Contesting Imaginaries of Freemason Women

One of the curiosities of the German Occupation of France during World War II was how freemason women disappeared from view. After nearly two centuries of attention, primarily by brethren who felt authorized to speak about mixed and adoption lodges, the sisters seemed utterly irrelevant to the Propaganda Abteilung. One of its principal projects was the film *Forces occultes* (*Occult Forces*) directed by the former mason Jean Mamy (a.k.a. Paul Riche) in 1943. This purported cinematic exposé of the Judeo-masonic conspiracy for world dominion was written by Jean Marquès-Rivière and produced by Robert Muzard to reveal the craft’s dangerous subterfuge as men conceived it. The only women to grace the film were the unsuspecting wives of masons; they knew nothing about their husbands’ lodge activities; they were as innocent as the film’s intended audience of Vichy supporters. Besides propounding masonry’s threats to legitimate order, the message was clear: there were no freemason women. This deliberate erasure of a historical phenomenon, of course, belied the myriad instances of sisters in society, literature, opera, and popular culture since the Old Regime. The brethren were hardly alone in their representations. With a few major exceptions, their renditions were in effect emblematic of powerful imaginaries contesting the place of women in public space during the slow, conflicted development of civil society in France from the eighteenth century onward.

Among the earliest images of women in some sort of masonic community are those by none other than Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade. He was most likely never a freemason, despite much speculation on the matter; but he certainly knew a great deal about the craft. His perversely pornographic writings evince acquaintance with masonry’s rituals and practices, especially in *Histoire de Juliette, ou Les prospérités du vice* (*1797, Juliette, or The Rewards of Vice*). In the third part of this novel, Sade provides the bylaws of the Société des Amis du Crime, with forty-five statutes for its members to observe. Number 39, for example, stipulates, “The pain of death awaits any member who betrays the
Society’s secrets,” a version of which is inscribed in virtually every handbook in freemasonry since its origins, much as the ordinances on the usual housekeeping business of dues payment and active participation in the lodge.3 The disreputable Sade wrote enough about virtual masons to pass as one during his lifetime in line with the subsequent partisan commentary on his embodiment of the Enlightenment.6

An unabashed aristocrat, whatever his early sympathies for the revolutionaries, he expressed a determined hostility to the craft. More to the point, women on display in his fiction turn masonry’s gallantry on its head. Sade’s literary misogyny, instances of which are featured on nearly every page of his mature novels, subjects women to a vicious, unrelenting degradation that no mason ever professed so openly. His imaginaries include mixed lodges; and their sexual initiations wallow in savage, excruciatingly painful cruelty, lending veracity to the noun that bears his name, sadism. Idols of perversity long before France’s fin de siècle, these women are the antithesis of adoption and mixed masonry, however remote the link between the craft and Sade’s fiction as it occurred to his mostly male readers.7 So offensive are his delineations, it comes as no surprise that there have been very few imitators. Most freemason imagery falls within one of the historically familiar topoi of women generally, like those of muse, madonna, temptress, and helpmeet.8 The cultural construction of women in masonry results in much the same gendered ambivalence that one finds more broadly, far from Sade’s angry loathing, but with just enough traces of it to suggest a peculiarity in how masonic sisters were seen over a two-hundred-year period. These literary and cultural figures were mostly the creations of men, many but not all of them freemasons, hence the curious banality and inanity of these depictions. The women are rebels from male masonic convention, without a discernible cause other than their presence in a lodge.9

This thematic element to French poetry, theater, fiction, travelogue, opera, and song from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries cannot be distinguished from the gender relations that informed it. As the literary scholar Lucienne Frappier-Mazur remarks, “From the ars erotica,” for instance, “Sade retains the idea of the search for pleasure as the only absolute possible and perhaps that of the subject’s particular relationship to the master and initiator,” i.e., man’s relationship with woman.10 This sexual dominance replicates gender relations in society, so much so that Frappier-Mazur feels compelled to trace the novel’s hierarchy of the orgy, founded on power and the law in the figural ownership of women, as often as not, in order to control them.11 “Woman as metaphor for the social represents a potential menace” arising from the Old Regime’s natural
order of inequalities among beings, estates, and sexes. This Enlightenment-era truism is expressed by a leading member of Juliette’s sadistic circle, Saint-Fond: “this respect [for women] was never in nature, one would waste his time looking for it there. This sex’s inferiority is too well established for it ever to give us a solid reason to respect it.” Such gendered discourse throughout Sade’s work ensures that the reader understands precisely who is the victim, even in the author’s bisexual universe. The women are subordinate, the men always prevail in the end, here as in other literary accounts of some otherwise remarkable representations of women in masonry.

Serafina, Comtesse de Cagliostro

The main sources we have about Lorenza Feliciani (1754–94), better known as Serafina, Comtesse de Cagliostro, are owed to one man in particular, her husband. During her brief life, she was married to the flamboyant impresario, Giuseppe Balsamo, better known as Alessandro, Comte de Cagliostro (among other useful pseudonyms). His renown brought Feliciani into the spotlight with him. There are no studies of this freemason woman, just passages in the copious biographies of the Grand Cophet, as her husband styled himself. She left no written record of her own; she never learned to write. Her only extant correspondence is what the comte wrote to her, most notably during his incarceration in the Bastille (1785–86) over the Diamond Necklace Affair. Similarly, all of Feliciani’s portraits were commissioned by men. The resulting images of this obscure woman, in her lifetime and long afterward, were the creations of hierarchical gender relations and the contradictory construal of her as Balsamo’s unwitting dupe, victim, or accomplice. Observers mistook her role in the lodge; she must have been a scandalous slut or a magician like her husband. At best, however, she was a self-possessed manager of her husband’s complex affairs, a polished salon-keeper and maîtresse agissante of the adoption lodges that she and Balsamo established. Ultimately, she seemed to be a troubled but sincere Catholic who retreated to a convent in the last year of her life. Whoever Feliciani actually was, no one knows. These representations of a woman’s place in French civil society are all we have—and perhaps all that matter. How else shall we consider the numerous theatrical and lyrical renditions of many other freemason women in the period?

Gossip was the first to circulate about Feliciani, and the rumors said more about the mongers than they did about her. Marquis de Chefdebien, garrisoned in Strasbourg while the Balsamos were there in 1781, remarked her exotic
appearance in his report to curious masons back in Paris: “[The] woman is a Roman and has the face of one. To me she seems to have some éclat.”15 How she made her money was a concern that Vicomte de Barras did not share in his assessment years later in Paris: Balsamo “displayed much luxury in his home. He used it to embellish a pretty and attractive lady, whom he called his wife.”16 Her reputation for generosity to the poor, “as charitable as her husband,” was duly noted by M. de Kinglin, a priest in Strasbourg.17 On the other hand, an anonymous biography of the magician in 1787—Cagliostro’s Liber Memorialis (Gospel), translations of which circulated widely—denies that she was his wife; “she was merely an assistant for his hat tricks” and various tasks such as guarding their jewelry on feast days rather than attending mass (though late in life Feliciani evidently found solace in her discussions with a chaplain who aided her return to the church).18 Feliciani was overshadowed by her larger-than-life companion, who appreciated her willingness to step back from the limelight. This freemason woman preferred the dimmer aura of Cagliostro’s penumbra to create an independent space of her own, notwithstanding the many responsibilities he gave her to sustain the verisimilitude of his mystical illusions.

The most critical view was that of Marquis de Luchet, whose imagination ran amok in his descriptions of an orgy at the adoption lodge Isis in 1785. He was more than happy to embroider upon unseemly tidbits about the Cagliostros in keeping with Feliciani’s feminist critique of men’s dysfunctional institutions.19 More to the point, during the lodge’s inaugural initiation, the maestro as naked as Adam himself dangled from the ceiling to direct the women candidates to unveil their own unvarnished truths. Feliciani is then reported to have left with her rumored paramour, Chevalier d’Oisement.20 A half hour later, a bit disheveled, she returned to the festivities to justify the Egyptian Rite’s scandalous rituals. “That’s the point of our knowledge,” she announced to the banquet gathering of tipsy women. “Study twenty years, meditate like [John] Locke, reason like [Pierre] Bayle, write like [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau, all you know is how essential Pleasure is to the world. This temple is consecrated to it.”21 (The characters Justine and Clairwil in Sade’s novels said as much.) Because there is no other record of this pronouncement, Luchet’s account went down in masonic lore as true enough for Gérard de Nerval, a louveteau (child initiate) and son of a mason, to consider repeating it in his Les Illuminés (1852, The Illuminati); but he had second thoughts and excised the marquis’ most shameless exaggerations.22 Feliciani’s reputation, and that of the adoption rituals for women, was consistent with the dubious reputation of Balsamo himself, who is even alleged to have escaped Paris after the Diamond Necklace Affair with his wife’s diamonds, not the queen’s.23
Feliciani’s image changes dramatically after she informed the Roman Inquisition of Balsamo’s masonic activities. Her confession to the Holy Congregation complained of her husband and led to his incarceration in the Castel Sant’Angelo in 1789. The Inquisition’s investigation, quickly translated into French, provided francophone readers enticing details about the Egyptian Rite, but also about her disaffection with Balsamo. She wearied of his language, particularly its “most boring, disconnected [and] incoherent prolixity,” but also of his “diabolical manner” during the initiations. She even testified, the official record indicates, that Balsamo considered extramarital sex permissible if it had an ulterior motive other than love. Elements of her confession, in two installments, one in September, the other the following January, were also included in the flurry of publications on Balsamo’s arrest, trial, and death sentence (commuted by the pope to life in prison), though with considerably less scrupulous attention to accuracy than the inquisitors. Although rumors continued to circulate, such as about her escaping the cloister Santa’Apollinare to become the mistress of a prelate—a belief more about the clergy than about Serafina—she is supposed to have found consolation in her faith, evident in her repentant testimony. Long afterward, in 1895, Jules Bois still defined her by her husband’s occultism, with a marked polemical twist. “The 18th century,” Bois writes, “believed it was radiant, decked with a diadem and a tiara promised by the Tarot, empress and pope, wife of the great Copte Cagliostro, priestess of Isis. She instigated the revolution, she built the scaffold to revenge her funeral pyre.” This observation, by a putative ally of women’s causes, literally places Feliciani at the center of the conservative’s animus: masonry’s revolutionary conspiracy. By the end of the nineteenth century, her persona had shifted from person to ideology, from social scandal to political upheaval.

In the interim, after the revolutionary decade, Feliciani dropped from public view for nearly fifty years. There was instead a rash of theatrical interest in Cagliostro; his thaumaturgy was a natural source of popular titillation. At least six plays about the magician were staged in Paris, mostly comedies, between 1807 and 1844, likely reaching a larger audience than the correspondence, memoirs, and transcripts of the inquisition’s investigation. Among the earliest of these productions, Emmanuel Dupaty and Jacques-Antoine de Révéroni Saint-Cyr’s Cagliostro ou Les illuminés (1810, Cagliostro or the Illuminati), a comic opera, had no role for a Feliciani; there was just a young woman seeking enlightenment by initiation in the Illuminés de Bavière. Neither Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s satirical Der Groß-Cophta (1791, The Grand Cophte), staged in French in 1825, nor Eugène Scribe’s comic opera in 1844, Cagliostro, offers any indication of
Feliciani’s existence. The closest approximation of Balsamo’s partner assumes the guise of Mathilde, the presumed sister to the fabulist Comte de Santa Vecchia, in Jean-François Boursault-Malherbe’s adaptation of Julius von Söden’s play, *L’Illuminé ou Le nouveau Cagliostro* (1807, *The Illuminatus, or The New Cagliostro*). Mathilde is seduced by the count and serves as an accessory in dramatic scenes calling up the dead at the special request of an impressionable patron. “From the man of honor,” the count’s jealous rival, Sédoc, predicts sarcastically, “the wench will finish by persuading herself that she was really a sister of her former lover, and that this former lover was actually Comte de Santa Vecchia.”

