

Solitaires, Solidaires

Solitaires, Solidaires:

Conflict and Confluence in Women's Writings in French

Edited by

Elise Hugueny-Léger
and Caroline Verdier

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*À nos sœurs,
Céline, Julie, Nadège et Virginie*

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INTRODUCTION

ÉLISE HUGUENY-LÉGER
AND CAROLINE VERDIER

Women, Solidarity and Solitude

When Ségolène Royal used the word *sororité* in a speech in 2007, as she was running for the French presidency, many commentators and journalists mocked her use of the term, arguing that she had coined a new word. Beyond the gratuitous attacks which female politicians still face on a regular basis (and one could draw a long list of sexist remarks which Royal, and others, have to endure), this reaction is also symptomatic of a nation where children are taught at school that the masculine always wins over – *c'est le masculin qui l'emporte* –, a grammatical rule which can largely be applied in many areas outside of language: education, professional circles, power and politics. While the notion of *fraternité* has been, alongside *liberté* and *égalité*, one of the most powerful symbols of the French nation – featuring at the heart of its motto for over two centuries – the word *sororité*, which does predate Royal's use of it, is still largely underused in French. A reaction to the masculine overtones of 'brotherhood' and its pseudo-universalist message, *sororité* in French and 'sisterhood' in English emerged in the 1970s to suggest a more specifically female type of solidarity. Since then, these terms have been used predominantly in feminist, activist circles, to designate communities of women. But just as the notion of *écriture féminine*, which was also theorised during the 1970s, is far from being a consensual one, thinking along the lines of 'female solidarity' may be reinforcing stereotypes of invisible bonds between women, and actually undermining the many facets of feminism and female identity. Talking about *solidarité féminine* as a given may also leave behind the opposing points of view, the differences and conflicts, which operate between communities of women, as well as the paths of women who choose not to be part of communities but prefer solo trajectories.

It is these tensions between solidarity and solitude which this volume proposes to examine. The present book stems from the 2013 *Women in French* conference which celebrated twenty-five years since the creation of the network and attracted over thirty speakers from around the globe. In the past decades, this network has acted as stimulating platform to develop strong connections between scholars – predominantly, but not exclusively, female ones – based in the UK, France and the rest of the world. One of its aims is to promote scholarly exchange based on research in French Studies by or about women, and to maintain a network of contacts amongst women teaching and/or researching in French and Francophone Studies. The 2013 conference brought together for the first time the two *Women in French* British meetings: *Women in French UK* and *Women in French in Scotland* (WIFIS), which had until then been running separately on each side of a largely symbolic border. It therefore seemed opportune to reflect on what solidarity means, for academics who take an interest in the role of women in society, politics, journalism or literature: throughout history, women have often been marginalised and have had to come together in order to gain more freedom and independence – whether in their family life, in their social or professional environments, or in their ability to take control over their own bodies. Nowadays, women are still a minority in certain occupations and professions (including politics and high-responsibility posts), and there is a stigma attached to women who yearn for independence and choose to live without a (male) partner or children. Why it is so? What is the role played by groups and networks in the pursuit of independence and parity? Is the notion of ‘female solidarity’ really meaningful or does it need to be debunked? Is there a specific type of French ‘female solidarity’? What obstacles need to be overcome to achieve more solidarity, not just among women but also between men and women?

The studies included in this volume focus on historical and literary representations of solidarity in juxtaposition with the questions of solitude and isolation in a French-speaking context. Combining a historical approach with a series of close case-studies, the volume considers dynamics of solidarity and solitude in the construction of female identity, and acknowledges the individual paths taken by female writers and artists towards their own emancipation – paths which sometimes include voluntary processes of marginalisation. Through its thirteen contributions on the representation of female solidarity and solitude in French and Francophone literature and history, this study contends that the construction of female solidarity in a French-speaking context has depended not only on networks, dialogues and correspondences, but also

(and often simultaneously) on confrontations and rivalry between women, and on unconventional representations of femininity and motherhood. The volume therefore offers a nuanced insight into the place of women in French and Francophone societies and literatures, by exploring a range of factors which have favoured the emergence of women in the public sphere in France – and other French-speaking countries. As the selected contributions show, some most remarkable examples of women's liberation have depended on the refusal to conform to representations of female solidarity or identity.

With a focus on literary and journalistic texts ranging from the 17th to the 21st century, the volume is built around three main sections – a socio-historical one, a section on journalistic *milieu* and a more contemporary literary one – with the aim of shedding light on modern perspectives on estrangement, isolation and alternative representations of femininity.

The first section of the volume, 'Women in dialogue through centuries', provides an overview of some of the factors – social, educational, cultural – which favoured or discouraged dialogues and the construction of networks between women in France. It includes historical examples of marginal figures in literary circles from the 17th to the 20th century and looks at the role of written production (fiction and non-fiction) in response to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. Véronique Desnain considers the non-conventional trajectory of Gabrielle Suchon, who left the convent to pursue her intellectual interests and reflections on the role of women in society in 17th-century France, but reflections carried out in isolation. Isabelle Tremblay examines an epistolary novel by M^{lle} Poulain de Nogent, published in 1776, which sheds light both on bonds of friendship between women, but also on their place in society through the conventional structures of marriage and family life. Karen Humphreys focuses on codes of conduct published by the prolific Comtesse Dash. Through this lens, she considers how social codes dictate behaviour and pose limits to women's emancipation, while female networks can act as genuine forms of solidarity. The last two chapters in this section include marginal female figures of the *Belle Époque*: women who were both well-integrated in the society of their time, and excluded from it. While Philippe Martin-Horie contemplates the trajectory of the courtesan Liane de Pougy as represented in her autobiographical novel, Eugenia Grammatikopoulou traces the encounter and friendship between Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva and American writer Natalie Clifford Barney.

