



## “LE BONHEUR EST UNE IDÉE NEUVE EN EUROPE”

### THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS AND THE NEW VISION OF WOMEN

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The Enlightenment traditionally features as “the season of Light” [DICKENS, *A Tale of two Cities* : 3], an age of refinement, delicacy and gallantry, when Reason would reign supreme and dispel the shadows of superstition. It certainly was but such a postcard picture is incomplete and fragmentary. That period should be also regarded as “the season of Darkness” when secrecy would prevail. No brief summary can do justice to the diversity of enlightened thought in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. The combination of an exquisitely delicate artistry with a coarseness of spiritual fibre is one of the paradoxes of the period. The term “Enlightenment” did not come into use in English until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century with particular reference to French philosophy, as the equivalent of the French term “*Lumières*”.<sup>1</sup> The French word is in the plural, which reveals multiplicity and diversity. That age claims to be free to seek happiness and search out truth. “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” is a famous phrase in the American Declaration of Independence, illustrating the “unalienable rights” with which all human beings are endowed by their creator.<sup>2</sup> That era of intellectual revolution when man boasts he has mastered his environment and lords it over his future, is in search of novelty. The intellectual frenzy, the craving for change, the rebellion against despotic reason, all derive from intrinsic, innate insubordination without which no serious thought could have developed. In his essay “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), Immanuel Kant describes it simply as freedom to use one’s own intelligence. The Enlightenment is less a

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<sup>1</sup> The German term became “*Aufklärung*” from Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” (“Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?”).

<sup>2</sup> *The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America* (July 4, 1776): “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

collection of thought than a process of changing sociabilities and cultural practices.

As a matter of fact, unlike the revolutionary Frenchmen, most Englishmen at the time fear innovation, dread letting loose forces which seek to overturn the established order, as is powerfully expressed in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

We are resolved to keep an established church, an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater. [...] It has been the misfortune (not, as these gentlemen think it, the glory) of this age, that everything is to be discussed, as if the Constitution of our country were to be always a subject rather of altercation than enjoyment [BURKE 100].

Yet there are some who do wish to overthrow and to destroy. Thus such poets as Joseph Warton express a desire to go 'to charnels and the house of woe, / To Gothic churches, vaults and tombs' ["Ode to Fancy", 164], revealing a conscious flight from the sensible and sociable pleasures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to something morbid and much more emotional. Even more remarkable as an indication of changing tastes is the success of James Macpherson's 'Ossian' poems (1760-63). The transformation of the intellectual climate of the age is certainly not simply a shift to a more rationalistic outlook. Indeed the age of reason is also the age of sensibility, whose champions stress the power of the passions and senses as much as the mind. In the Enlightenment passions are officially recognised, legitimised, and restored at the same time as human nature: they become the driving force behind every action, the spur for all creation. According to Diderot, only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things.<sup>3</sup> We are constantly railing against the passions; we ascribe to them all of man's afflictions, and we forget that they are also the source of all his pleasures. Without them there is no sublimity, either in morals or in creativity. The eighteenth century holds that the proper study of mankind is Man. In fact the Enlightenment could have made Terence's line its motto *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*.<sup>4</sup> The humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment restores the pre-eminence of feelings over ideas. The domination of the concept of the individual leads to rehabilitating pleasure and asserting the individual's right to pleasure and happiness. Because it can be regarded as one manifestation of "the spirit of the age", an indication

<sup>3</sup> *Pens es philosophiques* 4: « Il n'y a que les passions et les grandes passions qui puissent  lever l' me aux grandes choses. »

<sup>4</sup> Terence (190?-159 BC), *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*) I - I, 77: "I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me".

of the many forces that are at work, a sort of barometer of the general moral state, literature expresses people's thoughts and passions, revealing the true springs of popular action. The growth of new forms is connected with the social and political state of the nation. Gothic novels and French libertine novels, characterised by transgression as they are, can be read as an expression of dissatisfaction with reality. Disclosing women's subversive desire for significance, they nudge their society and culture over the threshold of the modern, tilting it irrevocably away from old patterns of life toward the world we know today.

