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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

Dans ses mémoires, la comtesse de Murat répond à la longue liste d'accusations misogynes portées par l'abbé de Villiers dans les Mémoires de la vie du comte D*** avant sa retraite (1696), en critiquant les inégalités entre les sexes et en insistant sur la vertu féminine. Cet article se concentre sur la représentation positive de l'amitié féminine, par laquelle Murat dénonce l'allégation de Villiers selon laquelle l'affection des femmes est guidée par la cupidité. Alors que la protagoniste de Murat prouve le contraire par sa camaraderie dévouée avec Mademoiselle Laval, les relations féminines dans les mémoires de Murat ne sont pas toutes présentées sous un jour favorable. La femme de chambre de la protagoniste, par exemple, confirme la critique de la convoitise et de la déloyauté féminines formulée par Villiers. Même la relation entre la protagoniste et Mademoiselle Laval est ternie par des allusions saphiques, qui sont néanmoins en apparence niées. Cet article analyse la représentation paradoxale de la femme chez Murat, représentation qui s'appuie sur les arguments pro-féminins de François Poullain de la Barre et de Gabrielle Suchon. Pourtant, ce paradoxe est atténué chez Murat par l'attribution d'actes immoraux aux deux sexes. De plus, le lien intime entre Mademoiselle Laval et la protagoniste est porteur d'une ambiguïté qui prône l'homoérotisme et affiche une préférence pour les communautés centrées sur les femmes par rapport aux relations hétérosexuelles.

Paradoxical Philogyny: The Comtesse de Murat's Defense of Women and Female Friendship in Dialogue with François Poullain de la Barre and Gabrielle Suchon

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In her memoirs, the Comtesse de Murat replies to the long list of misogynist accusations made in Abbé de Villiers's Mémoires de la vie du comte D*** avant sa retraite *(1696) by criticizing gender inequalities and by emphasizing female virtue. This article focuses on Murat's positive representation of female friendship, whereby she denounces Villiers's allegation that women's affection is guided by greed. While Murat's protagonist proves the contrary through her devoted comradeship with Mademoiselle Laval, not all female relationships in Murat's memoirs are portrayed in a favourable light. The protagonist's* femme de chambre*, for example, confirms Villiers's critique of female covetousness and disloyalty. Even the relationship between the protagonist and Mademoiselle Laval is tarnished by sapphic allusions that are, however, outwardly denied. This article analyzes Murat's paradoxical representation of women that builds on pro-feminist arguments by François Poullain de la Barre and Gabrielle Suchon. Yet, this paradox is lessened in Murat through the attribution of immoral acts to both sexes. Furthermore, the intimate connection between Mademoiselle Laval and the protagonist lends itself to a double entendre that advocates for homoeroticism and a preference for female-centred communities over heterosexual relationships.*

Dans ses mémoires, la comtesse de Murat répond à la longue liste d'accusations misogynes portées par l'abbé de Villiers dans les Mémoires de la vie du comte D*** avant sa retraite *(1696), en critiquant les inégalités entre les sexes et en insistant sur la vertu féminine. Cet article se concentre sur la représentation positive de l'amitié féminine, par laquelle Murat dénonce l'allégation de Villiers selon laquelle l'affection des femmes est guidée par la cupidité. Alors que la protagoniste de Murat prouve le contraire par sa camaraderie dévouée avec Mademoiselle Laval, les relations féminines dans les mémoires de Murat ne sont pas toutes présentées sous un jour favorable. La femme de chambre de la protagoniste, par exemple, confirme la critique de la convoitise et de la déloyauté féminines formulée par Villiers. Même la relation entre la protagoniste et Mademoiselle Laval est ternie par des allusions saphiques, qui sont néanmoins en apparence niées. Cet article analyse la représentation paradoxale de la femme chez Murat, représentation qui s'appuie sur les arguments pro-féminins de François Poullain de la Barre et de Gabrielle Suchon. Pourtant, ce paradoxe est atténué chez Murat par l'attribution d'actes immoraux aux deux sexes. De plus, le lien intime entre Mademoiselle Laval et la protagoniste est porteur d'une ambiguïté qui prône l'homoérotisme et affiche une préférence pour les communautés centrées sur les femmes par rapport aux relations hétérosexuelles.*

The portrayal of women as perfect and imperfect beings represents one of the foundational aspects of the age-old *querelle des femmes*, a formal debate

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on the nature, characteristics, and capacities of women. Misogynist assertions that women were weak or incapable of existing without male supervision were answered with arguments in favour of women. Through her life and works, Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, Comtesse de Murat (1668?–1716), participated in the reworking of the portrayal of women by redefining the notion of female perfection to include female friendships as well as sapphic love, which commonly connoted female imperfection, and excused moral shortcomings with gender inequality. Murat thereby created a paradoxical philogyny.

On the one hand, Comtesse de Murat, through her social standing and learnedness, resembled François Poullain de la Barre's representation of aristocratic female perfectibility, as he described it in his *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673) and *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les moeurs* (1674). In these works, Poullain "advocated an enlightened education, soundly grounded in Cartesian philosophy, for women of leisure."[1] Similarly, Murat's erudition and her claim for women's self-determination echo Gabrielle Suchon's concept of women's perfection through education that she develops in her *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693).

On the other hand, the "imperfect" behaviour of the "abominable Madame de Murat"[2] aroused the suspicion of René d'Argenson, the Parisian lieutenant general of police, who in 1698 started his investigations into her scandalous indulgence in "a monstrous attachment to persons of her sex."[3] Murat's works contribute in a similar manner to the paradoxical representation of women during the *querelle des femmes*, including her *Mémoires de Madame la comtesse de M**** (1697). According to Geneviève Clermidy-Patard, her memoirs belong to the genre of "autofiction,"[4] since they combine invention and biographical facts and mirror Murat's life to some extent: for instance, the birth of her son,

1. Welch, "Introduction," 3.

2. I am referring to the title of David Michael Robinson's article, "The Abominable Madame de Murat."

3. René d'Argenson, quoted in Robinson, "Abominable Madame de Murat," 53–54.

4. Clermidy-Patard, *Madame de Murat*, 42. According to Joan DeJean, "despite their obvious similarities with their creators," the fictional heroines of this kind of memoir "are not autobiographical projections." DeJean, "Notorious Women," 68. However, Clermidy-Patard's use of "autofiction" aligns with DeJean's emphasis on the tension between fiction and biographical similarities.

her marriage and separation from her husband, as well as rumours regarding her lesbianism.[5]

