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Saint-Cyr: a “Useful” School for Girls?

“La Maison de St Cyr est un établissement national, qui par l’objet de sa fondation mérite considération puisqu’il est un moyen de récompenser les enfants des parents qui ont bien mérité de la patrie; l’organisation de cette Maison est un chef d’oeuvre dans son genre, les institutrices réunissent à la vertu la plus pure et à la plus grande modestie, tous les talents utiles et d’agrément, elles seules ignorent leur mérite; l’éducation y est aussi variée et aussi complète qu’on peut le désirer pour des mères de famille dans quelque position qu’elles se trouvent, tout y retrace l’ordre l’union l’égalité et la fraternité, la simplicité et l’économie en sont le piédestal: tels sont les titres de cet intéressant établissement dégagé de son ancienne prérogative de noblesse.”¹

It was in these terms that, on December the 5th 1792, the intendant of Saint-Cyr, citizen Astruc, began the conclusion of his report for the National Convention’s Committee on state education.² He had to convince French deputies that this house of education, founded in 1686 by Louis XIV for girls of disadvantaged nobility, needed to be preserved.

At the end of the year 1792, that is to say a few months after the fall of the French monarchy, the situation of the “Ancien regime” schools was precarious.

¹ “The House of St Cyr is a national school, which by the aim of its foundation deserves great consideration since it is a means of rewarding children whose parents deserved well from the fatherland; the organization of this house is a masterpiece of his kind, the teachers join together the purest virtue, the greatest modesty, every useful and agreeable talent and they are the only ones unaware of their merit. Education is there as varied and as complete as one can wish it to form good mothers in every possible social situation; everything talks about order, union, equality and fraternity, simplicity and economy are its pedestal: these are the merits of this interesting establishment freed from its former prerogative of nobility.”

² *Mémoire donné au Ministre de l’intérieur par le citoyen Astruc Intendant de la Maison de St Louis à St Cyr pour satisfaire à la demande du Comité d’instruction publique de la Convention nationale, décembre 1792.* Séquestres révolutionnaires, Archives départementales des Yvelines (from now on: ADY), 3Q80.

Indeed, since 1790, contrary to religious orders which had been removed and whose possessions had been declared national goods, hospitals and schools had been maintained by a decree pronounced by the Constituent Assembly. However, after August the 10th 1792, their situation deteriorated very quickly as a decree voted a short time after decided to abolish every teaching congregation.³ As a consequence, Saint-Cyr was directly threatened to be closed. Some unsuccessful efforts to avoid this were made by the municipal district and departmental authorities, since they worried about the negative consequences of a possible suppression of the house. Indeed the house used to be a local employer and used to maintain good relationships with the authorities born from the Revolution.⁴

In his ten pages report, written at the request of the Home Office Minister, Roland, Astruc, who had been intendant of the house for seventeen years, uses arguments which could catch the attention of deputies. To do this, he uses the vocabulary of his time but also concepts coming from the Enlightenment, as “social utility”, for example.

The aim of this paper is to present, very shortly, this exceptional establishment: it was unique in France, it was completely different from other convents where the girls of the social elite used to be educated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I choose to use the utility prism to study Saint-Cyr, as a conceptual tool, but one has to bear in mind that this term wasn't used by the founders, Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon. I base my work on the intendant's report and first I will wonder if Saint-Cyr was a “national school” or a “royal one”. Then I will present the objectives of this institution, and more particularly its utility as an educational institution since, as Astruc said, Saint-Cyr's goal was to “*récompenser les enfants des parents qui ont bien mérité de la patrie*” and to form good mothers in every possible social situation.

A “National school” or a Royal one?

Even if Astruc uses the adjective “national” when he speaks about Saint-Cyr, it must be underlined that, at the origins, Saint-Cyr was said to be a royal education house.

A school founded by Louis XIV but continued by his successors

The project of Saint-Cyr's foundation was inspired to Louis XIV not only by his confessor, le Père de la Chaise,⁵ but also by his secret wife Françoise d'Aubigné, marquess of Maintenon. She was born in 1635 in a disadvantaged noble family and used to suffer from her neglected education. She also had an experience of teaching because, since 1669 she had been secretly raising, the king and Mada-

³ Dominique JULIA, *Les trois couleurs du tableau noir, la Révolution*, Paris 1981, introduction.

⁴ Théophile LAVALLÉE, *Histoire de la maison royale de Saint-Cyr (1686-1793)*, Paris 1853, chapter XVI.

⁵ François de la Chaise d'Aix, (1624-1709) so called “le Père de La Chaise”, a Jesuit, was Louis XIV's confessor since 1675 to his death.

me de Montespan’s children.⁶ Moreover, she devoted a large part of her personal incomes to the education of poor girls. She began by helping a house held by two nuns of her friends and, after that, chose to settle some noble and commoner’s girls at Rueil, where she wrote her first letters on education. Using the king’s favours, she eventually succeeded in settling her school in Noisy’s castle, in 1684. A few months later, Louis XIV decided to give more importance to her projects and to create a royal house of education.

If the birth of Saint-Cyr was a political act, it was also a foundation guided by religious aims, since young girls and nuns had to pray every day for the souls of the dynasty sovereigns.⁷ They had to do it particularly for Queen Marie-Thérèse who died in 1683, and later for Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon. Besides, this foundation was also an opportunity for Louis XIV to give to the founder of the dynasty, Saint Louis, a new sanctuary. Thus Saint-Cyr is conceived as a place where devotion was expressed not only to Saint-Louis, but also to its royal creator, Louis XIV, and to its bienfaitrice, Madame de Maintenon. Saint-Cyr is also built to be a shelter and a burial for her. As we can see, the foundation of Saint-Cyr has thus nothing to do with the Enlightenment concept of utility.

Louis XIV’s successors never called into question this school and even confirmed its existence.⁸ Nevertheless, their role in the house was less important. For example, even if Louis XV decided to do a lot of works in the house, his visits used to be rare as he appreciated neither this house, nor the education which was delivered there. Queen Marie Leczinska often came to Saint-Cyr, as she was very attached to it and even settled her parents there for a time. However, she failed to convince her husband to choose Saint-Cyr for her daughters, and he eventually preferred Fontevraud. Louis XVI came only a few times to Saint-Cyr, but he contributed to increase the school’s possessions by allowing the attachment of the chapter of Troarn and by saving for the former students places of chanoinesses. His only official visit took place in 1779 with the queen. Marie-Antoinette wasn’t very interested by this school even if, as someone said, she appreciated the company of young girls who came from here.⁹ The centenary of the foundation was celebrated with ostentation,¹⁰ but attracted neither sovereigns nor princes or princesses of the royal family.

