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**“Gender in French Freemasonry, From the Eighteenth Century  
Until Today”**

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### Abstract

Since the origins of Speculative Freemasonry, the relationship between this institution and women has been controversial, and remains that way after three centuries of Masonic existence. In this article, the history of this relationship in France, from the eighteenth century to the present day is updated. France is an important country in which to analyze this topic, since it has caused a number of debates and diverse projects to incorporate women into the Symbolism.

### Resumen

La cuestión de la relación entre la masonería y las mujeres ha sido polémica desde el inicio de la masonería especulativa y sigue tres siglos después de actualidad en dicha organización. En este trabajo se actualiza la historia que esta relación desarrolló en Francia desde el siglo XVIII a nuestros días, país donde dicha cuestión suscitó numerosos debates y proposiciones de integración de las mujeres en el Simbolismo.

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## “Gender in French Freemasonry, From the Eighteenth Century Until Today”<sup>1</sup>

Cécile Révauger

### Introduction

At first sight, James Anderson is responsible for the exclusion of women from all Masonic lodges:

1723: The persons admitted Members of a Lodge must be good and true Men, free-born, and of mature and discreet Age, no Bondmen, no Women, no immoral or scandalous Men, but of good report<sup>2</sup>.

Yet Anderson was not being exceptionally "sexist," to use a neologism, at a time when women were excluded from clubbable England and the public sphere in general, even if in the previous century the presence of a few women, such as Mary Banister in the London Mason's Company in 1714, is documented in the *Old Charges*<sup>3</sup>. They must have been the exceptions that confirmed the rule, though. What is more surprising is the fact that several generations of Masons should have excluded women in the following centuries, totally ignoring social evolutions in terms of woman's emancipation. Yet across the Channel at the time of the French "salons," the idea of a "Maçonnerie des dames," the so-called "lodges of adoption," composed of brothers and sisters and working under the aegis of the Grand Orient of France, did not seem preposterous, which proves that the social and cultural context informs the history of Freemasonry.

For a long time, the importance of the lodges of adoption was underplayed, if not totally ignored, by most historians of Masonry. At the other end of the spectrum, feminists rejected the very idea of Freemasonry for women on the grounds that all lodges were male strongholds. So, paradoxically, the eighteenth-century model of the lodges of adoption was rejected both on account of sexist and feminist arguments.

It was high time to reassess the lodges of adoption: Margaret Jacob and Janet Burke did so in their seminal article, entitled "French Freemasonry, Women, and Feminist scholarship"<sup>4</sup>. They responded very convincingly to Dena Goodman's accusations against

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Laura Normand for revising this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Ligou, *Anderson's Constitutions* (Paris 1723) Lauzeray International, 1978, Article III, 180.

<sup>3</sup> Andrée Buisine, *Minutes of the London Worshipful Company of Masons*, 12 February 1714, quoted, *La Franc-maçonnerie anglo-saxonne et les femmes* (Paris, Guy Trédaniel, 1995), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Jacob and Janet Burke, "French Freemasonry, Women and feminist scholarship", in: *Journal of Modern History* (1996). This article, together with others by the same authors, was recently reedited at the Bordeaux University Presses, in *Les Premières franc-maçonnnes* (Bordeaux, PUB, 2010, Preface by Cécile Révauger).

lodges of adoption and the French salons in general<sup>5</sup>. They showed that Goodman's arguments were *de facto* very close to anti Masonic arguments.

In the wake of Le Forestier, Hivert Messeca and Françoise Jupeau Requillard studied the early presence of women in French Freemasonry<sup>6</sup>. A few theses have been defended on the subject<sup>7</sup>. Yet the first academic conference entirely devoted to women and Freemasonry since the eighteenth century was held in Bordeaux in just 2010<sup>8</sup>. It provided a good opportunity to revisit the issue of the lodges of adoption, as well as the presence of women in Freemasonry until today. Margaret Jacob and Janet Burke were our guests of honor and about fifty presentations were given<sup>9</sup>.

