Masonry’s Gendered Variations before and after 1789

IN THE SUMMER OF 1773, the widowed Claudine-Thérèse Provensal of Lyon made a painful public confession. During her initiation into Martinès de Pasqually’s Ordre des Chevaliers Maçons Élus Coëns de l’Univers, she took full responsibility for the miseries of humankind arising from Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden.1 “People, I have caused your woeful destiny; only in trembling do I dare appear before you,” she intoned before a mixed audience of men and women in the temple. “I declare myself the source of your shackles and your miseries.”2 In so doing, as a woman, she assumed the heavy burden of Original Sin in a gendered ceremony that, despite its Judeo-Christian roots, shared in the origins of civil society in modern France.3

This awful moment was specific to the Martinist rite, the first of its kind in France used to initiate women in the same lodge with men beginning in 1760.4 Only a few years earlier, the Grande Loge de France had barely tolerated the presence of women in separate lodges of their own, much less in mixed company. Although many masonic rituals for women echoed the Genesis story of Adam and Eve—who are reputed to have constituted the very first masonic lodge—the Élus Coëns (chosen priests) singled out womankind for the terrible consequences of Eve’s failure to resist temptation. In this way they kept faith with masonic Martinism, as it came to be known, an eclectic, esoteric form of Christian mysticism based upon the frailty of all humans who endured a profound spiritual privation. Their redemption was possible only by a re-integration or illumination. God’s unitary universe, this order believed, could be attained by channeling a hierarchy of divinities to whom the elite among the Élus had special access. Such was a decidedly religious side to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.5

In Provensal’s initiation, this doctrine also called for defiance, leading the candidate to promise bravely, “I will deliver you by stomping on the Serpent’s head.” From self-abasing confession came forthright action. The subsequent catechism moved the postulant through the stages of her reconciliation that resulted from full initiation into the ritual’s mysteries, a symbolic retribution
for the original source of evil in the world. Not unlike the church’s absolution of sin by apostolic succession derived from Jesus and his disciples, the power of masonry’s collective virtue exonerated every member who pledged to live an upright life according to the stern precepts of the lodge. Otherwise, the “very powerful master” of the temple remarked, Provensal’s demise was imminently: “You can only avoid it by following precisely all the rules that I have prescribed for you.” This strict engagement drew on the examples of biblical figures for the initiate to imitate.

In due time, during an initiation to a higher grade in this order, the neophyte renders to God an invocation, a supplication rather. It was written by Martinès de Pasqually evidently with the assistance of none other than Provensal herself. It reads in part:

You have promised to grant your creature all she would ask of you in your name, but she only wishes to offer you the pure wishes and desires that bring her closer to you. Such are those that my heart presents to you at this moment. Accept them as you accepted them from Judith your faithful servant when she called out your name and implored your help against the enemies of her people. Pour onto me the same grace that you poured onto Miriam, Esther, Elizabeth, and onto those men and women who, since and before the selection of your chosen people, have always invoked your holiness.

Notwithstanding the self-denigration evident in the initiatory ritual, imagine what sense of agency the Élus Coëns women must have felt from the story of Judith in her apocryphal book in Deuteronomy, which recounts the heroine’s single-handed beheading of Holofernes, the Assyrian general eager to destroy the Israelites; or from the prophecies of Miriam in the book of Exodus, sister of Moses and Aaron, one of the seven most important female prophets of ancient Israel, according to the Talmud; or from the influence of Hadassah in the book of Esther, the Jewish queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus; or, again, from the genealogy of Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, mother of John the Baptist, and relation of Mary the mother of Jesus, according to the Gospel of Luke in the Christian Bible. These figures defined vastly expanded roles for Martinist women to complement those defined for men in the same order.

This was the symbolic adumbration of Provensal’s confession and of her commitment to a secret society. Claudine-Thérèse Provensal (1729–1810) was no ordinary mistress Élu(e) Coën. She was the older sister and spiritual adviser of Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, vénérable of the lodge La Parfaite Amitié and founder of the Rectified Scottish Rite of the Strict Observance in Lyon, who
described Provensal as “the support, the exemplar, the consolation for many others,” “full of merit and virtue.” She was also a fount of philosophic inspiration to Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, redactor of the Martinist rite; he frequently addressed her as “maman” (mama), his “dear good mother.” Widely regarded for kindness, generosity, and other-worldliness—characteristics her brother admired and shared—this imposing woman commanded the respect of more than her immediate entourage. She was part of a larger circle of female initiates in the Élus Coëns, among whom were Marguerite Angélique Collas (Martinès de Pasqually’s wife) in Bordeaux, Mlle. de Chevrier and Comtesse de Brancas in Lyon, Comtesse de Lusignan and Marquise de La Croix (perhaps) both in Paris, and Élisabeth Du Bourg-Cavaignes in Toulouse. Others, like Mme. de Coalin elsewhere in France, had also committed themselves to the order’s sect-like regulations. But Provensal was undoubtedly among the best-known participants in the eighteenth century’s mystical masonry.

Provensal’s example provides the historian of freemason women a glimpse of the manifold permutations of gender at work during the early stages of civil society. The masonic lodge and its rites varied in the way they regulated relations between men and women in this influential association, in its share of public space, social networks, and civic morality in France on the eve of the French Revolution. Even in minor masonic orders that initiated women in mixed lodges, besides those that established special lodges of adoption, the men never regarded their female counterparts as full-fledged masons. Sexual difference did not make for equality, only hierarchical complementarity at best, in the minds of these well-meaning brethren. It was the norm in these lodges. But in the magical byways of minor masonic orders, such as the Élus Coëns, the Illuminés d’Avignon and the Haute Maçonnerie Égyptienne, women also played an active role in the sociability offered them, as evidenced by Provensal. By 1789, the revolution would begin to reconfigure these gendered norms in the Old Regime; under the pressure of the tumultuous 1790s and their imperial aftermath, the associational activities of masonic women—and those of many other women like them—would be transposed. By then, however, Provensal and her generation no longer figured in the rapidly changing public status of French women. Only the legacy of their witness remained in a new historical context.

The Eighteenth Century’s Mixed Orders and Adoption Lodges

Historians have discovered that the craft, as a symbolic organization with its own lodges and distinctive rites, began in France in the 1720s after it had
originated in Scotland and appeared in London. Irish lodges in Saint-Germain-en-Laye just to the west of Paris in the 1690s may have anticipated the introduction of masonry across the Channel, but these foreign precursors did not linger. Like them, the first French initiates were men, who soon sought to regularize their activity. They elected grands maîtres (grand masters) to oversee the brethren, in keeping with Marquis de La Tierce’s translation of Anderson’s *Constitutions* in 1733 (and other founding texts), whence the establishment of a Grande Loge by 1738. Though not the first grand maître, Louis de Bourbon-Condé, Comte de Clermont, assumed nominal direction of French masonry’s administration for twenty-eight years (1743–71). But he dodged several serious problems: the police crack-down on irregular masonry, the public revelations of the craft’s mysteries, the wayward independence of the lodges (especially in the provinces), and the pressing interest of women in initiation (stoutly resisted by the brethren).

The masonic conundrum about women was more than a matter of the organizational bylaws banning them and the eighteenth century’s particular aristocratic-haut bourgeois sociability; it was also a matter of social reputation. The mixed company of earlier secret societies and maçonniforme (mason-like) lodges was notorious for its alleged gallant behavior. French masonry’s early recruitment efforts could ill afford such guilt by association. Then in 1771, when Comte de Clermont died, the issue came a head. The Grande Loge de France begrudgingly recognized the schismatic Grand Orient de France (GODF), which decided how best to handle women’s participation. The GODF’s circular of June 1774 authorized separate lodges and rituals exclusively for them by adoption, i.e., under men’s tutelage. With effective safeguards in place, the brethren were no longer tempted by the possibilities of untoward behavior. And so masonry for both sexes, under the GODF’s aegis, expanded dramatically. It would take a whole century before such a broad segment of French society was as fully engaged in a comparable associational innovation (see fig. 1).

This convenient arrangement, however, continued to elicit divided views. The vast majority of male masons still resisted the least intrusion of females even in their own lodges. They gave ample voice to their concerns, which revealed the ideological basis for the male hierarchy in Old Regime freemasonry, despite or perhaps because of the craft’s secrecy about its initiation ceremonies. The main objections, which hardly changed for more than two centuries, were: (i) as daughters, wives, or widows—each of them subject to well-defined social roles and constraints—women are not independent actors in the same way men are; (ii) nothing is sacred, not just masonic secrets, to the congenital indiscr...
women; (3) women’s proclivity to share in French gallantry disrupts the masonic brotherhood predicated, as it is, on personal trust; (4) the standing of men but also of women in society is likely to suffer from all rumors, however ill-founded, about masonic misbehavior; and (5) with women in the lodges, civil and ecclesiastical authorities will impose still more restrictions on the craft. These are familiar allegations, based for the most part on enduring stereotypes of women, which had long been used to maintain their subjection in French society. Masons, in fact, did not need Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s subsequent views on how “woman is made to please and to be subordinated to man” to justify these arguments against masonic adoption as well as against mixed masonry.17 As the influential Chevalier Andrew-Michael de Ramsay stated in 1738 concerning le Sexe in the lodge, “its presence could change insensibly the purity of our principles and behavior.”18

A more detailed statement on masonic women appeared in the anonymous Apologie pour l’ordre des francs-maçons (1744, Apology for the Order of Freemasons) six years later. It deserves some attention. Cast in sympathetic defense of women, this document reworks the contentions mentioned above in more specific terms, identifying the dependent social relations that exclude women a
priori from public space. As the author put it, “Whatever the Creator assigned to Man & to Woman, certain characteristics . . . distinguish them, & . . . fix to each of the two its Vocation.” Aside from all other justifications of male-only masonry, there are two here concerning scandal, in keeping with Ramsay, likely arising from the insecurities of a secret society before establishing a firm reputation as an upright association. But five of the remaining ten points entail the adverse implications of male supremacy:

a. Only men are truly free. “Woman, on the contrary, is subject to & under the Laws of a Husband.”

b. A woman is always restrained in action. “Woman can never answer for her Liberty.”

c. A single woman lives in dependent relations with her parents or her tutor.

d. A woman is not accountable to her truest self. “She cannot answer for her Heart.”

e. A married woman with children is even more circumscribed in her activities outside the home. “She is no longer in a condition to dispose of Herself.”

