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## **Gabrielle Suchon:**

### **Militant Philosophy in Seventeenth Century France**

Despite remaining a relatively obscure figure of French literary history, Gabrielle Suchon has appeared in a number of critical texts in recent years and the first translation into English of part of her work came out in 2011.<sup>i</sup> Meanwhile, Elsa Dorlin stated quite categorically, at a Unesco conference on women and philosophy, that ‘[Gabrielle Suchon] est probablement la première philosophe érudite à s’être consacrée de façon si ambitieuse et si conséquente [...] à la question de la liberté des femmes et de l’égalité entre les sexes.’ (2004: 46) Writing at a time when church and state insist on keeping women under control and strictly subject to male authority, Suchon champions women’s right to education, independence and freedom in all aspects of their lives. In her second treatise, she goes so far as to defend female celibacy outside the Church. Despite her declarations of orthodoxy, what she proposes is essentially a new social and, in the long term, legal status for women. So the fact that few of us had heard of her until fairly recently seems incongruous and the true importance and originality of her work are still to be clearly established. A number of critics (Auffret, Dorlin, Le Dœuff, Desnain) have noted the way in which Suchon presents the paucity of female education as a deliberate political strategy aimed at depriving women of autonomy and prevent them from acceding to positions of authority that would challenge male hegemony. Others (Hoffmann and Girdlestone in particular) have argued that the social impact of her project is limited by her use of biblical and patristic sources; however, few, if any, critics have commented on the

fact that Suchon chose to address women directly. Suchon does not write for fellow *savants* and this, as well as the topics she addresses, hints at a desire to affect real change. Concentrating on elements that enable us to identify her intended readership, this article will seek to determine the implications of this unusual approach.

Much like Montaigne, whom she cites, Suchon could claim that ‘ma philosophie est en action’: her private ‘parcours’ is a clear example of what can be achieved by an intelligent and educated woman, despite the obstacles put in her way by social constraints; but her writing also aims to spur her reader into action and, as I will show, constitutes a real call to what would nowadays be termed ‘activism’.

Gabrielle Suchon was born in a relatively prosperous family in 1631 or 1632 and died in 1703. After her father’s death in 1645, she was sent to a Dominican convent in her home town of Semur-en-Auxois, where she remained until 1666. Philibert Papillon, a contemporary, states in his *Bibliothèque des Auteurs de Bourgogne* that Suchon then escaped from the convent to travel to Rome in order to seek a release from her vows from the pope. However Sonia Bertolini suggests that the story of her escape to Rome and meeting with the Head of the Church may be apocryphal, a theory supported by Jacobson Schutte’s recent research, which points to the more likely possibility that Suchon was due to be transferred to a different convent in Langres and took this opportunity to contest her vows in the rather more sedate way allowed by the church (namely by writing to local ecclesiastical authorities) What is clear is that Suchon does not appear on the list of nuns housed in Langres drawn up in 1673 and that she remained in the secular world until she died.<sup>ii</sup>

Suchon published her first text, *Traité de la morale et de la politique* in 1693. The second, *Du Célibat volontaire ou La Vie sans engagement*, came out in 1700 and the

title page, which states ‘Par Damoiselle Gabrielle Suchon’, makes it clear that the author is a woman and unmarried. The *Traité* is divided into three parts (La Liberté, L’Autorité and La Science), each of those divided into two sub-sections: in each case, the section praising the topic is followed by a demonstration of the adverse effects of being deprived of freedom, authority and knowledge. The general impression of a wide-ranging philosophical discussion given by the title that the text is is contradicted by the subtitle which appears on the *page de garde*: *Traité de la morale et de la politique, divisé en trois parties. Scavoir La liberté, La Science et L’Autorité ou l’on voit que les personnes du Sexe pour en être privées, ne laissent pas d’avoir une capacité Naturelle, qui les en peut rendre participantes*. This is followed in the original edition by a shorter treatise entitled *Le Petit Traité de la faiblesse, de la légèreté et de l’inconstance qu’on attribue aux femmes mal à propos*. The titles of these last two works offer unambiguous evidence of the author’s position in the debate on women and offer a glimpse of her originality. Unlike many *Querelle des femmes* texts, those are neither mere portraits of remarkable individuals (although references to outstanding female figures from political or religious history do feature in order to exemplify arguments) nor gallant glorifications of womanhood. They are, rather, a strict demonstration that women are as capable as men, intellectually and spiritually, and are being unfairly prevented from fulfilling their God-given potential by arbitrary human laws. Indeed, even when Suchon’s use of theological references to defend polemical social ideas brings her dangerously close to reformist ideas, acceptance of God’s will remains the corner stone of her argumentation. This should not be interpreted as a smoke-screen for contentious political ideas. Close reading suggests that it is, rather, Suchon’s deep-rooted faith that has led her to philosophy and to an open rebellion against what she sees as a perverted use of religion as a