### *The Enlightenment's Claim for Freedom and Happiness*

The Enlightenment's *philosophes* and their followers possess different views but share a common belief "that things can change and should change". They are united by a determination to look critically at traditional practices and beliefs and to explore fresh intellectual possibilities, especially through observation and experimentation. Newton's insistence on method—on inductive reasoning, drawing general conclusions from experiment and observation—becomes the universal wisdom. As Outram notes, the Enlightenment comprises "many different paths, varying in time and geography, to the common goals of progress, of tolerance, and the removal of abuses in Church and state" [29]. The Enlightenment's disciples want in particular to replace the Church's preoccupation with preparation for the hereafter with an emphasis upon working for earthly happiness and progress. Their purpose is to reform society using reason, challenge ideas rooted in tradition and faith, and advance knowledge through the scientific method. They promote scientific thought, scepticism and intellectual interchange and oppose superstition, intolerance and some abuses of power by the Church and the state.

With his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke lets in the light of reason. Locke's attack upon the doctrine of innate ideas is supported by the scientific method of an appeal to experience. He declares that he can find no "innate practical Principles" [65], except "a desire of Happiness and an aversion to Misery" [67]. "Good and Evil," as he says in a later chapter, "are nothing but Pleasure or Pain, or that which occasions, or procures Pleasure or Pain to us" [351]. All our knowledge comes through the senses. By Locke appears to have been generally meant the denial of innate ideas. Locke becomes the intellectual ruler of the century; and for the next two generations the English name is identified by the free-thinkers of the Continent with Locke, liberty, and philosophy. The Enlightenment is

characterised by a craving for liberation, a need of unfettering, a claim for freedom, the demand for men’s independence, thus releasing them from external guidance and guardianship. The adult is the man who is living in the clear light of reason, who has stepped free from all superstition, and who can think steadily—controlling alike his imagination and his prejudice. Hence the individual’s freedom and the people’s sovereignty can be asserted. “What is Enlightenment?” Immanuel Kant answers the question in the very first sentence of his 1784 essay: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.” Kant argues that the immaturity is self-inflicted not from a lack of understanding, but from the lack of courage to use one’s reason, intellect, and wisdom without the guidance of another. He exclaims that the motto of enlightenment is “*Sapere aude*”! – “dare to know”! “*Sapere aude*” is his charge to readers to follow this program of intellectual self-liberation, the tool of which is Reason. Enlightenment thus appears as a process of changing manners and ways of thinking. For people to enlighten themselves, Kant holds it necessary that all Church and State paternalism should be abolished and people given the freedom to use their own intellect. “For Kant, Enlightenment was mankind’s final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance” [PORTER 1]. According to Roy Porter, the notion of the liberation of the human mind from a dogmatic state of ignorance epitomises what the age of enlightenment is trying to capture. Everything firmly established in tradition is questioned and often replaced by new concepts in the light of philosophical reason. Emphasis is laid upon liberty, democracy, and religious tolerance. Along with this emancipation from ancient constraints new regulating principles are set up: the best justification for our actions is their serving human well-being, asserting the individual’s right to pleasure. All men are created equal and “they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, [and] among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” [*Declaration of Independence*]. The *topos* of happiness becomes a haunting leitmotiv throughout the Enlightenment; in Europe the notion of happiness takes a political meaning during the French revolution: it features in the 1793 constitution. Saint-Just claims that happiness is a new idea in Europe [218].<sup>5</sup> Happiness is the pretext for masquerades and games as well as the foundation of the natural philosophy set up by rationalists and sentimentalists. Claiming both freedom of thought and freedom of manners, contesting sexual restraints, rejecting religious and moral authority, self-indulgent pleasure-seeking libertines place value on physical pleasures, that is those experienced through the senses. The libertinistic philosophy that the

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<sup>5</sup> « Le bonheur est une id e neuve en Europe » Rapport   la Convention, 3 mars 1794.