In her poised and commanding demeanor, Mathilde mimics Balsamo’s Feliciani, the willing tool of a confidence man, exposed (and repentant) in the end, while the disgraced Comte de Santa Vecchia is addressed crudely in the second-person familiar, “Scram, go to hell!” This final scene of the play echoes Feliciani’s part in Balsamo’s condemnation by the Roman Inquisition in 1790.

In the late 1840s, Feliciani as a literary type takes another turn, this time at the hands of the prodigious novelist, Alexandre Dumas père. In lieu of a once-active participant in Balsamo’s mystical charade, Feliciani becomes a double figure, an innocent at the mercy of a calculating mesmerist, but also a resentful, independent woman anxious to flee her tormentor. This refashioned cultural icon engenders Feliciani into a variation on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s contemporaneous stereotype of women as either compliant housewives (at home) or wily courtesans (in public).

Dumas’s hugely successful *Les Mémoires d’un médecin: Joseph Balsamo* (*A Physician’s Memoir: Joseph Balsamo*) coauthored with Auguste Maquet and serialized in the Parisian newspaper *La Presse* (May 1846–January 1848), appealed to the mid-nineteenth-century’s expectations of utopian socialist and reform-minded women before the 1848 Revolution. Feliciani’s bifurcated character maps neatly onto divided notions of women at a critical moment of French social and political change. Evidently, the Old Regime and its institutions, including the Bourbon monarchy, masonic lodges, and Enlightenment salons on the eve of the Revolution of 1789, intrigued Dumas’s audience when comparable structures were in upheaval sixty years later. The banquet campaigns starting in summer 1847, the July Monarchy’s stiff resistance, and the drift toward yet another uprising predicted by Alexis de Tocqueville—“a wind of revolution . . . is in the air. . . . The storm is on the horizon”—promised women activists a new opportunity to be heard. In this context, Feliciani resurfaced in another guise consistent with prerevolutionary circumstances. It comes as no surprise that after decades of complaisance and relative indifference, freemasonry anticipated its own renewal in troubled times.
Dumas’s novel is best known in masonic circles for its stunning depiction of an initiation in the very first chapters (and again in *La Comtesse de Charny*). Balsamo reveals his identity to take charge of a tenue of Illuminati, near Mont-Tonnerre (Donnersberg) deep in the Palatinate’s most impenetrable forest, to move the lodge against the French monarchy, a goal expressed in the group’s slogan, *Lilia Pedibus Destrue* (Trample the Lilies Underfoot). But Feliciani does not take part in this ceremony. At the time she is making her own way to Paris where she will eventually stage-manage, under Balsamo’s careful direction, his masonic activities described in the novel, set some twelve to fifteen years (1770–74) before the actual couple was in Paris (1785–86). Their story is intertwined, in five fat volumes, with that of the provincial Taverney family’s quest in Paris for the preferment of position and privilege appropriate to the old nobility of the sword. Their fortunes are tied, however, to more than the Cagliostros; they are entangled with the personal and political intrigues at the court of Louis XV, his meddling mistress, his contending ministers, and the future king and queen of France. The physician of the fictional series, featuring three other novels and extending chronologically right through the Revolution of 1789–94, is the unscrupulously ambitious Gilbert, initially a servant of Baron de Taverney, then the protégé of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and a gardener at Marie-Antoinette’s Trianon in Versailles; he will train as a medical doctor whose memoirs are played out in historical time. The anachronisms frequent in Dumas’s hastily written fiction are hard to ignore, such as the arrival of three entourages, those of Marie-Antoinette from Austria, the Taverney from Lorraine, and the Balsamo from Rome, all at the same time in Paris. With that coincidence, the stage is set for the rest of the novel (well before a months-long break in the *La Presse*’s serialization pending the author’s pledge to the reader, “To be continued”).

Against this backdrop, Feliciani enables Balsamo’s rapid ascension into Parisian high society through his communications with the dead, his hypnotic magnetism à la Mesmer, and his mysterious rituals in the masonic lodges he convenes in Paris with the support of the Illuminati (who are funding his antimonarchist activities). The hypnotized Feliciani facilitates these endeavors at the expense of the lucid Feliciani who longs to break free from Balsamo’s control. As she says to Madame Louise, Louis XV’s eldest daughter, abbess of the Ursulines in Saint Denis, “with him there I am no longer myself, I am him; what he wants, I want; what he commands, I do; my soul no longer has any strength, my mind no longer has a will: a jail-keeper subdues and fascinates me.” This tension between enslavement and freedom, between clairvoyance and consciousness, is always there, whether or not Feliciani is in a trance, which renders her compliant without a
life of her own but always with the indelible traces of resentment. (The narrator’s sympathy for the young woman—and for others like her in Dumas’s oeuvre—is certainly worth noting.) Such is Feliciani’s condition throughout the novel as she seeks to escape her captor. It colors every scene where she plays the principal role until her tragic death at the hands of Balsamo’s demonic mentor, Althotas. Feliciani thus represents a masonic woman at odds with the craft represented by Balsamo, and thereby falls victim to its mystical elements that result in an insane—and deadly—quest for immortality. Feliciani, it seems, dies by someone else’s fatal mistake about her place in the masonic occult, a problem that Dumas the latter-day freemason claimed to understand.

This theme in Dumas’s novel—that of “two very distinct Lorenzas” and their implications for the mystical elements of freemasonry—unfolds in four key scenes: Feliciani’s attempt to escape to the convent in Saint-Denis (chapters 50–52), her confrontation with Balsamo over their marriage (chapters 55–57), her provision of secret masonic documents to the Lieutenant Général de Police Antoine de Sartines (chapter 123), and her sacrificial murder by Althotas (chapters 127–34). At each moment, Feliciani’s clairvoyance provides Balsamo the liberty, wealth, and power he craves, but at an emotional cost he can barely sustain without breaking her spell. She is his wife only figuratively speaking. The double existence of his spouse asleep and his spouse awake replicates fault lines in freemasonry itself, torn, like Balsamo, between Enlightenment and mysticism, between the perfection of humanity and the elixir of life, between rites for men and others for women. For this reason, it seems, Balsamo at last surrenders to his hypnotized wife the physical affection she so desired. “Love, which completes physical being, also enlarges moral being,” the mason explains. “Love, as with all generous passions, approaches God, and from this God comes all light,” presumably even that of the craft. As Balsamo’s Parisian townhouse burns to the ground, thanks to Althotas’s spiteful gesture when he realizes his imminent mortality, Feliciani is immolated along with all the trappings of Balsamo’s magic, including “the demons” she feared most in a world on the brink of revolution. These destructive tropes are pursued at much greater length in Dumas’s next three novels of Les Mémoires d’un médecin: Le Collier de la reine (1849–50, The Queen’s Necklace), Ange Pitou (1850), and La Comtesse de Charny (1853). The reader is thus left to contemplate the ambivalent image of a freemason woman destroyed by male privilege and history itself, both beyond her control.

Feliciani is not the only female character struggling against such constraints in Dumas’s novel. The lives of two others, Andrée de Taverney and Comtesse du
Contesting Imaginaries of Freemason Women

Barry, resemble Feliciani’s: they both are subject to Balsamo’s secretive practices with an eye to destroying the French monarchy; and they both find themselves in disgrace at the novel’s end, though Barry at least survives (only to die in tragic circumstances, comparable to those of Feliciani and Taverney, during the revolutionary terror twenty years later). These three women share a social status of someone else’s making. For Feliciani, though descended from old Roman nobility, she is a count’s spouse; for Taverney, she is from impoverished provincial nobility but elevated to the queen’s companion in Versailles; and for Barry, she is a commoner made a countess by marriage before becoming the king’s favorite. They are all torn by the same ambivalence, caught as they are between the rewards of their special talents as clairvoyant (Feliciani), as medium (Taverney), or as agent (Barry), on the one hand, and their enslavement to Balsamo’s mystical powers, on the other. For example, while Feliciani teeters on the verge of unconscious love and conscious loathing for the masonic magician, Taverney finds herself engaged in a secret struggle of her own, “this silent battle . . . between the girl and the mysterious traveler.” In familiar poetic terms used to characterize Feliciani, the narrator explains, “in effect, Andrée, subjugated by an unknown, irresistible force, nodded her forehead softly, like a flower whose calyx just received a very heavy dewdrop,” in response to Balsamo’s projection of mesmeric fluid in the novel’s early action. Despite their exalted station in life, these women’s independent agency is compromised by a real as well as a figural gender hierarchy in a ruthless Parisian society at the mercy of contending forces—of the seditious Illuminati and a failing monarchy.

Perhaps the most suggestive of portraits of the three is Barry’s, not because she is a freemason like Feliciani—she had nothing to do with the craft—but because in her role as the king’s mistress she exercises the authority of an illegitimate, one might say, subversive sort—as if she were a freemason. “The [king’s] favorite, with her casual habits, her free spirit, her mirthful personality, her inexhaustible nature, her boisterous flights of fancy, had transformed the quiet chateau into a topsy-turvy place.” During her own morning ceremony, attended by high-ranking, favor-seeking members of the king’s government, Barry displays all the attributes of a powerbroker, making use of her relationship with the king, of course, but also with the penny-scribblers, songwriters, and pamphleteers of Paris whose influence on public opinion she openly mobilizes to her purposes. Accordingly, for example, the head of the police, Antoine de Sartines, is blackmailed into working to have the king dismiss his chief minister Duc de Choiseul, if need be, so she can be properly presented to the king’s court in time for the official reception of the dauphine Marie-Antoinette. “My word, Madame,” cries
Sartines before he bends to his knees in supplication, “I place my responsibilities in your hands. I no longer oversee the police, you do.” And the ruse works. The dauphine, under orders from the Austrian ambassador, greets the king’s mistress with sufficient wit and courtesy to stupefy the court. “Your Majesty is very happy to have so charming a lady friend,” she says to Louis, “and I am not surprised by the attachment she can inspire.” Without the help of Balsamo’s timely interventions via the mesmerized Taverney, this stunning event would have never occurred, or so the novel would have its readers believe.

These women characters’ sad ends bear witness to the tightening gender norms of the nineteenth century. Taverney is raped by an impetuous suitor who kidnaps her baby; deep in the emotional miseries of betrayal, loss, and the trance from which a distracted Balsamo forgets to release her, she retreats to a cloister. Similarly, Barry gathers with Louis XV’s family at his bedside, only for the king to pack her off to the château in Reuil before he dies of smallpox, less to protect her from the disease than in a belated fit of family scruple. “Matters had come to this,” the narrator muses, “the king lives and Madame du Barry is still the queen? Or the king dies and Madame du Barry is merely an execrable and shameful courtesan?” Balsamo lamented neither Taverney’s seclusion nor Barry’s disgrace, but he despaired of Feliciani’s accidental sacrifice to Althotas’s occult practices, the very ones Balsamo himself deployed for his own “masonic” ends. In the novel’s anachronistic confusion of freemasonry with the Illuminati, seers, charlatans, and enemies of the monarchy, Dumas’s literary achievement is, in part, to have portrayed the stakes of this confusion for the women caught up in it. These figures disappear from the narrative for the remaining novels in *Les Mémoires d’un médecin*, along with Balsamo himself who lurks on the margins at watershed moments in the Diamond Necklace Affair, the storming of the Bastille, and the bloodshed during the Terror. The women seem to be both his victims and his victors. They may not have stopped the alleged masonic conspiracy against the Old Regime, but they relegated its historical plans for the monarchy, not just Balsamo, to the background. Men and women masons alike are but one factor in the fatality that Dumas saw in the revolution and its aftermath.