The second section, 'Journals, *journaux* and networks', brings together studies on the role of journals, newspapers and magazines in providing

spaces of belonging for women, also highlighting conflicts of interest which may have emerged from these networks, and builds on examples from the 18th century to the 1970s. In her study on early women's journals, Siobhán McIlvanney argues that these publications acted as communal spaces and political platforms, while retaining an intrinsically intimate, dialogical aspect. Lucie Roussel pursues this study into the 19th century, highlighting how women entering the intellectual or journalistic *milieu* had to fight prejudices against women's intellectual abilities. In reaction to this, journals provided a burgeoning professional network of solidarity and belonging in the public sphere. Margot Irvine reminds us, however, that any network is also a source of conflicts of personalities and interests. By focusing on correspondence exchanged between members of the prix Femina jury, over six decades, she argues that tensions were ripe in a *milieu* fuelled by political and social rivalry. Finally, Sandrine Lévêque draws on more recent examples, those of magazines *F Magazine* and *Histoire d'Elles*, both created in the 1970s, to map out the feminist strategies these publications deployed during a crucial time for women's movements.

The final section of the volume, 'Solidarity and estrangement in contemporary writings', provides a series of literary studies on representations of solitude, solidarity, estrangement and female identity in 20th- and 21st-century writings by French and Francophone female writers. Hélène Barthelmebs, in her study of two novels by Swiss writer Alice Rivaz, explores signs of female solidarity in a context of historical turmoil, that of the Second World War. Contributions on the most recent texts are situated in a context of post-feminist questioning on the place of women in society and in family life: thus Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, investigates marginal representations of femininity in Linda Lê – a writer who not only challenges maternity and family life, but also comes across as a solitary figure. In her study of the autobiographical writings of Belgian writer Lydia Flem, Susan Bainbrigg suggests that the creative potential can act as remedy to experiences of isolation and loss. Finally, Frédérique Chevillot charts the evolution of Virginie Despentes' feminist voice, from her initial, brutal novel *Baise moi* to her 'new feminism' manifesto *King Kong Théorie*, arguing that they display signs of female solidarity and compassion.

Another sign of solidarity is present in the volume: in 2013, this previously female-only conference welcomed male contributors, and we are delighted to achieve if not *parité*, at least *mixité*, in the present publication.

La solidarité comme acte politique

Le colloque *Women in French* qui s'est tenu à Leeds en 2013 a réuni le réseau 'britannique' et le réseau 'écossais' de *Women in French UK* – configuration, pour ne pas dire séparation, qui peut sembler surprenante mais qui souligne cette partie à la fois intégrante, et quelque peu à l'écart, de l'Écosse dans le Royaume-Uni, comme les débats politiques récents, autour du référendum de 2014, l'ont montré. En tant que Françaises résidant en Écosse, nous sommes particulièrement sensibles à ces appartenances, tout en souhaitant regarder par-delà les affiliations – géographiques, intellectuelles, politiques – qui ont tendance à nous définir. Au-delà des différences de dénomination, les réseaux *Women in French* sont, depuis plus de vingt-cinq ans, de forts marqueurs d'amitié et de solidarité entre universitaires, enseignant-e-s, qui s'intéressent à la place des femmes dans la société et dans les études françaises, les '*French Studies*'. Solidarité qui dépasse les frontières et à laquelle nous tenons; alors qu'un autre référendum se profile à l'horizon, celui de la place du Royaume-Uni dans l'Union européenne, nous avons à cœur de nourrir et poursuivre les liens qui se tissent entre les universitaires du Royaume-Uni, de France, du reste de l'Europe, d'Amérique du Nord et au-delà, lors de colloques, rencontres ou encore lors de la production d'un volume comme celui-ci. Ces travaux, ces rencontres sont un bastion de liberté et d'échange à entretenir, sous peine de le voir disparaître: si le Royaume-Uni quitte l'Union européenne, qu'advient-il des études de langue, déjà fortement menacées? Dans ce contexte, publier un ouvrage bilingue comme celui-ci est aussi un acte conscient, engagé pour que les études de langue au Royaume-Uni demeurent un secteur multilingue et international, riche de ses différences.

Nous tenons à exprimer notre reconnaissance envers les sources de soutien et de financement que nous avons obtenues pour l'organisation du colloque de 2013: merci d'abord à Maggie Allison et Diana Holmes, qui ont contribué à la mise en place du colloque et nous ont fait bénéficier de leur expérience et leur amitié. Les réseaux ASMCF (*Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France*), SFS (*Society for French Studies*), ainsi que le Service Culturel de l'Ambassade de France, nous ont épaulées financièrement pour cet événement. Pour la préparation du volume, nous sommes redevables à la patience de toutes les personnes qui y ont contribué et qui nous ont fait confiance à chaque étape du travail d'édition, ainsi qu'à Amanda Millar et Sam Baker à Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Merci, par ailleurs, à nos collègues des universités de St Andrews et Strathclyde et à nos familles et amis pour leurs conseils et leur patience durant les différentes étapes d'organisation du colloque et celles qui ont mené à la production de ce volume.