means of preserving male hegemony. Her intended audience is not then philosophers, whose reading might remain abstract and rhetorical, but the very people who can benefit from her work and use it to claim their rightful place in society: women. Suchon's main concern is to educate them and to give them the means to challenge their unfair and degraded condition. This sets Suchon apart from most of her predecessors in *La Querelle*, a genre in which texts are primarily written by men for men and 'to amuse [its] readers rather than persuade them.' (1977: 25

Even the works of authors perceived as staunch defenders of women are often ambiguous. This is the case with, for example, Poullain de la Barre (whom Suchon knows and cites): while he argues, in *De l'égalité des deux Sexes* (1673), that the supposedly natural inferiority of women is culturally produced and advocates in *De l'Éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les mœurs* (1674), a more enlightened approach to female education, he offers a rebuttal of his own arguments in *De l'Excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des sexes* in 1675. This is because, as Le Doeuff points out: 'l'égalité cognitive qu'il pose entre femmes et hommes est foncièrement pièce stratégique dans un propos destiné à l'apologie de cartésianisme.' (1998:54) His choice of topics therefore 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. The subjection of women is simply, as Le Doeuff puts it, 'un exemple exemplaire'. Pierre Ronzeaud offers a similar analysis, concluding that Poullain's work is too theoretical and abstract to have any real political impact. While Poullain insists on the intellectual abilities of women, it is clear that 'la thèse de l'égalité intellectuelle entre les sexes est destinée à montrer aux "sçavants" qu'il leur faut pratiquer le doute cartésien, elle est donc élément d'un discours adressé aux hommes.' (Le Doeuff 1998: 55) Suchon's text, on the other hand,

provides ample evidence that she hoped to address the oppressed as much as the oppressor, and Fauré, despite her reservations regarding 'l'ambivalence héritée du christianisme', does not hesitate to state that '[Suchon's] revendication est d'ordre politique' (1985: 129)

They are few female authors among Suchon's predecessors, and they are rarely seen to address a specifically female readership. Mary de Gournay, for example, concludes her *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* with a theological twist:

Si l'on croyait que l'Ecriture lui commandât de céder à l'homme, comme indigne de le contrecarrer, voyez l'absurdité qui suivrait: la femme se trouverait digne d'être faite à l'image du Créateur, de jouir de la très sainte Euchariste, des mystères de la Rédemption, du Paradis, et de la vision, voire possession de Dieu, non pas des avantages et des privilèges de l'homme: serait-ce point déclarer l'homme plus précieux et plus haut que toutes ces choses, et partant commettre le plus grief des blasphèmes? (1989: 105-6)<sup>iii</sup>

With this, she is clearly mocking the reader who may still hold the view, after all her arguments, that men are superior to women. This reader, in all likelihood, will be a man and it is at men that de Gournay's sarcasm is aimed.

Of course targeting arguments in favour of women at the very people who have power over them makes perfect sense in terms of affecting real change but Suchon is realistic in her assessment of the mechanisms of social change: 'Avec toutes ces fortes & pertinentes raisons, les femmes perdront toujours leur cause, parce qu'elles n'ont point d'autres juges que leurs Maîtres, qui ne veulent jamais changer les coutumes qu'ils ont introduites. (1693: 167). Her strategy then, is to give the oppressed a