In her memoirs, Murat replies to Abbé de Villiers's *Mémoires de la vie du comte D*** avant sa retraite* (1696) by challenging his negative portrayal of women as conceited and treacherous beings. Murat's heroine blames her shortcomings, including her vanity and (innocent) romantic intrigues, on her corrupt environment. By drawing attention to her lack of education, she also re-evaluates her shortcomings within the context of gender inequality, and in so doing, turns misogynist arguments into philogynist ones. Based on this multi-faceted portrayal of Murat's heroine, I will first analyze how some of the scandalous undertakings of Murat's female protagonist can be excused by paradoxically aligning them with Poullain's and Suchon's notions of female perfectibility relative to virtue, knowledge, and self-determination. Second, I will examine how Murat further challenges Villiers's affirmation of women's lack of virtue, which, according to him, makes them incapable of engaging in friendships. In her response to Villiers, Murat depicts the strong bond between her protagonist and another fictional character, Mademoiselle Laval. This relationship, however, causes a scandal due to rumours regarding its homoerotic nature, thereby at once enhancing and undermining Poullain's and Suchon's ideas of female perfection. Murat shows that women are capable of sincere attachment, yet with the danger of transgressing notions of *bienséance*.

A comparison of Poullain's, Suchon's, and Murat's defenses of women demonstrates that even though Murat uses arguments that are in part similar to promote women's perfectibility, the views of these three authors on the characteristics and role of learned women in society diverge from each other. Poullain envisions a private society of both sexes in which women's intellectual and moral skills can flourish,[6] while Suchon's independent woman "prays, helps her community, converses with friends, reads, writes books to help teach others, but mostly spends her time alone."[7] Murat, however, implicitly hints at the possibility of a gynocentric network in which women can attain self-determination through friendly and even romantic relations with each

5. See Clermidy-Patard, *Madame de Murat*, 40, 54, 55, 159, 169.

6. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 142; *De l'éducation*, 184, 346, 353.

7. Walsh, "Gabrielle Suchon," 700.

other, thereby reinterpreting the notion of female virtue as solidarity and love between women.

Women's education, self-determination, and virtue according to Poullain, Suchon, and Murat

It is unclear whether Murat knew the writings of Poullain and Suchon. Poullain's treatises did not receive the attention and success he had hoped for, due to his promotion of a Cartesian personal freedom, which undermined the authority of the Church and the monarch. Therefore, they did not gain a large audience under the restrictive absolutist regime of Louis XIV.[8] Yet, according to Marcelle Maistre Welch, Poullain's work was well received by "the few précieuses remaining in the open [who] applauded his general sense of equity."[9] He even dedicated his second treatise to Mademoiselle de Montpensier, a major opponent of the king during the Fronde and therefore perhaps a good ally for Poullain. Furthermore, Montpensier served as a model for the women writers of the end of the seventeenth century, including Murat.[10]

Female writers even quoted Poullain's treatises, as for example Suchon, "the first female philosopher to have left a substantial body of written work devoted solely to the subject of women."[11] Suchon mentions *De l'égalité des deux sexes* in her *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693) and uses some of Poullain's arguments pertaining to the intellectual capacities of women that are undermined by arbitrary misogynist laws.[12] Despite the fact that Suchon's second treatise, *Du célibat volontaire ou la vie sans engagement* (1700), gained a greater readership than her *Traité*, and the fact that she was intellectually marginalized and therefore without connections to salons or other intellectual

8. Welch, "Introduction," 9, 14, 27.

9. Welch, "Introduction," 12. Poullain himself mentioned in his third treatise, *De l'excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des sexes* (1675), that the *précieuses* were pleased with his *De l'égalité*. Even though he uses this argument in the misogynist part of his treatise, in which he foresees possible counterarguments of his philogynist standpoint, it might still be an accurate representation of the reception of his first work. See Poullain, *De l'excellence*, 118–19.

10. Trinquet du Lys, *Le conte de fées français*, 42–43.

11. Stanton and Wilkin, "Volume Editors' Introduction," 1.

12. Suchon, "L'Autorité," in *Traité de la morale*, 41–42.

gatherings, it seems that "the initial reception of her *Traité* […] must have been fairly positive."[13] It was reprinted a year after its first publication and received a rather favourable review in the illustrious *Journal des Sçavans*.[14]

It is therefore possible that Murat knew Poullain's two treatises as well as Suchon's, or that she was at least familiar with some of their arguments before she wrote her memoirs, since their work circulated and was discussed in the learned societies close to Murat. More importantly, Murat uses similar arguments to defend women's virtue, access to education, and their capacity for self-determination. Echoing Poullain and Suchon,[15] she explains in her "Avertissement" that oftentimes imprudence, caused by lack of education, and bad luck contribute more to women's bad reputation than their lack of moral excellence.[16] She therefore wishes to educate her female readership through her negative example, which will not only enlighten them but also help them attain self-determination by deliberately avoiding ambiguous situations: "On y apprendra à éviter les malheurs qui tiennent lieu de crimes, et à s'éloigner des occasions qui peuvent donner atteinte à la reputation des Femmes, en voyant par où j'ay mal ménagé la mienne."[17] Suchon and Poullain both emphasize the importance of experience, which they consider more useful for educating others than simple theoretical knowledge.[18] Murat's rectification of the negative reputation of women therefore also serves a pedagogical purpose.

Vanity, like imprudence, is another reason for women's bad reputation and is caused not by immorality but by ignorance. Blaming a corrupt family environment and the lack of a proper education, Murat's narrator traces back the origins of her narcissism. Her mother, concerned about her youthful appearance, had her daughter raised by the narrator's frivolous grandmother, who made her believe that her aristocratic status and her beauty destined her

13. Desnain, "Gabrielle Suchon," 268. See also Stanton and Wilkin, "Volume Editors' Introduction," 41.

14. "Cet ouvrage, composé en moins d'un an, sans aucun conseil ni aucun secours étranger, n'est pas une des moindres preuves de ce que la personne qui nous le donne y soutient à l'avantage de son sexe." Unsigned review of *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, by G. S. Aristophile [Gabrielle Suchon], *Journal des sçavants*, 6 December 1694, 469.

15. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 6; Suchon, "De la science," in *Traité de la morale*, 74.