dazzling rakes display seems to rebel against the narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy lurking behind the fa ade of bourgeois moral standards. In his pursuit of pleasure and sensual satisfaction, the philosophical libertine shows hedonistic patterns of thought. In his ideal of life, the libertinistic rake is anti-authoritarian, anti-normative, and anti-traditional. Rejecting conformism, libertinism can be associated with disobedience to authority (whether familial, paternal or moral), rejection of the laws and rules regulating social life. A libertine is one devoid of most moral restraints, which are seen as unnecessary or undesirable, especially one who ignores or even rejects accepted morals and forms of behaviour approved by the larger society. Whether it calls to mind licentiousness, dissolute behaviour or screens a subversive doctrine, undoubtedly libertinism asserts the individual's right to pleasure. Libertines, but also free-thinkers and libertarians. Far from being restricted to social and moral conduct, libertinism also gives rise to philosophical reflection and social dispute (as clearly shows in the title of some of the most famous French libertine novels such as *Th r se philosophe*<sup>6</sup> or *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*<sup>7</sup>). Libertine novelists aim at setting up natural ethics based on fostering man's vital instincts instead of repressing them. Rejecting the traditional part allotted to women, the heroines of libertine novels demand the same right to pleasure as men's. Likewise Gothic heroines redefine the traditional part played by the heroine in novels. Both genres–favouring darkness or half-light, cherishing mystery and intrigue, encouraging confusion and disorder–maintain the ferment of subversion that will rise against the tyranny of an antiquated patriarchal system, overthrowing the bases of a hypocritical alienating society.

### *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

“If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?” [ASTELL 563]. With this distressing question, in 1700 Mary Astell, a devout Christian and one of the first-ever feminist writers, launches the philosophical assault on gender inequality by explaining that man's intellectual superiority over woman is a result of his superior education; consequently, she calls for equal access to quality education. Astell also compares the domestic despotism women face in the home to the political despotism men rebel against in society, insisting that there must be reform of the marriage institution.

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<sup>6</sup> This novel published in 1748 is usually attributed to Jean-Baptiste Boyer d'Argens.

<sup>7</sup> Donatien Alphonse Fran ois de Sade, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir ou les Instituteurs immoraux*, 1794.

Following her lead, women like Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710) write poems critical of woman's subjugated state, explicitly stating their feminist principles, in particular claiming the right to education, stressing the unequal treatment women receive in law, aiming at providing equality in law and equality in social situations. Thus Lady Chudleigh, ahead of her time, challenges traditional gender roles. "To the Ladies" appears in *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703) echoing the feminist argument she sets forth in *The Female Advocate; or, A Plea for the Just Liberty of the Tender Sex and Particularly of Married Women* (1700). *The Female Advocate* is published to counter "a late rude and disingenuous discourse, delivered by Mr. John Sprint, in a sermon at a wedding, May 11<sup>th</sup>, at Sherburn in Dorsetshire, 1699." In her *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1710) she angrily attacks sex inequality and tries to persuade women to claim the right to be admitted to the Republic of Letters. Lady Winchelsea also takes an interest in woman's condition, condemning the subjection of married women in her poem "The Unequal Fetters": "Marriage does but slightly tie men, / Whilst close pris'ners we remain" [73].

For her, marriage is but short of slavery, hindering freedom. Marriage and domestic life are seen as a form of imprisonment and the metaphor of captivity and detention is also to be found in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana or the Fortunate Mistress* (1724) whose heroine protests she had rather be a kept mistress than a wife:

I found, that a Wife is treated with Indifference, a Mistress with a strong Passion; a Wife is look'd upon, as but an Upper-Servant, a Mistress is a Sovereign; a Wife must give up all she has; have every Reserve she makes for herself, be thought hard of, and be upbraided with her very *Pin-Money*; whereas a Mistress makes the Saying true, *that what the Man has, is hers, and what she has, is her own* [132].

Though much less guarded, or modest, Elizabeth Thomas (1677-1731) also deals with women's issues, particularly women's right to education, as women are in her time "still deny'd th'Improvement of our Mind". But she proves even more revolutionary, attacking as she does matrimony as a social institution, denouncing its unfairness to women, legally and morally in their husbands' power.

For when two bind themselves in Marriage Bands,  
Fidelity in each, the Church commands;  
Equal's the Contract, equal are the Vows,  
Yet Custom, diff'rent Licences allows:  
The Man may range from his unhappy Wife,  
But Woman's made a Property for Life [175].

Her reputation is severely damaged by notoriety as her tumultuous promiscuous life, not in keeping with the dictates of social decorum or moral standards, is the talk of the town. This perfectly shows how difficult it is in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for a woman devoid of protectors and fortune to make a position for herself in polite society. Her desire to be independent and her aspiration to equality cost her dearly, as it does Laclos's heroine, Madame de Merteuil, struck down by small pox.<sup>8</sup> According to popular conservative attitudes of the time, women are intellectually and physically inferior creatures that should be pitied; they are the sex whose duty it is to take care of all domestic duties; the only sex whose reputation is almost solely based on chastity and the maintenance of the perception of sexual virtue. The notion that woman is inherently weak and delicate preserves—if not perpetuates—men and women's master-slave relationship.

