



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## The paradoxes of religion in Gabrielle Suchon

**Citation for published version:**

Desnain, V 2021, 'The paradoxes of religion in Gabrielle Suchon', *Early Modern French Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 70-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2021.1924009>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/20563035.2021.1924009](https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2021.1924009)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Early Modern French Studies

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





## The Paradoxes of Religion in Gabrielle Suchon

Véronique Desnain

To cite this article: Véronique Desnain (2021) The Paradoxes of Religion in Gabrielle Suchon, *Early Modern French Studies*, 43:1, 70-87, DOI: [10.1080/20563035.2021.1924009](https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2021.1924009)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2021.1924009>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The Paradoxes of Religion in Gabrielle Suchon

VÉRONIQUE DESNAIN

*University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK*

Gabrielle Suchon's reliance on religious texts and authorities to support and legitimise the arguments she makes in her two texts *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693) and *Du célibat volontaire* (1700) has sometimes been perceived as running contrary to its defence of female freedom. Suchon's use of religious texts will be examined here as a corner stone of her attack on male hegemony and crucial to her argument, which rests in large part on the distinction between divine law and social customs. The article will focus specifically on how Suchon uses the paradoxes and contradictions found in her extensive corpus of references to advance the notion that the subjugation of women is a political strategy to support male power rather than the result of a natural and divinely ordained hierarchy of genders.

KEYWORDS Suchon, religion, gender, philosophy, celibacy, vocation

Gabrielle Suchon's two treatises represent the most extensive and coherent analysis of their time on the condition of women in France. The *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693), in particular, addresses many of the points debated throughout the *querelle des femmes* and rationally attacks male discourse and hegemony, while *Du célibat volontaire* (1700)<sup>1</sup> proposes a new social status for women, distinct from matrimony and religious orders, the only two uncontroversial and socially condoned paths for

<sup>1</sup> G. S. Aristophile [Gabrielle Suchon], *Traité de la morale et de la politique, divisé en trois parties. Sçavoir 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* (Paris: Certé, 1693); Gabrielle Suchon, *Du Célibat volontaire ou La Vie sans engagement* (Paris: Guignard, 1700).

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

*This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.*

women at the time.<sup>2</sup> Female freedom, as conceived by Suchon, is predicated on a religious stance both in its genesis and in its *raison d'être*. Yet some of the critics who have looked in depth at Gabrielle Suchon's œuvre have expressed surprise, unease or disappointment about the fact that Suchon's apparently orthodox attachment to religion is at the forefront of her argument. Christine Fauré, for example, states that 'contre toute attente, c'est dans le sillage des Pères de l'Église que Suchon situait sa réflexion.'<sup>3</sup> This 'contre toute attente' is in itself surprising given the predominance of religion in both contemporary social life and in the whole debate around women's attributes and place in society. It also chooses to foreground one ('Les Pères de l'Église') of the many authorities Suchon calls upon to support and articulate her examination of, and attack on, the subjugation of women. As we will see, not all of these are religious, and of those which are, not all are as orthodox as Fauré's statement would have us believe, firstly because not all patristic sources were deemed orthodox, and secondly because notions of what is considered orthodox at the time can be quite fluid. What may be surprising is that on some subjects Suchon is closer to more modern developments within the Church than to the Fathers she cites, while at other times, she uses patristic texts to counter modern interpretations. Her stance on celibacy, for example, can be seen to be aligned with that of the Council of Trent (December 1545 to December 1563) which issued among its decrees of marriage a canon which condemned the claim that the married state was superior to celibacy and asserted the excellence of the celibate state. Social mores, however, were not necessarily in line with such developments and, as we will see, the tension between social and spiritual practices and requirements are at the heart of Suchon's writing.

Despite this, critics' focus on the supposed submission of the author to ancient religious sources is not unique, and it ignores both the variety of sources Suchon calls upon and the use she makes of them. Paul Hoffmann, her most virulent critic, accuses her of 'fidéisme', arguing that her work ultimately recommends submission to the established order.<sup>4</sup> Most recognise the shortcomings of this perspective: Pierre Ronzeaud, first of all, who responds directly to Hoffmann<sup>5</sup> and Séverine Auffret, for example, who states, in her introduction to her modern edition of parts of Suchon's *Traité*, that:

Philosophe mal appréciée de son temps, pour avoir pensé à partir du sexe et du genre, Gabrielle Suchon ne l'est guère plus de notre modernité; à cause, cette fois, de son christianisme, étant sous-entendu que sa perspective de croyance ferait, plus qu'un rationalisme laïque, obstacle aux visées féminines d'émancipation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> While widows benefitted from a degree of personal autonomy and financial independence, patriarchal cultural practices often challenged their legal rights in a way that did not apply to unmarried men. See, for example, Julie Hardwick, 'Widowhood and Patriarchy in Seventeenth-Century France,' *Journal of Social History*, 26.1 (1992), 133–48.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Fauré, *La Démocratie sans les femmes: essai sur le libéralisme en France* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1985), p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hoffmann, 'Le féminisme spirituel de Gabrielle Suchon,' in *Dix-septième siècle*, 121 (1978), 269–76 (p. 272).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Ronzeaud, 'Note sur l'article de Paul Hoffmann,' in *Dix-septième Siècle*, 121 (1978), 276–77.

<sup>6</sup> Séverine Auffret, 'Introduction,' in Gabrielle Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique: La Contrainte*, ed. by Séverine Auffret, (Paris: des femmes, 1988), pp. 20–21.