The remaining concerns, seven through twelve, are framed as rhetorical questions that seem almost irrelevant: Can women in religious orders really be masons? Will not a nonmason father or husband frustrate a woman’s ability to keep masonic secrets? . . . The author here seems to be grasping for additional objections.

In conclusion, the writer notes shrewdly, the exclusion of women “from our Order comes, not from what the Order would deem unworthy of our mysteries, but uniquely from the dependence to which [women] find themselves subject in every way.” It is society that imposes these limitations on women, not scandal or masonry itself. This forthright statement underscores the prevailing concept of gender relations in the eighteenth-century French lodge. In a widely circulated document in the 1740s, first in manuscript then in published form, the author lays bare the assumptions underlying women’s very limited place in public space. It prefigures the emphatic case made by Carole Pateman about the subordination women by the sexual contract.

Yet there were significant variations in the way some lodges responded to these prescriptions. Beginning with the masonic adoption of aristocratic women, including members of the queen’s court, differences in status, wealth, and influence considerably modified the interactions of these initiates with men—and other women—in scores of lodges across the country (see app. 2). The objections described above were raised less forcefully in the most famous Parisian lodges
of adoption—Saint-Jean de la Candeur (established in 1775), Les Neuf Soeurs (1775), and Saint-Jean d’Écosse du Contrat Social (1766, 1774)—arguably the three largest and most exclusive in eighteenth-century France. Their initiates represented the most exclusive social circles.

In La Candeur, at one time or another, could be found Marie-Antoinette herself (though she was never initiated), Princesse de Lamballe, Duchesse de Bourbon, Comtesse de Polignac, Comtesse de Montmort, and Comtesse de Brienne. They were joined in the lodge, almost invariably, by their titled husbands, brothers, or brothers-in-law, in what seems to have been a mixed atelier. Their focus on charity—such as a proposed subscription for the outfitting of a warship during the American war for independence—took precedence over formal rituals of initiation, though during a ten-year period La Candeur did admit fifty-nine women, whose participation was decided by the maçonnes (women masons) themselves and their initiation overseen by the grande maîtresse (grand mistress) alone—in flagrant contravention of the Grand Orient’s rules. The ceremonies were nothing less than grandes fêtes (big celebrations) whose information about guests, initiates, speeches, banquets, and balls was detailed for the public over the course of nearly eight years (1775–83). This lodge was a world apart, its registers a testament to the elite status of the Old Regime’s highest aristocracy amidst an increasingly varied nobility.

In Les Neuf Soeurs appeared a somewhat more circumspect circle led by the mason sans tablier Anne-Catherine de Ligniville d’Autricourt (1722–1800), the lively Mme. Helvétius who regularly opened her home in Auteuil to members of the lodge. Most of them were Enlightenment leaders in philosophy, literature, and art: Nicolas Chamfort, Jacques Delille, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Claude Joseph Vernet, and Jean-Antoine Houdon, among others like Benjamin Franklin and John Paul Jones. In 1775 she joined with the astronomer Jérôme de Lalande to establish a men’s lodge in the memory of her late husband, the philosophe and physiocrat Claude-Adrien Helvétius. Les Neuf Soeurs began initiating women shortly thereafter. The number of them was never large, perhaps fewer than a dozen and with none of the public stature the men enjoyed; but their unorthodox engagement became the object of the governing Grand Orient’s attention, to the muted embarrassment of the lodge’s commitment to adoption.

In November 1778, when Les Neuf Soeurs memorialized Voltaire, who had died the previous May, the solemn ceremony introduced two women into the lodge. One was Voltaire’s niece and companion, Marie-Louise Denis, the other his “adopted” daughter, “Belle et Bonne” Reine-Philiberte Rouph de Varicourt,
Marquise de Villette. Exposing them to the brethren in full regalia was a major masonic indiscretion.\textsuperscript{36} Officials at the Grand Orient were not amused and authorized a new, much smaller meeting space for the lodge. Apart from the public controversies over Voltaire, they were concerned about women’s involvement in the lodge’s activities, primarily the public revelations of masonic secrets and the mixed audience for the readings of scandalous literary works. At Lalande’s insistence for written notification of the decision, the adjudicating chamber relented, even though the following March in Paris’s very public Cirque Royal, there was an embarrassing effort to initiate three young women whose parents objected during the long, badly bungled \textit{tenue} (ceremony). The Grand Orient responded more forcefully this time, but the lodge again escaped censure after agreeing to dissolve itself, only to resume operations two months later. The Grand Orient’s failure to enforce its own rules was a function of its relative weakness vis-à-vis Les Neuf Soeurs; it was also a reflection of the willingness of the men, in particular the vénérable and abbé Edmond Cordier de Saint-Firmin, to defend the lodge’s openness to women members.

The third lodge, Saint-Jean d’Écosse du Contrat Social, previously known as Saint-Lazare, has a comparably complicated story.\textsuperscript{37} It too had a powerful woman champion, the grande maîtresse of its adoption lodge, none other than Princesse de Lamballe, who hosted a number of well-attended gatherings for its members, men and women alike. So renowned was the princesse, her praises were sung effusively by brother Robineau de Beaunoir in his \textit{Hommage maçonnique} [sic] \textit{de la mère-loge écossaise d’adoption} (1781, \textit{Masonic Hommage for the Scottish Mother Lodge of Adoption}): “Venus, Love, the Graces, Cythère, and all that,” remarked one historian snidely.\textsuperscript{38} Her reception as grande maîtresse in February 1781 was accompanied by an elaborate festival far more than worthy of her reluctant willingness to participate. She ostensibly endured the pomp for the sake of her philanthropic intentions. Despite its reputation for indiscriminate mixing of social ranks—fully half of the brethren, for example, were artists, literati, musicians, and composers, and one of the sisters, Marquise de Saint-Huruge, was a former courtesan—Le Contrat Social was decidedly royalist and Catholic, and won begrudging forbearance from the arch conservative abbé Augustin Barruel in his long, polemical account of the French Revolution’s masonic origins.\textsuperscript{39} Dedicated to the established order, the lodge featured enough prominent members of the aristocracy to require proper titles in formal addresses and to permit their servants to assist them during banquets and balls (so much for the masonic principle of brotherly—and sisterly—love). Like most lodges in the Grand Orient, the women in adoption, like affiliated
servants or artists, were rarely mentioned in Le Contrat Social’s register of activities.

Given how visible were the women in these Parisian lodges and given how independently they functioned in cooperation with men, it is hard to imagine why adoption was necessarily secondary to the regular lodges that presumably sponsored them. In the historians Gisèle Hivert-Messeca and Yves Hivert-Messeca’s view, based on their findings on the best documented groups, “adoption [was] . . . a mixed masonic regime given to egalitarian androgyny, disequilibrated complementarity of the sexes, [and] hierarchical mixing.”

The gendering of its sociability was, at least for the privileged elites in Paris, far more polite than were the levelling initiation rites and the extensive commentary, often scathingly critical, of them. One gets another view from the correspondence concerning a lodge in Anjou, near Beaufort, whose grande maîtresse, Louët de Cordaiz, competently administered its affairs, including the recruitment of new masons and the operations of its rite, an extraordinary role for a woman to play.

Adoption practices in the French provinces, and beyond, suggest considerable variation on women’s inclusion, often because they existed far from their watchful loges-mères (sponsoring lodges) and the Grand Orient in Paris. In Bordeaux, for instance, historians have unearthed tantalizing traces of women’s interest in masonry at perhaps the earliest of adoption lodges in France. In 1734, women imitated the bordelaise L’Anglaise for both Irish and French men. The prestige of the brethren was so much at stake, however, that they took steps to stop the women’s experiment, though the women’s curiosity persisted. In 1742, L’Anglaise reprimanded one of its members, Curé de Rions, “for his extraordinary indiscretion . . . of having led women inside the temple.” The curé actually charged the women money for this service. Similarly, in 1746, the men’s lodge decided “in its wisdom to warn the other Lodges of this Orient in order to inform them about the abuses which have slipped into these assemblies of adoption.” Despite the Grande Loge’s best efforts to regulate lodge activities before 1750 everywhere in France, the vogue of women’s masonry continued to spread rapidly outside of Paris.

Especially in ateliers initiating the less socially august, the strictly gendered condition for women generally was mitigated by what the initiates themselves expressed about their masonic experiences. The sisters of two French adoption lodges in particular, La Juste in The Hague and La Concorde in Dijon, asserted agency, freedom, and dignity comparable to what the women in La Candeur enjoyed (thanks to a virtually independent lodge by the authority of the Duchesse
de Bourbon, the Grande Maîtresse des Loges d’Adoption de France under the auspices of the Grand Orient). But as members of prominent families, in addition to those from wealthy bourgeois households and sanctioned royal institutions, these women far from Paris were privileged in their own right, empowering them to pursue broader conversations about a more important place for them in the lodge. Their embrace of reason, equality, and community moved them well beyond the ideals that their brethren envisaged for them, so much so that historians like Margaret Jacob, Janet Burke, and Francesca Vigni insist that these sisters shared “an inclination for emancipation,”95 that they “experienced the Enlightenment,”96 “a uniquely eighteenth-century feminism,”97 however speculative their judgments. All the same, these atypical ideas were impolitic to air so far, so wide, so insistently during the Old Regime.

