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# CONTINUUM

Edited by Dick Teresi

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## MOTHER LOVE

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Each week I collapsed on my shrink's ratty couch, fastened my eyes to a splashy, purplish wall print of Martin Buber, and talked about Mom. "She tied my hair back in braids while other kids had perms," I said, my eyes welling with tears. "She eavesdropped on my phone calls. And she hated all my friends."

The prognosis was bleak. My mother's inability to love, the shrink said, had left me narcissistic and nihilistic, helplessly stuck in the first dismal stages of the Oedipus complex. I'd need years on the couch to recover.

I'd just set aside \$10,000 to pay for my cure when I met Elizabeth Badinter, a soft-spoken French philosopher who made me feel better for a lot less money. Maternal instinct, she told me, simply did not exist. Mother love was not innate, immutable, and biologically determined, but merely a sentiment, one that varied from individual to individual, depending on the mores of the time. And I, the child of a critical mother, was not a *tabula rasa*. I was born with a unique character, and, though my mother may have hurt me, she couldn't warp me beyond repair.

Badinter, author of the new book *Mother Love*, started forming her theories a decade ago, during walks through the streets of Paris with her three small children. Watching other young mothers, she realized that "many of them were angry, not happy at all." Given accepted notions of effusive maternal love, she puzzled over the dissatisfaction of these women. Was their behavior horribly aberrant, she asked herself, a new and dangerous force in French society? The answer she finally came to was an unequivocal no: Many of the women seemed to be normal, relatively well-balanced people who just did not like their children.

It was in the late Seventies, while teaching a class on the history of the family at the Ecole de Polytechnique, in Paris, that Badinter began to research the issue in depth. Delving into eighteenth-century police records for course information, she discovered a staggering chronicle of maternal neglect. Out of 21,000 infants born in Paris in 1780, fewer than 2,000 were cared for by their mothers or live-in wet nurses. The 19,000 others were shipped to the countryside in the care of poverty-stricken young women, hired with little regard for their character or health.

Poor mothers, Badinter learned, had no choice: By sending their infants away for a minimal fee, they were able to take

desperately needed jobs. But richer women relieved themselves of children simply to have time for socializing and fun. Rich or poor, the banished babies were fed meager diets of wine-soaked bread and mashed chestnuts, and more than half of them died.

Then, during a single generation at the end of the century, everything changed. Infant mortality had reached such high levels that the French feared they wouldn't have enough soldiers to fight a future war, and frantic officials, led by Jean Jacques Rousseau, set out to improve children's chances of survival. In hundreds of speeches and books, they told women it was *natural* to keep children home for breast feeding and care.

Motherhood slowly became a consuming occupation for Frenchwomen, one that left them little time for anything else. By the 1800s they had chief responsibility for a child's moral upbringing and education. Then, in the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud imposed even higher demands on mothers. They were, he said, responsible for their children's lifelong happiness or unhappiness. A natural mother saw her child through every phase of its development, Freud explained, sacrificing other goals and desires to ensure the child sufficient love. Women who neglected their children, however, were unnatural; sick and sadistic, they created monsters, emotionally crippled for life.

Today's mothers are routinely saddled with impossible responsibility, then forced to wallow in bottomless guilt. But Badinter thinks "experts" who inspire such guilt are the *real* criminals. Though some women like being mothers, she says, some don't, and neither tendency is more "natural" than the other.

Furthermore, Badinter says, if mother love were essential to one's psychological health, psychosis would have waxed and waned with the centuries. But instead, the neglected infants of 200 years ago emerged no more psychologically scarred than the scrupulously loved children of today. As an example, Badinter describes the fate of eighteenth-century statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, who acquired his clubfoot as a baby, when a nurse allowed him to fall from a chest of drawers. Talleyrand barely saw his parents for the first four years of his life, yet grew up to possess one of the most rational minds in history.

As for the sessions with my shrink, Badinter has persuaded me to abandon them. I've decided to save the cash and get a good leather couch for my den. — PAMELA WEINTRAUB