We shall first focus on the presence of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French lodges before examining the emergence of both female Grand Lodges and co-Masonry at the turn of the twentieth century and in the following decades. Finally, special attention will be devoted to the modern stakes and in particular to the recent evolutions within the Grand Orient of France.

### **Women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French lodges**

French women were first to be found within the "androgynous orders" such as "Ordre des Mopses," "Chevaliers et Chevalières du Bouchon," or "Ordre des Fendeurs." The order of the Mopses was born in Germany, sponsored by Duke Clement of Bavaria in the 1740s. In 1745 *L'Ordre des francs-maçons trahis et le Secret des Mopses révélé* stated that the association thrived in Germany, England, the Netherlands, and France. One possible interpretation given by Le Forestier is that after the 1738 *Bulle Papale* Freemasons preferred to join such associations rather than Masonic lodges, and perhaps with the specific purpose of

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<sup>5</sup> Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a cultural history of the French Enlightenment* (New York: Ithaca, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Françoise Jupeau Requillard, « La Grande Loge Symbolique Ecossaise, le changement dans l'institution maçonnique » (Doctoral thesis, University of Burgundy, 1989). Gisèle et Yves Hivert-Messeca, *Comment la franc-maçonnerie vint aux femmes, Deux siècles d'adoption féminine et mixte en France, 1740-1940* (Paris : Dervy, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Françoise Jupeau Requillard, « La Grande Loge Symbolique Ecossaise, le changement dans l'institution maçonnique » (Université de Bourgogne, 1989). Marie-Paule Dupin-Benesse, « Francs-Maçons, Femmes et Féminin, 1760-1997 » (Université de Picardie Jules Verne, 1997). Ann Pilcher Dayton, « Women Freemasons and Feminist causes 1908-1935: the Case of the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry » (University of Sheffield, 2010). Celia Poulet, "L'apprentissage d'une pratique démocratique: l'exemple de la prise de parole en Franc-maçonnerie" (Marseille Université, 2011). Bérengère Kolly, "La sororité, une société sans société : modalités d'un être-politique" (Université de Paris, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Organized by myself with the support of the University of Bordeaux, the Conseil Régional d'Aquitaine, CELFF, Université Paris IV Sorbonne et CNRS, Laboratoire CIRTAI-IDEES, (CNRS) University of Le Havre, the Sheffield Centre for Research into Freemasonry, Centre de recherche sur la franc-maçonnerie, FREE, Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, the Center for the Study of Women, UCLA and Sapienza University, Rome.

<sup>9</sup> Cécile Révauger et Jacques Ch. Lemaire (sous la direction de), *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours. XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Bruxelles : La Pensée et Les Hommes 82-83, 2011); *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours. XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Bruxelles : La Pensée et Les Hommes 86-87, 2012). To be published in English soon both by *JRFF* (*Journal of Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*), available <https://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/JRFF> and *Ritual, Secrecy, and Civil Society*, published by PSO (*The Policy Studies Organization*), <http://www.ipsonet.org/104-publications/128-ritual-secrecy-and-civil-society>

initiating women. The society was famous for adopting a dog as its symbol, the dog representing fidelity: all the members had to be true to their association. Each member was provided with the representation of a dog, a toy, and besides, men carried swords while women were happy with articles of toiletry. Le Forestier depicts their strange rituals. The principles of government were really egalitarian, however: the lodges were chaired alternately by a man and a woman every six months. The mock rituals were inspired by the Masonic catechisms. What is striking is that beyond the ludicrous aspects, the principles advocated were really derived from the Enlightenment:

All the regulations of the Mopses only aimed at promoting truthfulness, trust, discretion, fidelity, tender and gentle feelings, humanity, in a word all the virtues which lead to love and friendship and which encourage sociability<sup>10</sup>.

However, because those societies often took on a libertine and erotic flavor, they were discarded as totally irrelevant by most historians of Freemasonry.