Glasgow et St Andrews, juin 2015

**WOMEN IN DIALOGUE
THROUGH THE CENTURIES**

GABRIELLE SUCHON: SOLITAIRE MAIS SOLIDAIRE

VÉRONIQUE DESNAIN

Gabrielle Suchon's path was a singular one for her time, from the convent to a life of relative isolation as a *célibataire*, a position which afforded her unusual freedom for a 17th-century woman, yet also made her socially suspect in the eyes of many of her contemporaries. Her life is therefore marked by two conflicting positions: her rejection of the segregation from the secular world demanded by her role as a nun is followed by the wilful segregation caused by her choices as a former nun, as an unmarried woman and as an autodidact and philosopher within the secular world.

Her philosophical work is similarly marked by paradox: Suchon's treatises highlight the unfairness of the *condition féminine* and denounces the abuses suffered by women as a group, but posits her arguments on the recognition of women as individuals, distinct from each other and beyond the often prejudiced expectations and limitations imposed on the female gender by an androcentric and misogynistic society. Her work, undertaken as she herself points out, in cruel isolation, sets out to demonstrate that in order to provide justice and equality for any social group, we must first and foremost move beyond essentialists views and consider the influence of social factors on the development of the individual.

This chapter shows how Suchon's writing examines the relationship between individual and society, and the need for the oppressed to recognise the engineering of their own oppression in order to denounce it, in a way that can be seen to prefigure later historical struggles for social equality.

The two concepts at the heart of this volume, 'solitude' and 'solidarity', may at first appear conflicting, if not contradictory: solitude suggests isolation and a focus on the individual, while solidarity implies a fellowship of purpose. Yet in a context in which being part of a social group implies being subjected to, and perhaps accepting, an essentialist vision of the self and one's own abilities, dissociation from the group may be needed in order to take the measure of the limitations imposed by the wider order and of the fallacy of the discourse used to justify these boundaries. Such a *prise de conscience* may then lead to the understanding

that, for each individual to be given the means to fulfil their potential, it is necessary to make others aware of their subjection and to insist on the need to unite as a group. This is the path taken by late 17th century philosopher Gabrielle Suchon and this chapter will show the way in which her philosophy articulates around these two concepts as necessary steps for women to develop a *conscience de genre* and challenge not only their inferior position in society but also the discourse which is used to justify it.

In order to fully appreciate the points made by Suchon, which will be discussed below, as well as their originality and import in relation to the social context in which they are formulated, some of the restrictions imposed on women should be remembered: at the time at which Suchon writes, in the late 17th century, they are considered as minors by the law and are under the absolute authority of their father or husband. This meant that they could not travel or attend events without permission. This included pilgrimages or church services, hence restricting not only their freedom of movement but also their freedom of worship. While many women of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy were literate, in most cases they were taught only the basic reading, writing and numeracy necessary to run their household. Nuns were actively discouraged from reading religious or theological texts which had not been abridged or interpreted for them. Their reading was instead limited to texts which simply allowed them to follow the liturgy (Bréviaires) or manuals for good conduct, usually written by male theologians who offer carefully selected abstracts from religious texts. So while female education at the end of the 17th century was fairly well developed, with a network of schools for girls in place, its purpose was very specific: to create good wives and mothers. Even an advocate of a more holistic female education such as le Père Du Bosc admits: ‘...je ne suis leur Panégyriste que pour être plus librement leur législateur.’¹

Gabrielle Suchon, born in 1631, spent about thirty years of her life in the convent. Whether she entered the orders of her own accord or was pushed into it by her family, she decided, in her middle age, to leave the religious community and managed to get released from her vows to spend the rest of her life in the secular world. Toward the end of her life, she produced two hefty treatises. The first, *Le Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693, published under a pseudonym), is a defence of women’s

¹ Quoted in Jeannette Geffriaud-Rosso, *Études sur la féminité aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Libreria Goliardico, 1984), p. 178.

right to education, freedom and authority; the second, *Le Célibat volontaire ou la vie sans engagement* (1700, printed under her own name), a blueprint for a new social status for women, which she proposes as an alternative to marriage or orders.² The *neutralistes*, as she calls those who would choose this life, remain single in order to devote their lives to education, contemplation, prayer and charitable works. It would be easy to deduce from *Le Célibat* that what Suchon proposes is of limited import: it would appear to be a viable alternative only for the very few women (wealthy widows, aristocrats) who have the means and the freedom to choose an independent life and a very unrealistic, if not fanciful, aspiration for the others. The assumption would therefore be that such a proposition could have very little impact on society as a whole. Other arguments have been put forward to draw similar conclusions about *Le Traité*. Its analysis and response to the subjection of women in 17th-century France, and to the discourse which accompanies and perpetuates it, seem to locate it firmly within the *Querelle des Femmes* movement, which as many critics have shown, had little to do with an actual desire for social change, or indeed female solidarity.³ The *Querelle*, from its first misogynistic salvo, *Le Roman de la Rose* (c. 1230), produced numerous texts seeking to demonstrate either the inferiority or superiority of women. Most of these texts were written by men for a male audience (with a few attempts by women such as Christine de Pizan or Marie de Gournay to weigh in on the debate from a female perspective). They are either violent invectives against the vices and evil of women or, conversely, apologies of female beauty and virtues. Most importantly, they often are 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*, the *effets de plume* become far more important than the topic addressed. This, of course, is not the case with Suchon, but the fact that the focus of her work is women and that she addresses many of the points raised by the 'anti-women' side during the *Querelle* (albeit to show their fallacy) has too often led commentators to simply assimilate her to this movement.