⁶ Among them was her favorite one, Louis Auguste, duc du Maine (1670-1736).

⁷ Bruno NEVEU, *Du culte de Saint Louis à la glorification de Louis XIV: la Maison royale de Saint-Cyr*, in: *Journal des savants*, juillet-décembre 1988, pp. 277-290; Philippe COCÂTRE-ZILGIEN – Bruno NEVEU, *Saint-Cyr, institut religieux et fondation royale*, in: *Proceedings of the conference on the 300th anniversary of Saint-Cyr*, *Revue de l’histoire de Versailles et des Yvelines*, t. 74, 1990; Bruno NEVEU, *Saint-Cyr: institut religieux, fondation royale et mémorial dynastique*, in: *Les Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr, maison royale d’éducation 1686-1793*, Paris 1999, pp. 132-147.

⁸ T. LAVALLÉE, *Histoire de la maison royale*, chapter XV and XVI.

⁹ Madame CAMPAN, *Mémoires*, Paris 1988, p. 95.

¹⁰ Abbé J. B. Du SERRE-FIGEON, *Discours pour la fête séculaire de la Maison royale de Saint-Cyr*, 27 juillet 1786, Paris 1786.

Thus the school, relatively well cut from the rest of the world by its religious fence, was entering the revolutionary years protected from the passing of time.

Close to the Sun King

Louis XIV was personally involved in the foundation of Saint-Cyr as we can see in a note he wrote.¹¹ A choice for the place of the school had to be made, and the king wished it to be close to Versailles while Madame de Maintenon wished it to be calm and far from the Court. That's why the village of Saint-Cyr was chosen because it was less than one mile from the palace, just at the border of the park.

In April 1686, Louis XIV bought the domain of Saint-Cyr; but as he wished to ensure solid incomes to this school, he added to the domain's revenues, 50.000 pounds in lands and every incomes of the manse of Saint-Denis' abbey, approximately 114.000 pounds. In order to do this, Louis XIV had to suppress the abbey's title. In the middle of the "*affaire de la regale*", a few years after the *Déclaration des quatre articles* (1682), this secularization of a Church possession was another point of disagreement between Louis XIV and the pope. After this, other incomes were added but only by kings.

The school building was entrusted to Jules-Hardouin Mansart and in eighteen months, everything was finished. The site was a part of a wet zone and as foundations weren't realized, "*l'humidité ruisselait sur les murs épais (...) le froid régnait dans les vastes pièces en dépit des feux de bois allumés dans les grandes cheminées.*"¹²

With the inauguration in August 1686, the most famous period of the royal house history began. Louis XIV and his court often came to the school. Racine wrote his first tragedy for the young ladies, *Esther*, and they played in front of the Court, in 1689; Racine other play, *Athalie*, was interpreted in 1691, in front of a small public, with ordinary clothes, since the house structures were already deeply changed.

Disturbed by quietism, Saint-Cyr found its serenity step by step. It is commonly said that the old king appreciated staying in Saint-Cyr with Madame de Maintenon, Demoiselles, and also with Adélaïde de Savoie, duchesse de Bourgogne. She had the same age than young ladies and liked to wear their dress and take part in their activities.

At the end of August 1715, the King died. Madame de Maintenon took refuge in Saint-Cyr. She found peace here during the last four years of her life.

¹¹ ADY D.93, published in Arnaud RAMIÈRE de FORTANIER, *Les Yvelines et leurs archives*, Paris 2003, pp. 72-73.

¹² "*Moisture streamed down the thick walls (...), cold reigned in most parts in spite of wood fires in the large chimneys.*", in: Dr. A. MONERY, *Madame de Maintenon infirmière. Documents inédits sur la médecine et le médecins à la Maison royale de Saint-Cyr*, in: *La chronique médicale*, 15 mars 1911.

Visitors were rare: some close friends, such as the duc du Maine, and some celebrities like Peter the Great. She died in August 1719, at eighty-four, and was buried in the hall of the Royal house church.

School structures

Louis XIV didn't want to create a new convent. As he said, he wanted it to be: *“ni un couvent, ni rien qui le sentit, soit par les pratiques extérieures, soit par l'habit, soit par les nombreux offices, soit par la vie, qui devait, selon lui, être active, aisée et commode, sans austérités; il voulait seulement une communauté de filles pieuses et sensées, capables d'élever les demoiselles dans la crainte de Dieu et leur donner l'instruction convenable à leur sexe: à quoi elles s'engageraient par des vœux simples de pauvreté, de chasteté, d'obéissance et par un quatrième d'élever et d'instruire les demoiselles.”*¹³

His will was initially respected: in June 1686, the first Letters patent created a community of thirty six Dames de Saint Louis, assisted by lays.¹⁴ Nuns pronounced simple wishes, were subjected to the authority of Chartres's bishop and didn't wear monastic dress. This house, not closed by a religious fence, wasn't a traditional religious community.

The Court's proximity and frequent visits worried Madame de Maintenon. She wished a radical change in order to preserve this school, to avoid its becoming a branch of Versailles. She feared Saint-Cyr could turn to be a tempting place for courtiers and that girls could become haughty princesses instead of good simple hearts. Thus began Saint-Cyr's reform. The priests of Saint-Lazare became chaplains and confessors. In order to stop the disagreement which opposed Louis XIV to the pope, the King accepted the transformation of the Royal house into a regular community. That's why during the autumn of 1692, the Dames de Saint Louis were linked to the order of Saint Augustin. From the moment they achieved a noviciate, under the direction of the Visitandines, they pronounced solemn wishes.¹⁵ Louis XIV gave in about monastic dress only in 1707.