This historical diffidence is reflected five years later in Jules de Saint-Félix’s *Aventures de Cagliostro* (1854, *Cagliostro’s Adventures*), a popular biography of Balsamo. It resembles fiction in its action and dialogue, re-creating the protagonist (and his wife) in terms not unlike those of Dumas’s novel. Saint-Félix wrote a forgiving assessment of Balsamo’s partner in their fraudulent activity together stretching across the face of Europe, from Rome to Saint-Petersburg.
to Paris and back to Rome. Balsamo was the source of their evil, not Feliciani. As Saint-Félix put it, “this new Penelope . . . was an excellent preacher to bring in souls and charm imaginations,” not because she was so adept but because she was so sincere.49 “The beautiful Lorenza,” the biographer writes, “made no small contribution to her husband’s success. To the elixirs and potions that Comte de Fénix [Cagliostro] distributed, she added the magnetism of her gaze and the charm of her words . . . in the manner of a capable actress.”50 This ploy also marks Saint-Félix’s account of the Diamond Necklace Affair; well-versed in deception, Feliciani read aright the malevolent machinations of Madame de la Motte. Similarly, during the August 1785 initiation of thirty-six women into the Isis lodge, she oversaw a remarkably restrained ceremony, the most outrageous feature of which were her honest remarks about the condition of married women in Old Regime society, contrary to Marquis de Luchet’s salacious version of the event.51 Even when Feliciani turns to the Roman Inquisition in an effort to save her soul, she thought of her husband’s salvation, as well: “she strived to draw upon the religious sentiments she had maintained deep in her heart.”52 To no avail. The last image of Feliciani we have is remarkably generous, one atypical of the period of its redaction, the mid-nineteenth century.

Pamina and Balkis

The masonic symbolism of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte (1791, The Magic Flute) is well known.53 The composer and his librettist, Emmanuel Schikaneder, were brethren, though records indicate that only Mozart was a member of Zur Gekrönten Hofnung in Vienna while they were working together on the opera (Schikaneder had been initiated by Zu den Drei Schlüsseln sometime earlier in Regensburg). They were both aware of the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II’s concern about the craft in the wake of the French Revolution, so they agreed to depict freemasonry as they understood it, subject to some creative whimsies (such as the tomfoolery of a major character, the bird-catcher Papagano, in search of a companionable mate in the indulgent Papagana). The storyline was settled early on in their collaboration: Tamino, a young prince, is sent by the Queen of the Night to rescue her daughter, Pamina, from the control of the queen’s archrival, Sarastro. Sarastro turns out not to be a sinister figure, but rather a wise and benevolent high priest, a source of light in sharp contrast to the queen of darkness. He recognizes Tamino as a likely candidate for initiation, which entails a series of trials shared by Pamina and Papagano, for admission to Sarastro’s secret order. Despite the efforts of the queen to frustrate
Sarastro and his acolytes, the opera ends with the triumph of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and love over hate, as the chorus honors Tamino and Pamina together:

Hail to you on your initiation! You have pierced the night,
Thanks be offered to you, Osiris and Isis!
Fortitude has triumphed and rewarded
Beauty and wisdom with an eternal crown!
(Act 2, Scene 30, lines 23–26)

Mozart’s music reinforces this masonic fable, drawing on musical motifs familiar to the brethren in the audience. It borrows the threefold chord that begins the overture and punctuates it twice more to underscore the mystical significance of the rule of three, which is also evident in the three temples, the three virtues, the three qualifications for initiation, and the three concurrent plotlines at work in the opera. For masons these elements were obvious, for the profane far less so.

One feature to *Die Zauberflöte* still less apparent to everyone is women’s participation in the masonic mysteries. In keeping with the craft’s mythic roots in the ancient past, including the builders of pyramids in ancient Egypt, Schikaneder appropriated much from Abbé Jean Terrasson’s novel, *Séthos* (1731), translated into German in 1777, which Cagliostro also used for his Egyptian Rite in both mixed and adoption lodges. This ritual tradition was not well known in central Europe at the time, but with the nearly contemporaneous publication of the Roman Inquisition’s investigation of Cagliostro’s masonic activity, the opera’s symbolism assumes other meanings that cognoscenti would have recognized during the performance.

The Grand Cophté was indeed a high priest like Sarastro, not just a grand maître at the head of a masonic order; he frequently invoked the male and female gods Isis and Osiris during the order’s tenues; and his wife Feliciani directed the initiation of women in the Parisian lodge Isis. These parallels became even more evident during the nineteenth century, when the Bédarride brothers established their own Egyptian order of Misraïm. A closer look at Pamina in Mozart’s opera certainly offsets its emphatic relegation of women, in part, to the forces of evil and to a subordinate place in Tamino’s initiation. Although Tamino and Pamina fall in love at first sight and develop a romantic equality-in-difference, Sarastro sternly warns the young woman, “Only a man must guide your heart, / For without him does every woman / Stray from her natural sphere” (Act 1, Scene 18, lines 24–26), an admonition that women hardly ever heard in a lodge or that Pamina necessarily heeded.
All the same, Pamina faces her own initiation-like trials and reaps the rewards for facing them. While Tamino (and Papagano) are blindfolded and led off to the temple to begin their initiatory trial of silence, Sarastro takes Pamina away with him, as if to show her a separate path to the masonic mysteries. Accordingly, she is given a knife to kill Sarastro and then subjected to harassment at the hands of the archetypal outsider Monostatos, the mounting fury of her frustrated mother, and the firm vow of Tamino not to speak to anyone, including her. She is formally separated from her betrothed. In Pamina’s despondency, she contemplates suicide, which her faith in Tamino’s love overcomes. She finds him in time to join in his final trial by fire, water, air, and earth, encouraged through it all by his playing of the magic flute. The opera ends in the triumph over the Queen of the Night and her minions to the boom of thunder and the blaze of lightening, as the temple opens to both Tamino and Pamina. “What luck that we see each other again,” he sings, “Happy hand in hand to enter the temple. / A woman, who does not fear darkness and death, / Is worthy and will be initiated” (Act 2, Scene 28, lines 18–21). In the words of musicologist and conductor Jane Glover, “it is [Pamina] who leads her own ‘Mann’ through the trials which bring him his wisdom, his maturity and therefore his security.”58 Mozart seems to have understood this key component to masonry, the role of women, notwithstanding Sarastro’s severity reflecting the Old Regime’s gender relations.59 For the composer—and the opera he created with Schikaneder—the woman is an essential companion and guide to freemasonry and thus to (hu)mankind. Much of this the opera’s Viennese audience may have recognized amidst widespread acclaim for the premiere far from revolutionary Paris. This singular success just months before Mozart’s death did not travel well to France, however. What Parisians experienced ten years later was nearly another work, *Les Mystères d’Isis* (1801, *The Mysteries of Isis*) by Étienne Morel de Chédeville and Ludwig Lenzel Lachnith, first performed at the Théâtre de la République des Arts.60 It was a medley of the opera’s most tuneful moments in another narrative and musical order, its elements mostly but not exclusively borrowed from Schikaneder’s book and Mozart’s composition. In part Morel and Lachnith needed to adapt a very Austrian work to French taste (for example, their production replaced Papagano’s impish pranks with sentimental ones) and they worried about the Consulate’s censors objecting to masonic references (the new work emphasized more religious themes instead). As a consequence, Morel adopted motifs from the ancient myth of Orpheus in Memphis and from spiritual initiations in Étienne-François de Lantier’s *Voyages d’Anténor en Grèce et Asie* (1797, *Antenor’s Travels in Greece and Asia*). Similarly, parts of the score were not from this opera.
at all but from three others by Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786, *The Marriage of Figaro*), *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791, *The Clemency of Titus*), plus some drumrolls by Franz Joseph Haydn. So different was it from the Viennese original—despite reference to Mozart’s music on the title page—better-informed viewers mistook it for a joke, which obliging wits quickly made explicit. Within three weeks of the work’s opening in Paris, *Les Mystères d’Issy* (*The Mysteries of Issy*) exaggerating the most egregious flaws of Morel and Lachnith’s so-called *Les Misères d’ici* (*The Miseries from Here*) was produced at the Théâtre de la Marais. As Hector Berlioz put it years later, “the libretto is itself a mystery that no one can decipher.”

The reviewers of the first French adaptation were just as confused and unsparing in their judgment. An anonymous writer in the *Album national* referred to Cagliostro’s “juggling acts”; they must have inspired the new opera, which “celebrated, in Paris, the bizarre mysteries that fashion and whimsy had given many adepts.” Similarly, François Guillaume Ducray-Dumenil stated, “*The Magic Flute* is a sort of farce, more or less bad with regard to interest [and] with regard to dramatic rules,” as one would expect in its very unclassical mixing of musical and theatrical genres of comic buffoonery and serious declamation, of fairytale fable and religious subject matter. “It is sad,” sighed Julien-Louis Geoffroy in the *Journal des débats*, “how Mozart had his heavenly music ruined by verses as trivial and as baroque as those for *The Magic Flute*” in Paris. As a general rule, critics like Berlioz were much more severe about the libretto than they were about the music. Mozart, they felt, managed to overcome “this extravagant play,” mused one in conclusion to his detailed synopsis. A full performance of Mozart’s opera (in German) did not occur in Paris until May 1829, and then only for two nights, at the Théâtre Italien. As a result, no one in France—beyond the three commentators Geoffroy, Brunot in *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* (*Postings, Announcements, and Various Notices*) and another in the *Album national*—thought of freemasonry in any connection with these works, much less the place of women in the craft as suggested in the original.

However arcane Mozart’s masonic references, they very nearly disappear altogether in the French version. Morel and Lachnith simply recast the work. Instead of Schikaneder’s two acts, there were four; all names but two (Sarastro and Pamina) of the characters were changed; their motivations were frequently inscrutable in a plot that had been reduced, except for extraneous diversions, to little more than Tamino’s preparation to become a high priest; and, perhaps the oddest modification of all, the magic flute had become an Egyptian sistrum. The basis for the opera’s original title was displaced entirely by another musical
tonality. “It was like reading a parody,” opined the irritated reviewer in *L’Encyclopédie (The Encyclopedia).* Consequently, the influence of the craft on the production is nearly impossible to discern. Tamino/Ismenor’s vaguely masonic initiation is central to Morel’s story—it *is* the plot—but it is obscured by inexplicable distractions throughout the narrative. At the very end, the chorus elides the masonic universalizing in Schikaneder’s book to sing happily, “How wedlock beckons; / For tenderness / Pluck the flowers. / Taste without ceasing / The sweet drunkenness / Of tender hearts” (Act 4, Scene 8, lines 10–15). And so, in a light-hearted mood focused on Tamino/Ismenor’s winning the hand of Pamina, “the initiate’s reception is the subject of the full ballet that ends the opera.” After the ceremony in the temple, this dance is as close to women in masonry as the adaptation gets.

A sizeable audience of Parisians had to wait until the Second Empire before they experienced anything resembling *Die Zauberflöte.* After sixty-nine performances by 1809, another seventy-five by 1825, the Morel/Lachnith version continued to be staged, off and on, until 1836. Its elaborate décor and many extended ballets minimized the influence of German culture on French music, which remained a burning topic for decades among cultural pundits. As with anything remotely seditious, Mozart’s opera appeared in French translation only after it had been meticulously vetted by the imperial censors; the 1865 version was no exception. Nüttier and Beaumont’s *La Flûte enchantée* restored the work’s original name, almost all of Mozart’s score, and much more of Schikaneder’s book, dramatically cutting the number and length of the dance scenes that had encumbered *Les Mystères d’Isis.* The two acts, the characters, and the plot were largely the same; Léon Carvalho’s musical arrangement hued truer to Mozart’s composition. But the masonic elements, lost in Morel’s revision, remained opaque in the changes to Schikaneder’s libretto that focused on religious mysteries to sanctify the love of Tamino and Pamina. In effect, the narrative was altered to conclude with Tamino’s initiation, alone, in the temple to make him worthy of Pamina. So, when the opera begins, the couple is already affianced; Tamino is a lowly fisherman corrupted by the Queen of the Night; Pamina is kidnapped by a slave merchant and sold to the divinities of the night; and the couple pick up where they left off only once Tamino has rescued her, with the assistance of the goddess Isis, and been ritually purified in the temple. Thus love, not Tamino’s (or Pamina’s) masonic virtue, conquers all in true popular theatrical form.