We may wonder why French women eventually entered proper Masonic lodges whereas it was not the case in eighteenth-century Britain. First of all, unlike their English counterparts, French women were not totally excluded from the public sphere; far from it, as the existence of the "salons" clearly shows. Besides, Anderson's *Constitutions* had little impact as they were only translated into French much later, by La Tierce in 1742. Therefore French Masons were not really influenced by the English canonical text and did not feel bound to exclude women any more than men born in slavery. Those who excluded women did not rest their case on Anderson's *Constitutions*, i.e. on theoretical arguments, but resorted to much more practical ones such as the so-called inability of women to keep secrets or the good morality of the lodges. As long as women were kept outside the lodges, Masons' wives could sleep in peace as they did not have to fear any infidelity from their husbands: women were excluded from the lodges for their own good. Such arguments can be found in several poems and songs such as "Pour les francs-maçons" (1743) or "Nouvelle Chanson Maçonique," in *Ordre Trahi* (1758)<sup>11</sup>. The Biblical argument was also conveyed to show woman's natural propensity to disobey and recall Eve's culpability. Admitting women into Freemasonry was a real issue throughout the eighteenth century.

Women had their advocates among Masons such as Louis de Beyerlé, who wrote *Essai sur la Franc-Maçonnerie* (1784), radical Nicolas de Bonneville—a close friend of Thomas Paine, the celebrated author of *Rights of Man* (1792)—who praised women Freemasons in *Les Jésuites chassés de la franc-maçonnerie et leur poignard brisé par les Maçons*, and of course Choderlos de Laclos, well known for his *Liaisons Dangereuses*. In a famous speech he delivered in 1777 at the inauguration of *L'Union Parfaite*, a lodge of adoption in Salins, Jura,

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<sup>10</sup> René Le Forestier, *Maçonnerie féminine et loges académiques, 1945-1950* (Milan : Arché, 1979), 11 : "Toutes les lois des Mopses n'avaient pour but que la fidélité, la confiance, la discrétion, la constance, la tendresse, la douceur, l'humanité, en un mot toutes les qualités qui font la base de l'amour et de l'amitié et celles qui forment ce qu'on appelle la sociabilité".

<sup>11</sup> Le Forestier, *Maçonnerie féminine et loges académiques*, 26-27.

Choderlos de Laclos praised the presence of women and debunked the myth of the original sin<sup>12</sup>.

It had long been thought that the first lodge of adoption had been *Lodge De Juste* in The Hague around 1751. Yet after exploring the so-called Moscow archives—i.e. the archives seized in Paris by the Nazi occupiers, stored in Germany, then retrieved from the Nazis by the Soviets and recently restituted to the French grand lodges—Margaret Jacob has recently uncovered the possible existence of a lodge in Bordeaux, under the aegis or close to *Lodge L'Anglaise* around 1732, long before the foundation of *Lodge L'Amitié* around 1776. Margaret Jacob and Janet Burke have listed a great number of lodges of adoption and precisely identified and described about 25 of them, mostly in the second half of the century. Indeed this is due to the fact that from 1774 onward the Grand Orient officially recognized the existence of the lodges of adoption. The most prestigious ones were *La Candeur* and *La Sincérité* in Paris, but there were lodges in small provincial towns as well, such as Dijon, Toul, Chinon, or Rochefort. Recently Jan Snoek has written a major study of the Rite of Adoption, after examining more than 130 manuscripts of different and yet in many ways similar rituals.

The very concept of "adoption" is controversial since it implies that the "sisters" were "adopted," i.e. patronized by the "brothers," and each adoption lodge was attached to a male lodge; yet this does not mean that they worked under the supervision of the male lodge, and while sisters could only meet with brothers, most of the responsibilities were shared within the lodge. Each lodge was endowed both with a "grand maître" and a "grande maîtresse," a "frère inspecteur" and a "soeur inspectrice," and the titles were often gendered.

Women of the aristocracy prevailed in the adoption lodges, even more so than aristocrats in ordinary lodges. Yet those aristocrats were often open to the ideas of the Enlightenment. Janet Burke has delved on the complex personality of Princesse de Lamballe, who read extensively the philosophers of her time. Françoise Moreillon has devoted an interesting article to Duchesse de Bourbon, made a Mason in *Lodge La Candeur*, who became the grand mistress of the lodges of adoption and who supported the French Revolution while calling herself "Citoyenne Bathilde Vérité"<sup>13</sup>.