Even men such as Francis Hutcheson<sup>9</sup> call for more equality in marriage and more rights for women. And Helvetius' book, *De l'Esprit (On Mind)*, condemned by Pope Clement XIII one year after its 1758 publication, argues that the differences between men and women are vastly due to a difference in education [GELBART 338-339]. In the middle of the century, women use journals to address issues of concern to their sex. When Mme de Beaumer takes over *Journal des Dames* (1759-1777) in 1761, just one year before Rousseau publishes his misogynistic work *L' mille*, she uses the publication to call attention to the plight of womankind as well as to highlight their achievements [GELBART 429]. Around the same time the Blue Stockings Society, a women's literary discussion group, begins to flourish. The group of upper-middle class women dismisses the trivial appetites and occupations of women of their day, embracing intellectual pursuits instead,

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre-Ambroise-Fran ois Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*  d. Michel Delon (1782 ; Paris : Librairie g n rale Fran aise, 2002) 511 : « Le Marquis de \*\*, qui ne perd pas l'occasion de dire une m chancet , disait hier, en parlant d'elle, que la maladie l'avait retourn e, et qu'  pr sent son  me  tait sur sa figure. Malheureusement tout le monde trouva que l'expression  tait juste ». *Dangerous Connections* letter CLXXV, *Madame de Volanges* to *Madame de Rosemonde*: "She is recovered, it is true, but horribly disfigured. [...] The Marquis of \_\_\_\_ [...] speaking of her yesterday, said, that her disorder had turned her inside out; that now her mind was painted on her countenance". The Internet Archive. 11 Feb. 2013. <http://archive.org/details/DangerousConnectionsVol.4Part2> (V rifi  le 18 avril 2014).

<sup>9</sup> His *System of Moral Philosophy* was published posthumously in 1755. Francis Hutcheson, *System of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Carey (1755; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2000).

a revolutionary step away from traditional, non-intellectual women's activities.

Consigning women to the private domestic sphere is a characteristic feature of the times. In his essay "On Women" ("Sur les Femmes", 1772), Diderot claims that there is no kind of harassment that a man may not inflict on a woman with impunity in civilised societies. A girl will pass from the care of her father into the home of her husband. She is unable to hold property in her own name. The social and gender restrictions of the age leave very few women with access to intellectual, political and scientific knowledge and influence. In her *Letters on Education* [593] in 1790, Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay (1731-91) asserts that prejudice, not truth, is the principal reason inequality of the sexes is accepted, that the apparent weakness of women is due to their mis-education and that the "foibles and vices" of women "originate in situation and education only" [WALTERS 30]. That same year, Constantia (Judith Sargent Stevens Murray) (1751-1820), the most prominent woman essayist of her day, among the first Universalists in New England, publishes "On the Equality of the Sexes",<sup>10</sup> which complains that the only reason women are intellectually inferior to men is because "the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science" [603]. She argues forcefully for improved female education and for women to be allowed a public voice. And in 1791, Olympe de Gouges writes the unapologetic "Declaration of Rights of Women", which commands an absolute equal distribution of rights and duties to both men and women, asserting that women "must have the same shares in the distribution of positions, employment, offices, honors, and jobs" [GOUGES 1995, 613]. One year later, Mary Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Eventually a French *philosophe* rises up to atone dramatically for the sins of Enlightenment thinkers who, while shouting indefatigably for free-thought and liberty, have disregarded and even at times actively sought to suppress women's rights: in 1787, Jean Antoine Nicolas de Condorcet writes a letter making the revolutionary call for woman's *complete* political and social equality. His essay "Sur l'admission des femmes au droit de cit " ("On Giving Women the Right of Citizenship") is an expanded version of his earlier call for complete equality. Later, in his seminal work *The Progress of the Human Mind* (*Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progr s de l'esprit humain*, 1795), Condorcet demands an end to "prejudices that have brought about an inequality of rights between the sexes" [199].

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<sup>10</sup> "On the Equality of the Sexes" was published in the *Massachusetts Magazine* in 1790.