² G. S. Aristophile (Gabrielle Suchon), *Traité de la morale et de la politique, divisé en trois parties. Scavoir La liberté, La Science et L'Autorité où 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* (Lyon: Jean Certe, 1693). Gabrielle Suchon, *Du Célibat volontaire ou La Vie sans engagement* (Paris: Guignard, 1700).

³ See for example Ian MacLean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610-1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Madeleine Lazard, *Les Avenues de féminie: les femmes et la Renaissance* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

This is in my view a clear mistake, which does not do justice to Suchon's true aim.

The religious slant of her argumentation has also led critics to dismiss its value as a proto-feminist text. Hoffmann, for example, states that:

En fait l'ouvrage de Gabrielle Suchon est d'abord un traité de spiritualité chrétienne. Une affirmation se trouve en son centre: la preuve de la dignité et de la capacité de la femme est enveloppée dans sa vocation à la vie spirituelle. Un tel point de vue commande les limites du féminisme de Gabrielle Suchon: dès lors que la vraie liberté est définie comme un état intérieur où l'esprit s'est détaché des choses et de leurs séductions sensibles, où il est élevé au-dessus de l'opinion pour ne déférer qu'aux commandements divins, la revendication de liberté, au profit de la femme, voit s'estomper ses significations polémiques pour se confondre avec le genre de l'exhortation spirituelle.⁴

It is however only in examining both texts together that we can take the full measure of Suchon's thinking and its implications, and this would lead us to conclude, as Ronzeaud does, that '[...] 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.'⁵ Indeed it is crucial to appreciate that, while it is true that the epistemological roots of Suchon's argumentation can be found in Christian philosophy, its significance goes well beyond mere theological debate. As Fauré recognises, despite her reservations regarding 'l'ambivalence héritée du christianisme', Suchon's 'revendication est d'ordre politique.'⁶

Other explanations have been put forward to explain the heavy reliance on religious authorities to support what Suchon presents primarily as a 'rational' argument. Dorlin, for example, insists that

Gabrielle Suchon utilise certains stratagèmes pour échapper à la censure qu'elle avoue craindre. Il ne faut donc pas se fier entièrement aux influences apparemment traditionnelles ou anciennes qu'elle met en avant,

⁴ Paul Hoffmann, 'Le Féminisme spirituel de Gabrielle Suchon', in *Dix-Septième siècle*, 121 (1978), 269-76 (p. 272).

⁵ Paul Ronzeaud, 'Note sur l'article de Paul Hoffmann', in *Dix-Septième Siècle*, 121 (1978), 276-77 (p. 277).

⁶ Christine Fauré, *La Démocratie sans les femmes: essai sur le libéralisme en France* (Paris: PUF, 1985), p. 129.

mais tenter de déceler derrière ou entre ses dires ce qu'elle a effectivement lu et ce qu'elle a théoriquement la volonté d'exploiter.⁷

This reading means that the emphasis on religious orthodoxy is only considered in relation to its role in this 'feminist' strategy and only accepts the ambiguous aspects of Suchon's argumentation, such as her position on the role of convents, as necessary compromises: 'Tous ces textes, citations, références sont autant de soutiens symboliques. D'efférence, fidélité et respect du texte deviennent des impératifs méthodologiques pour conquérir une certaine autorité philosophique.'⁸ While this is a convincing argument, the prevalence of religious references could also be explained by the fact that Suchon's theorising is rooted in her own experience, and that most of that experience took place in religious confinement, an ideal position to observe the reality of women's lives in convents and the discourse used to justify their subservience, whether in secular law and literature, or in the interpretation of religious texts. The reasons which prompted her to leave the convent, as well in fact as the circumstances of her entering it, will most likely remain unknown but it appears that she took vows as a teenager, and evidence found in her writing can lead to some speculative answers: it is clear that, despite having escaped confinement, Suchon led a life of devotion and was profoundly marked by her time in the convent. Papillon states that 'cette fille avait toujours sur la tête une espèce de voile, qui lui rappelait le souvenir de son premier état.'⁹ This apparent nostalgia for a status she chose to abandon, contrasted with her forceful attacks on religious enclosure (in particular in the second half of the first part of the *Traité*, which deals with 'La Contrainte'), suggests a rather ambiguous view of monastic life. However, this ambiguity is dispelled when taking into account the distinction Suchon makes between the ideal, divine institution and its secular incarnation. Suchon's attacks are clearly directed at the way convents are used for social and economic reasons and she simultaneously praises and defends them against what she sees as a perversion of their holy purpose. She presents convents as depositary for unruly daughters or as a means to avoid dowry payments, a practice which was widespread

⁷ Elsa Dorlin, *L'Évidence de l'égalité des sexes: une philosophie oubliée du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), p. 39.