The lodges of adoption have often been represented as subordinate lodges, meant to entertain women and make up for their exclusion from the "real" lodges. Margaret Jacob, Janet Burke, Jan Snoek, and also Alexandra Heidle and Máire Fedelma Cross have successfully countered that thesis.<sup>14</sup> The sisters in fact played an increasingly active role, both to govern their lodges and to elaborate new rituals. A rich material culture is still available

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<sup>12</sup> Francois Ambroise Piarre. See Charles Porset, « Choderlos de Laclos (La Clos), (1741-1803) », in C. Porset and C. Révauger, *Le Monde Maçonnique des Lumières*, (Paris : Champion, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Françoise Moreillon, « Louise Marie-Thérèse Bathilde d'Orléans, Duchesse de Bourbon, Princesse de sang républicaine... Grande Maîtresse de l'Ordre des Franches Maçonnes d'Adoption en France », *CNHRM* (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Alexandra Heidle and Jan Snoek, *Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Orders* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Máire Fedelma Cross éd., *Gender and Fraternal Orders in Europe, 1300-2000* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

showing the tracing boards, aprons, sashes, and also china specifically designed for women Masons<sup>15</sup>.

Jan Snoek has successfully explained the evolution of women's rituals: far from being imposed on them, those rituals underwent several transformations; specific adaptations. Some of them were specially invented by the "sisters" themselves. It can really be assumed that rituals were not subjecting women at all, but on the contrary allowing them to emancipate themselves from a certain number of prejudices. For instance, when the new initiate was asked to eat the apple while leaving out the pips, she was in a way encouraged to liberate herself once and for all from the Biblical myth of the original sin. At a time when the Catholic Church was all-powerful, emancipating herself from such a religious stigma was highly significant: women were encouraged to look towards the ideas of the Enlightenment rather than towards the Catholic dogma.

Although the lodges of adoption thrived in the French context, women were generally totally excluded from British Freemasonry. Some exceptions, however, confirm the rule: Robert Péter has recently found evidence of a lodge called *Urania* held at Braintree in 1787 and placed under the protection of Sister Dunckerley, the wife of the well-known Thomas Dunckerley, then provincial grand master of Essex<sup>16</sup>. Yet there are no minutes left and it is difficult to assess the real significance of the lodge. Similarly, in Boston, Hannah Mather Crocker did found an all-female lodge in 1790, lodge Ste Anne, for which she acted as worshipful master or mistress<sup>17</sup>.

Apart from those two examples however, one has to say that the English-speaking Masonic world totally barred women in the eighteenth century. This began to change in the United States in the nineteenth century with the emergence of the *Eastern Star* in the 1850s, under the aegis of Rob Morris and later Robert Macoy, who drew inspiration from the French lodges of adoption. Yet there was a notable difference between the French lodges of adoption and the Eastern Star chapters: whereas the French women were full-fledged Freemasons, members of the Eastern Star were not considered as such, not even in their own eyes. Never were French sisters required as their American counterparts to be relatives of Masons in order to belong to the lodges of adoption.

The French pattern also evolved in the nineteenth century, as Hivert Messeca has shown<sup>18</sup>. After Napoleon left his imprint on Masonry—whether he was a Mason or not himself is still a matter for debate—the lodges of adoption essentially became charitable associations, eager to help the poor and work hand-in-hand with male lodges in their benevolent actions. Less emphasis was put on rituals: yet, at the time, elaborating their own rituals had been a sign of autonomy for those women. They were probably not too different

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<sup>15</sup> See Musée de la franc-maçonnerie, in Paris, rue Cadet. Several window cases are devoted to the lodges of adoption.

<sup>16</sup> Róbert Péter "The Fair Sex' in a 'Male Sect'? Gendering the Role of Women in Eighteenth-century English Freemasonry", in: *Gender and Fraternal Orders in Europe, 1300-2000*, ed. M. F. Cross (Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> John Slifko, notice « Crocker, Hannah Mather (1752-1829) », in : *Le Monde Maçonnique des Lumières*, ed. Charles Porset et Cécile Révauger (Paris : Champion, 2013). This has also been evidenced by Karen Kidd, a member of Human Duty.