Like other lodges working degrees elsewhere in Europe—so many in fact that historian Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire speaks of a European masonic network—La Loge de Juste in The Hague left records in French as the language of the educated classes nearly everywhere in the West.98 Much of its masonic practice seems to have been imported from France, since a number of active participants were actors and actresses from the Comédie-Française. Even so, the initiation of men and women into the same grades by the same rite in the same lodge was very unusual in the eighteenth century, even in northern Europe which had a reputation for welcoming masonic women.49 As Jacob states, La Juste “invented its own rituals so that the female and male members might express their equality, ‘fraternity,’ and mutual search for virtue and wisdom.”50 In particular, for the higher grade of architect, one apparently unique to the lodge, “the mystical language of the degree permitted the women and men to become something other than they were, to reach out through gestures and words for an illumination of the spirit that would be individually experienced as well as socially recognized.”51 These notions were remarkable for women to profess in 1751, and they did not endure; no subsequent records exist for La Juste. The lodge seems to have lasted less than a year and never worked the architect degree. In an ironic twist, the atelier may well have been ahead of its time because it was not sufficiently masonic in form and substance to benefit from the craft’s early institutionalization.52

Thirty years later, however, another adoption lodge, La Concorde, provided the forum for a more pronounced challenge to the eighteenth century’s gender norms. In 1782, a soeur compagnonne (journeyman sister), Présidente Fardel de Daix (née Jeanne-Chantal Séguin de la Motte) gave voice to a diplomatic but daring response to women’s subordination in the lodge but also in Old
Regime Dijon. Addressing the other women in attendance, after acknowledging the special favors the male masons had extended by adoption, she stated forthrightly:

Oh, my sisters, let us ensure that we are not condemned solely to the regard that goodness accords to weakness, to the praise that diversion lavishes on frivolity, or that enticement prepares for vanity. . . . In short, let us prove that the charm of peace, that the ties of respect, that the heavenly sentiment of friendship, that the hard work of reason, in a word, that even the challenge of discretion can also be ours.\textsuperscript{33}

A woman is like a man, capable of virtue and deserving of respect like everyone else, however unremarkable such sentiments were among the Lumières. Clearly, the \textit{soeur présidente} (presiding sister) Fardel de Daix was taking aim at masons who found their adoption counterparts unworthy of the craft because of their subjection to men by law and custom. In this way, advancing a claim that the women in La Juste felt disinclined to make in 1751, the sister faced squarely the critique of women’s second-class status in freemasonry, which the anonymous \textit{Apologie pour l’ordre des francs-maçons} had detailed in 1744. How effectively she spoke truth to power on behalf of her sisters cannot be verified, yet as the noble wife of the Conseiller au Parlement de Dijon, Seigneur de Verrey and Daix, she could afford to take risks. In another decade, during the revolution, however, less entitled women affiliated with masonry had more to say.\textsuperscript{54}

In the independent spirit of these adoption lodges—for La Juste anyway, it was envisaged—at least three minor orders also kept their distance from Parisian enforcement of the craft’s constitutions and encouraged women to take charge of their initiations. Martinès de Pasqually (a.k.a. Jacques Delivron Joachin Latour de La Case), prime mover of the Élus Coëns, was certainly not alone in his regard for women’s potential for spiritual enlightenment, whatever his reservations about women’s true vocation. In Bordeaux from 1762 to 1772, he elaborated something of a doctrine. His disciple and secretary, Saint-Martin, drafted a rite for ten degrees—from apprentice to sovereign judge—for the dozen or so working temples in the country before Martinès de Pasqually’s departure for Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). He left behind about a hundred adepts, like Willermoz, to appropriate for their own purposes what they had learned from the theurgist (in Willermoz’s case, it was a variation on the Rectified Masonry from the Strict Observance).\textsuperscript{55}

At least ten women were initiated into Martinès de Pasqually’s order. They, too, embraced this synthesis of Judaic, Christian, and Islamist traditions in
which initiates accessed la Chose (What Matters), i.e., the redemptive capacity of Jesus Christ through the intercession of the divine mediator Sophia, the embodiment of spiritual wisdom.\textsuperscript{56} Martinès de Pasqually’s \textit{Treatise on the Reintegration of Beings}, not published until 1899) pronounced the theoretical basis for much of Provensal’s contemplation, such as when she recalled how her agitations had ceased at “a delightful moment similar to what I tasted . . . upon returning from a communion [for] which God had allowed me to be better prepared some time ago.”\textsuperscript{57} Despite the remotely masonic character of these particular rituals, and despite the short duration of the lodges—most of them closed in the 1770s—the Élus Coëns’s symbolic practices embraced a complementary equality as men and women alike worked through the positive spirits for their redemption. This visionary dynamic was very much Saint-Martin’s handiwork; he framed the rite that the members worked in their mixed lodges together.\textsuperscript{58}

Another mystical masonic order welcoming women on equal footing with men was the Illuminés d’Avignon (1782–96), inspired by another charismatic figure, Antoine-Joseph Pernety (1716–96). Originally a member of the Benedictine Congregation of Saint Maur, Pernety’s penchant for spiritual varieties of masonry arose from his passion for alchemy. This interest he carried with him to Berlin in 1767 when he left the Maurist order to serve as a librarian for Frederick the Great of Prussia. He soon established a heterogeneous circle based on Swedenborgian ideas, the Illuminés de Berlin, some of whose members moved with him in 1782 to Valence where his younger brother lived. Hosted by a generous benefactor in the Château Mont-Thabor at Bédarrides near Avignon, he recruited some actual masons who were also eager for union with the Virgin Mary as Pernety drifted back from theosophy. His death in 1796, in the wake of the Revolution of 1789 and the Holy Office’s censure in 1791, left the Illuminés too fragmented to continue in France much beyond 1800.\textsuperscript{59} Nevertheless, Pernety has long been attributed, incorrectly it turns out, as the source for the chevalier de soleil ritual, the 28th degree in the Rite Écossais Ancien et Accepté (Scottish Rite). This misattribution, however, underscores how much in tune with symbolic masonry the Illuminés d’Avignon were; the lure of pure symbolism would long haunt the craft.\textsuperscript{60} Like the Élus Coëns, given to the philosophical inclinations of Martinès de Pasqually, Saint-Martin, and Willermoz, Pernety’s lodges in Avignon also initiated a small number of women in their own quest for the divine.\textsuperscript{61}

The best known of the minor masonic orders of the eighteenth century was undoubtedly the Haute Maçonnerie Égyptienne, created single-handedly by
the flamboyant Giuseppe Balsamo (1743–95), better known as Alessandro, Comte de Cagliostro (and late in life, Comte de Phénix). This controversial figure was internationally (in)famous for his attention to the sick, to the rich and notable, and to long-deceased people, whose incarnation he claimed at various times to be. The Egyptian Rite, which he created during an interminable itinerary of towns all over Europe, including Strasbourg, Bordeaux, Lyon, and Paris, was based on the masonic belief in the origins of civilization in ancient Egypt. Derived in part from the Strict Observance, the adoption rites for his lodge Isis specifically recognized the spiritual equality of men and women. As the ritual for the apprentice grade states, echoing the feminist François Poulain de la Barre, “a day will come when you will be distinguished not by your sex but by your mind, which must work to raise itself and adopt sentiments appropriate to your new state.” Hence the long list of female aristocrats in Paris who joined this lodge: Comtesse d’Ambrugeac, Comtesse de Brienne, Duchesse de Polignac, Comtesse de Choiseul-Praslin, Comtesse de Genlis, and many other prominent women. Cagliostro’s own wife, Lorenza “Serafina” Feliciani, oversaw the adoption lodge’s initiations, in the same way the Grand Cophté—as the mage (magician) styled himself—did for the men’s. After initiating dozens of women in 1785, this lodge ceased its operations when a lettre de cachet (king’s warrant) cast Cagliostro and his wife into the Bastille for his alleged role in the Diamond Necklace Affair. But one legacy of this type of masonry and many others like it was the women’s claim to a very particular public setting.

**Freemason Women’s Social Networks in the Old Regime**

These exceptional lodges and their orders foreground the selective flexibility of gender relations evident in the craft (and the Old Regime) before 1789. The elite social status of their participants, like the relative independence of provincial lodges and of minor orders, informed the way women and men related in their rites. This was true whether they belonged to a mixed atelier with separate initiations or they worked their degrees in separate lodges. As it is, masonic fellowship provided privileged women a brief respite from their subordination, one otherwise inherent to French cultural prescriptions in the eighteenth century. Freemasonry carved out space for women to develop a sense of their own civic morality. It lay at the heart of an evolving civil society, apart from Habermas’s notion of the (male) public sphere that appeared to define literate opinion in opposition to the absolute monarchy during the Enlightenment. To the extent
that lodges shared in the social capital of personal networks underlying the growing interest of men and women in something bigger than themselves, masonry proved to be an early and, in the eyes of some fearful commentators during the revolution, outsized factor in major changes to French society, culture, and polity. Eighteenth-century women may not have “lived” the Enlightenment to its fullest, as some observers have variously suggested, but a number of them did indeed acquire a role in masonry’s initiation rituals, charitable activities, and associational life.67

How self-conscious were these women of their place in public as well as private life represented by the lodge? This question is difficult to answer, even in light of a growing respect for equality-in-difference during the eighteenth century. But a number of extraordinary individuals left signs of their awareness, if not exactly of feminist aspirations than of their possibilities in public. Subject to further study here, their memoirs, correspondence, and other writings with like-minded men and women, in a web of relationships within and beyond the lodge, indicate an enlarged sense of themselves in relationship with others. As Vicomtesse de Mathan asked rhetorically of her adoption lodge, in keeping with Old Regime sociability and its notion of a civic ethos, “where else does one learn by forgetting oneself to be occupied instead with one’s Brothers?”68 It is important to see more precisely what freemason women made of this apparent shift. Salons, academies, journals, studios, even some political intrigue beckoned them in ways that were consistent with their masonic commitments. This occurred well before the revolution when masonic adoption reached its apogee in France and long afterward in mixed mystical masonry that would wax and wane over the course of the next century.