16. Murat, "Avertissement," in *Mémoires de Madame la comtesse D***, avant sa retraite* (hereafter cited as *Mémoires*).

17. Murat, *Mémoires*, 2.

18. Suchon, "De la science," in *Traité de la morale*, 117–18. See also Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 315.

for "les rangs les plus élevez."[19] Murat's narrator criticizes women's vanity and their concern for beauty, youth, and aristocratic titles and shows that even religious women can instill this moral shortcoming in others. After the birth of the narrator's younger brother, she is sent to a convent where the nuns idolize her. Instead of a proper education, she is confirmed in her beliefs of superiority and perfection:

> Cette vanité s'augmentoit encore par les loüanges continuelles que les Religieuses me donnoient ; et par-là j'ay eu lieu de connoître que les Couvens du caractere de celui-là, ne sont pas une meilleure Ecole pour les enfans, que la Maison des Parens qui les idolatrent. Plus j'étois persuadée que les Religieuses devoient être des Saintes, plus je croyais meriter leurs loüanges : et je me flatois qu'il n'y avoit rien à corriger en moi, puisque les Personnes ausquelles on avoit donné le soin de ma conduite, applaudissoient à toutes mes volontes.[20]

This flashback to the narrator's childhood and coming of age highlights the importance of education and a moral environment in cultivating self-determination and virtuous conduct, qualities that are indispensable for women whose reputation can be so easily and unjustly tarnished.[21] As the narrator states, she regrets that she was not taught "la difference du solide et de la bagatelle" at a young age and before "la verité et la vertu" could leave a lasting impression on her.[22] As a consequence of this negligence, the twelve-year-old narrator turns into an avid reader of gallant novels, which causes her vanity to descend into coquetry and incites her to send love letters to the family friend the Marquis de Blossac.[23] Had she received an education allowing her to analyze her thoughts and feelings, she would have been able to vanquish her passion and therefore attain self-determination:

> Je n'avois souhaité de voir Blossac que pour avoir la gloire de le soumettre à mes loix, et je me soumis tellement aux siennes, que je n'avois point

19. Murat, *Mémoires*, 3.

20. Murat, *Mémoires*, 4.

21. Murat, *Mémoires*, 1.

22. Murat, *Mémoires*, 5.

23. Murat, *Mémoires*, 5.

> d'autre Plaisir que de penser à lui […]. J'aimois sans connoître l'amour ; et j'aimois d'autant plus, que j'ignorois ce que c'étoit que d'aimer : Mon ignorance m'empêchoit de combattre ce que je ne connoissois point.[24]

Because of her ignorance, the narrator succumbs to a "vanité chimérique que les Romans m'avaient inspire,"[25] wastes her time in trivial thoughts about Blossac, and eventually tarnishes her reputation when the nuns find her love letters.

In her *Traité*, Suchon, too, chastises women's vanity and coquetry, through which they help form their own chains,[26] like Murat's narrator whose frivolity keeps her ignorant and dependent on Blossac. According to Suchon, women therefore fail to attain the "sainte liberté" that allows them to honour their resemblance to God.[27] In order to achieve this "sainte liberté," women first need to be enlightened by reason to judge their actions properly; second, they need to be able to act freely and according to their will; third, women need to acquire "force et générosité."[28] As Julie Walsh explains, the concept of generosity is derived from Aristotle and possibly Descartes, and it entails the capacity "to shake off the constraint of caring what other people think of us,"[29] thereby diminishing the importance of everything terrestrial and ephemeral, be it youth, beauty, riches, or titles, all things valued by some of the female characters in Murat's memoirs.

Women can attain the "sainte liberté," because reason is the foundation of virtue, generosity, and free will, and as Suchon emphasizes throughout her *Traité*, women are intellectually men's equal.[30] As Walsh explains, Suchon believes in "freedom to increase proportionally with the degree to which knowledge determines what we choose to do."[31] If some women cannot achieve this "liberté sainte," it is because men deprive them of a proper education.[32]

24. Murat, *Mémoires*, 9.

25. Murat, *Mémoires*, 9.

26. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 126.

27. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 126. Similarly, Poullain suggests that we resemble God through our judgment (Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 137).

28. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 12–13.

29. Walsh, "Gabrielle Suchon," 695.

30. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 239.

31. Walsh, "Gabrielle Suchon," 690.

32. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 93.

Therefore, women are bereft of attaining moral and intellectual perfection, since their tasks do not include "des belles sciences" that would avail them of "sagesse et indifference," the latter being used as a synonym for generosity. Rather, female occupations are limited to housework[33] and to "l'usage des biens temporels pour la delicatesse, le luxe et la vanité."[34] In depicting her female narrator as vain and without access to education, Murat seems to echo Suchon's arguments that emphasize reason and education as the foundations of self-determination and virtue, thus attributing women's moral shortcomings not to their "defective nature" but to an unjust patriarchal system.

Poullain, whose *De l'égalité* served as one of Suchon's sources for her treatise, similarly deplores the restriction of female activities to the "soins du ménage et des enfants."[35] Furthermore, according to Poullain, women compensate for their alleged intellectual inferiority by focusing on their beauty and physical appearance.[36] This applies also to Murat's narrator, who succumbs to the illusion that she can rule over men through her charms, an assumption she learned from reading gallant novels. This misbelief is even more regrettable because women are men's intellectual equals and have the skills to study physics or medicine.[37] Indeed, if women were taught the Cartesian method, which Poullain explains in more detail in his *De l'éducation*, they would excel in all fields.[38] In *De l'égalité*, he describes the art of "bien penser" as accessible to anyone who has sufficient intellectual capacities to doubt established knowledge, to examine facts carefully, and thereby to differentiate the truth from prejudices.[39] Yet, despite the fact that women excel over men through their virtue, intelligence, and grace, which increase with age and experience,[40] the prejudice that women are intellectually inferior is so widespread that even women believe it.[41] Not only does the false belief in women's "impuissance

33. Suchon, "De la science," in *Traité de la morale*, 75.

34. Suchon, "De la science," in *Traité de la morale*, 115.

35. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 11.

36. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 16.

37. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 40, 43.

38. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 43.

39. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 5.

40. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 18.

41. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 12.

naturelle"[42] lead to their exclusion from the *res publica* and from science, but, even worse, the deprivation of knowledge also causes deprivation of happiness and virtue. As Poullain affirms, happiness depends on the "connaissances claires, et distinctes" that allow us to do good.[43]

In *De l'éducation*, Poullain further develops the importance of reason for attaining "une parfaite liberté d'esprit," which he prefers over "la possession des plaisirs, des honneurs, et des richesses." It is only through reason that we learn how to control our passions better and endure hardship through unstable times.[44] The instability of fortune, and thereby of everything terrestrial, resonates with Suchon's concept of generosity that encourages women not to tie "self-worth to external objects."[45] Furthermore, the importance of engaging in philosophical questions that, according to Poullain, bring pleasure and joy and lead to self-determination[46] reflects Suchon's emphasis on the use of reason to attain the "sainte liberté." Poullain's affirmation that the "plaisirs sçavants et spirituels" help "à adoucir tous les maux de la vie, et à moderer les excez qui en sont la cause ordinaire,"[47] explains why Murat's narrator is caught in a vicious cycle of ignorance and dependence. She lacks education, reason, and Suchon's concept of generosity, and without them cannot judge her actions and attain freedom.