To underscore this revision of *Die Zauberflöte,* Cavalho’s musical arrangement during Tamino’s trials also deviates from the original. As the musicologist George Servières observed, “the scene for the trials is staged with a music from
melodrama having no relation to Mozart’s score.” The same is true after Tamino’s initiation in the temple (Act 4, Scene 2). Instead of going into the temple hand-in-hand with Pamina, Tamino sings of marching through life together: “Love shows us the way. / Let us walk! My hand presses yours” (lines 8–9). And their duet closes the scene of their reunification: “Together let us walk to the end. / For you here is salvation” (lines 31–32). There is no hint that Pamina has endured similar trials preparing her for initiation with Tamino. They go forth as a married couple, not as brother and sister in a masonic lodge. Accordingly, the chorus closes the opera on a downtempo note: “For our holy mysteries / Fathom the meaning. / Glory to the powerful gods! / Frank and sincere hearts, / From a deceptive world / Flee the miseries, / To you happiness!” (Act 4, Scene 5, lines 9–15). The finale fails to rescue so insipid a lyric.

Clearly, the concluding gesture here is a contraction. It marks a closing in on the married couple celebrated by Isis, not an opening up to the harmony of all men and women to the greater good of a civic morality, as apparent in Schikaneder’s original chorus. The Parisian critics were swift to point this out. “Its religious essence is effectively La Flûte enchantée’s music. It expresses faith [and] love, and breathes, from its first to its last note, I know not what sentiment of infinite gentleness, of heavenly peace,” of a private ceremony not a universal engagement, according to Henri Blaze de Bury. It is no accident that Schikaneder’s name is found nowhere in the 1865 published edition. Only in 1909, 118 years after its first Viennese performance, were Parisians able to attend a faithful rendering of Mozart and Schikaneder’s work, thanks to Paul Ferrier and Alexandre Bisson’s version of La Flûte enchantée at the Opéra Comique. At last, just as the alliance between masonry and feminism reached its apogee, Pamina the maçonne reached the French stage.

It is worth noting how another opera—and the book on which it was based—presented a masonic protagonist for French audiences to admire: Balkis, the Queen of Sheba in Charles Gounod’s La Reine de Saba (1862). The composer was not a mason, nor was Gérard de Nerval, the author of the travelogue that Gounod and his librettist used for their work. As evident in his Les Illuminés, Nerval was well versed in the craft and featured it in his Voyage en Orient (1856, Journey to the Orient), first published as a series of articles. A large section of the book was devoted to the “Histoire de la Reine du Matin et Soliman, prince des génies” (“The Story of the Queen of the Morning and Solomon, Prince of the Genii”) recounting the famous visit of Balkis to King Solomon. This occasion coincided with the building of Solomon’s magnificent temple by the master
Contesting Imaginaries of Freemason Women

architect and bronze-maker, Adoniram, better known as Hiram or Hiram Abif in the Hebrew books of I Kings (7.13–45) and II Chronicles (2.12–17, 4.11–16). As with the Egyptian pyramids, the temple represents for freemasons a useful myth of an illustrious past, which lies at the heart of the initiation ceremony for the master mason in the rituals worked by the Scottish, French, and Memphis Rites. By keeping secrets and by trusting one’s brethren in life-and-death situations, the master mason demonstrates that s/he, too, can honor Hiram’s martyrdom. (Reputedly three of Hiram’s journeymen—Phanor, Amrou, and Méthousaël—betray their guild secrets and kill him for the wages they felt were owing to them.) His death also symbolizes the necessity for an initiate to renounce the profane’s life in order to be resurrected as a member of the lodge. Nerval revises this foundation story in freemasonry to include a woman, the Queen of Sheba. In his account, she falls in love with Hiram/Adoniram, despite Solomon’s earnest courtship. Consumed by jealousy, so Nerval has it, Solomon instigates Adoniram’s murder at the hands of his workers. But Balkis remains true to her love and their unborn child by returning to her kingdom in present-day Yemen.

On the face of it, Nerval’s version of Hiram’s heroic demise does not substantially alter the mythic meaning of freemasonry’s most important ritual. Masons accepted his interpretation, in spite of Solomon’s baser instincts, as confirmation of their long-held beliefs about the proper origins of their rites. This was in large part because Nerval based his work on what was known from Abbé Calbre Pérau on its eighteenth-century origins and from Louis Guillemain de Saint-Victor on its adonhiramite variations. Although the accomplished writer Théophile Gautier was never a mason, he noted the critical role played by the self-evident mysteries in Voyage en Orient as a whole:

The Legend of the Calif Hakim [and] the Story of Balkis and Solomon indicate to what extent Gérard de Nerval is imbued by the mysterious and profound spirit of these strange narratives in which each word is a symbol. One can actually say that he guards certain implicit understandings, certain cabalistic formulas, certain manners of the initiated, which are made believable at moments when he speaks from experience.

The ritual connection was thus obvious to an outsider, even if he knew less about it than did the emperor Napoléon III (who at the time was much more worried about rebellious workers than he was about masonic arcanum). The craft is in fact difficult to overlook when Nerval reveals how much Balkis reveres Adoniram, “the veritable chief of this nation [of working masons], a sovereign of intelligence and genius, a peaceful and patient arbiter over the destinies of the
Seigneur’s elect.” In a fit of enthusiasm soon after the publication of Nerval’s work, the redactors of ritual in the Scottish Rite revised the maître degree in order to enhance the role of Sheba and to diminish that of Solomon. Evidently, Nerval’s narrative of the queen’s love for Adoniram made her a more sympathetic embodiment of freemasonry for everyone, including women, to ponder. 

Unlike Adoniram, who undergoes an extended, dramatic initiation, Balkis is not a mason; but she is certainly a masonic figure. Her attachment to the master mason is, of course, one sign of her affiliation and the source for the expression that brethren frequently use about one another as “the widow’s child.” Solomon saw in her “the ideal and mystical instance of the goddess Isis,” the patron goddess of the Egyptian Rite whose masonic virtue lies in her having chosen Adoniram instead of Solomon as her mate. With the master mason’s assassination, she returns to Sheba with a promising progeny: “Adoniram’s posterity remained sacred for [the brothers]; for a long time afterwards they always swore by the widow’s son; thus are Adoniram and the Queen of Sheba’s descendants so designated.” 

Without Balkis, the mythology about the craft’s master rite makes no sense; Nerval’s story explains it in a manner typical of his mystical romanticism. As the noted literary critic Edward Said points out, “The Orient symbolizes Nerval’s dream-loss and the fugitive woman central to it, both as desire and as loss. . . . The Orient is [thus] identified with commemorative absence,” one as fundamental to the West’s view of the East as it is to the West’s view of itself. Freemasonry’s search for its origins in and around bronze-age Egypt—and that region’s search for its origins in India—leaves the craft, much as Western civilization, bereft of firmer foundations for its symbolic edifice, except in the deification of a woman to join its panoply of divinities. Unfortunately, perhaps for the sisters, Balkis was a relatively late and short-lived addition to masonic ritual and history. But her cultural image retains all its luster in Nerval’s book and Gounod’s opera.

Nerval sketched the libretto to an opera entitled, “La Reine de Saba.” Its score, he thought, would best be composed by either Giacomo Meyerbeer or Fromental Halévy to launch the career of the soprano Jenny Colon in the role of Balkis. He circulated the idea without success, at least while he was alive. But the idea, if not the sketch, finally fell into the hands of Jules Barbier and Michel Carré to revise with Gounod. Their debt to Nerval is significant. The plotline remains the same, as do the characters, the setting, much of the dialogue and the tone. Despite the differences between verse and prose, portions of the opera’s lyrics, especially in the first act, are drawn directly from Nerval’s Voyage en Orient. And so Solomon states of Adoniram, “He is an odd fellow, / Somber and dreamy, almost wild, / That the King of Tyre sent me; / His origins are a mystery” (Act
But there are also notable variations in detail, many of which highlight Gounod’s difficulties in working with a recalcitrant cast, chorus, dance troupe, stage designer, and minister of state (such that Georges Bizet felt obliged to append the omitted fantastic furnace scene in his transcription for piano and voice). During the rehearsals, to accommodate the twelve dance sets and to finish the performance by midnight, several scenes were cut, obscuring the characters’ motivations. The resulting confusion irked one critic enough to ask, “What interest can a story create where . . . its most important personalities are dolts and fools, if not cowards, rascals, villains, and repugnant types?” This cast of apparent rogues was none other than the principals of the love triangle formed by Solomon, Balkis, and Adoniram in an opera reduced to melodramatic convention.

What remains, however, is the significance of Balkis the freemason woman on and off the stage. She visits Solomon as a potential spouse. He courts her in part by displaying the splendors of his temple and the masons, including Adoniram, at work on it. But her first gift, a pearl necklace, is not accorded the king but the master architect whose secret hand gesture creates order from the chaos of all the men in his employ. Such power moves the visiting queen. Comparing the mason’s artistic genius with the king’s material vulgarity, Balkis falls in love with Adoniram, who in declaring his own affection foreshadows her role in and after his death. “No, even if my dream faded away forever,” he declaims to her, “even if this sweet hope eludes me . . . / Oh, do not speak, leave me to doubt / This happy or fatal moment, alas. / My heart calls out to it, my heart fears it. / Let me die! . . . Oh, do not speak” (Act 3, Scene 5, lines 70–75).

Meanwhile, Solomon’s humiliation and jealousy move him to urge the three disgruntled journeymen against their master. The trio confront Adoniram, stab him, and escape in time for Balkis to discover her dying lover in time to place on his finger the wedding ring she had retrieved from Solomon. She holds him in her arms as he dies. This actual and metaphorical embrace of masonry’s mythic hero, an initiation in extremis, makes her a virtual member of the craft; and the child she conceived with him signifies the next generation of freemasons. In the last scene of the opera, Balkis speaks to and for all future masters who have survived comparable trials, “Let us take at night to the other shore / The venerable remains of the mason who is no longer! / And let his hallowed name be handed down through the ages / Until the last days of centuries to come!” (Act 5, Scene 3, lines 4–7). These lines of love and despair, so expressive of masonry’s ritualistic heritage, are among Gounod’s more melodious moments. From this point onward, the freemason Balkis, like Gounod’s opera, is elided from public sight.
Consuelo, Comtesse de Rudolstadt

The fullest portrait of a freemason woman comes from the pen of a mason sans tablier. George Sand, the author of the two-novel sequence *Consuelo* (1842–43) and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (1843–44), was surrounded by masons from her earliest childhood—her father, first and foremost, but also several of her partners, Pierre Leroux especially, and the bevy of friends, colleagues and neighbors she corresponded with on a regular basis (see app. 4). In the early 1840s, she took time to learn more about the craft, whose aspirations influenced the idealist philosophy she had expressed in *Le Compagnon de tour de France* (1840, *The Journeyman’s Tour of France*) and would express later in *Les Maîtres sonneurs* (1853, *The Master Bell-Ringers*). By the time she started writing her second masonic novel in 1842, Sand was exceptionally well versed in the craft, its rituals, its lore, its history, and its ideals. Literary scholar Georges Lubin identified the relevant titles in her library, recommended and in some instances provided by Leroux. Among the most important were by Abbé Pérau (1758); Guillaume de Saint-Victor (1789); Joux (1801); De L’Aulnoye (1813), and Chemin-Dupontès (1819), most of them standard sources for studying the craft’s first century of existence in France. As Sand explained in a letter to Leroux in 1843, she was lost in the obscurity of its mysticism: “it is an ocean of uncertainty, a gloomy abyss.” But she immediately turned to describing what creative use she foresaw of this occult knowledge. “There is so much unknown in all this that... in fact the history of these mysteries can never be written, I believe, except in the form of a novel.” Thus by her prose fiction, Sand propounded masonic principles as well as respect for the initiatory secrets she had learned from her well-informed sources.