She concludes that ‘tous ces textes, citations, références sont autant de soutiens symboliques. D’effacement, fidélité et respect du texte deviennent des impératifs méthodologiques pour conquérir une certaine autorité philosophique.’<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Suchon appears to set, in the ‘Préface générale’ of the *Traité*, what we could call a ‘hierarchy of trustworthiness’ for her sources, starting with the Bible and ending with ‘les Auteurs Modernes’, via ‘les savants tant Saints que profanes.’<sup>8</sup> As Auffret notes, Suchon’s project is ‘philosophical’ and the recourse to ‘authorities’ is often strategic.<sup>9</sup> Seeing it only as a strategy, though, risks considering the use of religious texts only in relation to its role in an otherwise secular and strictly social feminist stratagem, and only accepts the ambiguous aspects of Suchon’s argumentation as necessary compromises, rather than as a genuine attempt to reconcile the author’s own beliefs with her social context. The paradox here is that these beliefs can be both grounded in faith and at odds with the dominant religious narrative. As Auffret points out:

l’Église de Gabrielle Suchon diffère passablement de celle des prélats, des autorités qui se donnent la puissance de contentions matérielles, de clôtures, de gestes et de rituels extérieurs: Église toute spirituelle, constamment référée à ses origines primitives, se devant d’entériner le principe de liberté qui “n’est autre chose que la raison humaine.”<sup>10</sup>

While it may at first appear that she is assenting to the Church’s position, close analysis of her arguments reveals that Suchon also provides a number of points which subvert it. Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in the chapters of the *Traité*, in which she addresses the issue of women hearing confession. Her argument starts with a somewhat disingenuous acknowledgement that ‘L’Église a très justement ordonné le contraire’<sup>11</sup> but she proceeds to present the reasons for which women are entirely suitable for such a role, concluding: ‘Les femmes ne sont pas si dénuées des talents nécessaires à la conduite des âmes qu’on le prétend.’<sup>12</sup> What’s more, in developing her argument, she foregrounds the benefits that would arise from permitting women to exercise such functions, such as sparing men from importune questions and allowing women to support each other spiritually. In support of her stance she paraphrases (and acknowledges as her source) Saint Bernard to assert that, ‘elles ne seraient pas contraintes de commettre leurs secrets aux lèvres et à la puissance d’autrui,’ thus opposing patristic authority to contemporary religious authorities, and demonstrating that her relationship to her sources, and in particular to religious ones, may be rather more complex than previously suggested.<sup>13</sup>

This article proposes that Suchon’s reliance on religious texts may be the fruit not only of her historical context and of the nature of dominant discourses on women, but also of genuine faith. Suchon establishes a clear distinction between faith and

<sup>7</sup> Auffret, p. 42

<sup>8</sup> ‘Préface Générale,’ n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Auffret, pp. 12 and 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> Auffret, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> ‘De l’autorité,’ *Traité*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

the church as a ‘man-made’ institution (‘il faut toujours séparer l’autorité divine de la malice du cœur humain’).<sup>14</sup> As pointed out by Rachel Paine:

It is clear from her critique of established religion that her Christian faith excludes the conventional ways of expressing one’s love of God, challenging the Scholastic dogma of the time. She describes the convent as a social institution designed to keep women in a subservient position, with virtues such as chastity, modesty and piety encouraged only as a means of social control.<sup>15</sup>

As a widely read scholar, she is also clearly aware that many religious texts, being by necessity interpretations, are also subject to historical and geographical relativity, to which she refers specifically in the chapters on the ‘Privation d’Autorité’. As she puts it, ‘Il y a d’autres Lois et Ordonnances de l’Eglise qui s’accommodent aux mœurs et aux coutumes différentes des diverses Nations qui la reçoivent pour Mère,’<sup>16</sup> adding later, ‘Ces lois sont variables et ne durent qu’un temps, parce qu’elles changent selon les Magistrats, les Maîtres, et les Supérieurs qui ne sont pas toujours les mêmes’.<sup>17</sup> To this relativism, she opposes the ultimate authority: God’s plan. As Julie Walsh succinctly puts it:

God does nothing in vain. This is a powerful statement and one that Suchon deftly wields in her discussion of freedom in *Traité de la Morale et de la Politique*. She ultimately uses the fact that divine action is end-directed to ground the point that restricting women’s ability to act in a way that is consistent with her rational nature is not only bad or unjust but against God and nature.<sup>18</sup>

Far from being a form of *fidéisme* then, the references to a variety of religious sources offer a wealth of contradictions and paradoxes, which Suchon exploits to support her arguments, noting in her ‘Préface Générale’ that such an approach is also supported by some of the Saints Pères:

St Bernard, parlant des écritures sacrées nous assure qu’on les peut expliquer en divers sens, sans commettre aucune absurdité. Quelle raison peut-on avoir pour trouver mauvais que les saintes lettres, les livres des Pères, et des auteurs graves soient appliqués différemment pourvu que l’on suive toujours la foi Catholique et orthodoxe, puisque les choses matérielles sont propres à divers usages et servent à plusieurs et différentes fonctions [?]

The question ‘quelles raisons peut-on avoir?’ is somewhat disingenuous but sets the stage for Suchon to prove that such reasons have little to do with religion and much to do with preserving male hegemony. It should be noted that she uses a similar strategy in her treatment of Ancient secular authorities. The

<sup>14</sup> ‘De l’autorité,’ *Traité*, p. 5. The chapters on ‘La dépendance dans les choses spirituelles’ (XIII and XIV of this volume), for example, level some extremely harsh accusations at priests and other ‘Directeurs de conscience.’

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Paine, ‘Gabrielle Suchon’s vision of the good life,’ *Philosophy Lives*, <https://www.philosophylives.com/essays/gabrielle-suchons-vision-of-the-good-life> [accessed 11 February 2021].

<sup>16</sup> ‘De l’autorité,’ *Traité*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Julie Walsh, ‘Gabrielle Suchon, Freedom and the Neutral Life,’ *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 27.5 (2019), 685–712 (p. 687).

breadth of material available, rather than its religious standing, appears then to be the determining factor in Suchon's choice of sources. This however should not detract from the possibility that the use of religious sources, rather than a mere strategy designed to deflect accusations of heresy, is both the essential motivation and the principal structural authority in the *Traité de la morale et de la politique*.