Murat exemplifies her narrator's state of dependence by depicting two major events: at the age of eleven, the narrator is forced by her mother to enter a convent; and later, marriage is her only way out of the convent. As Lisa Shapiro rightly points out, women's choice of a profession in seventeenth-century France was limited to these two options.[48] Like an object, the narrator is handed from her parents to the nuns, and from the nuns to her husband. Both Poullain and Suchon condemn forced religious vows. In *De l'éducation*, Poullain's alter ego Stasimaque wishes to protect women from taking the veil against their will. Yet his critique of the marital state only concerns the restriction of the husband's

42. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 48.

43. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 49–50.

44. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 15, 16.

45. Walsh, "Gabrielle Suchon," 697.

46. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 22.

47. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 19.

48. Shapiro, "Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist,'" 63.

abuse of power,[49] a position he repeats in *De l'excellence* by emphasizing "that husbands and wives have equal dominion or right over each other."[50] Suchon, however, goes further in her denunciation and takes a clear stand against coercing women to enter the cloister as well as against forced marriage. According to Suchon, women cannot find happiness nor live virtuously if they do not enter these states voluntarily and after deep reflection.[51]

Whereas Stasimaque only expresses his wish to protect women in the conditional,[52] Suchon explicitly points out that canon and civil law prohibit any authoritative figure from coercing their subjects to enter a convent or marry against their will, thereby emphasizing the criminal aspect of limiting women's self-determination. What is more, she specifically disapproves of the "Père de Famille," who kidnaps his daughter and engages her in a forced marriage.[53] Yet, this is exactly what the narrator's father does; he marries his daughter against her will to a violent and jealous husband. Consequently, and in accordance with Suchon's argumentation, her lack of self-determination impedes Murat's heroine from behaving virtuously. Her forced marriage turns violent, and the narrator leaves her marital home, thus jeopardizing her reputation by evading male supervision. Even worse, the narrator, misguided by her vanity and belief in her flawlessness, seeks protection from one of her suitors who remains, however, indifferent to her situation. The narrator, therefore, tarnishes her reputation while proclaiming her innocence and fidelity throughout her marriage.[54] Yet her moral shortcomings are not attributable to the misogynist stereotypes of women's fickleness but, as we have seen, to her lack of education and self-determination.

The narrator herself criticizes her parents' abuse of power that changes her respect and deference for them to aversion. Before her forced marriage, she still seems attached to her father, who pretends to be affected by her fate:

49. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 6.

50. Wilkin, "Feminism and Natural Right," 234. See also Poullain, *De l'excellence*, 29–30.

51. Suchon, "De la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 38–39.

52. "Outre plusieurs reglemens qui seroient avantageux aux femmes, j'empescherois absolument que l'on ne mist les filles en Religion, malgré elles. Je limiterois si bien l'authorité maritale que pas un homme n'en abuseroit." Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 6.

53. Suchon, "De la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 24–25.

54. Murat, *Mémoires*, 46–48.

> Mon Père étoit le seul pour qui je conservois encore quelque amitié, car il paroissoit m'aimer toûjours, et quand on me voulut mettre dans un Couvent, j'eu recours à lui, pour marquer ma repugnance et mon desespoir. Il fut si touché de ma douleur et de mes larmes, qu'il ne pût s'empêcher de pleurer : mais il n'étoit pas le Maître et il me pria d'avoir pour l'amour de lui, la complaisance de me laisser mener au Couvent, me promettant que je n'y serois pas long-tems, et qu'il me marieroit dés que je serois en âge.[55]

While the narrated-I seems to believe her father's sincerity and his interest in her well-being, the narrating-I questions his attachment. The verb complement "*paroissoit* m'aimer toûjours" casts doubt on the trustworthiness of his paternal love, which is only corroborated by the external signs (his tears) through which he convinces the daughter to submit to her fate. However, the genuineness of his sorrow is later undermined by his manipulations to make his daughter marry a man he is indebted to, thereby emphasizing the role of the protagonist as simply a good to be exchanged.[56] Even though he never names her suitor and only describes him as a wealthy nobleman and good husband, the father induces the narrator to believe that it is in fact the Marquis de Blossac. Without this stratagem, the narrator would not have consented to the marriage.[57]

We can once again explain the narrator's credulity as a lack of education and experience, thereby dismantling the misogynist argument of women's intellectual inferiority. According to Poullain, women easily believe those who have power over them because of their misguided trust that these authorial figures would never act out of ignorance or self-interest.[58] Murat clearly illustrates this abuse of power by showing how the nuns encourage the narrator in her belief in her own faultlessness—a sign of their ignorance—and how her father misuses his authority by first inciting her to enter the convent and then by forcing her to marry a man unknown to her. After her forced wedlock, Murat's narrator justly criticizes both of her parents: "Qu'une fille est à plaindre quand ses parens ne cherchent que leur interest en établissant!"[59]

55. Murat, *Mémoires*, 3–4.

56. Murat, *Mémoires*, 21, 22.

57. Murat, *Mémoires*, 18.

58. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 70.

59. Murat, *Mémoires*, 21.

The misconduct of the narrator's father corroborates Poullain's affirmation that men are more likely to abuse their power than women who have less influence,[60] and it resonates with Suchon's warning that women must mistrust "les trompeuses caresses et les feintes douceurs de ces dissimulez ennemis."[61] Even though Suchon is referring here to romantic entanglements, her cautious warning to doubt men's love and friendship can also be applied to the misleading proofs of paternal love given by the narrator's father. While this representation of women's innate goodness and men's corruption is stereotypical,[62] and to some extent undermines Poullain's critique of prejudices through his use of common places, it is the foundation of Poullain's, Suchon's, and in part Murat's descriptions of gender relations: women are virtuous, men are malicious. According to Poullain, women's kind nature is incompatible with unjust behaviour,[63] Suchon emphasizes that women's "debonnaireté, gentillesse et bonne grace" help men acquire kindness and tenderness,[64] and Murat decries the "malignité" and "aveuglement" that foster men's misogyny.[65]

Murat's portrayal of gender relations seems more complex than Poullain's and Suchon's, since she also describes wicked and vicious female characters, such as the narrator's mother and her chambermaid.[66] At the same time, she underlines gender inequalities that are based on men's self-interest—the foundation of the misogynist legal system—as can be seen in the narrator's desperate attempts to separate from a jealous and violent husband. To the narrator's great dismay, the representatives of civil and canon law have their own interests at heart: her lawyer unsuccessfully attempts to seduce the narrator and to blackmail her into satisfying his desires, while her spiritual counsellor takes pride in overzealously admonishing the narrator's moral conduct and tarnishing her reputation in order to better celebrate his own virtue.[67] As Joan DeJean

60. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 73.