political conscience and to prompt them to action. Cohen points out that ‘Ancien Régime debates about intellectual equality were political debates precisely because speech and authorship were understood to confer wide-ranging power and authority’ (1997:138). Suchon’s work then not only demonstrates the weakness of the arguments deployed to justify women’s subservience, it also positions the author as an active participant in the intellectual discourse of her time. While the evidence does not support the contention that Suchon’s work had much more impact on contemporary thinking than, for example, De Gournay’s, her intention was clearly to improve the lives of at least some women by chipping away at the preconceptions of which they were victim, encouraging them to demand change through her own example. In this, she is no doubt much closer to Pizan than to her contemporaries. Pizan offered herself as a model: what the *Trois Dames* did for Christine, *La Cité des Dames* would do for its (female) readers, namely ‘[les] retirer de cette ignorance.’ (1986: 36) For Suchon too, the primary aim 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. She insists that ‘Elles seraient au-dessus d’une partie de leur contrainte si elles savaient y résister et n’être pas assez dociles ni assez aveugles pour aider à former leurs chaînes.’ (1999: 14) Reading Suchon would not only make them more able to defend themselves against accusations of weakness, and therefore, in the long term, to obtain the position they deserve but would, in the short term, restore what we would now call ‘self-esteem’ and save them from ‘le trouble’ (what Pizan calls ‘désarroi’) caused not only by their lack of freedom, but also by their acceptance of the male discourse regarding their supposed inferiority: ‘C’est être esclave de l’estime des hommes de se rapporter en toutes choses à leurs sentiments; et jamais l’on ne saurait posséder le

repos de l'esprit si l'on ne méprise l'envie et le désir de leur plaire.' (1693: *La Science, Avant-propos*, no page number) Although 'les hommes' cannot be taken as a gendered reference (it can be understood as a general stance regarding the desire to please and to be admired often berated by contemporary philosophers), its appearance in conjunction with an encouragement for women to educate themselves, can be read as an injunction not to be put off by the ridicule often aimed at *femmes savantes*.

Similarly, Suchon's tendency to address us directly as 'mon lecteur' (*Préface Générale* and *Avis sur le titre* of the *Traité, Avertissement* of *Du Célibat Volontaire*) should not necessarily be taken to mean that she excludes the potential 'lectrice'. On the contrary, the end of the *Préface Générale* spells out Suchon's intentions very clearly:

Je n'ai point eu d'autre intention en tout ce traité que d'inspirer aux personnes du Sexe des sentiments généreux & magnanimes afin qu'elles se puissent garantir d'une d'une contrainte servile, d'une stupide ignorance, & d'une dépendance basse & ravalée. (1693: no page number)

She concludes: 'ce traité ne saurait être que très avantageux aux personnes du Sexe' (1693: no page number). Furthermore, other, more subjective, indications point to the fact that Suchon's intended audience was female. Such is the distinctively educational tone adopted in some chapters. Suchon warns us that:

On y touche plusieurs[e]s matières qui appartiennent à la Logique, à la Physique et à la Métaphysique, et même à la Théologie tant démonstrative que positive, toutes ces choses étant appliquées au règlement des mœurs et à la perfection des personnes du



Sexe. (1988 : 31)

Indeed, the chapters on experimental science and on rhetoric are remarkable for the fact that they are literally lessons in subjects on which women would not normally receive any formal instruction. This also highlights the links between Suchon's intended readership and the political nature of her project. Norbrook's remark on Elizabethan literature might equally apply to late seventeenth century France: '[Rhetoric] stimulated an interest in debate, and helped to lay the foundations for some forms of challenge to political authority and could reveal the arbitrariness of all structures of meaning.' (1994: 141) Furthermore, teaching women rhetoric undermines the very foundation of male authority in that it goes against the strictly gendered distinction between public and private. Earlier texts on women's education, from Vives to Fénelon, argue that female education should preclude certain topics because women would have no use for them in the domestic realm to which they should confine themselves. Conversely, teaching them rhetoric implicitly suggests that they may, in fact, take an active part in public debate. Despite her constant efforts to reassure the reader that she does not wish to upset convention, Suchon is preparing the ground for women to take a far more active, overt, part in intellectual life.<sup>iv</sup>

Pour s'avancer davantage dans les sciences, les personnes du Sexe qui sont portées à l'étude, après s'être ad[d]onnées à celles qui sont solitaires et particulières, elles peuvent se former des sociétés afin qu'étant plusieurs ensemble elles raisonnent, argumentent, & disputent les unes avec les autres, & se communiquent ce qu'elles ont appris dans le secret (1693 : 268).<sup>v</sup>

Given the way that public speech was perceived as an exclusively male preserve, the notion that women should learn to ‘argumenter’ and ‘disputer’ in a public arena, even one populated only by women, would inevitably present a clear threat to men’s monopoly on intellectual discourse.