Female passions are dreaded by men as a source of potential ruin because, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle says, woman is the archetypal other in a phallogocentric society [LECERCLE, "Dracula et la politique"]. The woman who openly and consciously rebels against the traditional gender role of women behaves transgressively and this results in changing the character's physical appearance. Thus in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Coxcomb* (1751), Miss Wilmore despises her own gender role and has "kicked off its trammels, and declared openly for unbounded liberty, in defiance of custom" [138], deciding not to marry and to turn to gallantry, "with all the freedom of a man" [139]. However this unfeminine behaviour proves damaging to her physique:

Her person had however suffered by her boundless indulgence to all her passions. It had robbed her entirely of that grace and modesty, and delicacy, which distinguishes and embellishes female softness. A masculine air had taken the place of it, and appeared as unnatural, though not so disgustfully shocking, as effeminacy in a man. Her bloom was already worn off, and her features enlarged, and grown towards coarse. Yet still there was great fire and spirit left in her eyes, and an unaccountable something about her, which engaged, and took with one, the more one knew, or conversed with her, especially in her cooler intervals, when her passions gave her natural sense fair play [140].

Several things are made clear here: modesty and delicacy are distinctive feminine traits, and a "masculine air" is "unnatural" to females. The "feminine" qualities of delicacy, gentleness and propriety are also praised by Dr James Fordyce in his *Sermons to Young Women* (1766). Miss Wilmore's "masculine" behaviour has altered her features, making them more "coarse" or perhaps more masculine, as if assuming a specific gender role could actually modify physical characteristics. Likewise the unnatural behaviour assumed by Signora Laurentini in Radcliffe's novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) unavoidably leads her to physical and mental decline and decay.<sup>11</sup> The last but one chapter unveils Laurentini's physical corruption due to her sexual desire. Laurentini, spoiled by her parents who failed to teach her to control her passions, gives in to her passion for a man and urges him to poison his wife (Emily's aunt).

Conversely, when Miss Wilmore eventually experiences true love for the first time, she undergoes a transformation that is as abrupt as it is unexpected: "All her masculine airs were now softened into tenderness. The rakish, the bold, the indelicate miss Wilmore disappeared, and in her place I

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<sup>11</sup> Such a dreadful fate also befalls Madame de Merteuil in Laclos's novel (see note 8).

held in my arms a true female with all the timidity and modesty of a new made bride" [CLELAND 148]. Miss Wilmore's feminisation is considered as a return to reason and common sense. The threat of her independence that challenged the existing gender economy has been neutralised. The transgression of gender boundaries is a serious question that should be prevented by all means. Being in possession of a "masculine" understanding may be acceptable for females because common sense and reason are valuable qualities that should be developed, as St Aubert advises his daughter Emily. Noticing her "uncommon delicacy of mind" and observing "a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace" he endeavours, therefore, "to strengthen her mind; to enure her to habits of self-command; to teach her to reject the first impulse of her feelings" [RADCLIFFE 1980 : 5]. Like Jane Austen twenty years later, Ann Radcliffe shows the drawbacks of excessive sensitiveness that leads imagination astray and distracts it away from reason. But while possessing masculine common sense and intellect is highly desirable, knowledge of the world is a more troublesome concept as a show of independent superiority and freedom is not deemed suitable for a woman. Sensible and wise females know their place subordinate to men and they act accordingly. Throughout her life Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) continually demands the right for women to be educated, a concern which shows in her letters.<sup>12</sup> But she is aware of the hindrance erudition and learning constitute for women who should carefully hide them, a piece of advice she gives her daughter Lady Bute, in January 1753, in a letter devoted to her eldest daughter's education: "The second caution to be given her (and which is most absolutely necessary) is to conceal whatever learning she attains, with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness" [226].

The relegation of women to the domestic sphere is characteristic of the period and those who want a more substantial role than of being mere decoration and who crave for significance feel frustrated, confined in domestic space, trapped in the circularity of their lives, victimised by the patriarchal ideological construction of the "proper lady" since subordination and docile passivity remain the feminine ideal. "Inner rage and overwhelming guilt are, in eighteenth-century circumstances, very feminine

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<sup>12</sup> *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 215: "If your daughters are inclined to love reading, do not check their inclination by hindering them of the diverting part of it; it is as necessary for the amusement of women as the reputation of men; but teach them not to expect or desire any applause from it. Let their brothers shine, and let them content themselves with making their lives easier by it" (To the Countess of Bute, Dec. 1751).