The reform of Saint-Cyr was ratified by a pontifical decree, in September 1692, and by new Letters patent. The life of the Royal house was now based on modified Constitutions and Settlements¹⁶ which remained alive until the closing in

¹³ *“neither a convent, nor anything like that, either by external practices, or by dress, or by many offices, or by life, which should, according to him, be very active, easy and convenient, without austerities; he wanted only one community of pious and sensible teachers, able to grow up the young ladies in the fear of God and to give them the instruction suitable to their sex: they would commit themselves to such a task by simple wishes of poverty, chastity, obedience and the vow to grow and teach the young ladies.”* in: *Mémoires de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans l'établissement de notre maison depuis sa fondation jusqu'à présent (1686-1739)*, in: *Recueil de pièces et mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Maison royale de Saint-Cyr (1686-1732)*, BNF, Mss. Fr. 11674. chapter VII, pp. 151-152.

¹⁴ *Lettres patentes* de 1686: BNF, Mss.Fr. 23824 and 14029, Mss.Nlle.Acq.Fr. 7489.

¹⁵ The uses are the same in the Ursulines (1612) and the Visitandines (1618) orders.

¹⁶ *Règlements généraux de la Maison royale de Saint Louis*, 1695, BNF, Mss. Fr. 14446.

1793. The number of nuns, Dames and lays was increased and the Dames' places were reserved to the Demoiselles.

"Récompenser les enfants des parents qui ont bien mérité de la patrie"¹⁷

This school had a capacity of two hundred places but not every little French girl was allowed to get a place, as it depended of their family situation.¹⁸

Daughters and parents

Girls must belong to the old disadvantaged nobility, especially the one ruined by the King's army. That is why the sovereign wanted to requite officers for their services by offering them the privilege to raise their daughters with State's means. It was a necessity for Louis XIV to assist the nobility struck by successive wars and anxious about the perspectives of another conflict. The following was continued to justify the existence of such a privilege. We can say that this is really "utility" (as the Enlightenment is going to use it during) in the meaning suggested by the Enlightenment in the following century: indeed reward came from merit. But Saint-Cyr was also linked to another aspect of royal policy as giving privilege was a means to assure the faithfulness of the nobility to the King.

For the girls, admission wasn't contingent upon either merit or capacities but rather upon their families' qualities. The family had to fit with a profile designed by the monarchy: old nobility, poverty and father's military service. These standards were known *id est* by the public because of their diffusion in small books.¹⁹ Only two standards concerned the girls: their age, between seven and twelve, and their physical appearance. They had to be pretty and have a good health: "*Aucune infirmité ni difformité*".²⁰ In one of these books,²¹ a medical visit just after her arrival in Saint-Cyr was even mentioned. Parents knew that it was useless to cheat on the girls' health condition, because if so they would be returned.

The process of selection

It is the same sources which inform us about the process to follow for admission. First, the family sent to Versailles a request to get a place with a certificate of poverty from the bishop of residence and with certificates of military

¹⁷ "a means of rewarding children whose parents deserved well from the fatherland" in: *Mémoire donné au Ministre de l'intérieur par le citoyen Astruc*.

¹⁸ Dominique PICCO, *Les Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr (1686-1793)*, doctorat Pantheon Sorbonne University, under Daniel Roche's supervision, 1999, unpublished, Part one.

¹⁹ For example: *Mémoire des titres qu'il faut que chaque demoiselle nommée par le Roi pour être reçue...*, unknown, BNF, 4-Lk7-8629 et Mss. Fr. 32507; *Instruction de ce qu'il convient de faire pour obtenir une place de Demoiselle dans la Maison de Saint Louis établie à Saint-Cyr*, unknown, BNF 4-Lk7-8626; *Mémoire pour servir aux personnes qui désireront obtenir des places pour des demoiselles*, Paris, 1713, BNF 4-Lk7-8630.

²⁰ "No infirmity nor deformity" in *Instruction*, BNF 4-Lk7-8626.

²¹ *Mémoire*, 1713, BNF 4-Lk7-8630.

service from the father or other male members of the family (these certificates were compulsory only since 1763). All requests were transcribed into a register. Several times during the year, a list was submitted to the king who chose by himself according to the places left by the departures of the eldest pupils and by the pupils' deaths. Based on informations contained in two preserved registers dealing with the years 1711 to 1717,²² we can estimate that a fourth of the requests were satisfied. The selected applications were rather those of orphans, soldiers' daughters, members of large phratries, poor families, demoiselles or Dames' relationships. These sources reveal that some applications were supported by famous people or by parents. The most effective supports came from Dames de Saint Louis and mostly from Madame de Maintenon directly. The family network between pupils, former students and Dames was considerable.

Once a girl was selected, her family had three months to prove her nobility; to do this, the family had to send notarial acts to the King's genealogist justifying the girl's nobility on four generations on the paternal side. This formality was entirely supported by the Royal house.

The recruitment realities

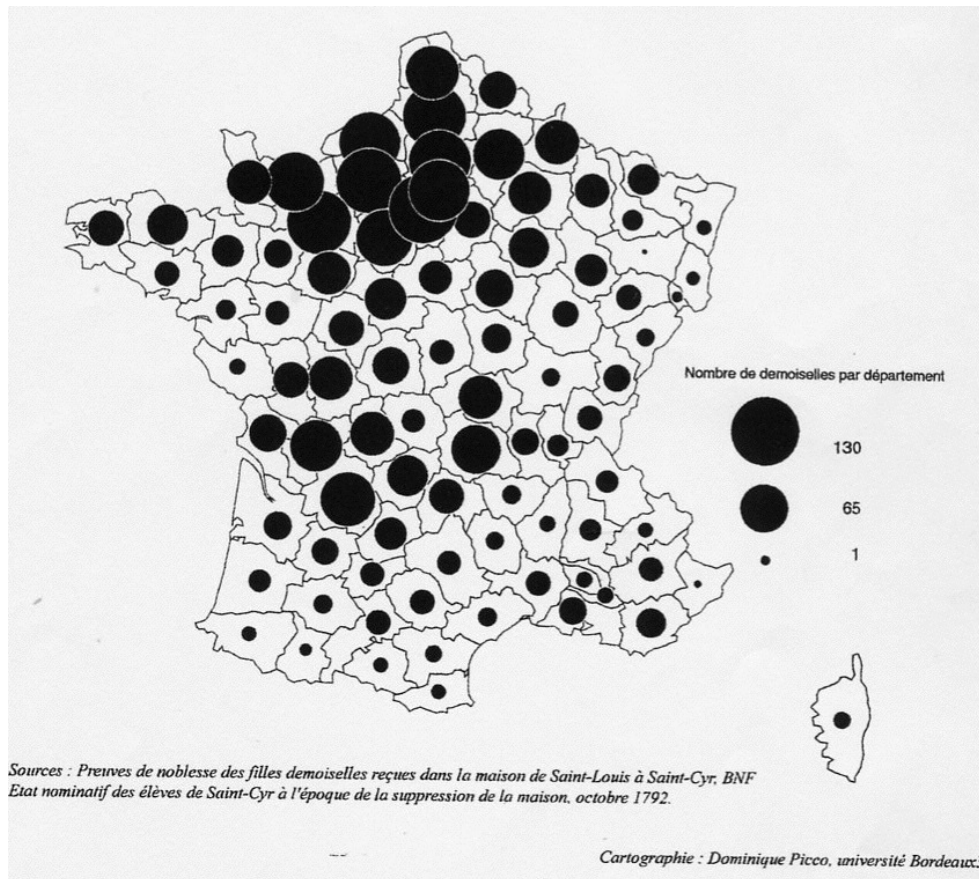
Some registers containing copies of the proofs until 1766 are conserved at the French National Library.²³ After that it is necessary to use other handwritten sources to study the corpus of three thousand one hundred and fifty five pupils. Except for a few of them, the pupils came from the old nobility. It was only necessary to prove four degrees of nobility, but a majority attested more. The king conceded few exemptions for girls with foreign origins and for some recent nobility.²⁴