To assess the design of Suchon's enterprise, it is perhaps best to examine both texts side by side. The *Traité* is a more clearly argued response to the on-going debate about women's abilities, education and socially subservient position. It develops in three parts, culminating in the demonstration that all other restrictions (lack of education and freedom) placed on women intend to deprive them of autonomy and authority in order to maintain male power and supremacy, as summed up in the final part of the *Traité*: '... les hommes ne privent les personnes du beau Sexe, des deux premiers avantages [la Liberté et le Science], que pour les empêcher de prétendre au troisième [l'Autorité].'<sup>19</sup> We can therefore deduce from this that Suchon sees male domination as a 'political' strategy and attempts to counteract it by giving her female reader the arguments and practical advice necessary to embrace their own autonomy and defend their desire to learn and to opt for a celibate lifestyle if they so choose, at a time when independent women were regarded as oddities and open to suspicion and persecution from their contemporaries, the state and the Church.<sup>20</sup> Suchon uses a pseudonym (Aristophile) but, while aware that this might give her detractors some ammunition ('Tout ce qui vient à l'esprit des femmes étant toujours suspect à celui des hommes'), she makes it absolutely clear in the Préface Générale that the text was written by a(n unmarried) woman ('C'est le travail d'une fille'). The second text, *Du célibat volontaire ou La Vie sans engagement*, was published in 1700 and the title page, which indicates that the text was written 'Par Damoiselle Gabrielle Suchon', makes it clear that the author is a woman and that she is unmarried. It is also divided in three parts and focuses more closely on both the advantages of the secular celibate life and on its practical aspects, in particular in the 'livre troisième', entitled 'L'emploi du temps, les exercices, & les vertus les plus nécessaires aux Personnes, qui passent leur vie sans engagement'. According to Suchon's vision, the secular celibate, or *Neutraliste*, is not called to the religious life but would remain unmarried in order to dedicate herself to study, charitable works and contemplation. In *Du célibat*, she specifically devotes chapters to the fact that having to look after children (Chapters IX, X and XI) and manage servants (Chapters XII, XIII and XIII) constitute an obstacle to this, while elsewhere she cites the obedience to superiors required of nuns and claustra as obstacles to 'l'emploi du temps', and 'les exercices' which are detailed in Part

<sup>19</sup> 'De l'autorité', *Traité*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> While the celibate life could be embraced by both men and women, it must be noted that it raises specific issues for women, even when they were, like widows, afforded a degree of legal autonomy. As noted by Hardwick, 'the efforts of their male peers to resolve what they saw to be the challenges that [they] posed to the patriarchal order, and the responses of women in this position together defined a practice of widowhood that could not take full advantage of the opportunities promised in the law. Widows were subject to pressures widowers did not incur, and widows' autonomy was continually restricted by practices that embedded them in a network of male kin' (p. 133). It can be safely assumed that such difficulties would be equally present for women who never married and were granted even less autonomy by the law.

3 of the text. The status proposed for women in *Du célibat* is of course predicated on a degree of autonomy and ‘authority’ whose legitimacy has been established in the *Traité*.

It should be pointed out here, as this is relevant to our understanding of the true dimension of Suchon’s use of religious sources in her argumentation, that she may have authored a third text, no longer extant. The only reference to this text is from Suchon herself. She states in Chapter 22 of *Du célibat* on ‘l’amitié’: ‘Comme j’ai parlé de l’Amitié au troisième Tome des fidelles Amantes de Jesus-Christ, pour remarquer les différences avec l’amour, je passerai sous silence beaucoup de choses que je pourrais dire à cet endroit, de crainte d’user de redites.’<sup>21</sup> There is no evidence that this text was ever published (although it was granted permission to be printed), yet Suchon appears to expect that her reader will have read it and be cognisant of its contents.<sup>22</sup> If we accept the existence of this earlier volume, which presumably treats of life within a religious order, and establishes perhaps the parameters of a ‘true’ vocation (she warns in *Le Traité* about vows taken too young, when one is still too immature and uneducated to truly understand the commitment required to be a ‘good nun’), *Du célibat* can then be seen as an alternative for those who are not suited to that life rather than opposed to it. This is significant and should inform how we view her other works and especially her use of religious texts. If the tome did exist, then far from undermining the arguments of the *Traité*, it could potentially support one of the most important aspects of it, namely that both orders and marriage are appropriate for those genuinely called to them, but have potentially disastrous consequences for those who are not, therefore making a ‘third path’ necessary for the latter to fulfil their God-given purpose. The legitimacy and necessity of such a status are underlined by Suchon’s assertion that ‘c’est une condition sans engagement, qui renferme tous les autres états en puissance’.<sup>23</sup> The above can of course only be speculative until extant copies of the third text, if any exist, can be analysed. Yet if this is confirmed, then Suchon’s complete works, taken in their likely order of creation, or at least the order in which she intended them to be read (*Traité de la morale et de la politique / Traité de l’excellence de la vocation des filles / Du célibat volontaire*) point to a strategy that aims first to offer a critical examination of the social (rather than religious) uses of convents and an analysis of the religious justifications used to validate the subservience of women embedded in marriage, before establishing the religious life as desirable only in the right conditions. Having demonstrated the need for a new status, she can finally develop in the

<sup>21</sup> *Du Célibat volontaire*, pp. 401–02.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace Kirsop came across confirmation of its existence while investigating the two other texts. An entry in the register of the Paris booksellers’ guild for 7 July 1699 indicates, ‘Damoiselle Gabrielle Suchon Nous a présenté des Lettres de Privilège à elle accordé par sa Majesté pour faire imprimer et vendre par Charles Cabry un Livre intitulé *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 pendant Le tems de huit années Donné a Paris Le 4me juillet 1699 signé Boucher.’ Wallace Kirsop, ‘A note on Gabrielle Suchon’s efforts to seek publication of her works,’ *Journal of Romance Studies*, 5.2 (2005), 17–18 (p. 17). Further research is required to ascertain if this text was ever published but its position in Suchon’s overall project is worthy of consideration.

<sup>23</sup> *Du célibat volontaire*, p. 2.



last volume the purpose and practical dimensions of this path, one that does in fact already exist but lacks recognition and legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