61. Suchon, "L'Autorité," in *Traité de la morale*, 112.

62. Poullain, Suchon, and Murat acknowledge, however, that not all women are virtuous. See Poullain, *De l'excellence*, 102; Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 71; Murat, *Mémoires*, 1.

63. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 14, 73.

64. Suchon, "De la science," in *Traité de la morale*, 188.

65. Murat, *Mémoires*, 1, 115.

66. Murat, *Mémoires*, 76.

67. Murat, *Mémoires*, 66, 118.

rightly states, Murat's memoirs belong to a genre that was in vogue at the end of the seventeenth century and that promoted "a defense of all women who are victims of abusive husbands and unjust laws."[68] This genre represented the danger of destabilizing "honorable families"—genealogically, financially, and politically—as well as delegitimizing the state[69] through the portrayal of notorious female characters and their critiques of unhappy marriages. Therefore, authors like Murat as well as the genre of the memoir novel itself "were quickly excluded from literary history" and considered a "literary plague capable of weakening society's foundation."[70] This bleak representation of the "condition féminine" and the accompanying critique recall the treatises of Poullain and Suchon.

In *De l'égalité*, Poullain explains the origins of the misogynist legal systems depicted in Murat: due to their physical weakness, caused by pregnancy and child-rearing, women were subject to "la loi du plus fort" that keeps men in a superior position and leaves women the limited choice of marriage or convent.[71] Suchon agrees with Poullain—"les loix […] tendent toûjours à l'abaissement des femmes"[72]—and offers in part a comparable "solution" to this problem. In *De l'éducation*, Poullain differentiates between two compatible forms of authority that he calls "vérité intérieure" and "verité extérieure." The first concerns the individual's search for truth and reason, representing self-determination, while the second refers to habits and beliefs commonly admitted in the individual's social context. While the latter should always be preferred to the former in order to avoid harming public well-being, both are important: the "vérité intérieure" serves the individual's own perfection, while the "verité extérieure" guarantees one's protection as a member of a community.[73] Poulain's strategy for securing women's equality derives from this concept, since he "advises women to cultivate freedom of mind in private while conforming outwardly to the society's customs as a matter of self-preservation."[74]

68. DeJean, "Notorious Women," 71.

69. DeJean, "Notorious Women," 74, 75.

70. DeJean, "Notorious Women," 67, 68.

71. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 6, 12, 13.

72. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 148.

73. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 160.

74. Wilkin, "Feminism and Natural Right," 241.

Similarly, Suchon distinguishes between two complementary authorities: a terrestrial one, that is God-given and therefore needs to be respected,[75] and the ultimate authority, God himself. Suchon can therefore assure her readers that she does not want to encourage women to rebel against the laws and customs, which would be foolish, but only wishes to "relever leur courage en sorte qu'elles ne regardent que Dieu en toutes leurs dépendances, suivant la Doctrine du Prince des Apôtres Saint Pierre, qui nous enseigne, d'être soûmis à tout homme qui a du pouvoir sur nous."[76] This recognition is the first step towards the self-determination that women can achieve through the "lumieres spirituelles" that help them govern themselves. Self-determination is "la plus forte, la plus juste et la plus belle de toutes les autoritez," because it can never be taken away.[77] As Suchon points out, misogynist customs can never cause women's hearts or virtue to submit.[78]

Yet her second step towards self-determination distinguishes Suchon's approach from Poullain's, according to whom women's equality can be achieved primarily in a prestigious and exclusive social environment,[79] where women can convince men of their "injustice et aveuglement"[80] through the exercise of their intellectual capacities.[81] Suchon's primary aim, however, "is not to convince men of women's abilities, but to show women that they are not, by nature, inferior, to give them the means to improve themselves and to convince them that this can be achieved without men's approval or help."[82] As Shapiro suggests, Suchon understood that "the freedom that is intrinsic to humankind requires proper conditions to be fully expressed."[83] Consequently, Suchon underlines and criticizes the political goal of the miseducation that prevents women from attaining positions of secular and ecclesiastical power.[84] While it is true that

75. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 33.

76. Suchon, "L'Autorité," in *Traité de la morale*, preface.

77. Suchon, "L'Autorité," in *Traité de la morale*, 12.

78. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 117–18.

79. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 142.

80. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 25, 26, 35, 36.

81. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 26.

82. Desnain, "Gabrielle Suchon," 260.

83. Shapiro, "Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist,'" 63.

84. Sabourin, "Plaider l'égalité," 220. See Suchon, "L'Autorité," in *Traité de la morale*, 11–12.

Poullain acknowledges the political context of women's subservience[85] and even enumerates various professions they could successfully exercise if given the chance, Charlotte Sabourin rightly states that for him the crux of the problem is the prejudice affirming women's inferiority, which can be easily dissolved under scrutiny.[86] This is why some of his critics believe that his philogynist defense "is not so much intended to improve the lot of women as to incite controversy and demonstrate that Cartesian analysis is applicable to any topic."[87]

Suchon's realization of the political implications of women's inferiority leads her to envision a third option for women besides marriage or religious vocation: the neutral or celibate life, which she develops in her second treatise, *Du célibat volontaire*. Suchon neither wishes to eliminate nor reform marriage and religious vows. Rather, women who have no inclination for the first two choices can engage in a life unconstrained by institutional demands and establish their own rules of conduct, guided by virtue and reason.[88] This choice excludes any romantic commitments; all devotion should be focused on God, which is an argument already present in Suchon's first treatise.[89] For some, Suchon's vision of women's self-determination represents a failure because it falls short of "a social, cultural, political, and moral revolution."[90] For others, her development of a neutral life is a "wishful note implied for the future."[91]

Interestingly, Murat alludes in her memoirs to what seems to be a combination of Poullain's and Suchon's solutions for women's self-determination, yet with some consequential changes. Suchon's vision of a woman who is not tied to a husband or convent excludes friendship and love.[92] In Murat's memoirs, however, these human relations play an important role. Furthermore, Murat implicitly references Poullain's learned mixed-gender society, transforming it into a gynocentric network, which is less focused on Cartesian "enlightenment"

85. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 57.

