

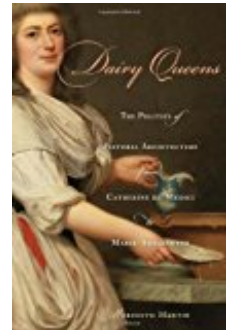
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The Bombshell

Got Milk? The Gender Politics of Pleasure Dairies

France was on the verge of Revolution, the ill-famed extravagances of Marie-Antoinette having poisoned the populace against her and the entire regime. Pornographic circulars featuring the Austrian-born Queen were rife in the streets of Paris as was an engraving entitled “La France Malade” (“France Is Sick”) representing a female allegory of France being bled while Marie-Antoinette, known as “Madame Déficit,” greedily grasps out for her blood. Louis XVI’s reign was in degenerative free fall. Something had to be done. The solution: the construction of a magnificent new pleasure dairy -- a faux-rustic garden building where elite women gathered to consume milk products made on the premises by servants. It was called the “Queen’s Dairy,” built at Rambouillet, a rural royal property near the palace at Versailles. Its intended message was that the monarchy was intent on a policy of regeneration and reform.



Of course, in the end, the Queen’s Dairy couldn’t save the Ancien Régime, even if milk and the pleasure dairy were, by the mid-1780s, as Meredith Martin argues in her brilliant and gorgeous new book, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de’ Medici to Marie-Antoinette*, embodiments of healthfulness. Moreover, the pleasure dairy symbolized female moral rectitude and was a locus of the domestic feminine virtues of fertility, nurturing, and maternity.

It couldn’t have helped matters much that the Queen’s Dairy was lavishly decorated and included a sixty-five-piece Sèvres porcelain service featuring “the breast cup,” a breast-shaped cup based on the ancient Greek mastos used for Dionysian drinking rituals. With no handles, the flesh-colored cup, culminating in a pert pink nipple, rested on a tripod base. To drink from it, the vessel was cradled in one’s palms, adding to the “reality effect.” An enduring rumor (disproved by Martin) is that the model for the porcelain cups was molded from Marie-Antoinette’s own breasts.

The association between the fertile female body and the pastoral life, still prevalent today, was famously encapsulated by the early modern French statesman the Duc de Sully: “Tilling the land and tending the flock are the two breasts from which France is fed.” Two centuries before

Marie-Antoinette's reign, another foreign-born French Queen, Catherine de' Medici, found her popularity waning due to her inability to produce an heir. So she built France's first pleasure dairy at Fontainebleau, "initiating an architectural language of female political agency that would resonate for centuries."

With abundant political finesse and savvy, Catherine de' Medici created in the pleasure dairy a space of feminine authority and self-governance by understanding a fundamental tenet of women who achieve powerful political positions and want to stay there: she must express her influence in "socially acceptable and virtuous rather than mercenary or threatening ways." In other words, she must subvert her worst enemy -- misogyny -- by donning an armor of feminized passivity and domestic virtue. Think Hillary Clinton baking chocolate chip cookies and Michele Obama growing a vegetable garden on the White House lawn.

Catherine de' Medici eventually had three sons, each of whom became king, and she played a key role in all their reigns. She built many more pleasure dairies, pastoral refuges for elite and aristocratic women, projecting "Arcadian prosperity, maternal care, and the natural right of rule." Pleasure dairies became an "assertion of power enveloped in the language of retreat," where women could identify with Cybele, Artemisia, and Isis but could also freely perform or resist images of idealized femininity.

Over the following centuries, pleasure dairies would flourish, the most elaborate built by significant political and cultural women including Madame de Montespan, Madame de Pompadour, the Duchess de Bourgogne, and Marie-Antoinette. These buildings, often on the fringes of royal gardens and country estates, were sanctioned as therapeutic health retreats but also used as an escape from the oppressive demands of court where women could enjoy complete command of their minds and bodies. (Not unlike today's yoga retreat.)

"Great men" such as Louis XIV, Louis XVI, and Napoleon usurped the political benefits of the pleasure dairy's prelapsarian agricultural values by building their own versions whenever their power got wobbly, resorting to the radical belief that whoever owns the female body rules the world. Louis XIV subsumed the feminine traits of the pleasure dairy into masculine dominance, using the womblike space "to transform the red blood of war into the white milk of peace."

In the 18th century, a pastoral genre in art and literature grew up around depictions of the pleasure dairy, most notoriously in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Rousseau led a public campaign encouraging aristocratic women to return to their country estates and pleasure dairies "to cleanse themselves of the impurities and wanton values of the city... by breast-feeding their children themselves." The campaign claimed that physical and moral inclinations were passed on to children through breast milk. Promoting the male fantasy of "good" femininity, it urged women to "save themselves, their children, and 'La France' by abandoning their harmful ways and adopting the virtues of maternity and domesticity."

Plus ça change... Today, constant breast-is-best newspaper articles based on "scientific studies" not only tout the benefits of breastmilk to mother and child, but insinuate the overall

degradation of any woman who fails to breast-feed, thereby imposing severe mental, physical, and moral disadvantages on her child. The argument has become wondrously perversified lately -- and worthy of Marie-Antoinette -- by recent reports of the health-obsessed buying pumped breast milk at exorbitant prices over the Internet to eat with their morning cereal.

Until now, little has been written about the pleasure dairy and this is certainly the first I've heard of it. An explanation for its disappearance from our cultural history and consciousness is that almost all of the actual buildings no longer exist. But the pleasure dairy's gender coding and associations with female exclusivity and power is likely another reason. It is a testament to Meredith Martin's talent as both writer and scholar that the pleasure dairy has now become so vivid in my imagination, a part of our political and cultural history, that I feel as if I have always known about the phenomenon, Martin's book serving as an exquisite reminder.