While Suchon's enterprise has often been perceived by some modern readers primarily in the context of *la défense des femmes*, which may be explained by the similarities found between some of Suchon's arguments (especially on marriage and education) and well-known pro-woman writers, such as Poulain de La Barre or le Père Le Moyne, I would argue that the long history of difficulties experienced by women attempting to define their own modes of worship outside the Church (filles séculières, Béguines, Ursulines) could have had as strong an impact on Suchon's writing as contemporary debates of a more overtly social nature, since she specifically comments on them in Chapter 2 of *Du célibat*.<sup>25</sup> Since the Middle Ages, women had been trying to negotiate with the Church a way to take an active part in apostolacy, rather than being content with the passive role assigned to them in convents. Women who, for reasons of class or money, could not enter convents, those who felt a strong vocation to teach or care for their local communities, as well as those who did not feel up to the hardship inherent in conventual life, had long been trying to develop ways to avoid clausura while choosing a lifestyle in which spiritual issues were at the forefront and which closely resembled that of nuns, often taking private vows of poverty and chastity. Unlike the vows taken by nuns however, these vows could be temporary (in a similar fashion to those of the celibacy advocated by Suchon). Clearly the fact that these women did not take public and permanent vows constituted a problem for the Church who could not control their mode of worship or, more worryingly, their interpretation of theological issues. Yet for women like the Ursulines, intent on apostolacy, clausura creates an unresolvable dilemma: 'le choix de la religion implique l'abandon de tout engagement avec le monde, tandis que le choix de l'action rend tout status religieux impossible.'<sup>26</sup> The Ursulines' insistence on a 'vie mixte mêlée de la contemplation et de l'action'<sup>27</sup>, is not dissimilar to Suchon's insistence in *Du célibat* that the *neutraliste's* life should consist of both contemplation and service to the community (Suchon herself was known to teach, for example): it seems that, like Suchon, the Ursulines were 'prêtes à braver l'opprobre pour se vouer à une vocation qu'elles estiment plus sainte même que la vie monastique traditionnelle.'<sup>28</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt asserts that the main objections from the church focus on two aspects: 'la liberté de mouvement et l'interaction avec le monde.' Similar aims for women are

<sup>24</sup> It is of course impossible to establish with any certainty the order in which the texts were actually written: we know that *Le Traité de la Morale et de la Politique*, for example, received an 'approbation' from J. B Junot, Docteur de Sorbonne, on 14 October 1691, two years prior to its publication in April 1693. According to Bertolini's archival research (Sonia Bertolini, 'Gabrielle Suchon: une vie sans engagement?' *Australian Journal of French studies*, 37.3 (2000), pp. 289–308), by 1673 Suchon may have left the convent. It is of course possible that she worked on two or more texts concurrently, over the following twenty years or so. This does not, however, contradict the possibility of an overarching strategy linking all three.

<sup>25</sup> On this idea, see also *passim* in Julie Walsh, 'Gabrielle Suchon'.

<sup>26</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt, 'Les religieuses en mouvement. Ursulines françaises et Dames anglaises à l'aube du XXVII<sup>e</sup> siècle,' *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 52.4 (2005), 7–23 (p. 8).

<sup>27</sup> Archives départementales de la Haute-Garonne [désormais AD31], 221H-37, f. 2, Mémoires du commencement et progrès de l'ordre de sainte Ursule, Cahier 1604–1621. Cited in Lux-Sterritt, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

articulated in the *Traité* where Suchon defends engagement with the world and freedom of movement for women, not only in order to educate themselves and serve the local community, but also in order to travel more widely:

Et comme, pour glorifier Dieu dans ses ouvrages, il faut nécessairement les voir et les considérer, la même obligation qui [les] engage à louer le Créateur [leur] donne les moyens qui peuvent conduire à l'accomplissement de ce devoir.<sup>29</sup>

While the above may be understood to apply in a local context, the last chapter of 'La Liberté' is unambiguous about the extent of this freedom, and concentrates on the stories of 'Plusieurs exemples des personnes du Sexe qui ont apporté beaucoup de fruits et d'utilité par leurs voyages'.

Women professing a religious vocation but refusing to enter religious orders also raised issues for society at large in so far as, having chosen celibacy, these women could not be 'controlled' by men through marriage. Perceived as dangerously unsupervised, they were derided by society and persecuted by the Church itself, who sought to impose clausura on any community of women and strongly discouraged imitation of religious structures in the secular world. As Elisja Schulte van Kessel points out, 'en fait, elles n'avaient droit de cité ni dans l'Eglise ni dans la société.'<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps in the problems experienced by those women in their attempts to return to a pre-institutional mode of worship that we may find the inspiration for Suchon's philosophical enterprise. It is also important to note that the notion, and terminology, of *Neutralisme*, are not Suchon's own and can be found in earlier texts, clearly suggesting that such a status, while not widely embraced, or seen as desirable, or even acceptable, by all religious scholars and authorities, was nonetheless accepted as legitimate by some. As I have argued elsewhere, the term appears in a small but significant number of ecclesiastic writers: such a status, and name, had previously been used most notably by Nicolas Caussin, a Jesuit priest and moralist, referenced by name in a marginal note in *La Science* (p. 252).<sup>31</sup> This would suggest that Suchon was well aware of those who preceded her in advocating secular celibacy and the difficulties they encountered. This, rather than the use of religious texts to detract from or give weight to a position that would otherwise be singularly secular or unorthodox in its genesis, would explain why religion is at the heart of her argument. Ultimately, what emerges here is the sense of a woman struggling between her faith and what she sees as obstacles in the fulfilment of her, and other women's, own relationship to God, and seeking in her reading and writing to find some resolution to the tension between individual worship and the restrictions imposed by social norms.

<sup>29</sup> 'De la liberté', *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, p. 208.

<sup>30</sup> Elisja Schulte van Kessel, *Women and Men in Spiritual Culture, XIV–XVII Centuries: A Meeting of South and North* (The Hague: Netherlands Govt. Pub. Office, 1986), p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> See Véronique Desnain, 'The origins of *la vie neutre*: Nicolas Caussin's Influence on the writings of Gabrielle Suchon', *French Studies*, 63 (2009), 148–60. The terminology used by Suchon is therefore not quite as original as Lisa Shapiro suggests. Lisa Shapiro, 'Gabrielle Suchon's "Neutralist": The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy,' in *Women and Liberty, 1600–1800*, ed. by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 50–65 (p. 53).

Jeannette Geffriaud Rosso's assertion that 'contrairement à l'avis de tous, le célibat apparaît, aux yeux de Gabrielle Suchon, un état privilégié'<sup>32</sup> may, however, be stretching the point. Firstly, as suggested above, Suchon posits *le célibat* on an equal footing to the two other paths open to women rather than preferable to it. Suchon's entire argument would collapse if *le célibat* were presented as 'privilégié' since its very existence is predicated on a God-given vocation. It would therefore be unsuitable to anyone called to the religious life or marriage. Secondly, while not widespread, the recognition of the legitimacy of this status is not limited to Caussin and Suchon: Maillard's note on the *page de garde* of his *Le Bon Mariage ou le moyen d'être heureux et faire son salut en estat de mariage* (1647) suggests that this third status, while not widespread and possibly more likely to be taken up by men, was common enough to warrant a specific address: '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.' Maillard, like Caussin, and of course Suchon, places emphasis on 'vocation': 'Que pour être heureux en mariage, & en tout autre état, ne faut s'y engager sans bien connaitre que Dieu y appelle', a idea on which Suchon's argument in *Le Traité* fully depends.<sup>33</sup> Vocation, as a direct and entirely individual response to God, is crucial to Suchon because it confers legitimacy and authority.

