reason. In fact, the peasants' version outdoes the psychoanalysts' in violence and sex. (Following the Grimms and Perrault, Fromm and Bettelheim do not mention the cannibalizing of grandmother and the strip-tease prelude to the devouring of the girl.) Evidently the peasants did not need a secret code to talk about taboos.

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Little Red Riding Hood, by Gustave Doré

The other stories in the French peasant Mother Goose have the same nightmare quality. In one early version of "Sleeping Beauty" (tale type 410), for example, Prince Charming, who is already married, ravishes the princess, and she bears him several children, without waking up. The infants finally break the spell by biting her while nursing, and the tale then takes up its second theme: the attempts of the prince's mother-in-law, an ogress, to eat his illicit offspring. The original "Bluebeard" (tale type 312) is the story of a bride who cannot resist the temptation to open a forbidden door in the house of her husband, a strange man who has already gone through six wives. She enters a dark room and discovers the corpses of the previous wives, hanging on the wall. Horrified, she lets the forbidden key drop from her hand into a pool of blood on

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the floor. She cannot wipe it clean; so Bluebeard discovers her disobedience, when he inspects the keys. As he sharpens his knife in preparation for making her his seventh victim, she withdraws to her bedroom and puts on her wedding costume. But she delays her toilette long enough to be saved by her brothers, who gallop to the rescue after receiving a warning from her pet dove. In one early tale from the Cinderella cycle (tale type 510B), the heroine becomes a domestic servant in order to prevent her father from forcing her to marry him. In another, the wicked stepmother tries to push her in an oven but incinerates one of the mean stepsisters by mistake. In the French peasant's "Hansel and Gretel" (tale type 327), the hero tricks an ogre into slitting the throats of his own children. A husband eats a succession of brides in the wedding bed in "La Belle et le monstre" (tale type 433), one of the hundreds of tales that never made it into the printed versions of Mother Goose. In a nastier tale, "Les Trois Chiens" (tale type 315), a sister kills her brother by hiding spikes in the mattress of his wedding bed. In the nastiest of all, "Ma mère m'a tué, mon père m'a mangé" (tale type 720), a mother chops her son up into a Lyonnais-style casserole, which her daughter serves to the father. And so it goes, from rape and sodomy to incest and cannibalism. Far from veiling their message with symbols, the storytellers of eighteenth-century France portrayed a world of raw and naked brutality.

How can the historian make sense of this world? One way for him to keep his footing in the psychic undertow of early Mother Goose is to hold fast to two disciplines: anthropology and folklore. When they discuss theory, anthropologists disagree about the fundamentals of their science. But when they go into the bush, they use techniques for understanding oral traditions that can, with discretion, be applied to Western folklore. Except for some structuralists, they relate tales to the art of tale telling and to the context in which it takes place. They look for the way a raconteur adapts an inherited theme to his audience so that the specificity of time and place shows through the universality of the topos. They do not expect to find direct social comment or metaphysical allegories so much as a tone of discourse or a cultural style, which communicates a particular ethos and world view.⁶ "Scientific" folklore, as

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the French call it (American specialists often distinguish between folklore and “fakelore”), involves the compilation and comparison of tales according to the standardized schemata of tale types developed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. It does not necessarily exclude formalistic analysis such as that of Vladimir Propp, but it stresses rigorous documentation—the occasion of the telling, the background of the teller, and the degree of contamination from written sources.⁷

French folklorists have recorded about ten thousand tales, in many different dialects and in every corner of France and of French-speaking territories. For example, while on an expedition in Berry for the Musée des arts et traditions populaires in 1945, Ariane de Félice recorded a version of “Le Petit Poucet” (“Tom Thumb” or “Thumbling,” tale type 327) by a peasant woman, Euphrasie Pichon, who had been born in 1862 in the village of Eguzon (Indre). In 1879 Jean Drouillet wrote down another version as he listened to his mother Eugénie, who had learned it from her mother, Octavie Riffet, in the village of Teillay (Cher). The two versions are nearly identical and owe nothing to the first printed account of the tale, which Charles Perrault published in 1697. They and eighty other “Petits Poucets,” which folklorists have compiled and compared, motif by motif, belong to an oral tradition that survived with remarkably little contamination from print culture until late in the nineteenth century. Most of the tales in the French repertory were recorded between 1870 and 1914 during “the Golden Age of folktale research in France,” and they were recounted by peasants who had learned them as children, long before literacy had spread throughout the countryside. Thus in 1874 Nannette Levesque, an illiterate peasant woman born in 1794, dictated a version of “Little Red Riding Hood” that went back to the eighteenth century; and in 1865 Louis Grolleau, a domestic servant born in 1803, dictated a rendition of “Le Pou” (tale type 621) that he had first heard under the Empire. Like all tellers of tales, the peasant raconteurs adjusted the setting of their stories to their own milieux; but they kept the main elements intact, using repetitions, rhymes, and other mnemonic devices. Although the “performance” element, which is central to the study of contemporary folklore, does not show through the old texts,