In the French legislation, the transmission of nobility came from the father, so he was the central figure of the proof. Few of them had titles (7% of the studied files) and most were knights (1/3) or squires (1/2). We know the professional activities of half of them. Most of them were soldiers, a tendency that increased during the eighteenth century. Average officers, captains or lieutenants, were much more numerous than the higher officers; every arm was represented, from the most highly reputed corps to the smallest ones. These families seem then very heterogeneous, and for some of them, their poverty can seriously be questioned.

²² *Livre des Demoiselles qui demandent pour entrer à la Maison Royale de Saint Louis à Saint Cyr, 1711-1716*, Ms. XVIII^e, BNF, Mss.Fr. 11677 and *États des Demoiselles qui demandent pour entrer à Saint-Cyr in Registres des demandes et bons originaux du Roi, du Régent et de divers ministres pour l'admission des Demoiselles depuis octobre 1710 jusqu'au 2 août 1734*, Ms. XVIII^e, BNF Mss.Fr. 11678.

²³ *Preuves de Noblesse des filles demoiselles reçues dans la Maison de Saint Louis, fondée à Saint-Cyr par le Roi au mois de juin de l'an 1686, et formée par les soins et par la conduite de Madame de Maintenon; dressées par Mr Charles [et Louis Pierre] d'Hozier, 1685-1766*, 19 vol., BNF, Ms. fr. 32118-32126.

²⁴ D. PICCO, *Les Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr*, Part two.



Map 1: Geographical origins of the Saint-Cyr Demoiselles (1686-1793)

No doubt that, because of the service in the army, the nobility at Saint-Cyr was not the poor one studied by Jean Meyer and Michel Nassiet in Brittany.²⁵ Its daughters often belonged to younger branches of the noble families, which remained in the provinces and felt poor compared to the eldest branches living at the Court. Some of them affected poverty in order to get in Saint-Cyr: studies on matrimonial alliances teach us that ten percent of the mothers came from rich families. Soldiers and families of humble descent suited to Saint-Cyr's standards.

²⁵ Jean MEYER, *Un problème mal posé: la noblesse pauvre. L'exemple breton au XVII^e siècle*, in: *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 1971, pp. 161-188 and *La noblesse bretonne au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris 1966, [rééd. 1985]; Michel NASSIET, *Noblesse et pauvreté, la petite noblesse en Bretagne, XV^e/XVIII^e siècles*, Rennes 1997, new edition.

From a geographical point of view,²⁶ Saint-Cyr is original because its recruitment came from the whole country. At that time, girls' institutions had a limited recruitment just like colleges – except the riche ones. However, we can see great differences between lands: the region north of the river Loire, especially the north-western Bassin parisien, Normandy and Picardy were more represented than the south. As time went by, the geography of the recrutement changed. From territories close to the Royal house and the center of political power it expanded to the whole France, including outlying areas and borders. A small group of girls (less than 3%) was born out of Metropolitan France, in territorial enclaves, colonies or foreign countries. Nobilities coming from annexed territories (Lorraine and Corsica) sent very soon their daughters to Saint-Cyr and it may have been a means to show their fidelity to the French king and to integrate as soon as possible the French nobility.

Shaping good Mothers?

Teaching organization²⁷

The pupils stayed more than ten years at Saint-Cyr without going back to their family as holidays didn't exist at all. They could have some visits from their parents four times a year, only in a visiting room and with nuns's presence. Family letters were opened and read. Cutting young ladies from their families and from the world for a long time was part of the basic principles of Saint-Cyr education.

Girls were divided into four classes depending on their age and wore different colors: red clothes from 7 to 10 years old, green ones from 11 to 14, yellows one between 15 and 16 and blue ones up to twenty. Each class was associated to a classroom with its library and dormitory. Each class, that is to say, about fifty young girls, was divided into bands of ten, depending on age, maturity and aptitudes. The band, gathered around one table and one chief, formed the basic teaching unit, identified by its own activities and rules and which was organised to grow children responsible. Each class was placed under the authority of a first mistress, helped by assistant mistresses. These teachers were always looking after children. A girl should not be left alone, neither in classroom, nor church, nor refectory, nor dormitory. But it didn't mean that there was a lack of affection: Dames -house's former students- had to give them some but without preference.

Daily time was rigidly organised, rythmed by piety exercises: getting up at six, prayers, mass, lunch, class, dinner, playtime, class, collation, class, vespers, catechism, supper, playtime, self examination, prayers, bedtime around eight. The

²⁶ D. PICCO, *Les Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr*, Part three and D. PICCO, *Origines géographiques des demoiselles de Saint-Cyr (1686-1793)*, in: Chantal Grell – Arnaud Ramière de Fortanier (eds.), *L'éducation des jeunes filles nobles en Europe XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, Paris 2004, pp. 107-126.