Authority is central to Suchon's endeavour, not only as the ultimate aim defended by her work, but also in terms of her position as a writer. It is threatened at every turn by the lack of legitimacy afforded women in general and women writers in particular. Like her few predecessors (Christine de Pisan, Marie de France), Suchon takes as her first line of defence the divine imperative: she is 'called', as a writer, and as a teacher, to perform this task. Her 'vocation' also ensures that she has been given the qualities required to bring her philosophical 'mission' to its end. For the lack of authority granted to women by society, as opposed to that conferred by God's design, is also, according to Suchon, the ultimate deprivation and the one she truly aims to challenge. As pointed out by Derval Conroy, Suchon's argument highlights how the deprivation of freedom and knowledge 'makes it easier for men to keep women in their state of dependency.'<sup>34</sup> Knowledge then, if women are as capable as men of acquiring it, should form the basis of any authority granted to them, and Suchon sets out to give a magisterial demonstration of her own abilities in this respect. The range of sources she calls upon to do so, and her engagement with them, are in themselves part of the demonstration. Given both the importance of religious discourse on social matters relating to gender (most *manuels* on marriage or female education, for example, are penned by ecclesiasts) and the efforts made by the Church to discourage women from engaging directly with Scriptures and

<sup>32</sup> Jeannette Geffriaud Rosso, 'Gabrielle Suchon: une troisième voie pour la femme?', in *Ouverture et dialogue: mélanges offerts à Wolfgang Leiner*, ed. by Ulrich Döring, Antiopy Lyroudias and Rainer Zaiser (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), pp. 669–78 (p. 670).

<sup>33</sup> Claude Maillard, *Le Bon Mariage ou le moyen d'être heureux et faire son salut en estat de mariage* (Paris: Jean de Launay, 1647), p. 92.

<sup>34</sup> Derval Conroy, 'Gabrielle Suchon: the Politics of Exclusion,' in *Ruling Women*, Vol 1: *Government, Virtue and the Female Prince in Seventeenth-Century France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 100–17 (p. 106).

theological discussions (including those in religious orders, who are most often given abridged or edited versions),<sup>35</sup> the breadth of Suchon's reading, and especially that of religious texts, as exemplified by her references, underlines her success as an autodidact and offers proof of women's capabilities.

Yet she goes further by positing that there should be no restrictions to the materials from which women should seek this knowledge or the topics to which these materials relate, and that women should do this as autonomous beings rather than in relation to any specific status. Again this sets her apart from her predecessors, including female advocates for women such as Christine de Pizan. While some Catholic thinkers advocate for the education of women they do so in the context of women as wives and mothers and limit that education to topics that will enable them to perform these roles better. Yet even such limited access to education could be seen as unacceptable by the Church: Fénelon's treatise on girls' education was deemed too daring, despite his assertion that 'La science des femmes, comme celles des hommes, doit se borner à s'instruire par rapport à leur fonction'<sup>36</sup>, and his concession that 'elles ne doivent gouverner l'Etat, ni faire la guerre, ni entrer dans le ministère des choses sacrées; ainsi elles peuvent se passer de certaines connaissances étendues, qui appartiennent à la politique, à l'art militaire, à la jurisprudence, à la philosophie et à la théologie.'<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that the dissention between Fénelon and Suchon may also have a wider theological context, if we accept Patricia Touboul's analysis of Fénelon's text: whereas Suchon put forward the notion that the pursuit of knowledge and the development of intellectual qualities and skills for their own sake are divinely dictated, Fénelon's premise is that the acquisition of knowledge is not an end in itself:

[...] car il ne s'agit pas, dans l'idéal que revendique Fénelon, de rechercher le savoir pour lui-même et, par conséquent, de se livrer à l'étude comme si elle était une fin en soi: l'exercice de la raison n'est donc pas, en soi-même, un bienfait. Personne, en ce sens, ne devrait se prétendre savant, comme s'il s'agissait là d'une occupation qui, en tant que telle, méritait d'être recherchée. Il est donc indigne de l'homme, créature de Dieu, et image de la perfection divine, de se livrer à cette forme d'activité gratuite, vaine plutôt que véritablement libre. Il n'y a donc pas lieu de plaindre les filles – préoccupées par les tâches pratiques et utilitaires du foyer – d'en être privées. Au contraire, tous, hommes et femmes, doivent travailler, et nul ne doit revendiquer cette forme de liberté, comme absence totale de contrainte, qui serait figurée par le loisir à l'état pur.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The Council of Trent (1545–63) not only insisted on the rules of enclosure for women, but also, in response to Protestantism and its acceptance of lay preachers, set out restrictive parameters for the interpretations of Scriptures, limiting them largely to ordained members of the Church, parameters which *de facto* excluded women. In this instance, unlike on other topics, such as the validity of the celibate status, Suchon diverges from the canons of Trent and is closer to contemporary developments, which sees the publication of a number of treatises, often written by men of the cloth, that advocate scriptural reading for the laity, including women. It is worth noting then that her choice of arguments and sources appears to be dictated by their effectiveness in serving her aims and arguments rather than any hierarchy of orthodoxy.

<sup>36</sup> Fénelon, *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1994), p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Touboul, 'Le Statut des femmes: nature et condition sociale dans *Le Traité de l'éducation des Filles* de Fénelon,' *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 104.2 (2004), 325–42 (p. 336).