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folklorists argue that the recordings of the Third Republic provide enough evidence for them to reconstruct the rough outlines of an oral tradition that existed two centuries ago.⁸

That claim may seem extravagant, but comparative studies have revealed striking similarities in different recordings of the same tale, even though they were made in remote villages, far removed from one another and from the circulation of books. In a study of "Little Red Riding Hood," for example, Paul Delarue compared thirty-five versions recorded throughout a vast zone of the *langue d'oïl*. Twenty versions correspond exactly to the primitive "Conte de la mère grand" quoted above, except for a few details (sometimes the girl is eaten, sometimes she escapes by a ruse). Two versions follow Perrault's tale (the first to mention the red hood). And the rest contain a mixture of the oral and written accounts, whose elements stand out as distinctly as the garlic and mustard in a French salad dressing.⁹

Written evidence proves that the tales existed long before anyone conceived of "folklore," a nineteenth-century neologism.¹⁰ Medieval preachers drew on the oral tradition in order to illustrate moral arguments. Their sermons, transcribed in collections of "Exempla" from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, refer to the same stories as those taken down in peasant cottages by folklorists in the nineteenth century. Despite the obscurity surrounding the origins of chivalric romances, *chansons de geste*, and *fabliaux*, it seems that a good deal of medieval literature drew on popular oral tradition, rather than vice versa. "Sleeping Beauty" appeared in an Arthurian romance of the fourteenth century, and "Cinderella" surfaced in Noel du Fail's *Propos rustiques* of 1547, a book that traced the tales to peasant lore and that showed how they were transmitted; for du Fail wrote the first account of an important French institution, the *veillée*, an evening fireside gathering, where men repaired tools and women sewed while listening to stories that would be recorded by folklorists three hundred years later and that were already centuries old.¹¹ Whether they were meant to amuse adults or to frighten children, as in the case of cautionary tales like "Little Red Riding Hood," the stories belonged to a fund of popular culture, which peasants hoarded over the centuries with remarkably little loss.

The great collections of folktales made in the late nineteenth

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and early twentieth centuries therefore provide a rare opportunity to make contact with the illiterate masses who have disappeared into the past without leaving a trace. To reject folktales because they cannot be dated and situated with precision like other historical documents is to turn one's back on one of the few points of entry into the mental world of peasants under the Old Regime. But to attempt to penetrate that world is to face a set of obstacles as daunting as those confronted by Jean de l'Ours (tale type 301) when he tried to rescue the three Spanish princesses from the underworld or by little Parle (tale type 328) when he set out to capture the ogre's treasure.

The greatest obstacle is the impossibility of listening in on the story tellers. No matter how accurate they may be, the recorded versions of the tales cannot convey the effects that must have brought the stories to life in the eighteenth century: the dramatic pauses, the sly glances, the use of gestures to set scenes—a Snow White at a spinning wheel, a Cinderella delousing a stepsister—and the use of sounds to punctuate actions—a knock on the door (often done by rapping on a listener's forehead) or a cudgeling or a fart. All of those devices shaped the meaning of the tales, and all of them elude the historian. He cannot be sure that the limp and lifeless text that he holds between the covers of a book provides an accurate account of the performance that took place in the eighteenth century. He cannot even be certain that the text corresponds to the unrecorded versions that existed a century earlier. Although he may turn up plenty of evidence to prove that the tale itself existed, he cannot quiet his suspicions that it could have changed a great deal before it reached the folklorists of the Third Republic.