²⁷ Educational plans didn't exist at all, that's why on this topic we have no choice but to use normative texts, Madame de Maintenon's writings and some others contemporary archives.

ordinary days' monotony was broken by some "recreation days": Sundays, liturgical celebrations, vêtements, parents' visits.²⁸

Madame de Maintenon attached great importance to pedagogy and particularly to the necessary adaptation of education to capacities and ages, as she said: "*la manière d'instruire les rouges est différente de celle qui convient aux bleues*".²⁹ In order not to bother children, it was necessary, as she said, to "*diversifier leurs instructions, [à] les faire courtes, parce qu'elles sont fréquentes et, même [à] les égayer souvent. Il faut se servir de tout jusques dans leurs jeux pour former leur raison*".³⁰ Training must be progressive, as she said "*il faut leur dire peu de choses à la fois, afin qu'elles retiennent plus facilement*",³¹ while teachers should cause emulation. Rewards were good points, ribbons, oranges, pastrie or white gloves.³² Punishment should be an exception, shouldn't endanger health and be proportional to the fault.

Education contents

The first goal of this education, and Astruc paid attention not to reveal it, was to shape "*pieuses et raisonnables*"³³ women. "*[...] ce qu'il faut apprendre aux demoiselles. Premièrement à connaître Dieu et la religion, à l'aimer par-dessus toutes choses. Il faut leur enseigner le catéchisme fort simplement en leur montrant la vérité des mystères et la morale de l'Évangile [...]. Il leur faut inspirer une grande horreur du vice et un grand amour pour la vertu; leur donner tous les bons principes, non seulement des vertus chrétiennes, mais des vertus morales [...]*".³⁴ For Madame de Maintenon, true piety was "*solide, droite et simple*",³⁵ based upon the respect of Christian duties. From the first class onwards, catechism was reinforced by the teaching of sacred history: as Fénelon used to say, it was a mean

²⁸ *Mémoires de Manseau, intendant de la maison royale de Saint-Cyr*, Versailles 1902.

²⁹ "the manner of teaching the reds is different from the blues" in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien sur l'éducation des filles*, Paris 1854, p. 269.

³⁰ "to diversify their educations, and to make them short, because they are frequent and, even should be brightened. To shape their reason, it is necessary to use every methods even in their games" in: *Mémoire de ce qui s'observe dans la royale Maison de Saint Louis [à Saint-Cyr] fondée par Louis XIV*, BNF, Mss. Fr. Nlle. Acq. 10678, pp. 7-8.

³¹ "it is necessary to say only a few things at the same time, so they can remember more easily" in: *Mémoires de Manseau*, p. 281.

³² Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien sur l'éducation* (1710) published in Jean PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France. Madame de Maintenon*, Paris 1981, p. 296.

³³ "pious and reasonable" in Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien sur l'éducation des filles*, p. 317.

³⁴ "[...] What should be taught to these young ladies. First, to know God and religion, to love Him above everything else. It is necessary to teach them an extremely simple catechism, by showing them the truth of the mysteries and the morality of the Gospel [...]. They must be given a great fear of vice and a great love for virtue; they must be given all the good principles, not only Christian virtues, but also moral virtues [...]" in: *Règle, Esprit de l'institut, Constitutions et règlements de la Maison de Saint Louis à Saint-Cyr*. BNF. 8-Lk-7- 8625.

³⁵ "solid, straightforward and simple" in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien sur l'éducation des filles*, p. 23.

to make dogmas simple for children.³⁶ As everywhere else, morality was added. This morality fit pupils' social conditions, noble but poor, and their female nature. Dames taught them "feminine values": piety, virtue and modesty, but also obedience to their father, husband, superiors, and to their nobility. "*Elles sont pauvres et apparemment le seront toujours*"³⁷ as Madame de Maintenon said. This is obviously an explanation for the place given to work, which was regarded as a means to fight idleness and as a need for some of them.

We know rather badly the other taught scholar disciplines because of the lack of study plan. Normative texts are laconic on this point, and even if Madame de Maintenon's writings are plethoric they only inform about theoretical contents. However, some books³⁸ and some maps,³⁹ and a few testimonies can give us an idea of the reality of the teaching.

A school day, as described by the first intendant Manseau, began in the morning after mass by a general reading lesson, after which girls wrote and learnt to calculate with counters. In the afternoon, after playtime, they worked in embroidery, tapestry or linen and, then, mistresses taught them spelling. After collation came other writings, readings and drawing lessons.⁴⁰ In this description, at the end of the seventeenth century, the education content seems to be similar to other girls' convents. However, Madame de Maintenon, wanted, as she said, "*instruction [...] plus étendue [...] que pour une fille de vigneron*",⁴¹ so contents had been adapted to noble women but without falling into too much erudition, which was regarded as a drawback. As she said: "*on n'est point obligé de tout savoir [...] il vaut mieux paraître ignorante que de faire l'habile*".⁴²

A noble woman had to speak "*un bon français*";⁴³ so it was necessary to "*ôter le patois des provinces*"⁴⁴ and "*apprendre à bien prononcer*".⁴⁵ Even if the

³⁶ Dominique PICCO, "Tourner doucement le premier usage de leur raison à connaître Dieu" ou l'instruction religieuse des filles de bonnes maisons dans la France du XVII^e siècle, in: Proceedings of the conference *La religion des élites au XVII^e siècle*, organised by the Centre de recherches sur le XVII^e siècle européen, CAHMC, décembre 2006, Tübingen 2008, pp. 37-52.

³⁷ "they are poor and apparently will always be so" in Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien avec Mme de Berval*, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 146.

³⁸ Concerning the 1686's library see *Inventaire général des meubles trouvés à Saint-Cyr en 1686*. ADY D111, fol. 328 and for the end of the eighteenth century ADY D118 and 119, from 131 to 135.

³⁹ *Cahiers de géographie*, ADY D sup 1 à 261.

⁴⁰ *Mémoires de Manseau*, p. 60.

⁴¹ "a broader education [...] than for a wine grower girl" in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Lettre à Mme de La Vieville*, 1715, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 212.

⁴² "it is not a duty to know about everything [...] it's better to appear ignorant than to pretend to be witty" in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien avec les Dames*, 1699, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 145.