Suchon however suggests that all knowledge is worthwhile. To justify her call for an education for women which would be equal in its breadth to that received by men, she relies on the Cartesian model of the separation between body and mind, arguing that God's commandment 'de remplir la terre et de l'assujettir, fut pour Eve aussi bien que pour Adam, à qui le Seigneur donna une compagne et une associée, et non pas une servante ni une esclave, parce que la différence n'est qu'aux Sexes, et non aux Esprits'.<sup>39</sup>

Her active engagement with the texts to which she refers and the variety of topics she covers, including rhetoric, the sciences and history, could therefore be seen as a demonstration of women's ability to acquire knowledge, and use it appropriately. Michèle Le Dœuff suggests that Suchon's own rhetoric and use of sources is a form of internal dialogue ('in both her books Suchon *herself* produces objections to her theories and then refutes these very objections') and argues that 'Suchon's practice of philosophical reasoning in fact fits in with what Plato called 'thinking'.<sup>40</sup> Thus,

with Gabrielle Suchon's notion of autodidacticism, as connected – first of all – to reading books, we can say that her solitary dialogue with herself also included a conversation with both past and contemporary authors. [...] Books here stand in a role previously held by handsome Meno, promising Theaetetus, pompous Protagoras and all others. Books from which one can learn a lot, but in a critical mode, which means that one can also take issue with some of their contents.<sup>41</sup>

This notion of an inner philosophical debate also resonates when we consider Suchon's use of religious texts, be they patristic or modern. She brings these voices together and lets them, within a structured framework, respond to each other. She also finds in some of them, such as Caussin's, a rationalisation of her own trajectory as a former nun who, in a newfound secular life, must defend her right to autonomy.<sup>42</sup> It is in this juxtaposition of a multitude of views, and Suchon's assessment and manipulation of these views that her originality resides. As Le Dœuff argues:

When past philosophical texts are reread by a mind which can think, in dialogue with itself, which can work and include the feelings and the affections of the heart in the work, then of course a discontinuity will take place, perhaps as small as the deviation Lucretius called *clinamen*, but sufficient to create, in the end, a brand new world; in Suchon's case a new decipherment of the world as it was, a new set of ethical values, or rather a new art of deciphering the existing world from a point of view determined by those values.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, beyond this 'dialogue' with a wide variety of texts, from which it would seem odd to exclude the religious texts which are such an integral part of

<sup>39</sup> *Traité*, 'De l'autorité,' p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Michèle Le Dœuff, 'Women in dialogue and in solitude,' *Journal of Romance Studies*, 5.2 (2005), 1–15 (p. 10.)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> On autonomy, see Shapiro, 'Gabrielle Suchon's "Neutralist."'

<sup>43</sup> Le Dœuff, 'Women in dialogue and in solitude,' p. 12.

contemporaneous discourse on gender, Suchon's break with tradition can also be found in her intended readership. While her work is dedicated to the Holy Trinity, it has, Le Dœuff suggests:

a clearly acknowledged ambition: to wake women from their slumber, to invite them to read and become self-taught and establish small societies to argue with one another, and exercise their own free minds this way. [...]

[T]he major discontinuity she introduced [...] is to be found in the fact that she focused on solitary work, but with a not-yet-existing community in view, women readers, whom she invited to liberate themselves. It is, in itself, a remarkable discontinuity, however much she borrowed from the tradition she claimed as her heritage.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, for Elsa Dorlin, it is specifically the originality of Suchon's project which dictates its form:

Elle a conscience que la façon dont elle va aborder la question de la liberté de la femme est tout à fait originale. C'est pourquoi elle opte pour un style d'exposition et une forme d'argumentation très classique.<sup>45</sup>

To this, we could perhaps add the range of references she uses to develop her argument, one that appears, on the surface, extremely traditional, but used in a way that belies its 'fidéisme'. She relies heavily on classical and biblical texts and those are generally clearly indicated by margin notes, often giving chapter and verse references. She quotes the Scriptures, in particular the Old Testament, the Book of Ecclesiasticus, the Fathers of the Church (especially Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Thomas), as well as the Ancients: Juvenal, Pliny, Cicero, Aristotle, Plutarch and Plato.<sup>46</sup> Whether her reliance on such ancient and respected sources can be regarded as a mark of fideism and an obstacle to a truly original and political outlook is highly questionable given the way she deploys them.

Her use of patristic writings follows the pattern that opposes different sources, but also, most crucially, different texts from the same source to highlight inconsistencies. Saint Augustine, for example, is often cited but in his vast corpus – he authored 93 books, while over 300 of his letters and over 600 of his sermons are still extant – both charges against and defences of women can be found in his writing.<sup>47</sup> It is easy therefore to attribute arguments to refute or support either side of the debate about women to him and Suchon clearly manipulates this

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Elsa Dorlin, 'Gabrielle Suchon, une philosophie de liberté,' at 'Philosophie et libération des femmes. Journée de la Philosophie à l'Unesco, 3'. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001460/146018fo.pdf>, pp. 15–22 (p. 17).

<sup>46</sup> See Hélène Michon, 'La lecture de la Bible par les femmes: l'apologie d'Antoine Arnauld et de Gabrielle Suchon,' in *Les Femmes et la Bible de la fin du Moyen Age à l'époque moderne*, ed. by Élise Boillet and Maria-Teresa Ricci (Paris: Champion, 2017), pp. 107–22 for a brief discussion of this. On the intellectual pursuits of women within the Church and the accessibility of religious texts to women, see the excellent and very thorough study by Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des femmes à la culture sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Champion, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> See Tarsicius J. van Bavel, 'Augustine's View on Women,' *Augustiniana*, 39 (1989), 5–53.

wealth for her own purpose. Saint Paul is also used in this way. In 1 Cor 11:7, he states that man was the image and glory of God, while woman was the glory of man, while in 1 Timothy 2, he argues that women were created second, sinned first, and should keep silent. He was troubled by the social implications of Christians adopting a celibate lifestyle, something that clearly cannot be reconciled with Suchon's project. Yet, as shown by his epistles, he approved of women speaking in Christian worship assemblies, leading local churches, and travelling as evangelists, and Suchon quotes abundantly from those very passages. Conversely, many attacks against women can also be found in Saint Jerome but he saw celibacy as a way for women to overcome their 'inferiority': 'You have with you one who was once your partner in the flesh but is now your partner in the spirit; once your wife but now your sister; once a woman but now a man; once an inferior but now an equal. Under the same yoke as you she hastens toward the same heavenly kingdom' (Letter 71 'To Lucinius').<sup>48</sup> It is obvious that such a stance supports Suchon's argument for celibacy outside the Church, a choice often denigrated by the Church itself in its attempts to curb secular religious movements that it saw as a threat to its own authority.<sup>49</sup> Suchon therefore calls on Ancient sources in order to put forward notions that could be seen as dangerous or heretical by contemporary religious institutions; she plays one authority against another, or, shrewdly, shows the contradictions and evolutions apparent within a single author's production, hence suggesting that what is temporarily perceived as truth may change over time. The criteria for selecting a particular authority or text does not seem to be their perceived level of orthodoxy, but rather how well the point, or indeed the contradictions, which she brings to the fore serve her argument. Within this stratagem, there is no significant difference in the way she uses secular and religious sources.