86. Sabourin, "Plaider l'égalité," 219.

87. Desnain, "Gabrielle Suchon," 259.

88. Shapiro, "Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist,'" 57.

89. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 68.

90. Walsh, "Gabrielle Suchon," 699.

91. Desnain, "Gabrielle Suchon," 268.

92. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 71.

than on the enactment of moral values such as altruism and generosity that enable women's self-determination.

Female friendship and love

In Murat, the relationships the narrator entertains with men are tainted by the latter's self-interest and their tendency to calumniate women, such as in the case of the narrator's spiritual counsellor.[93] Besides the Marquis de Saint-Albe, who at the end of the memoir novel marries the narrator before he goes off to war and (conveniently) dies, all other male characters are at best ambiguous, if not depicted in a purely negative light.[94] Interestingly, the positive portrayal of Saint-Albe depends on his opposition to the masculine *doxa* and therefore on his androgynous appearance as a submissive and self-effacing lover. As Clermidy-Patard states, it is Saint-Albe's resemblance to the heroine that wins her heart, therefore adding a homoerotic touch to their bond.[95] However, it is not the relationship with Saint-Albe that guarantees the narrator's protection in a misogynist society but her friendships with the loyal Mademoiselle Laval and the Duchesse de Châtillon, who offers the homeless protagonist "sa Table et sa Maison."[96] Through their importance, these friendships represent the narrative thread of the novel and correspond to Poullain's notion of a small, secret society, where virtue, self-determination, and educational advice flourish. Like Suchon's neutral life, these intimate relationships on which the narrator's protection depends constitute an alternative to marriage and religious vows: the Duchesse de Châtillon is unmarried, the narrator is separated from her husband, and while Mademoiselle Laval is married, she seems to live with the narrator for at least as much time, if not more, as with her husband. [97] Furthermore, all three are members of the aristocracy, making their bond homogenous and thereby comparable to the concept of ideal friendship from Plato to the Ancien Régime.[98]

93. Murat, *Mémoires*, 118.

94. Murat, *Mémoires*, 37.

95. Clermidy-Patard, *Madame de Murat*, 108–9.

96. Murat, *Mémoires*, 59.

97. Murat, *Mémoires*, 50, 60, 61, 76.

98. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 14.

Yet their relative independence from male supervision does not exempt these female characters from "médisance" and "calomnie," which can function as a tool to control behaviour.[99] As Nicholas Hammond reminds us, gossip, or "médisance," was particularly popular in seventeenth-century Parisian society. Louis XIV "was the first king to collect as much data as possible about his subjects, including, amongst other routes, through the channel of gossip."[100] Therefore, "gossip acquires a particular sense of danger after the creation in 1667 of the *lieutenance Générale de police* in Paris," when the lieutenants general relate information collected from the streets to the king in their weekly meetings.[101] As we will see, the political consequences of gossip will impact the narrator and Mademoiselle Laval as well as Murat herself.

In her memoirs, Murat challenges the misogynist idea that women are incapable of engaging in friendships because of their alleged imperfection.[102] According to Aristotle, friendship was the "mark of a virtuous soul,"[103] and therefore women were excluded from such a communion. Throughout the seventeenth century, writers like the Abbé de Villiers questioned women's capacity to engage in truthful and lasting relationships.[104] In her reply to Villier's *Mémoires de la vie du comte D****, Murat challenges his misogynist generalizations by depicting Mademoiselle Laval and the Duchesse de Châtillon as loyal and generous friends.

While fleeing from her husband, who has wrongly accused her of infidelity, the narrator meets the Laval couple on her journey. When the narrator is forced to stop in the outskirts of Paris to give birth to her son, Mademoiselle Laval decides to stay and help.

> Mademoiselle Laval ne me voulut point quitter ; et ayant jugé par mes manieres que j'étois une Personne de qualité, elle pria son Mari de trouver bon qu'elle demeurât avec moi : il eut la complaisance de me la laisser.[105]

99. Murat, *Mémoires*, 60, 118.

100. Hammond, *Gossip*, 12.

101. Hammond, *Gossip,* 14.

102. Legault, "Amitiés féminines," 269.

103. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 15.

104. Villiers, *Les Mémoires*, 5, 56–60.

105. Murat, *Mémoires*, 50.

While Mademoiselle Laval's friendly inclination towards the narrator depends on the latter's deportment, which highlights "the moral similarity between friends"[106] according to Plato's concept of perfect friendship, Monsieur Laval's cordiality depends on his material gain. It is only after he learns that the narrator gave his wife a diamond ring in exchange for her help that he invites her to his house.[107] As soon as he learns the protagonist's identity, Monsieur Laval, misguided by the rumours of the narrator's supposed adultery, ends his friendship and forces her to leave his house. He has second thoughts, however, when he learns that the narrator benefits from the support of a high-standing aristocrat, the Duchesse de Châtillon.[108]

Monsieur Laval's reaction to the protagonist's identity shows his shallowness, self-interest, and mercurial temperament, which, in light of Villiers's defamation of women's capacity to engage in friendships, calls into question men's ability to demonstrate solidarity and loyalty.[109] According to seventeenth-century moralist François de La Rochefoucauld, fickleness and self-interest are "the main obstacle[s] in the path of true friendship."[110] Mademoiselle Laval, however, proves to be the perfect friend:

> Mademoiselle Laval, à qui la connoissance de ce que j'étois avoit encore donné pour moi plus d'amitié, fut au desespoir de l'ordre de son Mari […]. Elle me promit qu'en quelque Maison que j'allasse, elle trouveroit moyen de m'y venir voir.[111]

Mademoiselle Laval's solidarity with the narrator is underlined by her disregard of gossip. Her indifference towards gossip might also be motivated by her awareness of the far-reaching implications of the (false) accusations that she herself will later experience.

106. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 14.

107. Murat, *Mémoires*, 50.

108. Murat, *Mémoires*, 61.

109. The untrustworthy Marquis de Blossac is another example of men's inability to engage in friendships. Murat, *Mémoires*, 37.