<sup>18</sup> Yves Hivert Messeca, "La Maçonnerie des Dames dans la France napoléonienne : chant du cygne ou métamorphose?", in : *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières nos*, 301-319.

from all the religious ladies' associations sponsored by the church, later called "dames patronesses."

Besides the Grand Orient of France, the Grand Orient of Spain also sponsored lodges of adoption. From 1871 onwards women were initiated in the same lodges as men. However, twenty years later, in 1891, the Grand Orient of Spain decided to keep them apart by making them join specific lodges of adoption<sup>19</sup>.

### **Female orders and co-Masonry from the turn of the twentieth century onward**

For most of their history the French lodges of adoption were sponsored by the Grand Orient of France. They only became attached to the *Grande Loge de France (GLDF)* in the 1860s and apparently were no longer very active during that period. Minutes for the period 1860–1901 are cruelly lacking. The GLDF sponsored the lodge *Libre Examen* in 1901, which was to become the first on the roll of the future *Grande Loge Féminine de France (GLFF)*.

The mixed orders started in 1893, with the foundation of the *Droit Humain (DH)*—"Human Duty"—by Maria Deraisme and George Martin. (Incidentally, the English translation for "droit" should be "right" and not "duty," a matter of concern for linguists but most of all for sociologists.) Maria Deraisme was a feminist, who committed herself to the enfranchisement and sexual emancipation of women; she had been made a Mason at Lodge *Libres Penseurs* in Pecq in 1882. Annie Besant, both a feminist and a theosophist, followed in her steps by inaugurating the first lodge of the DH in London (Lodge n°6 of the international order) on September 26, 1902.

Therefore from 1893 onwards French women had the choice between two options: either the mixed order of the DH or the specific adoption lodges, which in fact became women only from 1901 onwards and which heralded the *Union Maçonnique Féminine de France* (which was to become the GLFF). It would be ridiculous to compare the merits of the DH, or of *Grande Loge Symbolique Ecossaise et Mixte* (in which Louise Michel became a Mason in 1904, at Lodge *La Philosophie Sociale*), and of the first feminine lodges, the ancestors of the *Union Maçonnique Féminine de France*. In fact several links united all those lodges at the beginning of the twentieth century. The *Grande Loge Symbolique Ecossaise et Mixte* was short-lived and its members joined either the lodges of the DH or the adoption lodges which worked under the aegis of the GLDF. Before World War II there were about 300 women in the nine lodges of adoption of the GLDF; the most famous ones were in Paris, *Loge la Nouvelle Jérusalem Adoption* and *Le Libre Examen Adoption*.<sup>20</sup> Most of the women who entered lodges at that time were committed to the emancipation of women, whatever the lodge and grand lodge. The context was essential and minimized the issues of mixed orders or specifically feminine orders.

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<sup>19</sup> One of those lodges actually became very active in the fight for the enfranchisement of Spanish women *Lodge Amor* in Madrid in 1931, which had among its members a well-known suffragette, Carmen de Burgos known as Colombine. See José Antonio Ferrer Benimeli, *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours*, 323-365.

<sup>20</sup> Françoise Moreillon, « Les loges d'adoption du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle : creuset de la franc-maçonnerie féminine indépendante », *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours. XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* 86-87, 93-106.

If we compare the French and the English situation, the historical context largely accounts for the major differences. The Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Masonry emerged in 1908, a few years after Annie Besant's co-Masonry, first as a co-Masonry order and then as a women-only order (Order of Women Freemasons).

In Britain those who were committed to the emancipation of women and who openly supported the suffragettes all belonged to the DH. Members of the *Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Masonry* who were committed to the emancipation cause were few and far between, as they were eager to please the United Grand Lodge of England; incidentally, they gave up co-Masonry to become a women-only order precisely for that reason.