Hardly typical of all freemason women but well documented is Louise-Marie-Thérèse-Bathilde d’Orléans, Duchesse de Bourbon (1750–1822), the Grand Orient’s first and only Grande Maîtresse de Toutes les Loges d’Adoption en France (1781–83).69 Her commitment to masonry was exemplary. She willingly accepted the prestigious position on behalf of the obedience, delaying her appointment until she had been initiated into the fourth and highest degree at the time, maîtresse parfaite, in order to maintain ritualistic order in the lodge. “I believe myself obliged to set . . . the example of regularity,” she said primly.70 As Jan Snoek describes the ritual, the grade “is about the passage from slavery to liberty,” based upon a summary of the previous three degrees (from apprentice and journeywoman to mistress) and a long catechism in large part about Mary’s husband Joseph.71 What adoption masonry meant to Bourbon is difficult to say, other than to note that she took her responsibilities seriously.72 She is known to
have visited lodges, such as in Bordeaux, during her extensive travels in France. She also remained active in her mother lodge, La Candeur, and its remarkable sisters, with at least one princesse, one duchesse, fifteen comtesses, and ten marquises, as active members (though not everyone was as involved as she was). Some six hundred of France’s aristocracy celebrated her induction in 1781. An accomplished musician, Bourbon was well read, exceptionally generous to the poor and sick, and deeply religious to the point of mysticism. Her trusted guide Saint-Martin warned her in his Ecce homo (1792) that she needed to restrain her visionary proclivities. She even shared them with Suzette Labrousse, who lived with her briefly during the revolution, whose collection of prophetic visions of the revolution Bourbon had printed at her own expense. Clearly, this otherworldly propensity of the grande maîtresse complemented her oversight of the adoption rite.

Much later in life, long after her leadership in masonry ended in 1785, Bourbon engaged in a prolonged correspondence with a young man, Michel Ruffin. In 1797 he had served as her government-appointed escort into Spanish exile. For thirteen years, they expounded upon their religious beliefs, with Bourbon making an earnest effort to convert her interlocutor to a more Catholic faith. It did not take her long to suggest that Ruffin meet Saint-Martin in Paris. “I would wish,” she wrote in the summer of 1800, “that you make the acquaintance of a man who is a fount of natural and spiritual knowledge in the most modest manner possible, who is so kindly disposed to everyone who speaks with him.” She knew this from personal experience after her own quest for consolation when her infant son nearly died in 1774 and then in the wake of a disastrous marriage with Philippe d’Orléans. “It is [Saint-Martin], my dear angel, who will show you the light and will lead you, step by step, past the rationality that you so value.” She recommended a number of Saint-Martin’s books. Although this introduction to mystical masonry did not lead to an initiation—Ruffin only met with Saint-Martin a few times before the oracle died in 1803—it did serve to enfold him into an extensive social network, which Bourbon had marshalled in masonry and which had helped her to cope with the many tragedies of her life.

“Saint-Martin’s writings, as well as our conversations, have affected me for a long time,” Bourbon explained, “while the evils, the prisons, and the trials of every kind weighed on my unhappy existence and drew upon the worst that was in me. This is how it comes to all who have strayed from the direct path that leads to God.” Before the divine as in the lodge, everyone, male or female, was equal.
Lamballe was appointed Superintendante de la Maison de la Reine in 1775, after she had been widowed by her libertine husband who died very young, at age twenty, most likely of venereal disease. The pressing matters of running the queen’s social life may well have been welcome relief from that agonizing experience (during which she herself was infected and nursed her undeserving husband in his dying days). The capable, devoted, and decent Lamballe managed the queen’s affairs until Marie-Antoinette tired of her efficiency and asked Duchesse de Polignac to serve as governess to the queen’s children. Lamballe carried on, true to her pious faith and personal ties, pursuing her longstanding interest in philanthropy and refurbishing the Parisian residence, the Hôtel de Toulouse, of her doting father in-law, Duc de Penthièvre. Eventually Marie-Antoinette realized Lamballe’s value, a realization for which she was rewarded in the princesse’s testament in 1791: “I beseech the Queen to receive a mark of gratitude from one to whom she had given the title of her friend, a precious title that has been the happiness of my life.”

Like other members of the queen’s court, Lamballe was initiated by adoption in La Candeur in February 1777; but unlike most of them, she participated actively in its tenues, once signing herself “Soeur princesse de Lamballe” on the lodge’s register. At La Candeur’s gathering a year later, Lamballe shared in the elaborate festivities to hear the last verse of a song sung by one Soeur Comtesse Descelles:

It is thus that the Goddesses,
Disposing of their Majesty,
Go forth from pure tenderness
To enjoy equality.

Lamballe probably did not consider the members of even this august lodge her equals, with perhaps one exception; they were all initiated into masonry. She longed for a community of sisters, albeit of another sort from the all-female dinner with the queen she is reputed to have hosted at the Hôtel de Toulouse, causing a minor scandal at court. She did not stop there. In January 1781, some five years after she had been initiated in Saint-Jean d’Écosse du Contrat Social, Lamballe was named Grande Maîtresse de Toutes les Loges Écossaises Régulières de France. The elaborate installation ceremony occurred a month later. This responsibility, too, she took seriously in the context of virtually the same social networks as Bourbon. The adoption lodges in the Scottish Rite took Lamballe into the world of side degrees and their complex symbolism, far more than existed in the Grande Loge’s lodges practicing the first suite of degrees. Such was a
portion of Lamballe’s substantial social capital, a combination of the country’s very highest aristocracy and masonry’s fastest growing order on the eve of the French Revolution.

The queen’s court was hardly the only source of masonry’s contribution to an incipient civil society in Old Regime France. Far more representative of the craft’s membership were Mme. Helvétius’s social connections, i.e., if the Enlightenment’s cultural elite can be considered typical. “Minette,” as she was known by close family and friends, honored her husband’s masonic attachments, first to the short-lived lodge Les Sciences, which he jointly founded with Lalande in 1766, and again to the better-known Les Neuf Soeurs, after Helvétius had died. Her husband’s ceremonial apron, for example, was Voltaire’s to wear (and to kiss in his honor) when he was initiated into Les Neuf Soeurs in April 1778; the symbolism was no afterthought, in the same spirit as Helvétius’s gift of a special, posthumous printing of her husband’s long, contemplative poem, *Le Bonheur* (1772, *Happiness*). Copies of the title were distributed to brethren in the new atelier.

In the ensuing years, she regularly and deliberately blurred the line between lodge and salon, such as hosting the Les Neuf Soeurs celebrations of Saint-Jean d’Été at her garden in June 1776 and 1777. She welcomed informal and at times unorthodox visits of lodge members to her home. “Notre Dame d’Auteuil,” as she came to be known, favored Pierre-Louis Lefevbre de La Roche the liberal abbé, Cabanis the future Idéologue, Jean-Antoine Roucher the struggling poet, and, most notoriously, Franklin the emissary in vogue from America. Although his initiation is not well documented, another frequent guest, Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet participated in both the Société Olympique and the Lycée sponsored by the brothers. States the historian Jean-Paul de Lagrave, “there existed a tie between this salon and the lodge of Les Neuf Soeurs . . . which gathered the French and foreign epitome of the philosophical spirit.”

Minette’s household was thus home to far more than her clowder of angora cats. She opened her doors to notable friends who enjoyed her spirited personality, one grounded in firm commitments to family, masonry, and their ideals as expressed by the very people who got to know her over the years. The lapsed Jesuit and academician André Morellet, in fact, lived with the widow in a place far safer to work than the Bastille where he was imprisoned for three months over his ill-timed, ill-tempered critique of a satire on the *Encyclopédie*. Soon after Condorcet married in 1786, he brought by his bright new bride, Sophie de Grouchy, who observed how Helvétius planned and conducted a successful salon, much like the one she was to establish at the Hôtel de la Monnaie. Similarly, Helvétius and Franklin were well suited, praising each other’s charms
flirtatiously. “In your company we are not only pleased with you,” Franklin confessed in 1778 not long after they had met, “but better pleased with one another and with ourselves.”

Nine years later, she admitted to Franklin, “your letter produces nearly the same effect on me, by which it reminds me more strongly of all your virtue and this fine, noble and simple character that I admire so much in you.” Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that Helvétius’s masonic sentiments evident in her numerous, sustained relationships, with lodge members and philosophers alike, made her a virtual sister in the craft and its public ethos in the final decade of the Old Regime (see app. 3). Her social world was smaller than Bourbon’s and Lamballe’s—just fifty-five correspondents, one-third of whom were masons—but to judge from the tenor of their letters, her circle was close.

The social influence of another masonic woman, Lorenza Feliciani, Comtesse de Cagliostro (1754–94), was derived from a mystical faction of the royal art; the Egyptian Rite incorporated women much earlier and more directly than was usual among the principal obediences. In part this inclusion was recognition of the equality of men and women in occult masonry during the Old Regime. The daughter of a Neapolitan artisan in bronze-making, Feliciani became interested in the lodges that her husband, Giuseppe Balsamo, created in The Hague, Courland, Warsaw, Strasbourg, Bordeaux, Lyon, and Paris between 1778 and 1785. As Giacomo Casanova described Feliciani, she had a quiet presence that contrasted sharply with her husband’s flamboyance. The memoirist noted “the nobility, the unpretentiousness, the naïveté, the sweetness, and this shy modesty which lends charm to a young woman.” A self-confident bearing served her well during the initiations of candidates, known as colombes (doves) in the Haute Maçonnerie Égyptienne; she supervised the meeting rooms, the recruitment and training of the child-participants, the crystal vase filled with magnetic fluid, and, in Paris, the adoption ceremonies. For the few months that the lodge named after the Egyptian goddess Isis operated in the capital, Feliciani led the initiation of the first thirty-six aristocratic women who paid the very steep fee to join (100 louis were far more than the average Parisian artisan made in a year). And for those neophytes who became a maîtresse, they heard familiar notions from the pre- sided maitresse agissante (efficacious mistress): “Let us leave [the men] to make their murderous wars or to disentangle the chaos of their laws, but let us charge ourselves to govern opinion, to purify customs, to cultivate the mind, to promote refinement, to diminish the number of the unfortunate.”

Those who ruled did not necessarily know better.