Where *Du Célibat volontaire* is concerned, it is clear from the start that those who stand to benefit most from this status are women. She presents it as ‘un état permanent qui sert d’asile et de lieu d’assurance pour préserver des chutes et des périls où l’on pourrait tomber, sous des occupations difficiles à soutenir.’ (1994: 22) The nature of these ‘occupations’ (religious confinement and matrimony) have been made clear previously, as is the fact that they are especially burdensome to women. The first and second parts present all the advantages of *célibat*, both for the individual and for society. Thus the potential *Neutraliste* is armed to respond to criticism of her singularity. The third part is more practical and constitutes a veritable handbook for the potential *Neutraliste* consisting of ‘l’emploi du temps, les exercices et les vertus les plus nécessaires aux personnes qui passent leur vie sans engagement.’ (1700: 423) Not in itself unusual, this format was normally used in texts written by religious men and destined to show readers how to lead a spiritually sound life within marriage. Such texts though are markedly different from Suchon’s project, whose general reflections on the nature of the subjection inherent in marriage in the first *Traité* lead her quite naturally to her advocacy of secular celibacy in the second.

The term *célibat* was used before Suchon, and it is to be noted that at least two of her predecessors seem to consider celibacy as a valid option and that one already called it ‘la vie neutre’. Maillard’s statement on the *page de garde* of his *Le Bon Mariage ou le moyen d’être heureux et faire son salut en état de mariage* (1643), that ‘Ceux et celles

qui font profession de célibat ou de Religion, connaîtront l'usage qu'ils peuvent avoir de ce livre en la Seconde Préface', suggests that this third status was, if not common, at least accepted. It is clear however that Maillard writes for both sexes and that celibacy is tolerated rather than advocated.

Nicolas Caussin, on the other hand, suggests that a form of celibacy close to Suchon's *Neutralisme* is to be encouraged when vocation for religious vows or matrimony is lacking and was an important inspiration for Suchon.<sup>vi</sup> Caussin's *La Cour Sainte*, which dates from 1624, offers both arguments and a structure which may have inspired Suchon for her *Célibat volontaire*.<sup>vii</sup> Significantly, the first book of the first *Traité* of *La Vie Sainte* sets out to show that a spiritual life is open to all, even in the secular world and castigates those who feel that the search for Christian 'perfection' is the preserve of those who have entered a religious life. *La Cour Sainte* is a mixture of rhetorical arguments and advice on practical issues which immediately calls to mind the format used by Suchon in *Le Célibat volontaire*, but again, only a minimal part of Caussin's work is devoted to celibacy and most of *La Cour Sainte* appears to be aimed, despite its strong defence of women, at a male readership. Suchon's grammatical choices, on the other hand, make it clear that she sees the *Neutraliste* as female:

Plaise à Dieu, que les Neutralistes soient si éclairées en ce qui est de leur vocation, qu'elles n'appréhendent jamais ni le blâme, ni la critique du monde; et que par cette raison elles se rendent habiles dans la théorie et dans la pratique de tout ce qui regarde leur état.' (1700: 653)

The *Préface Générale* to the *Traité* also gives us some indication of the expected

education of the reader and points at a desire to be clearly understood by those who have received limited instruction and may be unused to philosophical reading<sup>viii</sup> For example, her stylistic choices bear witness to her care in presenting a discourse which is clear rather than impressive (unlike many *Querelle* writers). Thus, comparaisons are used because ‘leur diversité donne du plaisir et du contentement au lecteur’ and ‘réveille l’esprit en lui présentant les choses sous un voile [...] lequel bien loin de les cacher ou de les rendre obscures les fait paraître plus évidentes & plus faciles à comprendre étant d’un très grand soulagement aux personnes studieuses.’ (1693: *Préface Générale*, no page number) For the *Traité* is clearly intended for study rather than pleasure and Suchon berates those who ‘porte[nt] cette qualité de ramasser des termes affectés, et de mettre en usage des paroles étudiées, qui servent plus d’amusement que d’instruction.’ (1693: *Préface Générale*, no page number). It is possible to see here a criticism of those authors of the *Querelle* who were more concerned with showing off their rhetorical skills than with challenging the status quo.