Given those uncertainties, it seems unwise to build an interpretation on a single version of a single tale, and more hazardous still to base symbolic analysis on details—riding hoods and hunters—that may not have occurred in the peasant versions. But there are enough recordings of those versions—35 “Little Red Riding Hoods,” 90 “Tom Thumbs,” 105 “Cinderellas”—for one to picture the general outline of a tale as it existed in the oral tradition. One can study it on the level of structure, noting the way the narrative is framed and the motifs are combined, instead of concentrating on fine points of detail. Then one can compare it with

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other stories. And finally, by working through the entire body of French folktales, one can distinguish general characteristics, overarching themes, and pervasive elements of style and tone.¹²

One can also seek aid and comfort from specialists in the study of oral literature. Milman Parry and Albert Lord have shown how folk epics as long as *The Iliad* are passed on faithfully from bard to bard among the illiterate peasants of Yugoslavia. These “singers of tales” do not possess the fabulous powers of memorization sometimes attributed to “primitive” peoples. They do not memorize very much at all. Instead, they combine stock phrases, formulas, and narrative segments in patterns improvised according to the response of their audience. Recordings of the same epic by the same singer demonstrate that each performance is unique. Yet recordings made in 1950 do not differ in essentials from those made in 1934. In each case, the singer proceeds as if he were walking down a well-known path. He may branch off here to take a shortcut or pause there to enjoy a panorama, but he always remains on familiar ground—so familiar, in fact, that he will say that he repeated every step exactly as he has done before. He does not conceive of repetition in the same way as a literate person, for he has no notion of words, lines, and verses. Texts are not rigidly fixed for him as they are for readers of the printed page. He creates his text as he goes, picking new routes through old themes. He can even work in material derived from printed sources, for the epic as a whole is so much greater than the sum of its parts that modifications of detail barely disturb the general configuration.¹³

Lord's investigation confirms conclusions that Vladimir Propp reached by a different mode of analysis, one that showed how variations of detail remain subordinate to stable structures in Russian folktales.¹⁴ Field workers among illiterate peoples in Polynesia, Africa, and North and South America have also found that oral traditions have enormous staying power. Opinions divide on the separate question of whether or not oral sources can provide a reliable account of past events. Robert Lowie, who collected narratives from the Crow Indians in the early twentieth century, took up a position of extreme skepticism: “I cannot attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever.”¹⁵ By historical value, however, Lowie meant factual accura-

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cy. (In 1910 he recorded a Crow account of a battle against the Dakota; in 1931 the same informant described the battle to him, but claimed that it had taken place against the Cheyenne.) Lowie conceded that the stories, taken as stories, remained quite consistent; they forked and branched in the standard patterns of Crow narrative. So his findings actually support the view that in traditional story telling continuities in form and style outweigh variations in detail, among North American Indians as well as Yugoslav peasants.¹⁶ Frank Hamilton Cushing noted a spectacular example of this tendency among the Zuni almost a century ago. In 1886 he served as interpreter to a Zuni delegation in the eastern United States. During a round robin of story telling one evening, he recounted as his contribution the tale of "The Cock and the Mouse," which he had picked up from a book of Italian folktales. About a year later, he was astonished to hear the same tale from one of the Indians back at Zuni. The Italian motifs remained recognizable enough for one to be able to classify the tale in the Aarne-Thompson scheme (it is tale type 2032). But everything else about the story—its frame, figures of speech, allusions, style, and general feel—had become intensely Zuni. Instead of Italianizing the native lore, the story had been Zunified.¹⁷

No doubt the transmission process affects stories differently in different cultures. Some bodies of folklore can resist "contamination" while absorbing new material more effectively than can others. But oral traditions seem to be tenacious and long-lived nearly everywhere among illiterate peoples. Nor do they collapse at their first exposure to the printed word. Despite Jack Goody's contention that a literacy line cuts through all history, dividing oral from "written" or "print" cultures, it seems that traditional tale telling can flourish long after the onset of literacy. To anthropologists and folklorists who have tracked tales through the bush, there is nothing extravagant about the idea that peasant raconteurs in late nineteenth-century France told stories to one another pretty much as their ancestors had done a century or more earlier.¹⁸

Comforting as this expert testimony may be, it does not clear all the difficulties in the way of interpreting the French tales. The texts are accessible enough, for they lie unexploited in treasure houses like the Musée des arts et traditions populaires in Paris and

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in scholarly collections like *Le Conte populaire français* by Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze. But one cannot lift them from such sources and hold them up to inspection as if they were so many photographs of the Old Regime, taken with the innocent eye of an extinct peasantry. They are stories.