110. François de La Rochefoucauld, quoted in Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 29.

111. Murat, *Mémoires*, 51, 52.

Murat, an avid reader of "mon ami Montaigne,"[112] might have been inspired by Michel de Montaigne's description of his perfect friendship with Etienne de la Boétie. Yet, following the common arguments of female imperfection, Montaigne denied women such relationships.[113] Montaigne describes his bond with de la Boétie as one of trust—"je me fusse certainement plus volontiers fié à luy de moy qu'à moy"—and as a shared communion:

> Aussi l'union de tels amis estant veritablement parfaicte, elle leur faict perdre le sentiment de tels devoirs, et haïr et chasser d'entre eux ces mots de division et de difference […]. Tout estant par effect commun entre eux, volontez, pensemens, jugemens, bien […] honneur et vie.[114]

Trust, altruism, and the complete union between friends also define the narrator and Mademoiselle Laval's bond. When the narrator finds herself in need of money, Mademoiselle Laval sells the diamond ring the narrator gave her and forces her to accept the proceeds.[115] When the protagonist again faces false accusations of having an affair, she portrays Mademoiselle Laval as her only true friend, who, informed of every aspect in the narrator's life, is at times her only succour: "Mademoiselle Laval qui sçavoit mon innocence, me consoloit du mieux qu'elle pouvoit ; et je crois que sans elle je me serois poignardée."[116] The narrator even puts Saint-Albe and Mademoiselle Laval on the same footing by emphasizing their respective qualities as a lover, "un amant digne d'occuper mon cœur" (Saint-Albe), and as a friend, "une amie qui meritoit si bien ma confiance" (Mademoiselle Laval).[117] This parallel, however, is problematic, for it allows an exchange between the exemplary friend and the perfect and androgynous suitor. As Gary Ferguson[118] and Marianne Legault have shown, Montaigne's portrayal of his friendship "betrays same-sex erotic overtones,"[119]

112. Clermidy-Patard, *Journal*, 42.

113. Montaigne, *Essais*, 234.

114. Montaigne, *Essais*, 237, 238.

115. Murat, *Mémoires*, 53.

116. Murat, *Mémoires*, 62–63.

117. Murat, *Mémoires*, 118.

118. Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings*, 148–90.

119. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 26.

which we also find in Murat's description of female friendship. As Ferguson reminds us, precisely because "the friendship tradition generally excluded women, the integration of equality and reciprocity into the domain of lesbian sexuality seems to have been less problematic." In the sixteenth century, mutuality and the absence of hierarchy in lesbian relationships "neither challenged patriarchal social distinctions nor was likely to provoke a 'homosexual panic' in relation to the discourses and practices of male friendship." While I contend that female homosexuality did represent a threat to patriarchal society, as we will see, Ferguson's analysis also applies to Murat's memoirs, in that "it was lesbians who [ironically] offered the most viable example of Montaigne's uneasily formulated ideal: the integration of friendship and sex."[120]

Indeed, since the beginning of the narrator's attachment to Mademoiselle Laval, Monsieur Laval has been suspicious of the nature of their relationship:

> Monsieur Laval étoit jaloux, il s'imagina que l'amitié que sa Femme m'avoit témoignée, n'étoit fondée sur la conformité de nos inclinations. Tout ce qu'il avoit appris de moi en Province, et ce qu'il en avoit oüi dire dans le Carosse, lui fit croire que j'étois une Femme sans honneur et sans conduite.[121]

The husband seems foremost concerned about the "conformité d'inclination" between his wife and the protagonist, which alludes to their sapphic attraction. Indeed, when the Lavals and the protagonist first meet, Murat describes their encounter in an ambivalent manner: "Le Mari s'appelloit Monsieur Laval, et Mademoiselle Laval sa Femme étoit assez jolie pour me faire croire qu'elle étoit un peu interesseé à la deffense que je prenois des Dames."[122] The emphasis on Mademoiselle Laval's attractiveness suggests that the conversation between the women is flirtatious, lending the narrator's "deffense des dames" not only a philogynous but also a sexual undertone. Mademoiselle Laval's disregard of gossip might then be based in solidarity with "sapphists" like her, which would also explain why her feelings intensify after she discovers the narrator's identity.[123]

120. Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings*, 167.

121. Murat, *Mémoires*, 51.

122. Murat, *Mémoires*, 50.

123. Murat, *Mémoires*, 51–52.

Furthermore, Mademoiselle Laval and the narrator later become victims of an unspecified calumny that, through its vagueness, seems to allude to the "vice innommable," a synonym for homosexual relations.[124] Saint-Albe's first wife, jealous of the narrator, writes letters "où elle disoit des choses horribles de Mademoiselle Laval et de moi."[125] These "choses horribles" are never further specified. Following Valerie Traub's work on the "epistemological opacity" of sexuality in the early modern period and her insight that erotic behaviour does not have an intrinsic meaning but can be interpreted in different ways,[126] these "choses horribles" *can* be interpreted as sexual, and more particularly as homosexual. As Susan S. Lanser reminds us, "seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe […] witnessed an intensified interest in lesbians,"[127] who, according to Traub, were particularly popular in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travel literature and in vernacular medical advice books, whereas the eighteenth century featured the sapphist in newspapers, published trial records, novels, and pornography. Given this "ubiquity" of the lesbian figure, we can assume a certain "*knowingness* of everyone involved"[128] as to the nature of the "choses horribles" imputed to the narrator and Mademoiselle Laval.

The assumption of a lesbian relationship is further validated when Saint-Albe's first wife sends letters to the queen with the intention of imprisoning both women. Such a punishment is only understandable if we keep in mind that, according to Lanser, "intimacies between women became entangled with contests about authority and liberty, power and difference, desire and duty, mobility and change, order and governance."[129] As a consequence, "the sapphic became a flash-point for epistemic upheavals that threatened to dismantle the order of things."[130] This "sapphic threat" was also the reason for Murat's own incarceration at the royal Château de Loches in 1702, where she stayed until

124. The Franciscan priest Ludovico Maria Sinistrari (1632–1701), for instance, used this expression in his treatise on lesbianism, *De sodomia tractatus* (1700). According to Sinistrari, women whose physical constitutions resemble men or who masturbate during their childhood can develop a hypertrophied clitoris with which they penetrate other women (Sinistrari, *De sodomia tractatus*, 30).