Whatever these women understood of their participation did not last long. After Balsamo was released from the Bastille in 1786, he headed for London,
leaving Feliciani to break-up the household and to follow him in his frantic itinerary across Europe to Rome by 1789, just after the outbreak of violence in Paris. We will never know precisely why Feliciani informed the Holy See of a desire to clear her conscience and share information of interest concerning her husband. Her confession of casual adultery was less critical than the details she provided of Balsamo’s lodge activities; he was arrested, tried, and convicted of masonry by the Roman Inquisition. “Baptized Christian but wretched, heretical, sadly celebrated after having propagated in all of Europe the impious dogmas of the Egyptian sect and after having attracted, by his prestige and his speech, a mob of nearly innumerable adepts,” a good number of them women, Balsamo had violated two papal pronouncements (1738, 1751) condemning the brotherhood.

In 1790, Feliciani retreated to the convent of Santa’Apollinare where she faced a repentant death less than a year before Balsamo died in his Castel Sant’Angelo prison cell under mysterious circumstances. As a leader of masonic activity herself, Feliciani had profound regrets about her conduct. She had shared in Balsamo’s masonic commitment, whose object seemed sacrilegious in retrospect: when all is said and done, “ego sum qui sum” (I am who I am). But we have no documents in her hand to confirm what she thought; Feliciani never learned to write in either French or Italian; and the lodge Isis, which she oversaw so deftly, dissolved shortly after her departure from Paris, its circle of maçonnes dissipated as they returned to (or sought out) other adoption lodges.

The Egyptian Rite’s promised spiritual union with the world of the dead, as offered equally to men and women alike, suffered comparison with the regular adoption lodges in vogue on the eve of the revolution. Egyptian masonry, as Feliciani practiced it, never set deep roots in either French society or in the craft itself. But it provoked more than a century of historical speculation, literary invention, and cultural imagery about the maîtresse agissante. This interest arose in part from the role played by the Queen of Sheba in the initiations, at the expense of principles that Feliciani and her fellow sisters espoused during their initiatory experiences, as reflected in the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. For the women, not eating the apple’s seeds promised the redemption of humankind, “the means of repairing this loss, the fruit of our glory, and the recovery of the power that the Supreme Being accorded to everyone,” a notion antithetical to Feliciani’s renewed Catholic faith.

Historically of longer duration and of deeper significance to the women who embraced it was the mysticism of another iteration of masonry, the Élus Coëns, whose sisters were enthusiastic participants in its creation. The conversant Provengal was hardly the only woman immersed in this rite crafted by Saint-Martin.
They drew inspiration from his mentor Martinès de Pasqually, with the help of the better focused and organized Willermoz. From 1776 to 1785, Élisabeth Du Bourg-Cavaignes (1721–94) and her prominent aristocratic family in Toulouse also corresponded with the self-styled “Unknown Philosopher” Saint-Martin; he requested their advice in the ritual practices he had in mind. As the theosophist mentioned in February 1777, “what you have said about your new discoveries fills me with pleasure and proves more than ever that you do not need any help from men.” Obviously, Du Bourg-Cavaignes had as much to inform Saint-Martin in such matters as he had to inform her, particularly where the material and the immaterial meet, as in his choice of a spouse. Three of his letters requested her views of his plans to marry the kind of woman who would guide him in his future work. Toward that end, he worried about a wife with a very different religious background from his. Later, Saint-Martin mused about the purposes of gnosis and belief; “knowledge values the mind, virtue values God,” thereby suggesting that what one knows must always be seen in the image and substance of God if one is ever truly to know. In eighteen such letters (two of them sent jointly to the présidente and her husband, Valentin Du Bourg-Cavaignes), Saint-Martin elaborated as well as confirmed the principles of his variations on the craft, thanks to the substantive contribution of more than one female initiate among the Élus Coëns. Their network was geographically wide, but no less important to him.

Saint-Martin learned still more from another female counselor, albeit less directly, in his efforts to make sense of the eleven anonymous notebooks that Willermoz received unsolicited from an “Unknown Agent” in April 1785. Saint-Martin never knew whose voice it was that revealed the Virgin Mary’s guidance in the Élus Coëns’s quest to communicate with the angels of the highest sphere. After two full years (1785–87) of correspondence, during which a total of 120 notebooks and forty-two other communications were received, Willermoz unveiled the author: Marie-Louise de Monspey, otherwise known as Eglé de Vallière (1733–1813), the younger sister of Alexandre de Monspey, a mason in the Stricte Observance Templier and close acquaintance with Willermoz in Lyon. All of them had found the occultist side of Franz Anton Mesmer’s magnetic fluid—“a material whose subtlety penetrates all bodies without especially losing its activity”—a promising source of healing (though, for most contemporaries, Mesmer’s influence was more social than therapeutic). The anthropologist Christine Bergé has since combed through the substantial body of materials that Saint-Martin and Willermoz together used to frame a new rite. Their “Livre des Initiés” (“Book for the Initiated”) owed much to
Vallière’s graphic visions, thanks in part to her reputation as the canoness at the renowned abbey of Remiremont in Lorraine; she was widely revered by her peers in the church as “an ardent mystic . . . initiator, writer, and therapist . . . an erudite woman.”

Saint-Martin’s compilation of materials, a third of which came from Vallière, defined the doctrine and practices of a renovated Élus Coëns rite, whose first lodge was to be the Élue et Chérie de la Bienfaisance, convening primarily the adepts of the original order. “It is Mary who holds the pen,” Vallière stated, “chief of the abode inaccessible to reintegrated forms, an agent of reparation.”

But when the Unknown Agent delivered only inconsistent and contradictory pronouncements, Saint-Martin lost patience and moved back to Strasbourg, leaving Willermoz to decide what to do next. At Willermoz’s insistence and her brother’s urging—Monspey was the courier for all of Vallière’s communications—Vallière finally visited Lyon to interpret her cryptic views. Willermoz then decided that the Unknown Agent was less sincere than he had hoped and explained this to the lodge in 1788. Vallière continued a communion with the Virgin in her psychic writing, and published her first book, _Extraits de la Philosophie_ (1827, *Philosophical Extracts*), under her own name. She received no further notice until the archivist Alice Joly rediscovered her portion of Saint-Martin’s manual in the 1930s and secured copies of many more notebooks by the 1960s. Although Vallière knew nothing about the craft, she was at the origin, if not the founding, of a paramasonic rite; but its influence on women drawn to the spiritualist side of masonry—like the Élus Coëns—promised far more than it delivered.

Masonry’s more tangible benefits to women were evident elsewhere. For instance, they appear in how brethren partnered with the women editors of the _Journal des dames_, viz., Mesdames de Beaumer (1761–63), Maisonneuve (1763–69), and Montanclos (1774–75). It is unlikely that any of them was ever initiated, but they depended upon the support of the craft to sustain a monthly publication of interest to both men and women, off and on, from October 1761 to April 1775. In her research on the _Journal des dames_, Nina Rattner Gelbart discovered the intervention of several masons, most notably Louis-François de Bourbon (Prince de Conti), Joseph Mathon de La Cour and Louis-Sébastien Mercier, to keep it operating. The journal’s expressed ideas, like those of masonry itself, were well ahead of its time and social milieu. As historian Christine Fauré put it, the first female editor Beaumer was a bit “too combative” in her ardent vindication of women’s equality with men, which she thought in time would change French, then European, customs enough to create lasting
social peace at home and abroad. Bourbon provided Beaumer refuge from the censors in 1762, but it was not enough for the self-styled editrice (woman editor) to manage her work, and so she sold the journal to her successor, Catherine Michelle de Maisonneuve, who modeled better “the bounds of respectability.”

Maisonneuve may have been more diplomatic in her editorial practice, yet in 1763 she actually ran an article declaring, “all people are not made to be philosophes, but all are made to be active citizens.” (The active citizenship she had in mind was much more modest than it was during the French Revolution and long afterward.) In this work, Maisonneuve was seconded by the ambitious Lyonnais, Mathon de La Cour, who printed masonic poems and the reviews of books by brethren in the journal, including large excerpts of Mercier’s incendiary writing. It did not take the censors long to close the journal for nearly five years. Picking up the pen from her predecessor, Marie Émilie de Montanclus (a.k.a. Baronne de Princen) defined a still more conservative editorial policy, dedicating the journal to Marie-Antoinette and directing more attention to the safe topic of family life in the mode of Rousseau. She pledged to publish “all that relates to the health of mothers and their children, all that is useful to the education of young ladies,” despite her preoccupations as an actress. Eventually, Montanclus also grew weary of the intrigues at court and distracted by her own family life; she happily turned the journal over to Mercier for very little return on her initial investment. It had been perhaps a worthy cause, with considerable assistance from masons and their regard for autrices (women authors), a decidedly daring deviation from conventional gender expectations in the period.

There were, of course, other freemason women in the eighteenth century than the ones featured here, about one thousand of them on the eve of the French Revolution (see fig. 1). At first glance, one is hard pressed to ascertain what these women had in common, apart from the varying degrees of their engagement—for some of them very little—in the craft’s adoption lodges. They were hardly a mirror image of Old Regime society; fully 82 percent of them inserted an aristocratic particle in their name. Many were interested in masonry through family members and through the charitable opportunities that the lodges afforded them in the community with the funds collected from members at each initiation. The women we know were also atypical of freemasons generally, if only because of the imperfect retention of lodge records over the past two centuries. The archives favor the famous, the powerful, and the wealthy, many of whom were Parisian; the capital city hosted adoption masonry’s largest and most prestigious lodges. In the provincial cities, however, the mystics roamed more freely, presumably because these adepts felt more welcome there (see fig. 2 and
Ultimately, the gender relations of freemason women were modified by social privilege; as elites, they realized a peculiar sisterhood, one set within a fraternal organization, during the early decades of a civil society-in-the-making. These historical actors had a sense of obligation to others, or some variation on it, that would become much more evident during the revolution.\textsuperscript{125} After the Old Regime’s tentative inception of a political culture, the year 1789 would redefine the public space that these women had come to know and, in some cases, to appropriate for themselves.