As in most kinds of narration, they develop standardized plots from conventional motifs, picked up here, there, and everywhere. They have a distressing lack of specificity for anyone who wants to pin them down to precise points in time and place. Raymond Jameson has studied the case of a Chinese Cinderella from the ninth century. She gets her slippers from a magic fish instead of a fairy godmother and loses one of them at a village fête instead of a royal ball, but she bears an unmistakable resemblance to Perrault's heroine.¹⁹ Folklorists have recognized their tales in Herodotus and Homer, on ancient Egyptian papyruses and Chaldean stone tablets; and they have recorded them all over the world, in Scandinavia and Africa, among Indians on the banks of the Bengal and Indians along the Missouri. The dispersion is so striking that some have come to believe in Ur-stories and a basic Indo-European repertory of myths, legends, and tales. This tendency feeds into the cosmic theories of Frazer and Jung and Lévi-Strauss, but it does not help anyone attempting to penetrate the peasant mentalities of early modern France.

Fortunately, a more down-to-earth tendency in folklore makes it possible to isolate the peculiar characteristics of traditional French tales. *Le Conte populaire français* arranges them according to the Aarne-Thompson classification scheme, which covers all varieties of Indo-European folktales. It therefore provides the basis for comparative study, and the comparisons suggest the way general themes took root and grew in French soil. "Tom Thumb" ("Le Petit Poucet," tale type 327), for example, has a strong French flavor, in Perrault as well as the peasant versions, if one compares it with its German cousin, "Hansel and Gretel." The Grimms' tale emphasizes the mysterious forest and the naïveté of the children in the face of inscrutable evil, and it has more fanciful and poetic touches, as in the details about the bread-and-cake house and the magic birds. The French children confront an ogre, but in a very real house. Monsieur and Madame Ogre discuss their plans for a

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dinner party as if they were any married couple, and they carp at each other just as Tom Thumb's parents did. In fact, it is hard to tell the two couples apart. Both simple-minded wives throw away their family's fortunes; and their husbands berate them in the same manner, except that the ogre tells his wife that she deserves to be eaten and that he would do the job himself if she were not such an unappetizing *vieille bête* (old beast).²⁰ Unlike their German relatives, the French ogres appear in the role of *le bourgeois de la maison* (burgher head of household),²¹ as if they were rich local landowners. They play fiddles, visit friends, snore contentedly in bed beside fat ogress wives;²² and for all their boorishness, they never fail to be good family men and good providers. Hence the joy of the ogre in "Pitchin-Pitchot" as he bounds into the house, a sack on his back: "Catherine, put on the big kettle. I've caught Pitchin-Pitchot."²³

Where the German tales maintain a tone of terror and fantasy, the French strike a note of humor and domesticity. Firebirds settle down into hen yards. Elves, genii, forest spirits, the whole Indo-European panoply of magical beings become reduced in France to two species, ogres and fairies. And those vestigial creatures acquire human foibles and generally let humans solve their problems by their own devices, that is, by cunning and "Cartesianism"—a term that the French apply vulgarly to their propensity for craftiness and intrigue. The Gallic touch is clear in many of the tales that Perrault did not rework for his own Gallicized Mother Goose of 1697: the *panache* of the young blacksmith in "Le Petit Forgeron" (tale type 317), for example, who kills giants on a classic *tour de France*; or the provincialism of the Breton peasant in "Jean Bête" (tale type 675), who is given anything he wishes and asks for *un bon péché de piquette et une écuelle de patates du lait* ("crude wine and a bowl of potatoes in milk"); or the professional jealousy of the master gardener, who fails to prune vines as well as his apprentice in "Jean le Teigneux" (tale type 314); or the cleverness of the devil's daughter in "La Belle Eulalie" (tale type 313), who escapes with her lover by leaving two talking pâtés in their beds. Just as one cannot attach the French tales to specific events, one should not dilute them in a timeless universal mythology. They really belong to a middle ground: *la France moderne* or the France that existed from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century.

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That time span may look distressingly vague to anyone who expects history to be precise. But precision may be inappropriate as well as impossible in the history of *mentalités*, a genre that requires different methods from those used in conventional genres, like political history. World views can not be chronicled in the manner of political events, but they are no less “real.” Politics could not take place without the preliminary mental ordering that goes into the common-sense notion of the real world. Common sense itself is a social construction of reality, which varies from culture to culture. Far from being the arbitrary figment of some collective imagination, it expresses the common basis of experience in a given social order. To reconstruct the way peasants saw the world under the Old Regime, therefore, one should begin by asking what they had in common, what experiences they shared in the everyday life of their villages.