⁴³ "good French" in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Lettre à Mme de La Vieville*, 1715, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 212.

⁴⁴ "to remove her provincial language" in: *Mémoires de Manseau*, p. 60.

priority was the French language, as Fenelon used to highlight, some Latin was considered a necessity and girls had to learn to read it, not in order to study classical authors but to understand church services. Musical studies began with red class, little girls learnt to read scores and to sing, and, when close to fifteen, the most gifted practised an instrument.⁴⁶

Mme de Maintenon saw no objection in overseeing which books were read, as she feared: “ [...] *les romans, parce qu'ils ne parlent que de vices et de passions; [et] il y en a d'autres qui [...] comme, par exemple, l'histoire romaine ou l'histoire universelle, du moins celle des temps fabuleux*”.⁴⁷ However history was considered as essential to a good education of the nobility: “*il est juste de connaître les princes de sa nation, pour ne pas brouiller la suite de nos rois [...] mais tout cela sans règle ni méthode, et seulement pour n'être pas plus ignorants que le commun des honnêtes gens*”.⁴⁸

The content of the libraries reveals that ecclesiastical history (1/3) is less represented than profane history (2/3).⁴⁹ French history books, especially the ones studied in classes (36% of titles), were based on the glorification of the French monarchy. We saw here the political dimension of Saint-Cyr's foundation: pupils were regarded as a tool to transmit ideal and monarchical values.

Geography was taught with maps which decorated classes and with geographical paper books.⁵⁰ The content of these books was not only geographic. For example, in the books concerning Central European states, the variability of borders and of political forms of government was dealing with, which could be regarded as a subtle manner to underline, by comparison, the solidity and perennial dimension of the French monarchy.

⁴⁵ “to teach her to pronounce properly” in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Entretien sur l'éducation* (1716), published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 342.

⁴⁶ Concerning the music in Saint-Cyr, see Anne PIÉJUS, *La musique des demoiselles*, in: *Les Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr, Maison royale d'éducation*, pp. 174-181 and Anne PIÉJUS, *Le théâtre des demoiselles. Tragédie et musique à Saint-Cyr à la fin du Grand Siècle*, Paris 2000.

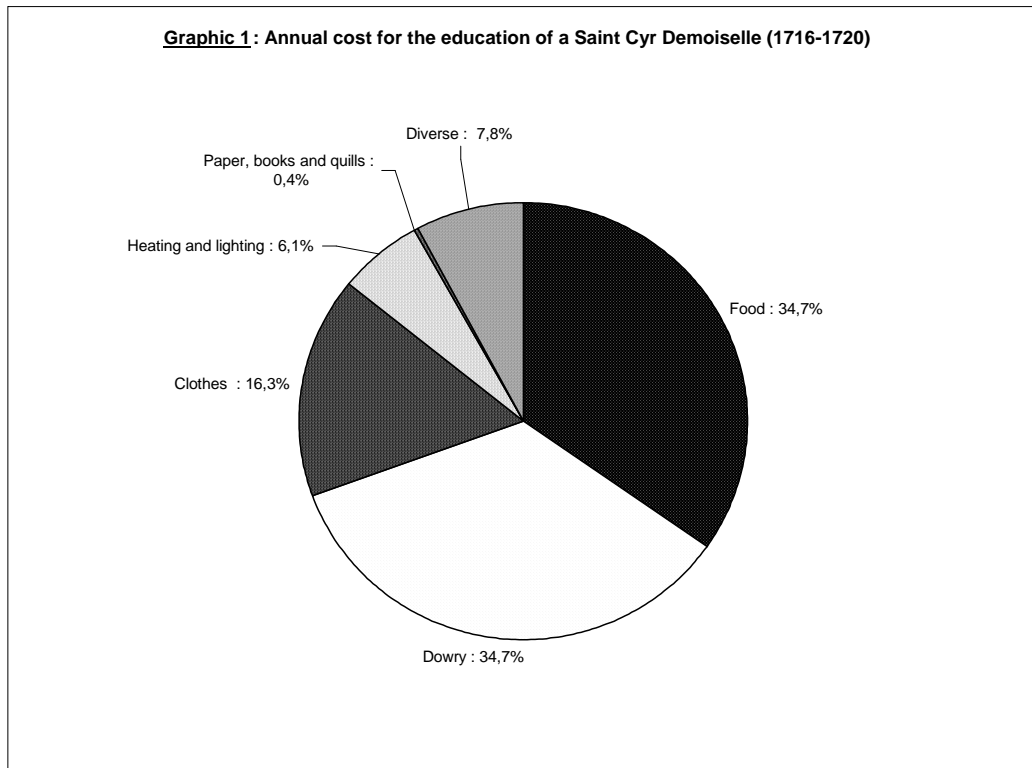
⁴⁷ “novels, since they only deal with vice and passions, and other ones such as, for instance, Roman history or the history of mankind – at least that of legendary times”, in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Instruction*, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 135.

⁴⁸ “it is right to know the princes of our nation, in order not to muddle up the succession of our kings [...] but all this without rule or method, and only not to be more ignorant than the average honest people” in Mme de MAINTENON, *Instruction sur les lectures profanes*, 1696 published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 136. Concerning the teaching of history see Dominique PICCO, *L'histoire pour les demoiselles de Saint-Cyr 1686-1793*, in: *Les femmes et l'écriture de l'histoire, 1400-1800*, Proceedings of the Conference in Rouen, mai 2005. Forthcoming.

⁴⁹ About the libraries, see Hélène JACQUEMIN, *Livres et jeunes filles nobles. L'exemple de la Maison Royale de Saint-Louis de Saint-Cyr (1686-1793)*, Master thesis supervised by Anne-Marie Cocula et Dominique Picco, Université Bordeaux 3, 2005, Angers 2007.

⁵⁰ Dominique PICCO – Karen TAYLOR, *Géographie à l'usage des demoiselles de Saint-Cyr*, in: *Itinéraires spirituels, enjeux matériels en Europe, Mélanges offerts à Philippe Loupès*, Pessac 2005, pp. 149-178.

Besides, the body was not forgotten: it was necessary to preserve health by a good food.⁵¹ Food represented more than thirty percent of the pupil's annual educational cost (700 pounds in 1716/20, according to Daniel Roche's evaluations⁵²). Thus abundance was a reality just like in the majority of religious communities.