Suchon is therefore clearly selective in her choice and use of quotations, and her reliance on sources respected by her peers, far from being a mere craven attempt at validation, can indeed be seen as strategic, with the author deliberately choosing arguments from the very same sources used by the detractors of women to expose their inconsistencies, situate them in the context of their time and perhaps show that even famous detractors of women have at times been forced to recognise their intellectual and spiritual qualities. As pointed out by Conroy:

like Gournay, Suchon appropriates, and hence situates herself within, a paradigm of male hegemonic discourse, drawing on both ancients and moderns, in her use of scriptural, patristic, classical and modern writings. In this counter-cultural reading of traditional sources, which Suchon explicitly justifies, – one that is not always unproblematic, to say the least – the two female thinkers can be seen to participate in the creation of an alternative female tradition of interpretation, a pro-woman hermeneutics.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npfn2-06-03.htm#P3043\\_802029](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npfn2-06-03.htm#P3043_802029) [accessed 17 March 2021].

<sup>49</sup> For details of this, see, for example, Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Évelyne Berriot-Salvadore, *Les Femmes dans la société française de la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp. 306–22.

<sup>50</sup> Conroy, p. 102.

The novelty of this approach should not be underestimated and sets Suchon apart from preceding discourse on women, which broadly constitutes the *Querelle des femmes*, with which she has occasionally been associated. Far from being a slavish 'listing' of arguments and counter-arguments such as have appeared throughout the *Querelle*, Suchon's work engages in an active and meticulous examination and critique of these arguments. While Suchon's work draws upon many of the tropes and methods of the *querelle* – the Cartesian approach of Poullain, the *recueils de femmes illustres* popular throughout the seventeenth century, the *manuels* destined for women in marriage and convents – both her critical approach (and it is perhaps in her complex engagement with religious texts that this is most obvious) and the fact that she directs her writing at a female reader and envisages this reader as an autonomous individual rather than as a woman with a specific role to play in society, are features that set her apart from this tradition.

She is also keenly aware of, and criticises, the importance of the stylistic features which dominated such debates. For if Suchon may seem to represent the 'arrière garde' of the *Querelle*, she does not in fact share its aims, which often had little to do with an actual desire for social change, or indeed female solidarity.<sup>51</sup> Texts written by men for a male audience are sometimes little more than an opportunity for the author to display their rhetorical and literary skills, to the extent that, as Suchon herself notes in the Préface to her *Traité*, that the 'effets de plume' become far more important than the topic addressed. In clear opposition to this, Suchon highlights, in the Préface to the *Traité*, the simplicity and educational value of her own writing. Her reliance on a multitude of sources, and the provision of marginal notes clearly identifying those sources is also a way to point her reader towards further study, or to counter the dearth of texts available to her. It is indeed crucial to underline that Suchon's project is consciously instructive: as mentioned above, her intended reader is female and as such, she would not necessarily have access to the texts to which Suchon refers in their entirety and may only be cognisant of the arguments provided by those who would use them to justify her subjection. By juxtaposing conflicting authorities, Suchon, again, makes a point about the subjectivity of accepted knowledge and provides her reader with counter-arguments, from equally authoritative sources, to the ones that reader may have come across in her own, perhaps more limited, reading.<sup>52</sup>

What Suchon's use of religious sources clearly shows is that, for her, authority should derive from truth and logic, and that truth can only be perceived by examining all facets of a single argument. By showing the fallibility and paradoxes of even the most respected authorities, and placing them in their historical and geographical context, Suchon shows that knowledge is not static and establishes that the development of intellectual abilities and the acquisition of knowledge through all available means are the *sine qua non* conditions of understanding and fulfilling

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Ian MacLean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610–1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), esp. chapter 2, pp. 25–63; Madeleine Lazard, *Les Avenues de féminité: les femmes et la Renaissance* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> A review of *Du célibat* in *Nouvelles de la République des lettres* (May 1700) notes 'Elle met à profit ses lectures dans tout cet ouvrage, et elle cite Les Pères et divers autres ouvrages que peu de personnes de son sexe connaissent' (my emphasis) (p. 583).



God's design as an individual. Suchon proves, through her own example, the 'capacité' of an individual woman to do this, and by extension the potential of all women, even as social norms put every possible obstacle in her way. The very existence of the text is evidence of the truth it seeks to demonstrate.

It is clear, of course, that Suchon is aware that the change necessary to enable all women to aspire to such knowledge, freedom and authority will not come quickly, and most certainly not in her lifetime:

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.<sup>53</sup>

I would argue that, in contrast with the legal rights for women that Suchon may hope for in the distant future, she believes that her writing will, in the short term, enable women to develop their own intellectual skills and autonomy to face the struggle against the 'projet politique de domination masculine'<sup>54</sup> with self-respect and fortitude.<sup>55</sup> The mere fact of convincingly exposing the fallacy of 'natural' female inferiority can be seen as a powerful act of revolt in itself. Ronzeaud concludes his defense of Suchon with the words:

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 à 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.<sup>56</sup>

Even more remarkably, as Dorlin points out, the way in which she does this has implications well beyond her main topic:

Avec Gabrielle Suchon, la critique de l'inégalité des sexes devient le cas d'école de toute critique sociale de l'iniquité du pouvoir. Dans ces conditions, c'est bien un appel à la résistance auquel nous invite Gabrielle Suchon.<sup>57</sup>

The fact that Suchon relies on orthodox texts and authors to make this 'appel à la résistance', far from undermining her project, serves it. By using the same sources as had been used to bolster 'l'iniquité du pouvoir', she effectively demonstrates the way in which such sources had been used selectively to support and justify male hegemony both within and beyond the church.

Suchon's entirely reasonable assumption that the change she advocates will not happen overnight does not necessarily negate her belief that it will happen, not least perhaps because she sees such change as a return to God's true design. The reference to the rise of the Amazons, as one of the 'merveilles' which show that God can perform miracles, hints that the impediment is only 'moralement impossible' in a secular context. In other words, such a change within her own time would be nothing less than a miracle, because of the political opposition to it from men,

<sup>53</sup> 'Avant-Propos,' in 'De l'autorité,' *Traité*.