Thanks to several generations of research by social historians, that question can be answered. The answer must be hedged with qualifications and restricted to a high level of generalization because conditions varied so much in the kingdom, which remained a patchwork of regions rather than a unified nation until the Revolution and perhaps even well into the nineteenth century. Pierre Goubert, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Pierre Saint-Jacob, Paul Bois, and many others have uncovered the particularities of peasant life region by region and have explicated them monograph by monograph. The density of monographs can make French social history look like a conspiracy of exceptions trying to disprove rules. Yet here, too, there exists a danger of misplaced professionalism; for if one stands at a safe enough distance from the details, a general picture begins to emerge. In fact, it has already reached the stage of assimilation in textbooks like *Histoire économique et sociale de la France* (Paris, 1970) and syntheses like *Histoire de la France rurale* (Paris, 1975/76). It goes roughly as follows.²⁴

Despite war, plague, and famine, the social order that existed at village level remained remarkably stable during the early modern period in France. The peasants were relatively free—less so than the yeomen who were turning into landless laborers in England, more so than the serfs who were sinking into a kind of slavery east of the Elbe. But they could not escape from a seigneurial system

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that denied them sufficient land to achieve economic independence and that siphoned off whatever surplus they produced. Men labored from dawn to dusk, scratching the soil on scattered strips of land with plows like those of the Romans and hacking at their grain with primitive sickles, in order to leave enough stubble for communal grazing. Women married late—at age twenty-five to twenty-seven—and gave birth to only five or six children, of whom only two or three survived to adulthood. Great masses of people lived in a state of chronic malnutrition, subsisting mainly on porridge made of bread and water with some occasional, home-grown vegetables thrown in. They ate meat only a few times a year, on feast days or after autumn slaughtering if they did not have enough silage to feed the livestock over the winter. They often failed to get the two pounds of bread (2,000 calories) a day that they needed to keep up their health, and so they had little protection against the combined effects of grain shortage and disease. The population fluctuated between fifteen and twenty million, expanding to the limits of its productive capacity (an average density of forty souls per square kilometer, an average annual rate of forty births per thousand inhabitants), only to be devastated by demographic crises. For four centuries—from the first ravages of the Black Death in 1347 to the first great leap in population and productivity in the 1730s—French society remained trapped in rigid institutions and Malthusian conditions. It went through a period of stagnation, which Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have described as *l'histoire immobile* (unmoving history).²⁵

That phrase now seems exaggerated, for it hardly does justice to the religious conflict, grain riots, and rebellions against the extension of state power that disrupted the late medieval pattern of village life. But when first used in the 1950s, the notion of immobile history—a history of structural continuity over a long time span, *la longue durée*—served as a corrective to the tendency to see history as a succession of political events. Event history, *histoire événementielle*, generally took place over the heads of the peasantry, in the remote world of Paris and Versailles. While ministers came and went and battles raged, life in the village continued unperturbed, much as it had always been since times beyond the reach of memory.

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History looked “immobile” at the village level, because seigneurialism and the subsistence economy kept villagers bent over the soil, and primitive techniques of farming gave them no opportunity to unbend. Grain yields remained at a ratio of about 5-to-1, a primitive return in contrast to modern farming, which produces fifteen or even thirty grains for every seed planted. Farmers could not raise enough grain to feed large numbers of animals, and they did not have enough livestock to produce the manure to fertilize the fields to increase the yield. This vicious circle kept them enclosed within a system of triennial or biennial crop rotation, which left a huge proportion of their land lying fallow. They could not convert the fallow to the cultivation of crops like clover, which return nitrogen to the soil, because they lived too close to penury to risk the experiment, aside from the fact that no one had any notion of nitrogen. Collective methods of cultivation also reduced the margin for experimentation. Except in a few regions with enclosures, like the *bocage* district of the west, peasants farmed scattered strips in open fields. They sowed and harvested collectively, so that common gleaning and common grazing could take place. They depended on common lands and forests beyond the fields for pasture, firewood, and chestnuts or berries. The only area where they could attempt to get ahead by individual initiative was the *basse-cour* or backyard attached to their household plots, or *manses*. Here they struggled to build up manure heaps, to raise flax for spinning, to produce vegetables and chickens for their home brews and local markets.