125. Murat, *Mémoires*, 118.

126. See Traub, *Thinking Sex*, 42–43.

127. Lanser, *Sexuality of History*, 1. See also Traub, *Thinking Sex*, 93.

128. Robinson, "Abominable Madame de Murat," 55; emphasis in original.

129. Lanser, *Sexuality of History*, 1–2.

130. Lanser, *Sexuality of History*, 2.

1715, with the exception of a short hiatus in 1706. She was finally released by the regent, the duc d'Orléans, who was himself known for his homosexual penchant.[131]

While Murat herself could not avoid her imprisonment, the narrator and Mademoiselle Laval benefit from the support of the powerful Duchesse de Châtillon, who intervenes on behalf of the two women and dissuades the queen from prosecuting the affair. Comparable to a *dea ex machina*, the Duchesse de Châtillon regularly intercedes in the narrator's mishaps. She protects her from the legal prosecutions of her mother and husband, facilitates her marital separation and financial independence,[132] and takes the narrator's defense against the corrupt lawyer who tries in vain to seduce her.[133] Whereas the narrator's bond with Mademoiselle Laval exemplifies Plato's concept of friendship, or *philia*, in that it "is closely linked to love,"[134] the narrator's affinity with the Duchesse de Châtillon resembles that of a protégée with her benefactor. Through her political power, the Duchesse de Châtillon partly embodies Suchon's ideal of female autonomy, protecting Mademoiselle Laval and the narrator from misogynist laws and intrigues.[135] Mademoiselle Laval's companionship is defined by its selflessness and unconditionality, as well as by her use of reason, which prioritizes the narrator's reputation according to the standards of *bienséance*.

For instance, Mademoiselle Laval tries to persuade the narrator to reconcile with her husband, since "jamais la reputation d'une Femme n'est en sûreté, lors qu'elle vit éloignée de celui à qui il a plû à Dieu de l'unir."[136] Thus, Mademoiselle Laval combines Poullain's "vérité intérieure" and "verité extérieure" by complying on the outside with societal standards while privately pursuing her intimate bond with the narrator as an alternative to heteronormative relations. However, having witnessed acts of domestic violence in the Laval household, the narrator refuses her friend's advice out of fear of a similar sort of violence if

131. Clermidy-Patard, *Madame de Murat*, 53.

132. Murat, *Mémoires*, 65.

133. Murat, *Mémoires*, 74.

134. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 14.

135. Suchon, "L'Autorité," in *Traité de la morale*, 11, 12.

136. Murat, *Mémoires*, 90.

she should return to her husband.[137] While the narrator appreciates her friend's guidance, because she is one of the "peu d'amis sincères qui sçachent donner aux Femmes des conseils qui conviennent à leurs véritables besoins,"[138] she prefers to separate from her husband, eventually marrying Saint-Albe. Murat encourages her female readers to prioritize their safety and well-being while not underestimating the importance of a good reputation. She therefore uses Poullain's and Suchon's concepts of self-determination differently. Poullain clearly distinguishes between "une liberté aveugle, et temeraire qui est propre à ceux que l'on appelle libertins" and the preferable "liberté judicieuse et éclairée, fondée sur l'amour de la vérité."[139] Likewise, for "Suchon, the neutralist's freedom is very different from that of the libertine who simply follows her inclinations at her will and pleasure."[140] Suchon reminds us that "le mécontentement et l'inquiétude sont le partage de celui qui aime les créatures et plus cette passion est forte, plus il augmente son supplice."[141]

Murat, however, does not deny her female protagonists their inclinations and pleasures, nor is their bond based on the enlightened "amour de la verité"[142] so dear to Poullain. Even if their passion is founded on generosity and altruism, which according to Poullain would excuse any dissimulation that is not "contraire à la charité que nous devons avoir pour le prochain,"[143] their friendship still represents the danger of destabilizing "honorable families" and the state.[144] Yet there are also similarities with Poullain's and Suchon's portrayal of female perfection. Following Poullain's affirmation that happiness and virtue require "des connaissances claires, et distinctes"[145] to act uprightly, Murat's characters seem to be able to foster a community of like-minded members and, through their mutual support and encouragement, to analyze and evaluate their situation. Inspired by Suchon's desire "to shake off the constraint of caring what

137. Murat, *Mémoires*, 90.

138. Murat, *Mémoires*, 90.

139. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 16.

140. Shapiro, "Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist,'" 50.

141. Suchon, "Privation de la liberté," in *Traité de la morale*, 68.

142. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 16.

143. Poullain, *De l'éducation*, 167.

144. DeJean, "Notorious Women," 74, 75.

145. Poullain, *De l'égalité*, 49, 50.

other people think of us,"[146] Murat incites her female readers to pursue their happiness that is, however, not directed towards God, as in Suchon's case, but towards terrestrial life. Through the depiction of Mademoiselle Laval and the protagonist, Murat showcases various options for gaining self-determination, while also emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balance between "vérité intérieure" and "verité extérieure."

Murat thus proposes a new combination of human relations that complements Poullain's mixed-gender society and Suchon's solitary neutral life by emphasizing the importance of a gynocentric network. Furthermore, she envisions what was unthinkable in the writings of male authors in Greco-Roman antiquity and in the early modern period: a female bond mirroring Montaigne's "parfaicte amitié" through its constancy, its "douceur" capable of *philia*, and its "liberté volontaire," where human relations are based on affinity rather than obligation.[147]

Following Poullain and Suchon, Murat criticizes the "condition féminine" through the narration of the life experience of her heroine. However, the ambivalent character of her female protagonists and their friendship also promulgates a different notion of female perfectibility that aligns with the often negative representation of marriage and heterosexual love in works by the *précieuses* and *conteuses* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Madeleine de Scudéry and Charlotte-Rose Caumont de la Force, for example, propose female friendship—and sometimes even love—as alternatives to heteronormativity.[148] Murat's memoirs rewrite "the tradition that would limit the scope of female intimate relationships to men" and that "seems to saturate seventeenth-century discourse."[149] The description of female friendships in Murat even alludes to a gynocentric micro-society, based, like the Greek *polis*, on friendship as a political structure.[150] In addition, these female relationships could mirror to some extent the historical friendships of the *précieuses* and *conteuses*, whose "close and sometimes erotic bonds […] appear to have tied some of these women."[151]

146. Walsh, "Gabrielle Suchon," 695.

147. Montaigne, *Essais*, 233.

148. For a detailed analysis of the works of these two authors, see Legault, *Female Intimacies*, ch. 3.

149. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 32.

150. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 16.

151. Legault, *Female Intimacies*, 7, 8.

Murat, who explicitly addresses her memoirs to women, aspired to enlarge "this female collective in which the male presence was, as a rule, secondary."[152]

As we have seen, Murat's arguments for female perfectibility are influenced by previous *querelle* texts, especially those by Poullain de la Barre and Suchon, and her advocacy for female education as foundation for self-determinacy resonates with that of her predecessors. Yet, Murat adds a new dimension to the portrayal of female perfection: the gynocentric and gynophile communion. Through its subversion of heteronormative values, Murat's female-centred circle goes against common notions of perfection, thereby creating a paradoxical philogyny.

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