The novel Sand had in mind was the one she was in the process of writing, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*. This sequel to *Consuelo* offers the most powerful and complex depiction of freemasonry in modern French literature. Its portrait of a clairvoyant mason-in-the-making is based on a superbly talented soprano, Pauline Viardot, one of Sand’s confidantes. Similarly, as the novelist began reconsidering her intimate relationship with Frédéric Chopin (1810–46), she used him as the principal model for Consuelo’s husband, Albert de Rudolstadt. But true to Sand’s most philosophical writing, the ideas embodied by these characters were almost exclusively her own. They were the product of her imaginative reworking of utopian socialism, or more accurately its romantic variety in which mysticism, republicanism, and women’s emancipation all play substantive, creative parts. In lieu of decrying capitalism and the laissez-faire ideology that justified an inexorable class war, her romantic socialism was a broader response
to the Enlightenment’s faith in natural law, human reason, and cultural progress that she felt had fallen dormant, tragically, during the bloodshed of the French Revolution and the loss of community during industrialization. Reform-minded thinkers, like Sand in her commitment to moral and spiritual renewal, sought instead to inspire humanity to achieve spiritual unity, political comity, and social equality, including between men and women. That these laudable goals were all too often at odds with one another, making them impractical if not unachievable, did not deter Sand’s determination to champion the significant benefits arising from such a lofty quest. The wretched, petty, staid status quo was not an option.

For Leroux—the most influential source of Sand’s idealism after the liberal Catholic theorist Félicité de Lamennais—the interests of the individual must not be pitted against those of society. Both would suffer. Rather, he saw the commonality of interests, as in religious faith, overcoming the alienation of individualism and the tyranny of the collectivity, especially institutional hierarchies like the state, the church, and the family. What Leroux had in mind was a return to the natural sense of fellowship that existed in primitive Christianity, which he subsumed in his religion of humanity and its promotion of revolutionary ideals, not their perversion during the Terror or their negation in industrial capitalism. A new spirituality, much as Saint-Simon had envisaged in his New Christianity, would restore the bonds of love and solidarity that Leroux advocated. In this way, he felt, not only would social-class conflict attenuate, but also possibilities for more equal gender relations would appreciate. The legal subjugation of married women enshrined in the Napoleonic Civil Code would yield to their liberation from patriarchy, their participation in politics, and their empowerment in a society modelled on their relational qualities. Less individualistic and selfish, more compassionate and forgiving, the result would be a new social order whose origins were described in Leroux’s exultant *De l’humanité* (1840, *On Humanity*). “Yes,” Leroux affirmed, “at heart, humanity is us.” However mystical and overly optimistic about human nature and a new society in an indeterminate future, this doctrine made eminent sense to Leroux, the former Charbonnerie egalitarian and later freemason enthusiast. This idealism also made sense to Sand as she was writing her initiation novels with other elements borrowed from Goethe’s *Bildungsromane* and Ann Radcliffe’s gothic fiction. Sand’s work elaborates, at length, her own view of romantic socialism. It occurs first in *Spiridion* (1838), which introduces initiation among monks questioning Roman Catholic doctrine. *Le Compagnon du tour de France* (drafted the same year that Leroux produced *De l’humanité*) and *Horace* (1842) were
published shortly thereafter, both of them committed to a masonic perfection of humanity. To circulate these latter two works, however, Sand and Leroux joined with Pauline’s husband, Louis Viardot, to found *La Revue indépendante (The Independent Review)* in 1842 because François Buloz of *La Revue des deux mondes (The Review of the Two Worlds)* had refused to print them for political reasons. The business-savvy Viardot put up the money, the editor Ferdinand François directed the journal, and the compositor Leroux printed it. Accordingly, *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* were serialized in their journal over a three-year period, marking Leroux’s greatest influence on Sand’s feminist idealism as expressed by a secret society, the Invisibles. Their syncretic ideas welcomed the initiation of not one but two women: Wanda z Prachalitz (Comte de Rudolstadt’s mother) and Consuelo (Wanda’s daughter-in-law), the central figure of the novels. “G[eorge] Sand is but a pale reflection of P[ierre] Leroux, a fanatic disciple of the same Ideal,” the novelist wrote in 1844. “I am a mere popularizer with a diligent and, at heart, impressionable pen.” She identified with Consuelo in her two novels, set mostly during the years 1742 to 1750, whose philosophic premises accord with those of Leroux and her masonic library.

The long and involved storyline of the singer’s life begins with her orphaned childhood in the streets of Venice. Her artistic genius catches the attention of Porpora, the teacher-composer-conductor. Mentored well, Consuelo achieves success in opera, despite jealous rivals and an unfaithful fiancé. La Porporina, as she is also known, escapes Venice to serve as the companion and tutor to the daughter of a prominent noble family in Bohemia. There Albert de Rudolstadt, the heir to the family estate, the gloomy Chateau des Géants/Riesenberg, falls in love with her. An important but shadowy presence, Albert is endowed (and cursed) by his Hussite ancestors, for whose misdeeds during long-past religious wars in the region he assumes personal responsibility; it is one manifestation of his moral reincarnation, a perverse legacy of guilt, clairvoyance, and catalepsy that drives him mad. Consuelo’s affectionate commitment to him, however, sustains her through the trials of a preliminary initiation to rescue Albert from his deep, underground sanctuary that can only be reached by a long, dark descent and through mysterious crypts. Her singular bravery results in an ambivalent reward: Albert offers to marry her. In the face of his physical and mental disabilities, La Porporina finds that she can never really love him enough to give up her career as a diva; so she journeys to Vienna, in the company of the young composer Haydn, to resume her professional singing. The Empress Maria Theresa attempts to recruit her for the court opera if she marries Haydn to give her a more respectable social standing. This opportunity Consuelo declines as she
heads off to Berlin with Porpora to sing in Frederick the Great’s theater at Sans Souci. Along the way, she learns that Albert is dying and must see her again. Just hours before he expires, Consuelo marries him out of pity, but renounces her title, privileges, and property as the widowed Comtesse de Rudolstadt in order to honor her obligation to sing for Frederick.

Here *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* properly begins, with La Porporina at Sans Souci in Potsdam. It continues the twists and turns of her ongoing saga since Venice, but this time with a shift in focus from Albert’s mystical madness to the Invisibles’ humane conspiracy. As literary historian Léon Cellier remarked, “If *Consuelo* is the novel of clairvoyance, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* is the novel of initiation,” even though there is an initiatory quality to the earlier novel. It appears during Consuelo’s quest to save Albert from the symbolic dungeon of his need to redeem the sins of his ancestors. The setting for her trials is a treacherous passage to reach Albert’s subterranean refuge, that is, through a temporarily empty cistern, by a flooding passageway, up a wall to a landing above the rapidly rising water, and out from a funereal space where she is nearly buried alive. Having survived these life-threatening perils, La Porporina finds more than relief and some presence of mind; she is changed. She becomes a different person endowed with “a fervent soul, a resolution full of charity, a quiet heart, a pure conscience, an impartiality with every challenge.” In this new guise, she is ready to venture forth through a series of doors to confront and console Albert in an exchange more on his terms than on hers. Their incoherent dialogue ends with Consuelo’s fainting from sheer exhaustion. But as the Sand scholar Isabelle Naginski notes, “Consuelo’s discovery of Albert resembles a successful quest. The heroine’s suffering is given a purpose. The Romantic search ends in initiation and growth.” So the plot does not postpone the Comtesse de Rudolstadt’s transformation until the eponymous sequel; rather, it prefigures the later, more fully developed transition in Consuelo’s long journey to rebirth, to a realization of Leroux’s notions of love and solidarity. There is thus more continuity, thematic as well as symbolic, between the first and last volumes of Sand’s two-part novel.

*La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* resumes the narrative a year after Albert’s apparent death when Consuelo has become a widely respected soprano in Frederick’s opera. But she is now subject to the intrigues of the king’s family and court. She struggles to avoid them, only to find herself confronted by specters of her late husband, who is seen in the audience, consorting with Cagliostro and wandering the halls of the palace as a sorcerer. The apparitions do not dissipate after Consuelo’s subsequent three-month imprisonment in the Spandau fortress. There
she encounters the jailor’s son Gottlieb who informs her of the mysterious Invisibles and carries their correspondence to her. They arrange for her escape from Spandau with an alluring masked member of this secret society; he escorts her to a safe haven far from Berlin. This is a key moment in the novel. Consuelo awakens to a passion she has never experienced before. Despite her resistance, she is strangely drawn to the disguised guard assigned for her protection, the so-called Chevalier Liverani. The rest of the novel turns on this emotional discovery.

The narrative details the various stages of Consuelo’s subsequent initiation into the Invisibles’ lodge—some two-hundred pages worth (chapters 26–41)—with a host of members, including a disguised Wanda z Prachalitz. They test her character to see if she is worthy of the order (see ill. 7). Again Porporina is subject to a dark and dangerous passage to a hidden, underground space in the isolated, aptly named Château de Graal. During her actual initiation, she discovers that her late husband Albert is not dead but the victim of a grand-mal cataleptic seizure. After his recovery, he adopted the persona of the enticing Liverani, the masked escort Consuelo embraced during her rescue from Spandau. The ceremony finishes with a marriage of true love and like minds—“this soul in two people, Consuelo and Albert”—who renounce together the prerogatives of their estate and leave, properly anointed by the Invisibles, to minister to the poor peasants in the Bohemian forests. An epilogue shows how, years later, they are faring in their sacred mission, notwithstanding Albert’s continued ravings and Consuelo’s having lost her voice.

Who precisely are the Invisibles, this mysterious sect at the heart of the novel’s storyline? It is actually the name given by Rosicrucians to their unknown superiors in the wisdom of esoteric knowledge handed down by generations of scholars since ancient times. The brotherhood prided itself on a privileged understanding of alchemical mysticism, religious doctrine, and revolutionary politics. By the eighteenth century, however, Rosicrucianism was undermined by the Enlightenment’s antipathy to religious speculation, even as freemasonry incorporated elements of the Rosicrucian order into some rituals. For Sand, as for others in the Romantic movement, this fascination with the otherworldly proved fruitful in her efforts to bring together the manifold ideals she appropriated from Leroux. It also confirmed her other sources on comparable societies, such as F.-T. Bégue Clavel’s controversial history of masonry in 1843, which was much discussed for its criticism of a moribund masonry and more, for revealing some of the craft’s ritual secrets, to the deep distress of his masonic brothers. The mainstream Grand Orient de France (for the craft degrees) and the Scottish Rite (for the side degrees as well) were implicated, in part, because of their willingness to develop a
validating mythology of their own from ancient Egypt, the Temple of Solomon, and the Knights Templar. Because freemasons were often confused with the Illuminati, the Illuminés de Bavière provided inspiration of a genuinely revolutionary sort, hence the Invisibles’ daring slogan for the 1750s: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Of more recent influence, the Saint-Simonians had captured Sand’s
attention in the 1830s, having invited her to become Prosper Enfantin’s La Mère; she did what she could for the women, like Pauline Roland, whom he misled with false promises of emancipation (Enfantin was masterfully manipulative). All of these societies shaped Sand’s depiction of the Invisibles and her “occult history of humanity.”