⁸ Ibid, p. 42.

⁹ Quoted in Gabrielle Suchon, *Petit Traité de la faiblesse, de la légèreté et de l'inconstance qu'on attribue aux femmes mal à propos*, traduction en français moderne, introduction et notes de Séverine Auffret (Paris: Arléa, 2002), p. 158. The original edition appears at the end of the *Traité*.

and accepted throughout catholic countries.¹⁰ Suchon clearly sees this practice as unacceptable, stating:

Ce n'est pas aux parents, non plus qu'à toute autre personne, d'immoler des victimes innocentes comme bon leur semble, soit pour la décharge de leur famille, soit pour satisfaire leur ambition, soit pour contenter leur avarice, soit pour assouvir leur vengeance.¹¹

Yet this criticism is not nearly as surprising as her assertion that '[...] on fait injure à l'époux des Vierges en soutenant que les filles qu'on lui destine pour être ses épouses doivent être enfermées dans des murailles et des grilles pour être chastes et pures', thus suggesting that a religious vocation (like hers perhaps) can be fulfilled outwith religious orders.¹² The fact that she also produced a volume dedicated to '*l'excellence de la vocation des filles consacrées à Dieu dans le Cloître*' makes it clear that she sees taking vows by vocation rather than under external pressures as a valid choice, and only denounces enforced confinement.¹³ Chapter three of 'La Contrainte', provides us with another possible reason for her leaving the convent: Suchon calls on Saint Paul and Pope Saint Leon to suggest that only mature women should be allowed to take vows (the first advocating sixty as a minimum age, the latter forty). She also notes that the present king of France, Louis, passed a decree establishing that women should be at least twenty-five before they are received into an order. The evidence however shows that this was not strictly, if at all, applied in practice, Suchon herself being proof of this. She may then have been disappointed by her experience in the convent despite feeling a vocation at an early age, perhaps because she was confronted there with 'ces victimes entachées de vices et de péchés énormes' or because she was herself one of 'celles dont le tempérament trop fort ou trop faible pourrait, dans la

¹⁰ While Suchon does not refer directly to her own time in the convent to illustrate her theories, the points she makes on a general level are clearly illustrated by writings by other nuns who give details of the practical and moral issues faced by women who have been confined against their will. See for example, Archangela Tarabotti's *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. and trans. by Letizia Panizza, 'The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe' (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹¹ Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, op. cit., p. 128.

¹² Ibid, p. 200.

¹³ Gabrielle Suchon, *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*. The volume is no longer extant and there is in fact no evidence that it was actually ever printed but it appears as having received all the necessary permissions to go to print in the Register of the Paris Booksellers Guild for the 7th of July 1699.

suite du temps, causer de fâcheuses révoltes ou dégénérer de la perfection de cet état.’¹⁴ It is also very likely that she would have felt intellectually, and even (since she implies in her writing that the two are intimately linked) spiritually stifled by conventual rules. Her thirst for knowledge is evident from her self-acquired education whose depth and breadth are displayed in both her treatises and it could have been the difficulties in satisfying it which drove Suchon to choose life in the secular world. Not only did most convents offer very limited access to books, but women’s access to any form of knowledge was generally tightly restricted. Any woman who was able to read and interpret the holy texts (as Suchon was) would be considered suspect. The case of Thérèse d’Avilla (1515-1582) is cited by Bernos: ‘telle de ses œuvres spirituelles (*Les Châteaux de l’âme*) a pu un moment paraître suspecte, parce que, lui dit un savant dominicain: “il n’appartient point à une femme d’expliquer l’Écriture sainte.”’¹⁵ Within orders ‘[ces femmes] posent un vrai problème d’obéissance quand les ordonnances de leurs évêques contredisent les ordres venus directement du ciel.’¹⁶

Leaving the convent did not however put Suchon in a much more comfortable position. Admittedly her status as a *célibataire* afforded her unusual freedom for a 17th-century woman, yet it also made her socially suspect in the eyes of her contemporaries. Her life is therefore marked by two conflicting positions: her rejection of the separation from the secular world demanded by her role as a nun, followed by the wilful social segregation caused by her choice to live as an unmarried woman and as a philosopher in a world where this role is seen as unsuitable for a woman. The solitude implied by this position was further emphasised by the fact that, unlike many of her contemporary female writers, Suchon did not belong to any literary circle or salon that would have provided a degree of moral and practical support for her project. Yet she appears to write from a position of solidarity with other women, describing with great empathy the hardships endured not only in religious orders, which she knew first hand, but also in marriage, a position she herself never experienced.

Her philosophical stance is similarly marked by paradox: her treatise highlights the unfairness of the many limitations imposed on women and of their subservient position in society and denounces the abuses suffered by women as a group. Yet her argument relies on the recognition of

¹⁴ Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, op. cit., p. 137.