Having highlighted what may be seen as weaknesses in her own work, Suchon concludes: ‘C’est pourquoi je prévien[s] sans m’étonner le dessein de ceux qui voudront faire sa critique; non pas afin qu’ils m’épargnent mais pour m’instruire moi-même, puisque connaître ses défauts en matière de science ce n’est pas être tout à fait ignorante; mais c’est plutôt un commencement de connaissance et de lumière.’ (1693: *Préface Générale*, no page number) On the one hand this may be taken as a statement of modesty on the part of the writer, but it can also be interpreted as an encouragement to the female reader who may feel that the ignorance in which she has been kept prevents her from studying. Suchon therefore sets herself up as an example of how willingness to learn is the first step to enlightenment. Since women commonly

‘ignorent les degrés de capacité et de suffisance que Dieu a mis en elles.’ (1693: *La Science, Avant-propos*, no page number), reading Suchon will show them that they are potentially capable of achieving as much as the author, although she makes it clear that this will demand great strength:

C’est ici un ouvrage composé en moins d’un an sans aide ni conseil de personne. Ayant été conçu dans la souffrance de mille traverses et persécutions, produit et enfanté dans la spéculation, le silence et la retraite. (1693: *Préface générale*, no page number)

Suchon is aware that her example is as crucial as her advice. In order for women to challenge their status, they must be convinced of their own abilities and shaken out of the apathy in which their submission has condemned them: uneducated, belittled, mocked, they may no longer have either the will or the wits to fight. As Suchon states in the *Préface Générale*:

Le Traité de ces trois choses est une entreprise aussi nécessaire & utile, que laborieuse et délicate, à cause que la plus grande partie des femmes s’imaginent que ces états de contrainte, d’ignorantes, & de sujettes leur sont si naturels, que leurs souffrances ne peuvent jamais recevoir de remède. Plusieurs[e]s les prennent d’une manière si peu élevée que souvent la simplicité de leur esprit ne les abaisse pas moins, que les lois et les coutumes introduites à leur désavantage. ’ (1693: *Préface Générale*, no page number)

The author’s intentions then are clear: to convince women of their worth, to

encourage them to apply themselves to study rather than pursuing activities 'designed' to keep them busy and ignorant and to a small extent to provide them with basic grounding in the subjects they should study further.

All this may seem very modern, yet the theological approach adopted by Suchon has led to some superficial analyses and perfunctory dismissals of her writing. Bertolini notes that 'quelques rares publications ont évoqué l'œuvre de Gabrielle Suchon... Soit l'on tente de réduire, comme le fait Paul Hoffmann, la portée critique du discours suchonien à un martyrologue des injustices subies par le Sexe, soit l'on considère le point de vue catholique de notre auteure comme un obstacle au propos féministe.' (2000: 290)<sup>ix</sup> Indeed Hoffmann's interpretation fails to take into consideration Suchon's persistent assertion that the subservient position of women is the main obstacle to spiritual fulfillment. <sup>x</sup> Far from leading away from polemical issues, Suchon's insistence on spirituality therefore brings to the fore the impossibility of reconciling God's will with a social order based not on nature but on men's determination to assert and preserve their superiority, regardless of the qualities bestowed by God on individuals. Suchon argues that 'la coutume' and the laws imposed by men through the centuries have harmed not just women, but society as a whole by depriving it of many gifted individuals who may have made a valuable contribution. Suchon's position is that this contribution should take the form of marriage or religious vows only when such a commitment is prompted by a true vocation rather than convenience and she attacks the abuses perpetrated by both parents and spiritual advisers.

We should also bear in mind that our understanding of her stance on religious vocation is only partial: Wallace Kirsop found evidence of a third book, entitled

*Traité de l'excellence de la vocation des filles consacrées à Dieu dans le Cloître et de la sainteté de leurs exercices divisé en trois tomes*, for which an entry was made in the register of the Paris booksellers guild on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1699 and Suchon herself refers to this text in *Le Célibat*.<sup>xi</sup> Unfortunately this volume appears to be no longer extant but evidence of its existence, even if it was never published, suggests that Suchon gave equal attention and importance to religious vows and celibacy and supports the notion that while the spiritual basis of her work is genuine, it does not exclude a desire, which is far from abstract, to see the *Neutraliste* recognised as a valuable member of society.