The religious overtones are as obvious as the masonic ones, especially the Rudolstadt family’s commitment to heresy since the Middle Ages. Albert’s insanity is driven mostly by his Podiebrad forbears, the Rudolstads before they were forced to change the surname to something less heretical. A host of them died resisting religious oppression. As Hussites and their more radical Taborite brethren committed to egalitarian Christianity, they inveighed long before the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century (and longer still before Leroux’s interest in the idea). Albert believed that he was the reincarnation of their military leader, Jan Žižka, whose “patriotic independence and evangelical equality” affected Consuelo before she knew much about her husband. This religious theme naturally echoes the millenarians. They were influenced by the Lutheran pastor Jacob Boehme and the Bohemian nationalists avant la lettre like the Podiebrads. Their latest incarnation, Albert the Romantic musician, played only local folk tunes, hymns, and battle songs. These passions made it possible for the Bohemian martyrs to endure persecution, incarceration, torture, and assassination, artefacts of which Consuelo encountered during her trials in the dank, cavernous antechambers littered with the bones of these heroes. On her way to the Invisibles’ temple, “she saw other objects of a more refined barbarism: trestles, wheels, saws, melting pots, pulleys, hooks, a whole museum for the instruments of torture.”

Her fainting response to these horrors, she is later told, honored the sacrifices that these proud people made for their ideals at odds with a despotic Catholic Church. Consuelo had passed her ordeals and was ready to be accepted by the sect.

Another element, and not the least, of humanity’s occult history is the subordination of women, which appears as a major theme in Sand’s novels. Given her unhappy marriage to Casimir Dudevant and her difficulties with a roster of other men, the author did not need the romantic socialists to tell her about the long history of women’s domestic enslavement; their faithfulness and obedience to the patriarchal household under the terms of the Civil Code were merely its legal manifestation. Sand took pains in her novels of initiation to ensure that her readers, many of them women whom she addressed directly in the narrative, understood that their oppression was akin to that of the religious heretics and the Bohemian nationalists. The message here is clear: marriage must be based on true partnership, the mutual love and respect of a man and a woman (unlike
much of what Sand had experienced). Consuelo adopts this perspective in her resistance to married life with Albert, in her passion for Liverani, and in her welcome discovery that Albert and Liverani are one and the same man. She is prepared for this initiation of another sort by Wanda’s story about her own loveless marriage with Christian de Rudolstadt and by her confessor’s explanation of God’s sympathy for women’s sexuality. “So be sure,” Consuelo is informed, “that God, far from imposing... sacrifices on your sex, rejects them and denies to anyone the duty to assume them. This suicide is even more guilty and cowardly than the renunciation of life.”

Intimate freedom is the basis of the relational feminism for which Sand long contended, however ironically it is turned on its head by the end of the novel. Years after her initiation, Consuelo loses her voice. This fate marks the end to her singing career and the start of her marital responsibilities as the insane Albert’s helpmeet.

The thematic, symbolic, and historical implications of Consuelo’s initiation into the Invisibles are thus apparent. She now projects a striking posture with a laudable, discernable mission defined by the Invisibles. In both novels, this figure is high-minded, sensitive, courageous, wise, passionate, yet compassionate, an embodiment of freemasons’ civic morality in her commitment to more than mere selfish, parochial concerns. As a mythic oracle, variously like Orpheus, Psyche, Persephone, and Cyane, this talented musician descends to hellish depths to rescue her love in the pre-initiative trials related in Consuelo. A venturesome, independent-minded woman subject to a life-changing rite of passage evident in and through both novels, she still embodies the nineteenth-century’s equality-in-difference in her relationship with Albert, who is much her better in social status, mystical vision, and self-sacrifice, but much Consuelo’s inferior in social relations, artistic expression, and personal responsibility. Her initiation ensures that her determination triumphs over the adversity that Albert cannot ever overcome. Historically, she represents the place of women in French society, much as Sand herself, whose social activism was ultimately recognized but not rewarded with the success that their male counterparts generally assumed for themselves. “Such is the law of conspiracies,” the leader of the initiation informs Consuelo, but you will know the secret of the freemasons, the great confraternity which, in the most varied forms and with the most diverse ideas, works to organize the practice and to spread the notion of equality. You will receive the degrees of all the rites, even though women are only admitted under the aegis of adoption and they do not participate in all the doctrine’s secrets. We will treat you as a man.
As such, Consuelo is charged to work with masonic lodges to help the Invisibles’ achieve their goal of establishing a true religion of humanity.

Sand’s novels tied their protagonists to a well-defined cause. In so doing, this image marks a break with earlier versions of freemason women. Although Feliciani, Pamina, and Balkis all challenged certain gendered norms, their objectives, beyond their freedom from the control of men, were not sharply delineated. Their motivations, and prospects, were vague if not implausible. The repentant Feliciani is murdered in a ritual, Tamino’s wife Pamina joins him in the temple, and the Queen of Sheba returns to her kingdom a widow; such was their undetermined quest for the greater good. But Consuelo’s initiation is predicated on grander ambitions, however muted by the end of the novel as she wandered the Bohemian forests, ostensibly to preach her revolutionary religion, with a delusional husband and three young children in tow, “like a true daughter of Bohemia, poetic like a generous goddess of poverty.” Her initiation marked the beginning of a new life, one more figuratively significant than first meets the eye, as scholars of such ritualistic transitions have characterized them.

Initiations for women are not entirely the same as those for men. The rites in adoption masonry, for example, differ considerably from those in mixed and male masonry. What these initiations have in common with Consuelo’s experience is equally obvious: a sacred space (better known as the temple where the rites are conducted in secret) and a rite of passage (requiring the willing participation of the candidate to face the ceremonial rigors to reach another state of being). Although the specifics of the ritual—the preparation of the candidate and of the lodge, the catechisms, the trials, the oaths, the speeches, the signs and symbols—vary from order to order for men and women, the candidate’s transition from profane to mason remains central to the ceremony. Many elements are shared, especially the tools of the craft, the secrecy, and the life of the lodge; they resemble the twin portico columns affixed to the Temple of Solomon, Jakin and Boaz, whose masonic symbolism as the sun and the moon, respectively, affirms gender complementarity in the roles and norms of the two sexes. But in her initiation novels, Sand felt compelled to elaborate upon these features to correct what she felt were serious deficiencies in masonry in the 1840s, namely, its empty rituals. “I found fault with this candidate whose courage and virtue were subjected to entirely material trials,” Consuelo remarks, “as if physical bravery sufficed to be initiated for the work requiring moral courage. I censured what I saw and deplored these cruel games of a grave fanaticism, or these puerile experiences of a wholly visible and idolatrous faith.” Such were Sand’s own criticisms, which her depiction of the Invisibles was meant, in part, to address.
She thus imagined an amalgam of rites from the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati, the Knights Templar, the Strict Observance, the Scottish Rite, as well as the craft, and what they meant for her deeply felt principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. She knew that her creation was derivative and inaccurate, but she reveled in the reforms that she thought would come of it. “In sum I worked by telling myself *fiat lux*,” she wrote proudly.\(^{120}\)

Since then, masons have marveled at Sand’s cheek, but also at her sincere interest in promoting some of their most cherished values. The specialists Léon Cellier and François Menard recognized her achievement as a non-initiate, despite reservations expressed by members of the craft whenever a profane writes about them.\(^{121}\) Literary critics like Paulin Limayric and Hippolyte Babou had been less kind. Their response to Sand’s romantic idealism, often resulting in interminable set-speeches by mouth-pieces posing as characters in her novel, was predictably harsh. “After having dragged out in ten long volumes the fantastic shadow of Comte de Rudolstadt, and after having taken an enormous amount of time analyzing her philosophical and amorous hobby-horses, the author . . . lost sight of the Heart,” opined Limayric in the *Revue des deux mondes*.\(^{122}\) But as the literary scholar Naomi Schor pointed out, this critique of Sand’s idealism was typical in the polarized gender beliefs of realists, almost all of them men. “In the age of romanticism, the ideal, idealism, and idealization traverse aesthetics, politics, and Eros, and provide important links among them,” even if Schor failed to examine them in Sand’s *Consuelo and Comtesse de Rudolstadt*.\(^{123}\) This omission has been amply corrected by Naginski and others especially sensitive to Sand’s initiatory vision across the entire novel sequence from Venice to Bohemia.\(^{124}\) After symbolic deaths and rebirths in no fewer than eight different initiatory experiences, “Consuelo was engaged in an adventure which is a Quest; the divine traced for her a destiny in which extraordinary encounters were but the sign of a superior will,” states Simone Vierne, an expert on initiation ritual in fiction.\(^{125}\) The implications of this work, discussed as well in her colleague Martine Watrelot’s important essay, lead the reader to understand the historical agency and transcendence that women have sought—and found—by their participation in freemasonry. “By her integration into a secret society,” concludes Watrelot, “woman becomes a subject of history,” no less.\(^{126}\)

Diana Vaughan and Others

Sand considered Consuelo an admirable type well suited to please her female admirers, such as Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie, whose fan mail affirmed
the author’s character and her messianic message. Men were less favorably impressed. This was in part because as realists they disdained the idealist fiction Sand had perfected, but also because many of them felt threatened by her feminist views of relational equality in marriage. To hear her critics, the family, the bedrock of society, was at stake. Women’s role in secret societies, like the Invisibles, only made matters worse. A year after Sand’s *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* was published, Jacques Collin de Plancy’s inflammatory *Dictionnaire infernal* (1845, *Hell’s Dictionary*) claimed how easily masons misled women (and in the case of Cagliostro, it was young children: “He established a sort of Egyptian cabal”).

Freemasonry remained a danger to the social order.

The same conspiratorial organizations that destroyed the Old Regime still seemed to be at work in the years leading up to the 1848 Revolution. Once the July Monarchy had fallen, freemason men promptly adopted the Second Republic; and former Saint-Simonian women formed political clubs, published newspapers, and nominated female candidates for public office. It did not take long for an assertive literary figure like the Comtesse de Rudolstadt to be depicted as a menace to social and political stability, especially to Roman Catholics whose pope, Pius IX, insisted that the church must become a bulwark against modernity as represented by republicanism, socialism, feminism, and, yes, freemasonry.

Antiquarians in the vein of Arthur Dinaux were happy to oblige with accounts of suspect societies and the social disruptions they continued to pose long after the eighteenth century; women “believed themselves to have been initiates, even though in fact they were only admitted into a meeting for pleasure and bombast,” Dinaux wrote in 1864. Accordingly, images of women in affiliated organizations, including the most innocuous in keeping with L.-P. Riche-Gardon’s *Temple des Familles*, appeared equivocal if not dark and insidious, because women were initiated in the same order as men.

An extreme example occurs in the prolific Charles Monselet’s gothic novel, *La Franc-maçonnerie des femmes* (1856, *The Freemasonry of Women*), written in the early years of the authoritarian empire that had cracked down on the craft. In Monselet’s novel, real authority rests in the hands of the truly sinister Marquise de Pressigny, grande maîtresse of her personal lodge of freemason women in a virtual “cavern beneath society.” True to Monselet’s chosen literary genre, the story’s plot turns on the evil marquise’s manipulation of her innocent niece, Amélie, whose marriage to Philippe Beyle (and elaborate masonic initiation) she personally arranges. But another freemason woman, the impulsive soprano Marianna, wants Philippe for herself, so she discredits Amélie by revealing her initiation to Philippe and in so doing betrays masonic secrets. Keen to regain the
honor of her lodge, Amélie challenges Marianna to a duel, which results in her death and Marianna’s escape from justice thanks to masonic connections among the police. The grieving Philippe, however, confronts the real source of his misery, the marquise, to learn that she has used Marianna to revenge herself on Philippe’s lack of affection for her. The honorable Philippe foregoes vengeance of his own. The marquise, he felt, was unworthy of it, as with all freemason women who were little more than “street larva.”