The backyard garden often provided the margin of survival for families that lacked the twenty, thirty, or forty acres that were necessary for economic independence. They needed so much land because so much of their harvest was drained from them by seigneurial dues, tithes, ground rents, and taxes. In most of central and northern France, the wealthier peasants rigged the collection of the main royal tax, the *taille*, in accordance with an old French principle: soak the poor. So tax collecting opened up fissures within the village, and indebtedness compounded the damage. The poorer peasants frequently borrowed from the rich—that is, the few relatively wealthy *coqs du village* (cocks of the walk), who owned enough land to sell surplus grain on the market, to build up

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herds, and to hire the poor as laborers. Debt peonage may have made the wealthy peasants hated as much as the seigneur and the ecclesiastical *décimateur* (tithe collector). Hatred, jealousy, and conflicts of interest ran through peasant society. The village was no happy and harmonious *Gemeinschaft*.

For most peasants village life was a struggle for survival, and survival meant keeping above the line that divided the poor from the indigent. The poverty line varied from place to place, according to the amount of land necessary to pay taxes, tithes, and seigneurial dues; to put aside enough grain for planting next year; and to feed the family. In times of scarcity, poor families had to buy their food. They suffered as consumers, while prices shot up and the wealthier peasants made a killing. So a succession of bad harvests could polarize the village, driving the marginal families into indigence as the rich got richer. In the face of such difficulties, the "little people" (*petites gens*) survived by their wits. They hired themselves out as farm hands, spun and wove cloth in their cottages, did odd jobs, and took to the road, picking up work wherever they could find it.

Many of them went under. Then they took to the road for good, drifting about with the flotsam and jetsam of France's *population flottante* ("floating population"), which included several million desperate souls by the 1780s. Except for the happy few on an artisanal *tour de France* and the occasional troupes of actors and mountebanks, life on the road meant ceaseless scavenging for food. The drifters raided chicken coops, milked untended cows, stole laundry drying on hedges, snipped off horses' tails (good for selling to upholsterers), and lacerated and disguised their bodies in order to pass as invalids wherever alms were being given out. They joined and deserted regiment after regiment and served as false recruits. They became smugglers, highwaymen, pickpockets, prostitutes. And in the end they surrendered in *hôpitaux*, pestilential poor houses, or else crawled under a bush or a hay loft and died—*croquants* who had "croaked."²⁶

Death came just as inexorably to families that remained in their villages and kept above the poverty line. As Pierre Goubert, Louis Henry, Jacques Dupâquier, and other historical demographers have shown, life was an inexorable struggle against death everywhere in

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early modern France. In Crulai, Normandy, 236 of every 1,000 babies died before their first birthdays during the seventeenth century, as opposed to twenty today. About 45 per cent of the Frenchmen born in the eighteenth century died before the age of ten. Few of the survivors reached adulthood before the death of at least one of their parents. And few parents reached the end of their procreative years, because death interrupted them. Terminated by death, not divorce, marriages lasted an average of fifteen years, half as long as they do in France today. In Crulai, one in five husbands lost his wife and then remarried. Stepmothers proliferated everywhere—far more so than stepfathers, as the remarriage rate among widows was one in ten. Stepchildren may not have been treated like Cinderella, but relations between siblings probably were harsh. A new child often meant the difference between poverty and indigence. Even if it did not overtax the family's larder, it could bring penury down upon the next generation by swelling the number of claimants when the parents' land was divided among their heirs.²⁷

Whenever the population expanded, landholding fragmented and pauperization set in. Primogeniture slowed the process in some areas, but the best defense everywhere was delayed marriage, a tendency that must have taken its toll in the emotional life of the family. The peasants of the Old Regime, unlike those in contemporary India, generally did not marry until they could occupy a cottage, and they rarely had children out of wedlock or after they reached their forties. In Port-en-Bessin, for example, women married at twenty-seven and stopped bearing children at forty on the average. Demographers have found no evidence of birth control or widespread illegitimacy before the late eighteenth century. Early modern man did not understand life in a way that enabled him to control it. Early modern woman could not conceive of mastering nature, so she conceived as God willed it—and as Thumbkin's mother did in "Le Petit Poucet." But late marriage, a short period of fertility, and long stretches of breast-feeding, which reduces the likelihood of conception, limited the size of her family. The harshest and most effective limit was imposed by death, her own and those of her babies during childbirth and infancy. Stillborn children, called *chrissons*, were sometimes buried casually, in anonymous collective graves. Infants were sometimes smothered by their

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