<sup>54</sup> Ronzeaud, p. 277.

<sup>55</sup> In this context, her recourse to examples of *femmes fortes* could be seen not as mere compliance to tradition but as a conscious desire to replace women in a female genealogy of which they can find pride and strength.

<sup>56</sup> Ronzeaud, p. 277.

<sup>57</sup> Dorlin, 'Gabrielle Suchon, une philosophie de liberté,' p. 19.

but it should not be perceived as going against God's will since it is this divine will that has given women the necessary qualities to achieve this. It is possible then that the reliance on religious texts also serves to reassure her female reader that seeking freedom, knowledge and authority does not equate with heresy. The fact that her female contemporaries have little chance of achieving the kind of freedom Suchon advocates certainly does not negate her belief in the eventual advent of equality. On the contrary, Suchon's work could be perceived as a conscious attempt to arm her followers for the battle that must take place before their rights are finally recognised. The final words of the *Avant-propos* certainly hint at such a conclusion but also emphasize that, should this become reality, it will, in fact, be attributable to divine will:

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.<sup>58</sup>

However, Suchon is not prepared to rely solely on divine intervention and she positions herself as an instrument of God's will. Her treatises not only serve as a compendium of arguments and counter-arguments which can enable women to answer their critics; they are also the spark which will ignite women's desire to 'better themselves', to shake them out of the apathy which their unfair subjection, and especially their lack of education, has created. As she 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 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.

The first step in fighting oppression is therefore to convince the oppressed that their condition is unjust and can be changed.

It should be no surprise then that religious texts and theological debates occupy such a large part of Suchon's developing argument and are intertwined with more practical issues, since such debates have potentially wide-ranging repercussions for social organisation. The two are linked on a fundamental level and cannot be separated, as clearly exemplified by the religious arguments brought to bear in the wider debate regarding female education. Her defense of women is therefore based on an opposition between the secular and the divine, including within religious literature, the evolution of social mores and the immutability of divine purpose, what can be changed (laws, customs) and what must be accepted (God's will). She consistently treads a fine line between orthodoxy and spiritual rebellion since her apparent submission to the church's edicts (on women hearing confession, as shown above for example) is at odds with her insistence on female intellectual, physical and spiritual independence. So while religion, and most importantly the way religious texts have been interpreted, lies at the

<sup>58</sup> 'Avant-Propos', in 'De l'autorité,' *Traité*.

heart of Suchon's work, it is with a very critical and individualistic stance that she approaches the issues it raises.

Suchon's use of religious sources is not intrinsically incompatible with her discourse on female freedom and should not detract from the radical propositions she makes or from her powerful denunciation of male hegemony. While it is true that she clearly, and no doubt realistically, had few illusions about the likelihood of her proposals being uncritically embraced or implemented by her contemporaries, her strong belief that her view would eventually prevail may well have been bolstered by the fact that her faith was genuine. Her writing can perhaps only be fully understood if we accept its religious, as well as social and literary, roots. In this context, Suchon's insistence on the vocational can be seen as a reflection of both her spiritual belief and her political project, even when she does not explicitly refer to the wider secular implications of such a stance. It is unlikely, however, that she would not have considered them: her chapters on 'des loix' (*L'Autorité*, Troisième partie, chapters 5 and 6) clearly express her belief that laws based on custom can, and should, be challenged and disobeyed when necessary.

Dorlin highlights the innovative attempt made by Suchon to demand an *égalité de droit* based on an *égalité de fait* but I would argue that this distinction cannot be based only, as Dorlin implies, on 'une problématique du vrai et du démontrable'.<sup>59</sup> In order to see beyond the apparent paradoxes of her rhetoric, it is crucial to recognise that the root of Suchon's argument is her conviction that this equality is God-given. This is clearly established by Auffret in her introduction to her edition of the first part of Suchon's first treatise, in which she describes Suchon as 'une béate, une mystique dont la piété s'insurge contre toute contrainte instituée.'<sup>60</sup> Auffret therefore fully acknowledges the importance of faith as a motivating force in Suchon's project and insists that to consider her strictly in the context of 'feminist trends' popular at the time would be wrongly reductive. Nonetheless, as Bertolini points out, positioning her as 'une mystique' may be overstating the case.<sup>61</sup> She might be more convincingly labelled a 'dévoté', in the mould of those defined by Elizabeth Rapley in chapter 4 of her book: 'deeply religious women, very often unmarried, and with time and leisure to devote themselves to the exercise of piety.'<sup>62</sup>

Suchon believes that the submission demanded of women is not only unfair but also heretical and an obstacle to their spiritual well-being, as well as being detrimental to society as a whole. Her writing sets out not only to prove this but also to give women the means to fight those who, under the guise of orthodoxy or custom, would deny them this 'perfection'. As she states in the Préface Générale of *Le Traité*:

<sup>59</sup> Elsa Dorlin, *L'Evidence de l'égalité des sexes: Une philosophie oubliée du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>60</sup> Gabrielle Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la Politique: La Liberté*, ed. by Séverine Auffret (Paris: des femmes, 1988), p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Bertolini, p. 302.

<sup>62</sup> Rapley, p. 6.

Mais comme dans la société civile et chrétienne il y a du bien à faire comme du mal à éviter; étant ignorantes, captives et abaissées, elles sont privées d'une infinité de moyens par lesquels elles pourraient procurer la gloire de Dieu.

With this, she positions herself as a defender of women, but equally as a defender of the true divine purpose.

### Biographical note

Véronique Desnain is a Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Edinburgh. She specialises in 17<sup>th</sup>-century French literature and philosophy, and in contemporary French crime fiction, with a particular interest in gender. She has authored a number of books and articles on these topics, including 'Gabrielle Suchon: a dangerous philosopher' (2017) for the 'Dangerous Women Project;' 'Gabrielle Suchon: Solitaire mais solidaire' in *Solitaires, Solidaires: Conflict and Confluence in Women's Writings in French* (2015), 'Le détective, Le journaliste, et la vérité' in *Roman noir et journalisme; en quête de vérité* (2020), and 'The state we're in: Global politics and economics in the novels of Dominique Manotti' in *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World of Crime* (2016).

Correspondence to: Véronique Desnain. Email: Veronique.Desnain@ed.ac.uk