Meanwhile, another well-intentioned but inept man, Blanchard, attempts to expose the lodge. Having spied on Amélie’s carefully orchestrated initiation—conducted in the dead of night—he is sequestered for his bizarre behavior in the mental hospital in Charenton near Paris where the attending physician is a masonic ally of the marquise. As a consequence, Blanchard can look forward to an indefinite stay and the freemasons can continue their dreadful work unimpeded by their most ardent opponents. Evidently, because of their weakness, the novel concludes (in Philippe’s words), “the most intelligent and most delicate women, the divinities of the family, the muses of amiable and elevated enterprises, desert their homes and become, in emotional fellowship, the equals of those creatures whose name is a troop of trumpeters and a life of scandal!” Freemason women are thus portrayed at best as the victims of depraved creatures, at worst as the sources of real danger to home, community, and society, little different from the uncontrollable Marquise de Pressigny. Set in the 1840s in a small town on Arcachon Bay, this novel must have overwhelmed whatever notions of women and masonry Sand offered in a much more favorable light. Their slogan, borrowed from the better-known Alexandre Dumas père—“ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL”—in a solidarity to the decided exclusion of all men, may have been the worst nightmare for writers hostile to women’s emancipation. As the rest of this chapter shows, Monselet’s perverse image of women in masonry prevailed for the next seventy years, presumably because it captured for another, larger readership than Sand’s the demonic implications of her romantic socialism during the repressive Second Empire and unstable Third Republic. Otherwise, Monselet expressed no further interest in the craft.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the best-known freemason woman, by far, was another threatening figure, the devil worshipper Diana Vaughan. She was the literary creation of the prolific and unscrupulous journalist, Léo Taxil, a.k.a. Gabriel Jogand-Pagès (and no fewer than five other aliases). Taxil cleverly used Monselet’s gothic literary devices to report on masonry as a world-wide conspiracy in which women like Vaughan, Pressigny’s alter ego, played a leading role. This campaign began perhaps as early as Taxil’s truancy years in a...
Jesuit reformatory near Marseilles, his hometown, where he imbibed an intense, lifelong anticlericalism. His checkered career was a convenient combination of well-timed publicity stunts, adroit plagiarism, scurrilous reporting on nonexistent events, and shameless exploitation of certain fantasies—first those of secularist zealots for seven years (1878–85), then those of the Catholic faithful for twelve (1885–97). Twice Taxil made abrupt departures to unknown destinations just one step ahead of the police and members of his outraged public.

In keeping with the counter-Enlightenment’s mysticism, as studied by Éliphas Lévi, Papus, and Josephin Péladan in J.-K. Huysmans’s Là-bas (1891, The Netherworld), Taxil joined the freemasons in 1881. But he was ejected from his lodge eight months later over a plagiarism conviction; he had borrowed long sections of the late Auguste Roussel’s Les Sermons de mon curé (1848, My Pastor’s Sermons) and was ordered to pay Roussel’s estate 60,000 francs. He went on to attack the lascivious reputation of the clergy, as in Les Amours secrètes de Pie IX (1881, The Secret Loves of Pius IX), for which Taxil was sued and ordered to pay another 60,000 francs. Then came a sudden transformation in 1884. After Pope Leo XIII handed down his encyclical Humanum genus attacking freemasons, Taxil decided to target the craft instead. Here was a new market to explore. He published at least six book-length exposés of masonic turpitude and several serializations of varying length about the nonexistent Palladium—Le Diable au XIXe siècle (1892–95, The Devil in the Nineteenth Century), La Restauration du paganisme (1896, The Restoration of Paganism), Le 33e Crispi, un palladiste homme d’état (1896, The 33rd Degree Crispi, A Palladist Statesman), and Mémoires d’une ex-palladiste (1897, The Memoirs of an Ex-Palladist)—totaling 2,500 pages of monthly fascicles. In all these publications, Taxil featured women, like Vaughan who is the supposed author of the last three works, engaged in implausible, blasphemous rites.

Allegedly quoting Charles Fauvety, a proponent of mixed masonry, Taxil stated, for effect, “the Temple of our dear French Masonry recalls accurately enough the temples of ancient Babylon, consecrated to Venus Mylita, whose locale was filled with women praising the [physical] charms of foreigners.” These exposés involving women were notorious for their deliberate distortion of masonry’s professions of virtue, with an eye to emphasizing what Taxil considered the craft’s shameless hypocrisy. In these instances, women were nameless props appropriate to the author’s contentious accounts that were still well grounded in original masonic sources by the likes of Louis Guillemain de Saint-Victor in the eighteenth century and César Moreau in the nineteenth. In one description of adoption masonry, for instance, Taxil worries aloud more about the morals...
of the brethren than he does about the sisters: “the adoption lodges were no longer anything more than annexes of the men’s Ateliers, that is, nothing but harems.”  The rituals for the higher grades are given the most attention largely because they are the most open to suggestive interpretation: “after the degree of Maîtresse, one wallowed in complete obscenity.” They are described in alluring chapter subheadings like “The Reception of Venus” and “The Reception of Love,” despite how few women ever sought a degree higher than the third; the adoption rite had not been worked for decades. To believe Taxil, rituals were an everyday excuse for endless orgies in masonic bordellos, i.e., in lodges during the fin de siècle. In his first antimasonic volumes, the lubricious nature of women, the allure rather of their unbridled sexuality, was Taxil’s favorite topic.

This crusading zeal in detailing prurience soon shifted to unveiling Satanism. Taxil’s serializations began with Le Diable au XIXe siècle in collaboration with Charles Hacks (under their collective pseudonym, Dr. Bataille). Hacks’s participation in the irregular installments, however, ceased after the first fourteen when the narrative of his erratic world travels in search of dark, arcane practices came to an abrupt halt. His encounters with bizarre satanic rituals (such as the baptism of a snake and the marriage of monkeys) had followed an itinerary, by steamer, from China to the Straits of Gibraltar, with a prolonged stopover in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), but no more. For the rest of what became two thick volumes there appeared a more expository presentation of masonry, especially its exotic higher degrees (of which the reading public knew little but suspected everything). Topics drew on tantalizing inferences from masonry’s initiations literally cut and pasted from titles in the public domain, if they were not rewritten with special attention to their reputed devil worship. Such were the unexpected visits of Moloch (as a winged crocodile who played strange tunes on the piano and leered at the mistress hosting the séance) and Asmodeus himself during a tenue. Incidents of this sort served to season the text.

As the 23rd installment skittered into spiritism, Vaughan makes her entrance; she returns with increasing frequency in the remaining seventy-three (or so) segments. Taxil had seized on her persona as a literary device to lure more readers than could Hacks’s diabolic, picaresque tales of secret societies and the faceless women in them. The autobiographical side to Vaughan’s narrative expanded dramatically in subsequent serializations, which developed the voice of an “actual” woman on her lodge experiences in the United States and France. The action focused on the on-going rivalry of Vaughan with another palladist, Sophie Walder, a more conniving figure who serves as Vaughan’s antagonist in her (temporary) detachment from various manifestations of the devil. So engaging was this new
storyline, larded with asides on related antimasonic topics, the pope himself
granted the author a personal audience in 1894 to thank him for his work on
behalf of the Holy Mother Church. Taxil must have assured him that there was
more to come.

As the story runs, Vaughan was born in Paris, the daughter of a wealthy mer-
chant from Lexington, Kentucky, and another Protestant from the Cévennes in
France. An early widower with an illustrious ancestry including the alchemist
Thomas Vaughan, Diana’s father destined her for leadership in the Palladium.
Albert Pike, the Supreme Commander of the Scottish Rite in the Southern Dis-
trict, presided over the girl’s first initiation in 1883 at age fourteen. Vaughan’s
subsequent initiations and satanic encounters on both sides of the Atlantic
Ocean—she was duly initiated as templar-mistress at the Parisian Triangle of
Saint-Jacques—form the core of her preparation to serve as Asmodeus’s protégé;
this fiend marks a dramatic moment in an affiliated lodge, the Onze-Sept, not
long before her initiation into the first female degree, the élue palladique, in
1889 (see ill. 8). “In sum, Diana Vaughan has the most original physiognomy
in the milieu of contemporary occultism,” the narrator states from the outset
of her curious trajectory in this presumably obscure masonic tradition. She
eventually becomes Lucifer’s grande prêtresse in Baphomet’s sanctum regnum
described in the three installments of La Restauration du paganisme. Recounted
at much greater length in Le 33e Crispi, Vaughan’s efforts prevail in Pike’s suc-
cession in the American Scottish Rite, but not without stiff resistance on the
part of Walder and her allies in Rome. The heir apparent to Universal Freema-
sonry and the Reformed Palladium, the Italian Grand Master of the Scottish
Rite, Signor Adriano Lemmi, was challenged by his nemesis, Signor Domenico
Margiotta. Needless to say, Vaughan’s invocation of satanic powers made it pos-
sible for Pike’s designated successor to remain head of the Supreme Council in
Charleston, South Carolina, not by an imposter in Rome. So it would seem.

In the midst of this internecine conflict, the fictionalized Vaughan joins the
Catholic fold. This sudden, unexpected conversion deserved explanation in yet
another long serialization, this time, of her memoirs relating still more amazing
activities, all of them in opposition to her new faith. The Mémoires d’une ex-pal-
ladiste was a welcome turn of affairs for Taxil’s French Catholic readers, even
though her confessions provided still more of the fantastic events that she de-
scribed before her conversion. Prayers and religious meditations, such as a “Hymne
à Jeanne d’Arc (Contre la Franc-Maçonnerie)” (“Hymn to Joan of Arc [Against
Freemasonry]”), appear every now and then to hearten her audience. “I will
write to make everything known,” she proclaims early on in her memoirs, “I will
say in my turn what occurs in the triangles [lodges], what I stopped to the extent I could, what I have always faulted, and what I believed to be right; the public will judge for itself.” All the same, Vaughan’s extravagances continued as before.

Taxil’s Catholic following soon detected inexplicable discrepancies between these recollections and what had transpired in earlier publications. Skeptical
church officials began requesting openly for Taxil, her presumed publicist, to adduce evidence of Vaughan’s existence at a conference in Trent. Photographs of the woman and various “authentic” documents were not enough (see ill. 4). Believers wanted to see her in the flesh, which Taxil finally agreed to arrange at an evening lecture held in Paris at the amphitheater of the Société Géographique on Easter Sunday, April 19, 1897 (mere days after the latest installment alluded to Vaughan’s trip to planet Mars). For a crowd of personally invited priests, prelates, monks, freethinkers, masons, and members of the press, Taxil proffered proof, not of Vaughan and her satanic practices, but of his elaborate hoax. “There is a freethinker,” he confessed, “who . . . has come to loiter in your company . . . : and it is yours truly.” Diana Vaughan the palladist did not exist, but Diana Vaughan the typist and sales representative of American typewriter manufacturers in Paris certainly did (she helped Taxil with his mail). Before retiring to Sceaux south of Paris to muse on more discreet matters, such as gourmet cooking and financial fraud, Taxil detailed his mystification about the presence of freemason women or, to put it more accurately, their menacing image in French society.

A year later, a rueful Louise Michel contemplated Vaughan’s portrait, one wildly at odds with what she knew about masonry from the Paris Commune (she had yet to be initiated herself). “Often, during the long nights in prison,” she wrote, “I still saw the long procession of freemasons on the ramparts, and I have a hard time imagining these believers in the future as writing, after having read these midnight stories of Dianah [sic] Vaughan, to arrange an interview with Lucifer.” She was, evidently, not fooled by Taxil’s fictive freemason women, but the impression lingered long enough for her to remember it, like freemasons participating in the Commune, to wonder in disbelief. Others, however, were more impressionable. The print runs of Taxil’s serial publications ran into the tens of thousands; he had an intrigued if credulous audience, whose appetite for his gothic horrors was insatiable and profitable. Despite Taxil’s disclosing the mendacity of his publications, consternation lingered among Catholic officials who continued to believe in Diana Vaughan and her Palladium; even their own colleagues had difficulty dissuading them. Jean Tourmentin (a.k.a. Abbé Henri Joseph), Gabriel Soulacroix (a.k.a. Gabriel de Bessonies), and Abel Clarin de la Rive, for example, were obliged to reconsider their compilations of documents and reports concerning Vaughan’s activities. According to Jules Bois, a firm believer in the unknowable, “The Religious Weekly of Paris, Catholicism’s official journal, recognized the existence of the anti-pope Lemmi, on whom the palladists, last September 20th, conferred Lucifer’s tiara. The Antichrist’s cult is now
a fact, and the church is no longer unaware of it.” René Guénon continued to call the gullible back to reality well into the interwar period, as he did in his review of Leslie Fry’s *Léo Taxil et la franc-maçonnerie* (1934, *Leo Taxil and Freemasonry*), a collection of documents questioning the fraud. Vaughan’s image refused to die.