A healthy body was regarded first as a clean body, so the rules of hygiene were essential. In the morning, girls made got a wash and did their hair with their comb or their brush; teeth and clothing were inspected at the exit of the dormitory. Before each meal, they had to wash their hands and after the meal, they had to rinse their mouth. Bed and body linen were changed twice a week. What useful habits for the future! A healthy body was also a drawn up body, so it was necessary to teach them “à se tenir de bonne grâce, non par vanité [...], mais pour ne pas tomber dans le ridicule que donne le monde aux filles qui sortent de religion quand

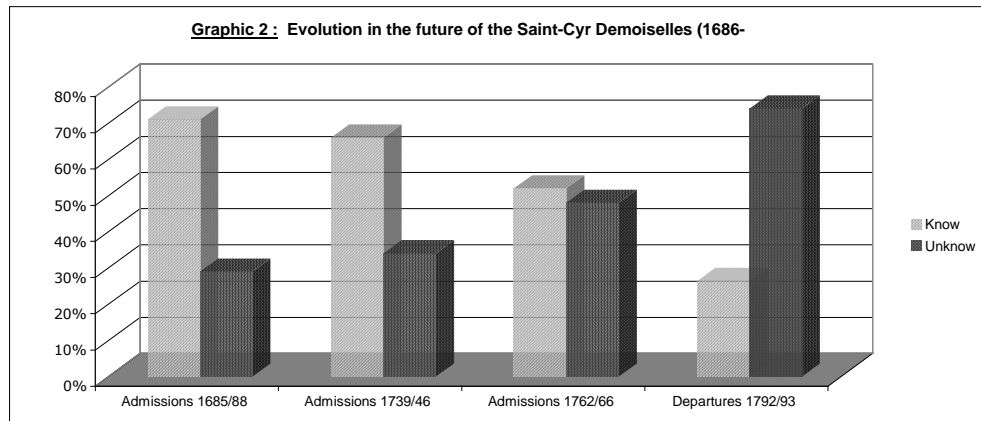
⁵¹ Dominique PICCO, *Vivre et mourir à Saint-Cyr entre 1686 et 1793*, in: Jean-Pierre Bardet – Jean-Noël Luc et alii, *Lorsque l'enfant grandit. Entre dépendance et autonomie*, Paris 2003, pp. 135-156.

⁵² Daniel ROCHE, *Education et société dans la France du 18eme: l'exemple de la Maison royale de Saint-Cyr*, in: *Cahiers d'histoire*, Lyon, tome XXIII, 1978, n. 1, pp. 3-24, quoted in *Les Républicains des Lettres. Gens de culture et Lumières au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris 1988, pp. 350-370.

on les laisse aller au mauvais maintien".⁵³ This implied a corset, changed regularly because, according to Madame de Maintenon: "*songez au tort que vous faites à une fille qui devient bossue par votre faute, et par-là hors d'état de trouver ni mari, ni couvent, ni Dame qui veuillent s'en charger*".⁵⁴ The body raising was also made by the practice of dancing.

Did they become housewives?

According to Astruc's report, Saint-Cyr had to shape family mothers. It was part of Louis XIV's original project: "*L'objet de la fondation n'est pas de multiplier les couvents, qui se multiplient assez d'eux-mêmes mais de donner à l'Etat des femmes bien élevées. Il y a assez de bonnes religieuses et pas assez de bonnes mères de famille. L'éducation perfectionnée à Saint-Cyr produira de grandes vertus, et les grandes vertus, au lieu d'être enfermées dans les cloîtres, devraient servir à sanctifier le monde.*"⁵⁵



Therefore Louis XIV created an annual particular income of sixty thousand pounds in order to give each pupil a dowry of three thousand pounds and this whether they chose marriage or cloister. Madame de Maintenon used to criticize marital status as

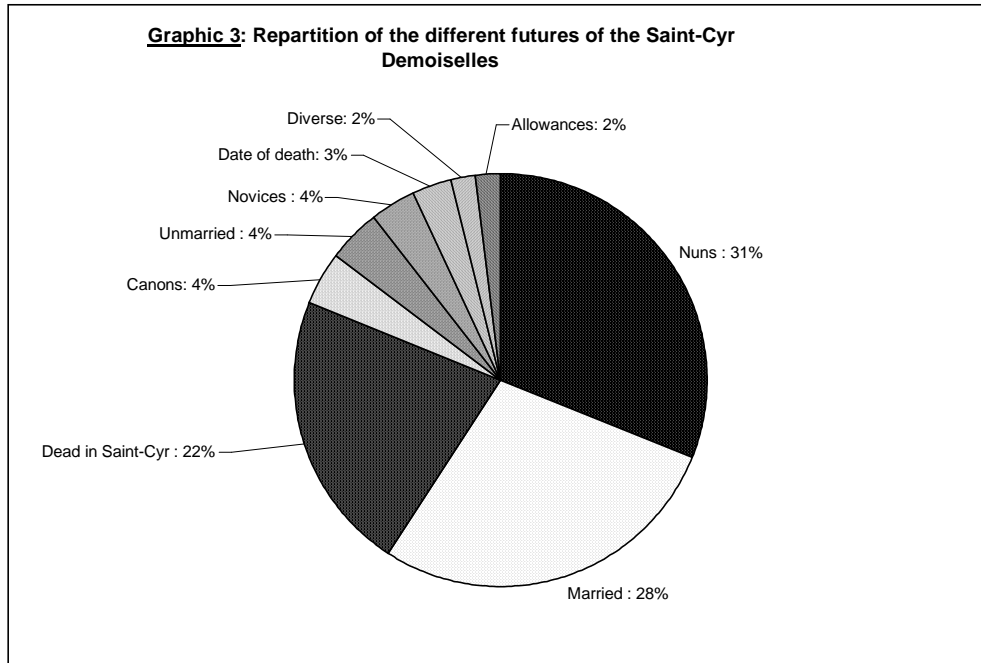
⁵³ "to stand up straight willingly, not by vanity [...], but in order not to fall into the ridiculous habits that the world gives to girls who have quit convent if one lets them fall into bad deportment" in: *Mémoires de Manseau*, p. 282.