Hoffmann touches on a crucial point when he asserts that 'ce qu'elle a dessein de faire, c'est d'arracher la femme à la persuasion paresseuse et lâche de son infériorité' (1978: 270) but his claim that Suchon's project does little more than encourage women to remain passive is misguided. While her many assertions that she is not encouraging women to rebel openly may find its roots in the Pauline stance that Christians should accept their condition and 'adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things' (Titus 2:10), her own unwillingness to accept the condition imposed on her by family and church and her clear desire to furnish the female reader with the intellectual weaponry necessary to challenge her condition make plain her conviction that things could and should be changed.

Her daring exposure of the fallacy of innate male superiority can clearly be seen as an act of revolt in itself. What purpose could her denunciation of 'toutes ces raisons [found in the hegemonic male discourse] spécieuses en apparence n'ont point d'autre but que de modérer la rigueur de leur sort, et de les consoler de leur faible et rampante destiné (1693: 127-28), if not to encourage women *not* to be placated and to seek to change their condition? As Ronzeaud points out:

Et il nous semble, en dernière analyse, qu'elle n'a rien d'une prosélyte de l'immobilisme et que, si l'acte d'écrire a un sens à ses yeux, c'est bien celui d'ouvrir les yeux des autres, de donner à voir l'injustice et non d'enseigner la soumission. (1975: 277)

Indeed, the religious arguments that underpin her writing suggest that for Suchon, the stakes go beyond the realm of the social welfare of women. The oppression or subjection of women is not merely unjust, it is an obstacle to their spiritual well-being. In this context, the predominance of religious arguments highlights rather than undermines the militant aspects of her work.

Berriot-Salvadore clearly demonstrates that the notion of *troisième voie* already had a long history by the time Suchon came to extol *le neutralisme*. From the Middle Ages onwards, women had been trying to find alternatives to the two choices offered to them and which required either dissociation from the secular world (with the limitations this imposed in terms of the charitable work or intellectual development) or submission to the will of a husband which may restrict their spiritual development. Attempts to provide women with the means to develop their spirituality independently faced opposition from the start, precisely because it had strong social implications, in particular where the question of precedence of duties is concerned: 'Les prédicateurs ne s'épargnaient pas de reprendre les femmes qui, sous ombre de dévotion, ne rendent pas le devoir qu'elles doivent, tant à leurs maris, qu'à leurs maisons.' (Duval 161 : 27-28)

Berriot-Salvadore concludes :



La littérature religieuse didactique de la fin du siècle (16<sup>e</sup>) traduit bien l'inquiétude - des Jésuites notamment - devant une dévotion féminine qui deviendrait, dans ses aspirations spirituelles, un désaveu de l'ordre social. Les diverses tentatives de fondations laïques enseignantes manifestent enfin l'ampleur de l'engagement féminin mais, par leurs échecs, condamnent une vocation qui serait, en somme, une tierce condition - entre le mariage et le cloître - incompréhensible, voire dangereuse, pour l'Eglise et le pouvoir civil. (1990: 338-9)

What Suchon proposes is even more far reaching: charity is certainly not the only, or even the main, purpose of *célibat*; and while secular orders have, to a large extent, mimicked the structure of religious organizations, Suchon's emphasis on individual autonomy challenges the supreme authority of fathers, husbands and spiritual guides. Her project addresses the individual whose spiritual development is hindered by the social context and it is clear that social conditions would have to be changed for those women to fulfil their duties to God, something they have been up to this point prevented from doing by men's rules and abuse of power.

The first step in fighting oppression is to convince the oppressed that their condition can be changed, something which, for Suchon, can only be achieved through education: 'Les personnes du Sexe ne pourront jamais se relever de cette injuste Privation qu'elles endurent, si elles ne travaillent à détruire l'ignorance, que l'on veut leur rendre inséparable.' (1693: 137)

Through her texts, she proposes a number of radical and practical challenges to male power, some of them clearly verging on the heretical side of catholic orthodoxy. The chapters on laws (*Autorité*, troisième partie, chapters 5 and 6) aim to demonstrate the moral and historical relativity of human laws and boldly suggest that breaking an unjust law is not sinful, concluding, in a chapter entitled 'de la transgression des lois':