A similar interest in the supernatural is developed in one of Papus’s few novels, *Au pays des esprits* (1903, *In the Land of the Spirits*). As one would expect from the fin-de-siècle’s foremost exponent of neo-Martinism, this fictional account self-consciously sets out to demonstrate to a female audience the virtues of masonry’s apparent mysticism. The preface states clearly that women can know the supernatural every bit as well as men, they just need to be exposed to it in a “manner apt to their mode of sensibility.” So the story Papus tells is predictably filled with visions, clairvoyance, mesmerism, out-of-body experiences, and magic, primarily through the auspices of an *âme volante* (spirit)—belonging to the beautiful Constance Mueller—in preparation for the main character’s initiation into another world. The autobiographical story, set in India, assumes such activities as perfectly ordinary occurrences even for the uninitiated. Louis B***, the scion of a distinguished but impoverished Hungarian nobility, recounts his introduction into the “Fraternity,” clearly a paramasonic association, which enables him to acknowledge the special powers he possesses, however coldly scientific this group’s mystical erudition. But the otherwise honorable brotherhood’s only initiated woman, Hélène Laval, is an evil figure, “a veritable Medea” intent upon securing Louis’s devoted wife, Blanche, for her brother. Blanche makes the mistake of allowing a hair-clipping of hers to fall into Laval’s hands, putting her at the mercy of this “witch.” In the end Louis cannot save Blanche and their newborn baby. As with Constance’s wandering soul, they pass on, but Laval’s spell is broken by the combined efforts of Louis and his Indian fakirs. Once Laval has been stripped of her powers, the protagonist can return home to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in order to tell his extraordinary tale to an appreciative audience.

Perhaps the last novel in the literary parade to portray women in freemasonry is the utterly incredible *L’Élue du Dragon* (1929, *The Woman Elect of the Dragon*) by Clothilde Bersone. Although the work is attributed to Bersone, this trope is a vehicle for the much better known antimasonic writer, Roger Daguet (a.k.a. Paul-Émile Boulin), who signed the preface to the second edition in 1932. The historical personalities enlivening the novel, much as Bersone herself, are true originals, and their activities, especially their soi-disant masonic initiations, grotesque. In the extended preface, however, Daguet claims:
This novel is drawn, nearly page by page, from the memoirs of Clothilde Bersone, who had been in Paris from 1877 to 1880 the mistress of J[ames] A. Garfield, elected president of the republic of the United States and assassinated in 1881. Garfield was secretly the chief of the High Lodge of the Illuminati, of which Bersone, by the title Nymph of the Night, was first the Affiliate, then the Initiated and the Inspired, Grand Mistress Elect of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{161}

The problem with this story is, Garfield only visited France once, and then quite briefly, before his election to the White House, yet the novel shows him speaking perfect French and living in Paris almost continuously for three years. Other European notables—Otto von Bismarck, Jules Grévy, Victor-Emmanuel, and Benjamin Disraeli—occur in the most implausible of situations, destroying any shred of verisimilitude, much less authenticity, to the work. The novel was a transparent effort to discredit freemasonry and the Third Republic as well as to titillate a voyeuristic readership. It is strongly reminiscent of Diana Vaughan’s memoirs fabricated earlier by Taxil (Vaughan was herself an élue du dragon). In both cases, the image of freemason women engaged in damning activities suggests something of a fixation.

By now it should be evident that freemason women left discernible traces from the eighteenth century onward. They began with Cagliostro’s Feliciani, but also Sade’s Juliette and the host of memoirists, real and fictive, among the royal and aristocratic elites who participated in adoption rites. Even when masonry for women effectively disappeared after the First Empire, the nineteenth century provided its own cast of characters closely associated with the craft. The idealistic reputation of Feliciani in \textit{Joseph Balsamo}, Balkis in \textit{La Reine de Saba}, and Consuelo in \textit{La Comtesse de Rudolstadt} improved upon that of their more frivolous sisters before the Revolution of 1789. In time, their presence among the accounts of actual freemason women, such as those initiated by the Temple des Familles and other minor orders, enriched the portraits left by novelists, composers, and their librettists. But it is the fin-de-siècle fascination with the occult and its antimodernist variations—spiritism, clairvoyance, mysticism, and Satanism—that marked a decided break in the literary tradition of freemason women. They were no longer depicted as innocent or committed figures in French society. The demonic side to masonry and its cognates, whether or not they belonged to a regular obedience like the Droit Humain, haunted the French cultural imagination in the guise of the malicious Marquise de Pressigny and the satanic Diana Vaughan.
The historical explanation for these changing imaginaries is more complicated than their documentation. But one can discern the influence of what Theodore Ziolkowski terms the “lure of the arcane,” i.e., “a basic human impulse to enjoy secrets, to be included in a special group that has privileged information about any subject that matters to the individual.”\textsuperscript{162} The result is the appeal of “secret societies,” as characterized by the German sociologist Georg Simmel, which in troubled times are blamed, by authorities and others fearing a loss of agency, for conspiracies against public order.\textsuperscript{163} Modern France is certainly not the only period and place for this phenomenon. It dates back to ancient times and is found in many different countries, though their literary manifestations are easiest to track in western Europe with the rise of the modern state in the eighteenth century, precisely when freemasonry emerged. With political revolution and rapid economic and social change leading to violent domestic and international conflict, it is easy to see how dangerous anything—or anyone, especially a woman—associated with such a society might seem to those excluded from it. Exclusion creates a natural impulse to mobilize a defense by demonizing others—ethnic groups (think: immigrants), socialists (after the Russian Revolution, Bolsheviks), and feminists (for their critique of gender hierarchies), not because they are secret so much as because they are deviant, alien, marginal, and thus little known. Freemason women fit this profile and lend themselves to stereotypical representations. The stranger they seem, the more dangerous they are perceived be.

From this perspective, it is easy to understand the historical forces underlying hostility to masons and their putative allies, the Jews, with daunting implications for maçonnnes. The peculiarly French cultural construction of a Judeo-masonic conspiracy arose in the nineteenth century thanks to pervasive Catholic concerns with modernity well before Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors (1864). Fear of such a plot actually stemmed from the father of antimasonry, Abbé Barruel. In 1806 he circulated a forged letter, probably sent to him by members of the state police opposed to Napoléon’s liberal policy toward the Jews, calling attention to their part in the conspiracy he had earlier attributed primarily to masons.\textsuperscript{164} This combination was given wider currency by the journalist-provocateur Édouard Drumont in his \textit{France juive} (1886, \textit{Jewish France}) and the monarchist Charles Maurras on the “four federated states,” i.e., Jews and Freemasons, but also Protestants and métis (of mixed race).\textsuperscript{165} After the Dreyfus Affair and the separation of church and state—like the lesser-known file-card scandal\textsuperscript{166}—anti-Semitic and antimasonic animus prevailed among the same arch conservative groups. These reactionaries were joined by well-funded polemics, some of whom compiled exceptional documentation on the craft and
its female initiates. Besides Tourmentin, Clarin de la Rive, and Soulacroix, there was Monseigneur Ernest Jouin, the influential director of the *Revue internationale des sociétés secrètes* (1912–39, *International Review of Secret Societies*) and a leading member of the Comité Antimaçonnique and its affiliate, the Union Antimaçonnique. As Channone Joseph Sauvêtre wrote of Jouin, “he discovered above and beyond [freemasonry] two other accomplice powers: Protestants and Jews,” which, he believed, were also leagued against the Roman Catholic Church when his six-volume *Le Péril judéo-maçonnique* (1920–23, *The Judeo-Masonic Danger*) was published. Women in the craft, it seems, were no less a threat to the French nation.

One consequence of this distinctly French belief in a Jewish-masonic collusion was the forgery and distribution of *Les Protocoles des Sages de Sion* (1920, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*). It allegedly documented a world conspiracy led by Jews with the help of freemasons. Despite credible reports on the fraudulent origins of its report on an 1897 meeting of the elders of the twelve tribes of Israel in Basel, this text—“the most widely distributed in the world after the Bible”—was believed to be proof certain of an end to Western civilization. What links the *Protocoles* to freemason women is the apparent role they played in its transmission to the Russian agents who published it first in 1906. According to the American polemicist Leslie Fry (a.k.a. Paquita de Shishmareff), Justine Glinka, a close friend of Juliette Adam whose editorial colleague Élie de Cyon may have drafted a lost version of it, obtained a copy from Joseph Schorst, a Misraïm brother in Paris, for 2,500 francs and forwarded it to General Orgevskii in Saint Petersburg. But the introduction to a popular translation of the text in 1921 spoke of another connivance. The document, declared the royalist Raoul Loky, originated with the “wife or mistress to one of the initiates who had written it and who believed it her duty to transmit copies to a Christian susceptible to putting his coreligionists on guard against some dark and menacing plots.”

Women’s freemason networks were directly incriminated.

Of course, there were other accounts. Recent historians have sifted through all of them to conclude, from archives maintained by the former Soviet Union, that the most likely source of the *Protocoles* was a Russian police agent, Matthieu Golovinski, working on assignment in Paris in 1900. But the myth of masonry’s collaboration, as revealed by an affiliated woman, remains one more insidious legacy in the rise of Nazi Germany and the use of the *Protocoles* to justify the final solution to the so-called Jewish question. Given how powerful the belief in a Jewish-masonic conspiracy was to leaders of the Vichy regime during the German Occupation, the demonic qualities of women in the craft were just as real
if not so visible a threat to combat during the war. These nefarious projections developed a life of their own comparable to images at work in the novels, travelogues, operas, and exposés of freemason women since the eighteenth century.

Whatever the topoi that French authors marshalled in their literary work, all of them ultimately portrayed aspects of gender relations. This historical force was ubiquitous and is implicit in the philosopher Charles Taylor’s relevant *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004), which defines civil society as a broad understanding of the way a given population envisages its public life. By social imaginary, Taylor writes, “I am thinking . . . of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”172 Such an idea is central to the gendered middle ground between the state, on the one hand, and the economy, on the other, as modern individuals search for meaning, despite their disengaged, self-responsible reason, in Taylor’s project to redeem a secular world.173 Cultural images of women (and men) in an associational context are a clear expression of this imaginary; novelists, poets, dramatists, and other literati conceive the structures of social trust and the challenges those structures face. At stake in this opposition is the civic morality that lends consequence, if not credence, to these depictions.

For freemason women over the two-hundred-year modernization of France, *A Civil Society* has captured much of their social reality, even though other writers have shown them in a less flattering light. The ambiguities of this gendered situation emanated from the space that women claimed for themselves, most often in the lodge, but also in their networks beyond it to other groups. The contested imaginaries studied in this chapter nuance the nature of these supposed lives as seen by everyone but the actors themselves (with the singular exception of George Sand). The views that others had of these women have had remarkable staying power and, in the wrong circumstances, a tragic impact on the lives of real people like them. It is what historian John Roberts referred to as the powerful mythology of secret societies, one which was fabricated not about their actual secrecy so much as it was, in this case, about the women who shared in those societies and the communities they represented since the eighteenth century.174 In the end, they endured and survived this pernicious legacy to help redefine civil society itself. Even Jean Mamy’s *Forces occultes* in 1943, it seems, could not erase freemason women from France’s historical memory for very long.