⁵⁴ "Think of the wrong you do to a girl who becomes round-shouldered by your fault, and therefore unable to find neither husband, convent, nor Lady who would accept to take care of her." Mme de MAINTENON, *Lettre à Mme de Berval, Maîtresse générale*, 1699, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 146.

⁵⁵ "The aim of the foundation isn't to multiply convents, which multiply enough by themselves but to give to the State well educated women. There are enough good nuns and not enough good housewives. Saint-Cyr improved education is going to produce great virtues and these great virtues, instead of being locked up in cloisters, should be used to the world sanctification." Quoted in T. LAVALLÉE, *Histoire de la maison royale*, p. 40.

well as religious life; that is why she wanted to inform the pupils of the assets and liabilities of each situation, to allow them to choose properly. It was possible to make them "*bonnes religieuses*" or "*bonnes femmes*"⁵⁶ since, as she said, "*une mauvaise religieuse n'est pas plus heureuse qu'une femme mariée.*"⁵⁷

So, what did they really become? According to the sources I used, in particular dowry registers,⁵⁸ the destiny of sixty percent of the demoiselles is known and the informations decrease with time.



The first girls which entered Saint-Cyr are the best known ones. After 1786, the absence of dowry registers and its suppression by the Revolution explain why the last destinies are so badly known.

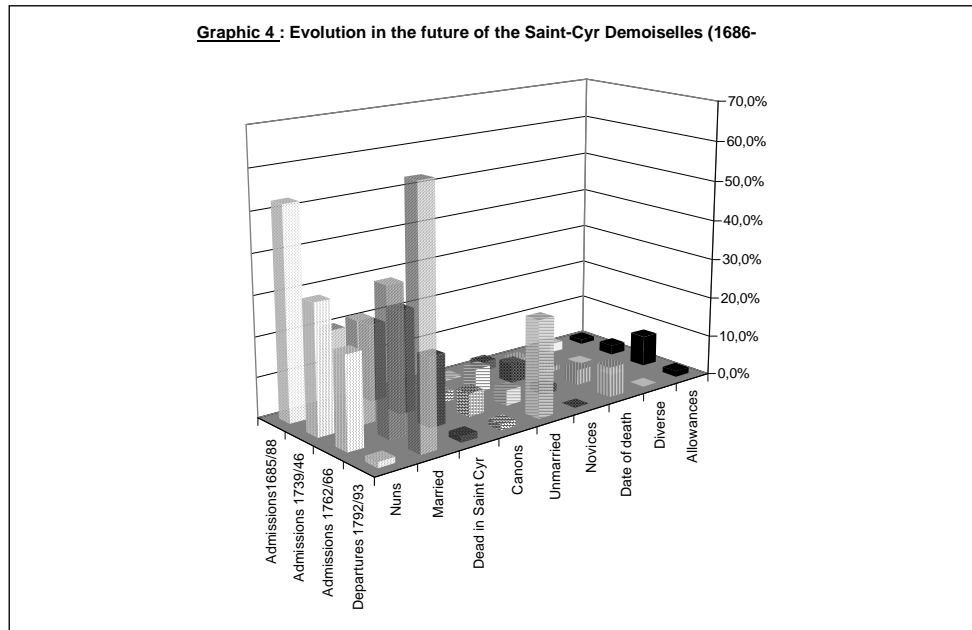
Twenty two percent died during their stay, that is to say about four by year. This strong mortality is explained both by insalubrity and the youth of the girls, which are the two main factors for the diffusion of epidemics. Thirty two percent became nuns: *bénédictines*, *ursulines*, *visitandines*, or *carmelites*. Twenty eight

⁵⁶ "good nuns" or "good women" in: Mme de MAINTENON, *Lettre à Mme de Fontaines*, 1691, published by J. PRÉVOT, *La première institutrice de France*, p. 104.

⁵⁷ "a bad nun is not happier than a married woman" in: *Conversations sur les inconvénients du mariage*, Madame de MAINTENON, *Conseils et instructions aux Demoiselles pour leur conduite dans le monde*, Paris 1857, p. 272.

⁵⁸ *Registres de dotation (1698-1786)*: ADY, D from 177 to 180 and from D183 to 201. See Dominique PICCO, *De Saint-Cyr à la "vie de château" (fin XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)*, in: *Le château au féminin*, Bordeaux 2004, pp. 189-206.

percent got married, that is to say a very small part compared to the founder's objectives. Undoubtedly the dowry was not sufficient enough to attract husbands.



The distribution of future changes during the eighteenth century: the part of married women increases from twenty percent to sixty two percent, whereas the number of nuns crumbled down. During the last period, religious orders didn't exist anymore. Yet, since the middle of the eighteenth century, the number of girls who wanted to be nun had fallen down. Even though it was hidden by a religious fence, Saint-Cyr wasn't cut off from the world.

We don't know much about these weddings. Wedding dates are known in sixty four percent of the cases: the average age of young ladies who married is twenty seven years old. Husbands' ages are more rarely known: they were older than ladies, but this was submitted to evolution. The difference between husbands and wives tended to be reduced. Based on a study of one hundred alliances, it is possible to know the husbands' origins: a quarter came from the same village than the girls, or had the same patronym since they married cousins. Moreover many are unions with another pupil's or a nun's brother, brother-in-law, nephew or cousin. This underlines how important was the families' network. It is clear that the French elites' reproduction was functioning well inside this institution.

For more than one hundred years, more than three thousand Saint-Cyr pupils received a complete education from the State which contained not only traditional teaching (like reading, writing, calculation, needlework, religious and morality lessons) but also original lessons like music, history and geography. But this education was never done with the explicit purpose of femal promotion.

Louis XIV's successors never called into question this school: this testifies of its political, social and religious necessity but also of its "utility" in a century which cared about this new value. Saint-Cyr was useful for families as it discharged them from the girls' education and allowed them to concentrate their efforts on the boys' education.

According to me, Saint-Cyr was also a tool for the monarchical state since several noble generations were influenced by these young girls who became wives, mothers and even teachers of many young boys and girls. Thus they transmitted the educational principles, the social and political values and the fascination for the Sun King that they had learnt during their stay in the Royal house. At last, this has nothing to do with the meaning the Enlightenment used to give to the concept of "social utility".