Revolution: The Communities of Freemason Women Transposed

Women played a visible role in the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{126} Their march from Paris to Versailles in October 1789, ostensibly to bring the king and his power closer to the people, was one of several such dramatic events in the first year alone. Much less well known is what freemason women did to further—or to impede—the precipitous changes that destroyed the Old Regime and led to a new, less stable order. Because the vast majority of women masons were aristocrats, they were quickly engulfed by the loss of absolute monarchy, social deference, and landed wealth. And their lodges, like La Candeur and Le Contrat Social, were closed or \textit{entrées en sommeil} \textsuperscript{(put to sleep)}, as masons put it. Many maçonnnes thought differently about their participation and, more perhaps, that of the maçons in their families who were blamed early on for plotting revolution in their lodges. “Be on your guard there against any freemason associations,” Marie-Antoinette warned her brother Emperor Léopold II in 1790.\textsuperscript{127} Two years after Marquis de Luchet’s extended essay on the Illuminés in 1789, Abbé Jacques-François Lefranc published a more pointed account of masonry’s alleged conspiracy, \textit{Le Voile levé pour les curieux} \textsuperscript{(The Veil Lifted for the Curious)}, whose second edition appeared just months before he was killed during the September massacres in 1792.\textsuperscript{128} In due time, this explanation, based in part on revived fears of earlier religious controversies like Jansenism, became received wisdom of the \textit{bien-pensants} \textsuperscript{(right-thinking conservatives) who emigrated from France to escape the violence.\textsuperscript{129} All the same, convinced revolutionary enthusiasts neglected their lodges; they had more consequential matters to attend to. By its very nature, with some notable exceptions in the provinces,\textsuperscript{130} the revolution preempted the attention of masons, women masons in particular, from the pleasures and purposes of the royal art.

Historians have long discussed what impact masonry actually had in 1789. Church leaders and monarchists were not the only ones to pose the question.
FIGURE 2. Mixed and Adoption Lodges in France (c. 1745–1790).
Some masons took credit for the upheaval, citing the democratic aspirations and operations of their lodges; they proudly adopted the revolutionary credo, liberté, égalité, and fraternité, as their own. Leaving their temples behind, brethren flocked to the new political clubs, like the Société de 1789 and the Cercle Social. Accordingly, historians have assessed these claims to note that masonry continued to function long after 1789 even as many individual masons became active politically. Of greater historical import is the question of how instrumental masonry was to the revolution. Conservative scholars like Augustin Cochin, Bernard Faï, and Reinhardt Koselleck saw the lodges at the heart of an esprit de société (associational tendency). In François Furet’s words, masonry was “an exemplary embodiment of the chemistry of new power, which transformed a social phenomenon into politics and opinion into action. In this sense, it embodied the origin of Jacobinism.” Feminist historians, for different reasons, have tended to agree. For Dena Goodman, masonry’s place in the new political culture was central, even though she believed that women masons simply did not share in it; they were “the displaced objects of male desire . . . and the submissive subjects of male-defined morality.” But Francesca Vigni had already argued quite the opposite: “In denouncing the iniquity of a world where the feminine being was forced to live a false and truncated life, the woman mason evoked, like other women from the same social milieu, the most urgent problems that social inequalities posed.” Let us consider another approach to masonic women’s involvement in developments leading to 1789.

The French historian of Old Regime France Roger Chartier did not discuss women in freemasonry per se, but he did propose an analogous explanation for men in the craft. In his analysis, it was “more than the invention of a modern concept of equality, democratic in the manner of the Revolution, it was doubtless [a] new formulation of the relationship between morality and politics that gave Freemasonry its power, at once secret and critical.” This politicization of masonic ideals complemented the rise of a new culture that challenged the authority of the king by subjecting it to the scrutiny of public opinion. Because politics were formally banned from atelier meetings and decisions were not always fully democratic, no more so than equality and fraternity always prevailed among its members, masonry was not actually a “school for democracy,” a manner of living the Enlightenment, so much as a space for juxtaposing principle and behavior that should have been better aligned in public life than it was. In this regard, the Bourbon monarchy, the Gallican Church, and the division of society into three separate estates fared badly. Similarly, women masons were confronted on a daily basis by a comparable disjuncture between belief and action, at home
and elsewhere, that they must have used to judge the nature of extant gender relations, most obviously, but also an absolutist regime, more discreetly, on the eve of the revolution. It was this particular set of juxtapositions, the basis of a new civic consciousness, that informed the views and commitments of women masons during the revolutionary decade.137

What space did freemason women occupy in the proliferation of associations starting in 1789? Within six months of the Bastille’s fall, dozens of political clubs, like the Société de la Révolution and its successor, the Société des Amis de la Constitution, appeared in Paris and provincial towns all over the country. These forerunners of the Jacobins, as they came to be known, organized a network of national affiliates with the mother society in the capital, much as the masonic lodges had with the Grand Orient in the 1780s. But very few masons, all of them male, participated. As historian Michael Kennedy pointed out, echoing Jules Michelet, “the clubs of the revolution were essentially new entities” with members of a more varied social profile.138 In lieu of the aristocracy that predominated in lodges of adoption, the professional and commercial middle class pervaded in the political societies, while artisans and shopkeepers animated the popular clubs. No known women masons joined these groups (and thus were not immediately disenfranchised when the Jacobins closed the ones for women in October 1793). Bourbon, Lamballe, Fardel de Daix, and Feliciani all disappear from their respective lodges, nor do they reappear in any of the political organizations that drew so much public attention. Those women who became active politically often disassociated themselves from the craft even as they continued to draw on an extensive social network of freemasons, as the astute editors of the Journal des dames did many years earlier. As evident below, figures like Sophie de Condorcet, Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, Michelle de Bonneuil, Julie Candeille, and Rosalie Jullien belonged to a younger generation of women at the center of a broader masonic community.

The three most notable examples of these trends in the history of masonry after 1789 are Mme. Helvétius the salon-keeper in Paris, Mme. Provensal the mystic in Lyon, and Mme. Fardel de Daix the wife of a privileged public official in Dijon, all for widely different reasons. Helvétius’s salon, whose guests were mainly drawn from Les Neuf Soeurs, continued to receive these masons after the lodge became the Société Nationale in 1789 and ceased operating in 1792. Much of this (temporary) continuity was owed to Girondist moderation espoused by its adherents and to Helvétius’s discretion during the Terror (1793–94). Moreover, she mentored the youthful Cabanis “like a tender and devoted son” who, as a philosophical radical but political opportunist,
survived the turbulent events of the 1790s to become a deputy under the Directory (1795–99) and a senator under the Consulate (1799–1804). No doubt he provided Helvétius and her salon some protection they might not otherwise have had, such as in the wake of her timely and generous assistance of Condorcet as a refugee from revolutionary justice in 1793. A masonic network served Helvétius well as it turned to support the lodge’s other auxiliary, the Lycée (1785–1803), which operated under difficult circumstances, much to the benefit of women, like Bonneuil, who took advantage of its intellectual and cultural activities. When Helvétius died in 1800, the bulk of her estate was bequeathed to Cabanis (and to Lefebvre de La Roche who had edited her husband’s collected works in 1784).

As for Provensal, she tried desperately to remove herself, like her brother Willermoz, from the revolution in Lyon, with only partial success. Even before 1789, but more fully so thereafter, the effects of the Unknown Agent’s guidance became divisive; some initiates in the new lodge retained their faith in the ritual book based on her writings, despite Willermoz’s grave doubts. Saint-Martin in particular had a spiritual crisis of his own; in the end, “like marble stone,” he lost faith in this new variation on the Élus Coëns, but not before he sought Provensal’s intercession. It failed, much to her own deep disappointment. Meanwhile, the revolution complicated all other forms of masonry in Lyon just as thoroughly as it did elsewhere in France. The only survivors, it seems, were the masonic visionaries and the pseudoscientific mesmerists, in large measure because no one understood their political or religious tendencies. Then local revolutionary authorities suspected Willermoz of insufficient republican enthusiasm, forcing the wealthy silk merchant into seclusion for more than six months, from December 1793 to July 1794. Provensal and her sister-in-law, Jeanette Pascal, offered cover for his safety as well as provisions for his comfort. Correspondence kept up their spirits in trying times, except when Provensal let down her guard. “Nothing new for you to note if not for the many arrests, so they say,” she sighed to her brother in despair. Three years after Thermidor, the family liquidated Willermoz’s business at a considerable loss and retreated to the bucolic idyll of rural life far from the occult intensity of Lyon’s masonry. In her old age, after decades of engagement in the outer fringes of symbolic masonry, Provensal’s support for Willermoz evolved from the mystical to the practical.

Fardel de Daix, for her part, seems to have disengaged entirely from her lodge and its precious circle of titled ladies well before the revolution struck Dijon and its landed elites. In the municipal archives there are no fewer than one printed and four manuscript copies of her remarks during the initiation in 1782, but
nothing more; by comparing texts written by her husband, one historian of masonry in Dijon has even questioned the authorship of her speech.\footnote{143} Certainly Fardel de Daix faced the revolutionary violence with no ostensible help from her fellow masons. After her spouse fled their Verrey and Daix estates, Fardel de Daix retreated to her own family’s property, Le Leuzeu, near Fleury. For years she fended off repeated outbreaks of hostility from local patriots. Her letters to the village mayor indicated that she had no intention of surrendering the firearms used by her servants to keep the wolves at bay; nor was she willing to attend masses celebrated by a revolutionary priest, much less turn over to authorities the refractory priest, nun, and the family of a Girondist living with her at the time. It took until April 1794 for her lands to be confiscated and sold, forcing her to flee to unknown parts. Long after her death during the First Empire, her sister recovered the property. It is difficult to fathom how Fardel de Daix survived the revolution. Her husband the former parlementaire was persona non grata; she faced off the Jacobins at her ancestral home; and yet there was no arrest, no trial, no execution.\footnote{144} In addition to an indominable personality, her Old Regime social network, whether or not it involved freemasons, apparently worked in her favor.