emotions—women have to suppress rage because they cannot control things; women feel guilty because they continually fail to live up to expectations” [DOODY 554]. Women’s desires of achievement and self-realisation are frustrated, and anxiety crops up from an awareness of unsatisfactory alternatives. Men rule the female’s world, making sure that she has no adventures and that all her actions are controlled. Her deepest fear then is that nothing shall ever happen to her and that everything is to be made insipid and unexciting. The motif of a character’s live burial, a common Gothic device, can be analysed as an epitome of female existence at the time. The architectural Piranesian setting of these fictions vividly suggests an oppressive society. The sense of futility, despair and the loss of hope are powerfully conveyed by the affectively dead setting. The *topos* of imprisonment is recurring either literally or metaphorically. That the first action of the French Revolution—the storming of the Bastille—should have been the pulling down of a prison shows how deep-rooted and powerful that image is in collective consciousness at the time. Whether actual prisons, fortresses or convents, these places of confinement are so many torture chambers, intended to stand for taboos and repression. “Why,” said she, “why are these massy gates permitted to exist; why are these hated walls, sad prisons of innocence and youth, where fraud and cruelty have power, and to torture and confine the helpless?” [*The Friar’s Tale* 14]. The walls of the convent are meant to express taboos and sexual prohibits and the eroticism they give rise to grants the convent a central place in Gothic fiction and in libertine literature. Sade of course turns the convent into the most vicious place ever but before him libertine fiction—from *La V nus dans le clo tre ou la religieuse en chemise* (1672) to *M moires de Suzon, s ur de Dom Bougre, portier des chartreux* (1778)—usually sets its scandalous plots behind the bars of a convent. With closure the proscription against any form of sexuality outside marriage reaches its climax: far from diminishing desire these novels claim this taboo only serves to inflate it: “l’imb cillit  de nos fondateurs et la cruaut  des hommes ont voulu nous interdire une fonction aussi naturelle, elles n’ont fait qu’irriter nos d sirs” [*Histoire de Dom Bougre* 172].

Whatever its form libertinism maintains something subversive about it, as the libertine only fulfils himself by infringing the principles intended to ensure society operates properly. Such a reappraisal of the patriarchal principles family and society are based on also features prominently in Gothic fiction whose development can be seen as a sure sign of the will to break the rules. These improbable fictions appeal so deeply to women because women need alternatives to their socially-defined state of

meaningless and powerless activity. Whereas individualism is praised in men, only subordination and shyness are recommended to women. Women novelists feel intensely frustrated at the thought that women are only granted self-denial, self-control and patience. The novel's appeal could thus be accounted for by the tedium and boredom of women's lives; Anna Laetitia Barbault acknowledges "the neglect and tedium of life which [the young girl] is perhaps doomed to encounter" [51]. "The 'romance' element in women's novels, then, is important as a fantasy of female power, through which women could escape in imagination from the reality of their oppression" [SPENCER 187].

### *Freedom or Women's Exercise in Desire*

It is not insignificant that many women turn to writing Gothic romances: it proves a medium through which they can express their own fantasies, offering them a reprieve from the frustrations of their daily lives. "Women's fiction has always been concerned with redressing the balance and restoring women to the record: whereas the domestic novel does this implicitly, Gothic fiction can make the claim explicit" [SPENCER 192]. Radcliffe's novels show how the Gothic novel can present a fantasy of female power. Her novels gain greater power as they allow repressed female sexuality to come close to the surface. In Radcliffe's romances, the repressed element of feminine sexual desire returns although it is never explicitly stated. "It is in the Gothic novel that women writers first accuse the 'real world' of falsehood and deep disorder" [DOODY 560]. The feminine principle Radcliffe proposes as a counter to male domination is an ideal femininity that challenges and rejects the abuses of patriarchal power and embodies a male/female alternative to ruthlessness and violence.