Je me contenterais seulement de dire, que les fautes qu'elles peuvent commettre, soit dans l'état de Religion, soit dans celui du mariage, lors qu'elles y sont engagées par des poursuites et sollicitations étrangères, plutôt que par la volonté & l'inspiration de Dieu, sont en quelque manière les péchés des parents & des maîtres spirituels qui les portent et les incitent à faire des choix, dont elles ne sauraient soutenir les Charges, Les Loix, les Obligations, & les Coutumes. Ce sont les transgressions de ces Législateurs & non pas les leurs propres. (1693: 103)

She therefore sets up a clear opposition between divine and human law. Where the latter is concerned, she places the responsibility for transgression firmly on those who would produce unjust laws rather than on those who would break them. In the context of the inequity between the genders which is the basis of the *Traité*, this appears only a step short of encouraging women to actively practice civil disobedience. In chapters 9 and 10 she unequivocally denounces salic law (under the bold heading 'Les femmes sont capables de gouverner'). Even more daringly, in chapters 13 and 14, Suchon offers an argument in which, although she states that 'l'Eglise a très justement ordonné le contraire', she demonstrates the logic of Luther's assertion that 'les femmes étaient capables de confesser & d'absoudre les péchés, aussi bien qu'un Evêque et qu'un Prêtre' (1693 : 82) and insists that 'les femmes ne sont pas si dénuées

des talents nécessaires à la conduite des âmes qu'on le prétend (1693 : 85).

In fact, Suchon cunningly identifies and plays on the ambiguity of religious discourse on women to bolster her argument. Even a casual look at the Bible, or at Suchon's favourite references, Saint Augustin and Saint Paul, highlights the instability and contradictory nature of early theologians' views on the place of women in the church. Suchon uses this to her advantage and her reliance on religious texts can therefore be interpreted as a crucial part of her militant strategy rather than as a hindrance.

It is clear that Suchon had little hope of seeing much change in her own time. Yet this does not mean that her stance can be interpreted as merely rhetorical. On the contrary, her work aims to give women the weapons and encouragement which may lead them, in the long term, to obtain the autonomy and authority which are theirs by divine right. Suchon's work found few echoes in her own times, perhaps because, as posited by Elsa Dorlin:

Seuls les discours théorisant l'inégalité naturelle des hommes et des femmes bénéficient de publicité et de lumière. Seuls ces discours sont jugés vrais et enseignés comme tels. Ainsi ce n'est pas la valeur des démonstrations, leur degré de rigorisme qui déterminent leur reconnaissance, mais bien la position qu'elles occupent par rapport à un ordre du savoir et du pouvoir.' (2000: 102)

Since only few comments on Suchon's treatises by her contemporaries can be found, it is difficult to evaluate how widely they were read, and in particular whether her readers were, for the most part, women, as she intended. A notice in the *Bibliothèque des auteurs de Bourgogne* (1742), lists her works with the following comments:

*Traité de la Morale et de la Politique*, etc. M. le Président Cousin, qui donna un extrait de ce livre dans *Le Journal des Savants* de 1694, ...dit que cet ouvrage, composé en moins d'un an, sans aucun conseil ni aucun secours étranger, n'est pas une de moindres preuves de ce que la personne qui nous le donne soutient à l'avantage de son sexe. L'auteur dut, sans doute ce jugement à la politesse de M. le Président Cousin, car son livre est très médiocre, et il est entièrement tombé. L'ouvrage suivant est meilleur.

The 'entièrement tombé' suggests that its popularity was both limited and very brief, a conclusion which seems to be corroborated by Wallace Kirsop's findings: he located copies of the first treatise (under various titles) in Paris BNF, Grenoble, Dijon, Besançon, Aix-en-Provence. Though disseminated, this work remained fairly close to where it was published. *Du Célibat volontaire*, however tells another story. Copies have been found in Besançon again, Paris (Arsenal) but also the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Gottingen, Florence, and Rome. This 'meilleur ouvrage' then was either valued enough to be carried by its readers even when travelling abroad, thought of well enough to be sent to friends in other countries or for printers to take copies to trade fairs. Kirsop also found evidence that a copy of *Du Célibat* was housed by the Cloître des Billettes until the French Revolution, which suggests that Suchon was successful, at least on a small scale, in reaching female readers.<sup>xii</sup> It is clear that Suchon herself was under little illusion that her work would be well received or that it would affect contemporary society. Yet her reference to morality in the introduction of the last part of the *Traité* cannot fully distract from the wishful note implied for the future:

Ce ne sont pas les femmes *de ce temps* qui entreprendront jamais de déposséder les hommes de leur puissance & Autorité, parce que ce serait un égarement d'esprit de prétendre à des choses moralement impossibles. (1693: *L'autorité, Avant-Propos*, no page number)

The fact that her contemporaries have little chance of putting her exhortations into practice does not preclude the eventual advent of equality. Might this comment be seen as a visionary assertion on the inevitability of women's raise? If so, Suchon's work could be perceived as a conscious attempt to galvanize her followers, who will continue the *travail de sape*, chipping away at *coutume* until their rights are finally recognized. The final words of the *Avant-propos* certainly hint at such a conclusion:

Car il [Dieu] peut élever le pauvre de la terre et le mettre au rang des Princes de son peuple, pour lui donner le siège de gloire & le faire participer de son héritage. (1693: *L'autorité, Avant-Propos*, no page number)

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<sup>ii</sup> See Sonia Bertolini's 'Gabrielle Suchon: une vie sans engagement?' *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 37 (2000), pp. 289-308. (p. 294) and Anne Jacobsen Schutte, 'Gabrielle Suchon leaving the convent', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 47 (2010), pp. 304-306.

<sup>iii</sup> For an more extensive analysis of Gournay's intended readership see Adeline Aragon, 'L'Ecart entre auteur et lecteur dans l'œuvre de Marie de Gournay', *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*, ed. Isabelle Brouard-Arends (Rennes : PUR, 2008), pp. 253-260.

<sup>iv</sup> ('Quoy que j'ai dit, que c'est priver les personnes du beau Sexe des moyens d'acquérir les sciences, de leur defendre l'entrée des lieux publics qui sont destinés pour les apprendre: je ne pretends pas néanmoins qu'elles doivent fréquenter ceux qui sont érigés pour les hommes: cette proposition serait ridicule et mériterait du blame. Mais je veux dire qu'[...] elles pourraient bien avoir des col[l]èges, des Universités et des Academies (p. 168)').

<sup>v</sup> In this instance, brackets indicate typographic mistakes in the original text.

<sup>vi</sup> Caussin's defense of *Célibat* is a thirty-odd pages 'mini treatise' on celibacy which appears as a 'parenthesis' in the middle of *La Vie de Sainte Isabelle, soeur du Roy Saint Loy et Fondatrice du Monastère Royal de Long-champ, Qui a donné un parfait exemple de la vie neutre des personnes non Mariées ny Religieuses* (1640). For more detail, see my article 'The Origins of *La Vie neutre*: Nicolas Caussin's influence on the writings of Gabrielle Suchon' in *French Studies*, LXIII (2009): 148-160.

<sup>vii</sup> It is difficult to know which edition Suchon might have read (it had already run to ten editions by 1640). The one used for reference here is the 1653 Bechet edition.

<sup>viii</sup> It is worth noting here that Suchon acknowledges that she uses translations of the classics. The absence of quotations in Latin in particular (which are often to be found in the works of her contemporaries) has led critics such as Auffret to assert that Suchon could not read Latin. This is certainly possible but this may also have been a wise editorial decision on her part: if her texts are aimed primarily at a female readership, few of whom would be conversant with Latin, then providing them with knowledge they could not decipher would seem particularly pointless. This may explain why Suchon, even if she could read them in the original, would have sought French translations for her quotations and prevents us, until other evidence emerges, from assuming her lack of knowledge in Latin.

<sup>ix</sup> The last part is a reference to Christine Fauré's statement that: 'Sous la plume de cette religieuse dont nous ne savons rien, nous retrouvons les limites habituelles que le mouvement de la Contre-Réforme imprimait à l'humanisme... et contre toute attente c'est dans le sillage des pères de l'Eglise que Gabrielle Suchon situait sa réflexion.' In *La Démocratie sans les femmes: Essai sur le libéralisme en France* (Paris: PUF, 1985) p. 129.

<sup>x</sup> Paul Hoffmann. 1978. 'Le féminisme spirituel de Gabrielle Suchon, *Dix-Septième Siècle*, 121: 269-276.

<sup>xi</sup> 'Comme j'ai parlé de l'Amitié au troisième Tome des fidelles Amantes de Jesus-Christ... ' Livre 2, ch XXII/XXII, p. 401.

<sup>xii</sup> Cited in Le Dœuff 's 'Women in dialogue and in solitude', p. 14.