With the lodges and their initiations in retreat, the revolutionary decade witnessed a transition in masonic activity. Increasingly, freemasons left their lodges, drawing upon the secrets of the craft less than they did the benefits of social networks that masonry created for its members. Not all masons were aristocrats like Bourbon, Lamballe, Fardel de Daix, and Vallière; many others enjoyed somewhat more modest social status like Helvétius the widow of a retired tax farmer, Provensal the part owner of a textile trading company, and Feliciani the daughter of an artisan and wife of a roving impresario. Their fates during the revolution were just as varied. Bourbon, Lamballe, and Fardel de Daix sought safety wherever they could, leaving their family properties for confiscation. The queen’s loyal friend Lamballe returned home to be arrested and brutally murdered; Feliciani died, likely filled with remorse, sequestered in an Italian convent; Vallière’s exclusive abbey in Remiremont was suppressed and her divinely inspired notebooks destroyed; Helvétius and Provensal lived much as before, but kept lower profiles to protect their closest relations. The politics of these masonic women were far from safely republican. From what we know of their views, they differed on one or more of the painful issues that tore families and communities apart: the constitutional monarchy, the civil constitution of the clergy, the impending war with Austria and Prussia, the king’s flight to Varennes, the First Republic, the war at home and abroad to defend it, the Committee of Public Safety, the Terror’s summary executions by guillotine, and finally Thermidor itself.
Still others sought out opportunities to learn and to network in public institutions that owed their existence to masonry. Perhaps the best known of these was the Société Olympique in Paris. It was hosted first at the resplendent Hôtel de Soubise, then in the fashionable arcades of the Palais Royal, to stage regular concerts by its accomplished musicians. Established in 1779 by the Loge Olympique de la Parfaite Estime, the Société was sponsored by the Mère-Loge Écossaise du Contrat Social whose adoption lodges were overseen by the Princesse de Lamballe until 1785. According to the published list of member and subscriber names and addresses in 1786, “its main object, of interest to the largest number of masons who came together again to form it and to those who have been associated with it since, is the establishment in Paris of a Concert that could in some respects replace the Concert of Amateurs,” which had been closed in 1781.

The performances were exclusively reserved for society members. In 1786, all 363 men had been initiated into the mère-loge and all 151 women into its lodge of adoption. Because the royal family attended the concerts, the membership costing 120 livres a year (about an artisan’s weekly earnings) posed no obstacle to the court. There were no fewer than two princesses (Lamballe and Broglie), six duchesses, twenty-six marquises, thirty-seven comtesses, baronnes, and présidentes. The Almanach du Palais-Royal (Almanach of the Palais-Royal) enthused, “its assemblies are striking by their pomp and glitter. . . . This society has had some extraordinary gatherings,” such as the performances of Joseph Haydn’s six Parisian symphonies commissioned by the Société. Associated musicians from other lodges, like Les Neuf Soeurs’s Pierre-Joseph Candeille—the father of Julie Candeille, the singer, actress, and dramatist—did not have to be initiated, but they were just as immersed in a masonic social circle and its cultural habits.

A week before the Bastille fell in July 1789, a mob sacked the society’s premises, forcing the concert to cease operations permanently.

Similarly, for two years (1789–91) the Société Nationale supported the Parisian institution of the Lycée. It proved a lively source of scientific, philosophic, and literary exchange in the tradition of Les Neuf Soeurs’s short-lived Société Apollonienne in 1780, which became the Musée de Paris for arts and sciences in 1781, the Lycée’s proximate predecessor in 1785. According to historian Louis Amiable, “as much by the name of Lycée as by that of Athénée [as it became known in 1802], this intellectual foyer grew and cultivated in French society the taste for serious study.” The lectures and courses offered at this cultural venue, however, were only remotely masonic in style or substance. They were directed by academicians, like Jean-François Marmontel in history and Antoine-François
de Fourcroy in chemistry, few of whom were masons. Not subject to formal initiation, the “subscribers” had no obligations but to pay their annual dues; depending upon their programs, membership lists turned over rapidly from year to year. This organization was thus masonic by sponsorship only, which likely helped it with the shifting political scene of Paris in the 1790s. For the women who attended the Lycée, their participation was more of moment to them than masonic memories of life in the lodges before the revolution. The craft’s attenuated legacy remained through the masons, male and female, who met in these courses, thereby sustaining networks they drew on during the revolution and long afterward. The implications, the stakes rather, for women were substantial, enduring, and in some cases life-threatening.152

After 1789, anything to do with the craft was anathema to the very social circles that had once found it so intriguing. Prominent aristocrats, like the skilled harpist Stéphanie-Félicité Du Crest, Comtesse de Genlis (1746–1830), were unfazed by the sociability and rituals they witnessed in their lodges.153 Genlis remarked archly in her memoirs that as a member of the queen’s court, she did not think much about her creation of a paramasonic rite, De la Persévérance, in 1777: “I took, in order to piece together this obedience, a part of the prettiest costumes from the old knighthood, and I added to it a thousand novelistic things of my own invention.”154 Her hated arch rival, Lamballe, of course, was not inclined to participate, nor was Marie-Antoinette. But that did not stop Genlis from La Candeur’s festivities and initiation into Feliciani’s adoption lodge in the Haute Maçonnerie Égyptienne in 1785 (whose membership list resembles the one for La Candeur). During the revolution, she reserved her salon at Bellechasse each Saturday for belles-lettres and each Sunday for politics, hosting her masonic cousin-lover-friend Phillipe Égalité (who gave Genlis control of his children), Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Jacques-Louis David, and members of the Constituent Assembly (Comte de Lameth, Bertrand Barère, and Antoine Barnave). This was dangerous company to keep in the First Republic, which forced her to leave for Switzerland and Britain.155 Neither her husband nor Philippe escaped the guillotine, and two of her young charges died in prison. For the last three decades of her long life, she continued to write—controversial memoirs, biographies, fiction, and reflections on childhood education—for an audience of young women who, after the revolution, had another kind of adoption to consider, one discussed in the next chapter.156 Genlis left a rich legacy of more than eighty published titles, in part drawn on the directed, experiential learning of nineteen pupils she personally groomed, such as the future king, Louis-Philippe (1830–48).
The craft’s passing fashion is also evident in the lives of women who were even more marginal to the lodges and their rites. The strikingly attractive Marie-Michelle Guesnon de Bonneuil (1748–1829), for one, was interested in Les Neuf Soeurs’s early variant on its Lycée.\textsuperscript{157} According to a published list of Musée members in 1785, she counted among the “subscribed ladies” who signed up to take at least one course from the likes of Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier in the sciences and Jean-François de La Harpe in letters.\textsuperscript{158} About the same time, Bonneuil’s fellow denizens from Île Bourbon, Évariste de Parny and Antoine Bertin, invited her and her two sisters to join the soi-disant Société de la Caserne, a veritable parody of secret societies, whose initiations were little more than ritualistic gallantry:

This Barrack, a happy abode,
Where Friendship, by foresight,
Received no rogue of Love
But by an oath of obedience.\textsuperscript{159}

These masonic indiscretions were all that Bonneuil affirmed before she joined the counter-revolution, much of it in secrecy for obvious reasons.\textsuperscript{160} They nearly led to her execution during the Terror. For years, she engaged in espionage on behalf of multiple regimes—and other countries—on special missions to Spain, Russia, and Britain. She made deliberate use of her persuasive social and physical charms, remarking to the academician Georges Brifaut, in 1808, how well they continued to serve her: “I have fought well with time. If I told you that I turned sixty today, would you believe it?”\textsuperscript{161} Much of this less-than-selfless public service, however, is enshrouded by occulted documents in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the mistaken identity of another woman, Jeanne Riflon, whose name Bonneuil used in her work abroad.\textsuperscript{162} This was not the secrecy she learned from freemasons.

Truer to the spirit of the craft, though still far from the atelier, was Marie-Louise-Sophie de Grouchy, Marquise de Condorcet (1764–1822). Unlike her husband and her brother, she was never initiated—no more than their contemporary, the outspoken Fanny Raoul—but her salon drew masons from Les Neuf Soeurs.\textsuperscript{163} The marquis lectured on mathematics at the lodge’s Lycée, “truly an academy for women and for men of the world,” according to Baron von Grimm.\textsuperscript{164} The couple had only been married for a few years before the revolution disrupted their intellectual and personal lives. Revolutionary events moved the marquis to write “Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité” (1790, “On
Granting Women the Rights of Citizenship”) before he was elected to the National Assembly in 1791 and then again to the National Convention in 1792. His fateful vote not to execute the king put him at odds with the Jacobins; his sharp criticisms of the First Republic’s constitution prompted a warrant for his arrest in 1793. While hiding from political authorities, he wrote, at Grouchy’s insistence, his *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1795, *Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*).¹⁶⁵ A brother in Les Neuf Soeurs, Cabanis, is believed to have given him the poison that the marquis shared with Jean Debry in order for both of them to avoid the guillotine in 1794.¹⁶⁶ Impoverished by the loss of family property, Grouchy undertook portraits on commission and kept a lingerie shop to support her little girl, an ailing sister, and an aging governess, sacrificing her own writing and literary salon until she recovered Condorcet’s property in Auteuil in 1795.

The works for which Grouchy is best known are her French translation of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and her own *Lettres sur la sympathie* (*Letters on Sympathy*), both published in 1798. She also edited Condorcet’s complete works (1804) in twenty-one volumes. These publications owe much to the Idéologues—close colleagues of the late marquis, such as Cabanis and Antoine Destutt de Tracy—who attended the salon Grouchy re-opened and used to develop her ideas. She was particularly attentive to Cabanis, in part because he had married her sister Charlotte; she nominally addressed her letters on sympathy to him.¹⁶⁷ She was very much a part of his effort to establish “the science of man.”¹⁶⁸ But Grouchy’s letters owe most to Adam Smith’s treatise; all eight of them gloss Smith’s work and were published in the second volume of her translation.¹⁶⁹ Grouchy’s very first missive notes Smith’s omission of the causes of sympathy, which she considers as a natural response to another’s pain, an observation derived from sensible not social experience. In her third letter, Grouchy elaborates on sense impressions: “The first signs of this sympathy arrive the very moment when the objects which are able to excite it are offered to our attention . . . [they are] only a very natural effect of our moral sensibility.”¹⁷⁰ Smith’s “invisible hand” had nothing to do with it. How right Grouchy got her science of morals for a female audience is testified by Germaine de Staël-Holstein. “You helped me rediscover,” she exclaimed, “a pleasure, for a long time lost, in emotion & admiration which the heart & virtue render palpable.”¹⁷¹ This affirmation explicitly recognizes an instinctive responsibility for others arising from Grouchy’s masonic network, including that of her husband’s, in the waning years of the Enlightenment.