Women's subversive desire for significance—as shown both in English Gothic novels and in French libertine novels—constitutes a threat to the status quo, to the established laws of patriarchy. By questioning gender hierarchies, defying normative behaviours and exalting unlawfulness, these novels allow some sort of release, an outlet for repressed impulses and desires. That is why Gothic fiction could be termed revolutionary. It provides a voice for the culturally silenced. "Women's lives [being] often more severely bounded than those of men, [...] women, therefore, are more likely to be strongly aware of a need for escape and self-realisation—the need that is so readily elided with the sublime" [CHARD 132-133]. Radcliffe's novels in particular could be read as an attempt to challenge patriarchal structures and to disrupt the ideology of the docile and delicate female. Of course it should be

remembered that the shadows we perceive in that fiction (of class anxiety, gender conflicts and domestic oppression) are what happens in the process of the writing, the effect of the writer's unconscious, rather than disguised social and political polemic. Nonetheless they are evidence enough of "the spirit of the age", a clue to the many forces that are at work, a sort of gauge of the general moral circumstances. Like the libertine novel, Gothic fiction is characterised by transgression: transgressing the bounds of reality, crossing the social and aesthetic limits, even defying natural laws, the Gothic is a mode that questions stability, both individual and societal, and can be read as an expression of dissatisfaction with reality. The female readers enjoy the thrilling dizzying seduction of Gothic fiction, where heroines can experience the same adventures and perils as male heroes have long lived in novels and romances. The Gothic heroine is somehow the female equivalent of the picaresque hero. Radcliffe in particular redefines the traditional part played by the heroine in novels: although the Gothic heroine seems trapped in the castle, a passive victim, she consistently proves determined to explore this threatening labyrinth. Emily St. Aubert, the heroine of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), with trembling step and a fluttering heart, repeatedly steals into the forbidden secret chambers of Udolpho and Chateau-le-Blanc in order to unveil the mysteries of the castles and to find out her relations to the original owners of those places. Those females—Signora Laurentini and the Marchioness de Villeroi—are represented as Emily's doubles. Udolpho's actual owner, Laurentini, is a sexually insatiable corrupt woman who is supposed to be dead. The last but one chapter reveals that she has become the demented sister Agnes, haunted by her haunting dreadful secret past, whose corrupted body is but the literal representation of her inner corruption. She somehow mirrors Emily's potential for transgression, presented as she is as some sort of double. So is the murdered marchioness: Emily is repeatedly mistaken for her aunt.

Thus Emily is both passive victim and potential transgressor. It is significant that early in the novel Emily is depicted as purity and passion united: "Hers was the *contour* of a Madona, with the sensibility of a Magdalen" [RADCLIFFE 1980 : 184]. At the end of the novel, Emily is back in the pastoral idyllic setting of La Vall e, an Edenic prelapsarian world of stasis that denies the Gothic subversive experience. At the close of the narrative, she is no longer submitted to a tyrannical will but takes her own fate in hand, in a pastoral paradise where she can enjoy uninterrupted happiness, safely sheltered from society. This retreat represents her exclusion from the male-dominated world of power but it is also a refuge from that power. Such is also the fate of Ellena, the heroine of Radcliffe's last novel *The Italian* (1797); as Jane

Spencer points out, the novel “end[s] with defeat for the authoritarian male and the heroine’s marriage to a feminised hero” [207]. The dashing young hero is weakened and, as Cyndy Hendershot claims, “possessed by Ellena, Vivaldi loses his traditional male subject position; Radcliffe figures this loss as a positive one that leads to a renegotiation of heterosexual relations.” Once possessed, feminised, Vivaldi becomes a suitable partner for Ellena. The hero of Radcliffe’s romances is the ideal, feminised male. “The Radcliffe hero is truly a sheep in wolf’s clothing” [SPENCER 204] who proves his worth by becoming a victim of powerful men and who shares womanly virtues. The process of feminisation is significantly carried out with a veil, when the guards in the prison of the Inquisition “[throw] over him the same mantle as before, and, in addition, a black veil, that completely muffle[d] his eyes” [RADCLIFFE 1992 : 325]. The veil, an explicit feminine sign, places Vivaldi in a position where he must acknowledge his lack. By wearing this signifier of femininity, linked throughout the novel with Ellena, Vivaldi literally dons the identity of a woman. This final feminisation enables him to “throw away the phallic mantle and be an equal partner to Ellena” [HENDERSHOT 48].

Radcliffe destabilises the traditional gender roles by feminising the male subject. She always tells the same story of a victimised heroine, disowned and disavowed who seeks her dead-undead mother in the labyrinthine vaults and corridors of a castle or an abbey, fleeing at the same time the erotic aggressive lust of a father figure. She secures the help of a young man to assist her in her flight and quest; this young man is invariably wounded, helpless and ineffectual, indeed emasculated and he becomes as much a surrogate brother as a lover and finally delivers the heroine away from the villainous father figure into the mother’s loving arms. Radcliffe’s feminisation of the male hero and the valorisation of a marriage between equal partners threaten the model of the traditional family, with its stereotyped gender roles and they convey a subversive message, picturing a utopian society unhampered by old traditions of deference and stuffy institutions. The historian of ideas considers rightly that the rise of the companionate marriage was one of the major cultural shifts in the eighteenth century.