¹⁵ Marcel Bernos, ‘Résistances contemporaines à l’autorité ecclésiastique à l’époque moderne’ (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles), in *Clio, Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés*, 15 (2002), 103-10 (p. 109).

¹⁶ Ibid.

women as individuals, endowed with distinct qualities rather than defined by the expectations and restrictions imposed on them by an androcentric and misogynistic society. Suchon recognises, unusually for her time, that justice and equality for any generic group depends on the recognition of the specificity of each individual within this group (the same recognition which will prompt French feminists in the 1970s to advocate the use of the terminology 'Mouvement des Femmes', as opposed to the original 'Mouvement de Libération de la Femme'). In short, she posits that it is necessary to move beyond essentialist views and to consider the influence of social factors on the development of each individual. She also recognises that change is only possible if the oppressed themselves are made aware that their position is engineered rather than natural and that they must unite in order to challenge the prejudice they face.

Unlike many of the texts of the *Querelle des Femmes*, to which Suchon has been too easily assimilated, *Le Traité* does not advance the inherent inferiority or superiority of women, nor does it simply aim to convince an educated, and therefore primarily male, audience that both genders are equal. Rather it addresses women themselves to show them the fallacy of the arguments used to justify their oppression and to convince them that the first step towards equality is to realise their own worth and to develop their intellectual abilities. Both solitude and solidarity are essential components in achieving this. In order to fully understand Suchon's advocacy of the celibate and solitary life, it is crucial to see it in the light of her analysis of the depravations and abuses suffered by women in *Le Traité*, that is to say, not as an act of selfish withdrawal, but as a necessary step towards a *conscience de genre*, and therefore a gesture of solidarity towards all women. It is clear that for Suchon, addressing the issue of female subjugation intellectually is not enough and intellectual debate is therefore only the first step towards action. The *Préface* to the *Traité* makes it clear that she holds few illusions about the possibility of immediate change but nonetheless perceives, or at least hopes, that it will take place in future: 'Ce ne sont pas les femmes de ce temps qui entreprendront jamais de déposséder les hommes de leur puissance et Autorité.'¹⁷ Indeed, as le Dœuff points out, 'she focused on solitary work, but with a not-yet-existing community in view, women readers, whom she invited to liberate themselves.'¹⁸ Her analysis of male discourse and of the disadvantages of entering either marriage or orders in *Le Traité* leads quite

¹⁷ Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, op. cit., Préface Générale, no page number.

¹⁸ Michèle Le Doeuff, 'Women in dialogue and in solitude', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 5.2 (2005), 1-15 (p. 12).

logically to the proposal that a 'third way' should be available to women, namely secular celibacy, as presented in *Du Célibat volontaire*. Furthermore, she insists that such celibacy should not be seen, as it usually was at the time, as an aberrant and perhaps even dangerous condition, but as a formal status which is equally valuable to the individual and to society. Of course this would imply that women are able to choose their vocation knowingly, rather than being forced into unwanted wedlock or disposed of in convents for financial motives or as punishment for perceived transgressions. In order to do so, they need a degree of education, autonomy, and self-knowledge that contemporary society effectively prohibits. Suchon's demonstration of the fallacies on which female inferiority is predicated and examples, including herself, of what women are capable of in her *Traité* is therefore followed by *Le Célibat volontaire*, which furnishes the potential *neutraliste* with both further arguments to defend her choice (parts 1 and 2) and with a very practical guide to 'L'emploi du temps, les exercices, et les vertus les plus nécessaires aux personnes, qui passent leur vie sans engagement' in part 3. Taken together, they suggest solitude as the most viable form of resistance to female oppression.

It may of course seem paradoxical for Suchon to insist that in order to change their position in the world in the long term, it is necessary for women to withdraw from the world in the first instance, but for this self-taught philosopher, in a society which precludes women from accessing educational resources freely and, for the most part from living autonomous lives, solitude is the *sine qua non* condition to develop one's intellect and acquire a sense of self as an individual. As we will see though, this solitude does not preclude solidarity or signify isolation in the long term.

Le Célibat Volontaire devotes two chapters to 'De la Retraite et la solitude', which are clearly put into perspective by other chapters, namely those entitled 'Quatrième avantage des personnes libres, qui est de pouvoir éviter une fâcheuse Société' (three chapters), 'Les Sociétés dangereuses' and 'Des amitiés apparentes et trompeuses'. From those emerges the picture of a conscience that is both contemporary and unique: clearly, a degree of suspicion for *le monde* is not unusual for the time, with writers influenced by Jansenism in particular (Pascal, whom Suchon cites, La Rochefoucault, La Bruyère) making the pitfalls of social interaction and the prevalence, as they see it, of hypocrisy and egocentric behaviour, an important focus of their writing. Suchon's assertions that 'le monde ne cherche que son intérêt', 'chacun n'aime que soi-même' and 'les prétextes de vertu, et les apparences de justice sont très dangereux' certainly fit in

with contemporary thinking.¹⁹ Yet her strategy throughout both treatises is to progress from the general to the specific, that is to say from considerations about human nature in general to the particular plight of women. The three chapters on avoiding ‘fâcheuse société’ are in fact all about the troubles faced by the married woman and she proposes that the first advantage of being a *neutraliste* is ‘[n’être] point en danger de souffrir les mauvais traitements d’un mari, et d’en supporter le fâcheux naturel et l’humeur bizarre.’²⁰ Since a married woman is bound by both law and custom to obey even her husband’s most unreasonable demands, and nuns vow to obey their superiors, any woman who wishes to study and improve herself has no other choice, implies Suchon, but to shun marriage and the convent and embrace *Neutralisme*.²¹ So for the individual, *Célibat* provides peace and autonomy, away from the strife and pressures associated with being dependent on the will of others; but since it must also be valuable to society, Suchon devotes several chapters to the *neutraliste*’s duty to perform ‘des œuvres de miséricorde’ and points out that ‘étant plus maîtresses de leurs actions, et de leur temps’,²² they are in a better position to do so than married women or nuns:

[...] il faut savoir que c’est être tellement maîtresse de son temps, que l’on ne puisse être empêché d’assister aux sermons, par une puissance supérieure, ni par aucune affaire domestique: les lois du cloître ne leur font point un obstacle à aller aux églises; et celles du mariage ne les soumettent pas à un mari, qui peut les détourner de l’assiduité aux prédications, soit par raison, soit par caprice, soit enfin pour veiller aux besoins d’une famille.²³

This particular argument regarding the ways in which women may be prevented from attending even religious meetings is repeated no less than ten times, in various ways, over just four chapters, no doubt to emphasise the way in which human laws and customs are given precedent even over pious obligations. Yet while Suchon makes this point in the chapter entitled ‘Le libre usage de la parole de Dieu’, she concludes the chapter with a paragraph on attending:

¹⁹ Suchon, *Du Célibat volontaire*, op. cit., p. 376 and p. 379.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 263-64.

²¹ For further detail on the origin and use of the term *Neutraliste*, 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.

²² Suchon, *Du Célibat volontaire*, op. cit., p. 505.

²³ Ibid., p. 335.

[...] les Conférences où se trouvent d'habiles gens...cette communication est le plus grand plaisir de la vie, à cause que par les Conférences particulières l'on s'instruit beaucoup mieux, que par les discours publics: l'on y propose ses difficultés, l'on en prend la solution, et si l'on est capable de docilité, l'on peut en quelque manière devenir savant en communiquant avec les Savans.

The term 'savans' is sufficiently vague to catch our attention and taken in conjunction with other passages, it suggests that such freedom should perhaps not be restricted to listening to sermons: in the next chapter 'Facilité de l'étude', Suchon recommend the study of religious texts that are not usually made available to women ('Saintes Lettres, Explications, Homélies, et les Commentaires des Pères sur l'un et l'autre Testament'²⁴) and which would enable them to address and discuss theological issues, rather than simply learn selected passages to be used in services or read abridged texts designed specifically for women. She also asserts that women should familiarise themselves with La Logique, la Morale, la Physique, la Métaphysique, La Grammaire, La Rhétorique, l'Arithmétique, le Chant, la Musique, l'Astrologie, La Poésie, l'Histoire, la Peinture, le Dessin, thus making it clear that the *neutralistes* should educate themselves as widely as possible. Most importantly, their choices should be based, not on prescribed social roles, but on their own inclinations and abilities. This is clearly a departure from previous texts advocating female education, which either restrict subjects of study to those useful to women as wives and mothers²⁵ or prioritise women's other duties over study, as does, for example, Le Moyne:

Afin d'apprendre ces leçons, il n'est point nécessaire qu'une Femme abandonne la conduite de son ménage, qu'elle fasse divorce avec son mari, qu'elle renonce aux plaisirs honnêtes et à la société civile, qu'elle

²⁴ Ibid., p. 345.

²⁵ See for instance Fénelon, *Traité de l'éducation des filles*, 1685: 'Il est vrai qu'il faut craindre de faire des savantes ridicules...', aussi n'est-il point à propos de les engager dans des études dont elles pourraient s'entêter ... 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.'; 'Venons maintenant au détail des choses dont une femme doit être instruite. Quels sont ses emplois? Elle est chargée de l'éducation des enfants, des garçons jusqu'à un certain âge, des filles jusqu'à ce qu'elles se marient, ou se fassent religieuses, de la conduite des domestiques, de leurs mœurs, de leur service, du détail de la dépense [...].'; 'La science des femmes, comme celle des hommes, doit se borner à s'instruire par rapport à leurs fonctions.'

s'enferme dans une chambre tapissée de cartes et meublées de sphères et d'Astrolabes.²⁶

The latter part is particularly interesting in that the author seems to view the relative isolation necessary to study as a specific problem, leading us to wonder what is at stakes here. Is it the welfare of the women who might find themselves cut off from social interaction (but perhaps amply compensated for this by their study or even able to reconcile both activities) or is it in fact their availability within the social economy? There is, in any case, a clear implication that such intellectual activities should take place within the context of marriage and give precedence to activities related to it.