One final woman benefiting from her contact with the web of masonic relations during the revolution was Rosalie Jullien (1745–1824). Her correspondence
with family lasted nearly thirty-five years (1775–1810), most of which was written in Paris. She was an astute and sensitive witness to momentous events that she felt compelled to recount.\textsuperscript{172} Again, like Grouchy, she was not initiated into an adoption lodge and never wrote anything about the craft; but her husband, Marc-Antoine, was a brother in Les Frères Réunis of Romans in rural Dauphiné and served as its deputy to the Grand Orient for four years before he moved his family to Paris and returned home to work its ancestral farms in 1787.\textsuperscript{173} Neither of her two sons expressed interest in the craft—the eldest boy Jules would become the Committee of Public Safety’s special agent in the provinces—most likely because they came of age at a time when freemasonry seemed irrelevant to the revolution.\textsuperscript{174} Jullien’s masonic relations were surprisingly discreet; they appeared at critical moments in her family’s life, if only because the social circles that she and her husband had cultivated in Paris were filled with brethren and at least one sister, at a time when masons, like the philosophes, were everywhere around them. A virtual Jacobin in her faith in the new republic, “she was an enlightened woman by virtue of her optimism,” writes her biographer Lindsay Parker. “Her ‘daring to know’ through great quantities of reading, her interest in science . . . , her reverence for virtue, and her belief in humankind’s potential” suggested an Enlightenment credo that was shared by masons.\textsuperscript{175}

At two moments during the revolution this enlightened faith might well have been so obvious to Jullien that she failed to notice. In early 1792, sensing the imminent danger to the adolescent Jules who had just joined the Jacobin club in Paris, Jullien worked to get him out of the country to England. She made plans, starting with the solicitation of introductions that Jules would need while he learned English to see the events in France from another, safer perspective. Almost all the letters she secured were written by prominent figures who, if not freemasons, were closely affiliated with masonry, among them Condorcet, Marquis de La Rochefoucauld, Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve, Charles-François Dumouriez, Jacques Pierre Brissot, and Charles-Alexis Brulart de Sillery.\textsuperscript{176} This extensive network must have served Jules well upon his arrival in London where one of his contacts would be a mason somewhat later, Talleyrand, who was there on diplomatic mission.\textsuperscript{177}

The other revolutionary incident when masonry touched Jullien personally occurred as Jacques-Louis David, a friend of her husband’s in Paris, sketched Marie-Antoinette on her way to the guillotine in October 1793 (see ill. 2). The artist inscribed at the foot of this stark ink drawing, “Portrait of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, taken to execution; drawn with an ink pen by David, a spectator of the convoy, & seated at the window with citizeness Jullien, wife
of the representative Jullien, for whom I am drawing this piece.” David was, of course, an artist, but also a brother in La Modération, whose wife, Charlotte Pécoul, had been initiated into its adoption lodge and served as its oratrice (woman orator), an important leadership position. With or without Jullien’s
knowledge, masonry literally ventured into her home to bear witness to a stunning historical moment.

From the available evidence, it appears that an incipient civil society in eighteenth-century France mediated features of gender relations in associational life. This sociability, especially its social networks, changed over time as women (and men) conceived something of a collective ethos. Freemasonry, as practiced by the women most closely associated with the craft, reveals how social class, region, and rite could affect the sexual hierarchy: the higher the social status, the farther away from Paris, and the more mystical the rituals, the more flexible that hierarchy became, permitting certain individuals more agency than would seem possible in a fraternal organization. The lodges La Candeur and Les Neuf Soeurs in Paris, La Concorde in Dijon, and Les Chevaliers Maçons des Élus Coëns de l’Univers in Lyon, for example, provided opportunities for aristocrats (in Paris and Dijon) and wealthy bourgeois (in Lyon) to exercise more sway in their lodges than the statutes accorded them. Their relationships with other women at the margins of masonry—family members, salon-keepers, friends, and neighbors, particularly those who attended social and cultural events sponsored by the lodges—raised the likelihood that women charted a larger place in public life for themselves. It seems quite possible that individuals who would otherwise have no connection at all with masonry were drawn into its sphere of influence, whose context during the revolution turned much more political, ironically, when all lodges lost sisters and many lodges ceased functioning. What seemed inconsequential actually became substantial as the pressures of revolutionary events bore down on everyday life, fatally for some, irrevocably for all.

Masonry’s gendered contribution to civil society in eighteenth-century France is well worth considering to illustrate its web of relationships and the historical implications for its women. Such is the case of Charles d’Éon de Beaumont, Chevalier d’Éon (1728–1810), a freemason since 1768, who embodies the themes of the present chapter.179 This cross-dressing nobleman from Tonnerre southeast of Paris was hardly unique in French society—recent historians have shown just how fluid gender identities were in France—but Éon managed to crisscross their boundaries in unexpected ways.180 At first, as a member of the foreign service, he used women’s clothes to disguise his espionage on behalf of Louis XV in Saint Petersburg and London. Eventually he decided to continue this ruse long after it was necessary. He adopted a bifurcated persona and earned some notoriety in the London press, much of it satirical, when in 1771 a public bet was made on his sex. By 1775, Éon’s return to France required royal consent to approve a pension
and other payments negotiated by a better-known colleague in the King’s Secret Service, Pierre-Caron de Beaumarchais. The new king, Louis XVI, insisted that Éon’s repatriation be conditional upon his staying dressed as a woman. “All Europe learned with astonishment and with admiration that this Negotiator of consummate experience, that this Warrior of tested courage, that this Writer of such agreeable erudition & of such sound judgment, was in effect a woman,” read the transaction agreement. It was now official, Éon was a chevalière. For the next thirty-five years of her life, in France and in Britain where Éon died, she dressed appropriately. She also proudly wore on her breast, for all to see, the honorific Croix de Saint-Louis awarded only to men.

When Éon arrived home in Tonnerre by 1779, after twenty-three years of distinguished service to the king, she had finally come to terms with her identity, converted to Catholicism, and started rebuilding her mother’s estate. Such was the new normal. Well-known by her neighbors as one of the largest landowners in the area, the chevalière was accepted on her own terms. So it seems from the petition of the local masonic lodge, Les Frères Réunis, to the regional orient’s authorities for her to participate in its initiations. “Despite [her] change,” the brethren insisted, “we would have failed not only in patriotic sentiments, in ties of blood and of friendship, but also in the name of brethren.” The chevalière already knew the mysteries from her initiation in the French lodge L’Immortalité in London overseen by the Grand Orient de France. Alas, the official response is missing from the archives, and there is no record of her further role in masonry. What the masons in Tonnerre understood, however, the obedience did not.

The difference between the lodge (about a brother) and the orient (about a sister) adduces evidence of how the place of women in French masonry remained subject to change. Here as elsewhere, the craft sought to strike a balance between competing principles of brotherhood: Was fraternity specific to men or was it general to all humankind? This woman question was addressed in each lodge, in its own way, according to the complexities of class, region, and practice. In some places, circumstances favored co-masonry (among the mystically inclined); in others, they led to separate lodges for and by women (as social elites); and in still others, they created the networks of personal relationships taking masonry beyond the lodge (as in the case of Éon, but also in those of Helvétius, Grouchy, and Jullien). In eighteenth-century France, the sociability of civil society, as exemplified by freemasonry, clearly made room and provided agency for women in public space, despite the resistance of most men and other women before the French Revolution.
Meanwhile, the chevalière struggled with her gender identity amidst occasional echoes of masonry. In the privacy of her soul-searching, Éon returned time and again to themes familiar to the craft’s cognoscenti. A draft essay, written before 1774, on the virtues of freemasonry, considered how such a fellowship, which privileged eating, drinking, and singing, “diffused the light of the sun, the consolation of God and the true Happiness in the heart of all humans sensible to simple virtue.”188 Eleven years later, from the perspective of her religious conversion as well as her gender transformation, the chevalière maintained her faith in masonry’s quest for virtue. “God is the first principle of all things by which everything is produced and everything moves,” she informed Duchesse de Montmorenci-Bouteville in 1785. “The principles of honor [as the masons knew them] can only come from a moral code, and the principles of conscience [as Éon had come to know them] only from religion.”189 In the secrecy of her atelier and of her conscience, the chevalière unveiled who she was and what she believed in the context of keeping virtue a private, personal concern.190

It was this same belief in inner goodness, at first masonic, later Catholic, that appeared in Éon’s championing of causes she held dear. She did so in her new incarnation as a Christian woman, much like the androgynous Jeanne d’Arc and the apocryphal Pope Joan during the Middle Ages.191 Éon was deeply committed to the possibility that gender identity, however malleable, was no bar to sanctity in this life or the next. As she explored at length in her incomplete autobiographical writings (left unpublished when she died in 1810), she created a virtual lodge-cum-convent, a “space where [she] could experiment with male and female attributes and still retain [her] virtuous virginity . . . space within which [she] could explore [her] ambivalence toward gender.”192 The chevalière’s former masonic experience, hardly inhibiting this exploration, seems to have factored in it. It captured, despite herself, the changing gender relations in the lodges for French women of the eighteenth century, much as they understood who they were and what they believed in a maturing sense of responsibility to others. Before and after the French Revolution, the chevalière d’Éon and others like her experienced a compelling transition in the early history of civil society in France.