What is new in the Gothic novel is that women come out of their closets, break out of the enclosed world where patriarchal society imprisons them, in order to travel through the world, even though often against their will. And in their quest they resort to symbols whose meaning they distort; thus the veil, a typically feminine symbol, far from restraining women becomes a defensive weapon, as clearly shows in *The Italian*. After the manner of the mask, the veil becomes a disguise, a concealing outfit that grants women

revolutionary freedom, sheltering them from society’s censorious glare. Whereas men can act openly, women must behave secretly. The masquerade allows the representation of forbidden subjects with perfect impunity; it confers to women an exceptional moral and sexual freedom and under cover of their masks allows them to break the limitations of feminine propriety. Masquerades and masked balls thus prove favourable places propitious for seduction, allowing women to usurp men’s power and grab their privilege of choosing their partners. As Henry Fielding indicates in *The Masquerade* (1728), “masquerade balls are breeding a new ‘Amazonian race’ of women who are propagating sexual chaos” [31-32]. By easing off unbearable tensions while containing them within certain limits, this catharsis manages to make up for unfulfilled desires. Likewise Gothic fiction can help heal the wounds of repression by staging what denial and silencing tried to control. Gothic fiction, essentially written by women for women, unveils the primal scene of an oppressed female, a mere object deprived of control on her own fate, and turns it into an initiation journey where females gain power and independence. They are novels of escape, questioning authority, criticising the status quo of male authority and fantasising an idealised pastoral world of female power. By questioning gender hierarchies, the Gothic novel and the libertine novel, like the carnivalesque tradition—an outlet for repressed impulses and desires—shift their society and culture from old patterns of life into the world we know today.

***Conclusion: What is Left of the Promises and Hopes of the Enlightenment***

By challenging gender hierarchies, the Gothic novel, like the libertine novel, like the carnivalesque tradition, call women and men to throw off the yoke of tradition and authority and submit only to the yoke of pleasure. Impregnated with the longing for liberty and the spirit of rebellion that led to the French Revolution, Gothic novelists and libertine authors begin tearing down the edifice of patriarchal dominion. Women’s subversive yearning for regard and recognition eventually encourages large-scale social subversion. Gradually, almost casually, Gothic and libertine fiction manage to convey female protest. Libertine and Gothic novels have a liking for half-light. They pass judgment on societal structures and manners, and they discuss customs and traditions, and question family relationships. Gothic fiction and libertine novels could thus be termed protest literature: the philosophical meaning of some libertine novels clearly shows in their titles (*Th r se philosophe*, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*) and the subversiveness of

Gothic novels has been exposed by contemporary critics. What emerges here is the underground issue of emancipation. Both libertine and Gothic heroes deviate from moral rules, and reject conventions, revealing their independence from social codes and manners. In their own way, not so fiercely for sure but as doggedly and surely as the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution, they contribute to sap and undermine the foundations of an outdated world.

The Enlightenment vision could be cursorily summed up as Science, Reason, Progress and the Promise of a Better Future. Asserting the right of the individual to question and criticise those very laws and institutions in public is deemed absolutely necessary for human progress. The question arises of what has become of the promise of that glorious movement. What is left of the Enlightenment promise? The Age of Enlightenment, regardless of how you define it, is a constant hope that we hold before us. It is both a promise of our destiny and a warning from our past. It is the desire to better ourselves. For some, the Age of Enlightenment is a constant promise of our current time of existence. It is a reminder to ourselves that we are expected to grow continually and move forward discovering new truth and meaning in the world around us. Kant draws a seminal distinction between an age of enlightenment and an enlightened age. If we are asked, "Do we now live in an enlightened age?", the answer is "No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment". As things now stand, we still have a long way to go before men can be or can easily become capable of using their own reason correctly in moral, political, religious matters without outside guidance. But we do have a few indications that the way is now being cleared for men to work in this direction, and that the obstacles to general enlightenment, to man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity, are gradually becoming fewer.

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