Suchon, on the other hand, argues that a withdrawal from the world, albeit momentary, is necessary in order to escape submission to men, who thrive to keep women ignorant in order to keep them subservient. Such withdrawal, however, is likely to make its subject the object of persecution and ridicule, not only from men, but also from women who have internalised the arguments developed by men over the centuries to justify their hegemony to such an extent that they collude in their own oppression. The lack of solidarity between women, although it is not specifically named as a concept, is presented in the *Traité* as one of the difficulties faced by women who wish to educate themselves:

Cela se voit tous les jours dans les femmes et les filles lesquelles bien loin de se supporter les unes les autres, et de s'unir ensemble pour étudier les sciences, sont toujours prêtes à blâmer celles qui travaillent à se relever de la poussière de l'ignorance et de la stupidité.²⁷

Her own work, she says, was produced '[...] dans la souffrance de mille travers et persécutions, produit et enfanté dans la spéculation, le silence et la retraite' and

[...] dans un abandonnement si général de toutes les créatures que je n'avais de secours et d'assistance que du seul créateur, qui m'a fait la grâce de ne me point abandonner moi-même et de travailler à cultiver mon esprit, pendant que les autres tâchaient de toutes parts à me jeter dans l'abaissement.²⁸

²⁶ Le Moyne, *La Galerie des femmes fortes* (Paris: Sommayville, 1647), p. 46.

²⁷ Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, op. cit., Avant-propos to Part II 'La Science', no page number.

²⁸ Ibid., Préface Générale, no page number.

It is worth noting the rhetoric twist which highlights both her enemies' viciousness (and by extension that of the enemies of all women since the term 'abaissement' is elsewhere applied to the inferior status granted to women in general) and her own intellectual qualities and strength in the face of overwhelming adversity. Despite this isolation, both chosen in 'la retraite' and inflicted in 'l'abandonnement', Suchon remains *solidaire* since her purpose is to inspire other women:

Je n'ai point eu d'autre intention en tout ce traité que d'inspirer aux personnes du Sexe des sentiments généreux et magnanimes afin qu'elles se puissent garantir d'une contrainte servile, d'une stupide ignorance, et d'une dépendance basse et ravalée [...].²⁹

To this end, even though she uses a gender-neutral *nom de plume* (G. S. Aristophile), she takes the unusual step of revealing her gender in the *Préface*:

Tout ce qui vient de l'esprit des femmes étant toujours suspect à celui des hommes; j'ai été longtemps en doute si je laisserais le Lecteur en suspens pour savoir si c'est un homme qui soutient le parti des femmes, ou si c'est une femme qui défend toutes celles de son sexe. Après avoir consulté le bon sens et la raison là-dessus je ne fais point de difficulté de confesser que c'est le travail d'une Fille, par ce [que les fautes en seront plus excusables, et] que ce traité ne saurait être que très avantageux aux personnes du Sexe, qui peuvent participer à la science, et à la force du discours aussi bien que les hommes.³⁰

Given the stigma attached to both single women ('Fille') and *femmes savantes* in 17th-century France, this is a fairly brave disclosure, and one that can only be explained by Suchon's desire to serve as a model to her reader.³¹ She makes it clear that she chooses this as a gesture of solidarity for other women, whom she encourages to recognise their own worth and abilities through her example.

In short, for Suchon, solitude must precede solidarity because women have been conditioned to misunderstand the nature of their oppression and to collude in it. Male discourse has, over the centuries, convinced them

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ While a few women do publish under their own name, many others do so anonymously or under an assumed name. Famous examples of this include Madame de Lafayette (*La Princesse de Clèves* is published anonymously in 1678) and Madeleine de Scudéry, whose works were originally published under her brother Georges' name.

that their inferior position is natural and stems from their inferior abilities. As pointed out by every defender of women from Christine de Pizan onwards, this assertion can of course only be sustained as long as women are kept in ignorance and prevented from competing with men on an equal basis, in particular through receiving a similar education. Suchon argues that since this is denied to them, they have to educate themselves, which they can only do if freed from the obedience and restrictions inherent in marriage and orders. Only then will they be able to respond to such conceits by rational demonstration of their fallacy, in much the same way as Suchon does in her *Traité*. While this may seem like mere wishful thinking, Suchon's purpose is to lay down, through her writing, the foundations of such a way of life for future generations. The determined reader can find in *Le Traité* and *Du Célibat* (with their mixture of rhetorical and practical advice) all she needs to start her own education and liberate herself from the constraints imposed on women. It is undoubtedly a difficult way of life but Suchon herself stands as living proof that it can be achieved. Most importantly perhaps, it holds the promise of social progress and emancipation for all women.

Solitude and solidarity, far from being antagonistic, are therefore presented as consecutive steps in an on-going process of personal and societal development. In fact, there are hints that this solitude is only a temporary measure and that women will need to regroup in order to help and support one another in their educational endeavours:

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, et disputent les unes avec les autres, et se communiquent ce qu'elles ont appris dans le secret.³²

Not only does she make it clear that the practice of solitary study is not an end in itself but a first step towards taking part in shared intellectual debates, she even suggests that such debates should not remain private (in the way that *salons* have done) but should, on the contrary, be validated through public institutions:

Quoy que j'ai dit, que c'est priver les personnes du beau Sexe des moyens d'acquérir les sciences, de leur défendre l'entrée des lieux publics qui sont destinés pour les apprendre: je ne prétends pas néanmoins qu'elles doivent fréquenter ceux qui sont érigés pour les hommes: cette proposition serait

³² Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, op. cit., p. 268.