In France, women lagged behind their English sisters in terms of enfranchisement. Franchise was not granted to them before 1945, i.e. more than twenty years after English women (1918 for women over the age of twenty-eight; 1928 for all women). French women might have felt the need to boost their cause by belonging to women-only associations, although mixed lodges were very active and committed to women's emancipation. Besides, the lodges of adoption were strongly encouraged by the GLDF to take their independence and thus free the brethren from their somewhat cumbersome presence. After World War II a number of feminists committed themselves inside the GLFF first to the cause of contraception and later to free abortion. Thus, Yvette Roudy supported the passing of the Weil law allowing abortion in France in 1975.

Women Freemasons have adopted different approaches to religion in France and in England. French sisters have generally endorsed the secular values put forward by most French grand lodges: this can largely be explained by the attitude of the Catholic Church, which traditionally opposed the values of the Enlightenment, Freemasonry, and the emancipation of women. In England, on the contrary, the Church of England has adopted a much more tolerant attitude, reconciling reason and religion, accepting Freemasonry (with a very few exceptions), and supporting the emancipation of women. Consequently, women Freemasons require their members to believe in the Supreme Being and support the Church of England. Besides, several women Freemasons in the wake of Annie Besant belonged to the Theosophist Movement.

Since 1945, with the creation of a women-only order, the GLFF (*Grande Loge Féminine de France*), French women have had a choice between mixed orders and specifically female lodges. In 1981 a second feminine grand lodge was founded, the *Grande Loge Féminine de Memphis Misraïm*, which never reached very high numbers (about a thousand members in 2013).

The DH also had to face the competition of two smaller grand lodges, the *Grande Loge Mixte Universelle (GLMU)*, 1973, about 1,600 members today) and the *Grande Loge Mixte de France (GLMF)*, 1982, about 4,200 members). The latter was an offspring from the GLMU, although it has now become more numerous. Today the GLFF has about 11,700 members and the DH 15,700 members<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> [Cited June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013]: available <http://obediences.maconniques.fr/OBEDIENCES-MACONNIQUES/effectifs.php>

## Modern stakes and perspectives: The Grand Orient of France, a real challenge

The Masonic landscape was revolutionized by the historical decision made by the Grand Orient of France in September 2010 to recruit members in a nondiscriminatory way, irrespective of gender. And yet the idea had emerged as early as 1869 with Frederic Desmons, the protestant minister, the very same Freemason who had suggested a general amnesty for all the participants in the Paris Commune and who originated the constitutional change of 1877 replacing the obligation to believe in the "immortality of the soul" with the notion of "freedom of conscience." Frederic Desmons had indeed demanded the admission of women inside the Grand Orient of France<sup>22</sup>. Of course he had been a little too early and the proposal had been nipped in the bud; the decision to admit women was only made in 2010. Yet if one remembers that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century the Grand Orient of France had allowed lodges of adoption, one could consider that the time span from 1860 till 2010 was just a regrettable parenthesis of 150 years. The Grand Orient of Luxembourg had taken such a step as early as 1982<sup>23</sup>.

The decision made by Luxembourg had more impact than it seemed at the international level as CLIPSAS—the federation of grand lodges that had been launched by the Grand Orient of France and by the Grand Orient of Luxembourg in 1961 in Strasbourg, in order to subscribe to the principle of freedom of conscience, leaving each member free to believe or not to believe in God—became de facto a co-Masonry federation. Everybody in France, however, had forgotten this when the Grand Orient of France launched the debate on the admission of women.

The debate over the admission of women really started at the end of the 1970s within the Grand Orient of France. In the 1980s about 50 percent of the lodges admitted sisters as visitors. Today this is the case of about 95 percent of the lodges. Five percent of the lodges still refuse the very idea of women visitors, even after the historical vote of 2010. So Paris was not built in a single day.

Contrary, for instance, to the United Grand Lodge of England—which makes important decisions at quarterly meetings—the Grand Orient of France has one annual general assembly where all the lodges are represented by their delegates. Several of the annual assemblies from 2002 onwards examined motions to allow the initiation of women, but to no avail. So the initiative eventually came from individual lodges, Lodge *Combats* (Paris), Lodge *Saint Just* (Paris), both as early as 2006, followed two years later by lodge *L'Echelle Humaine* (Paris), *Prairial* (Maison Alfort, near Paris), and *La Ligne Droite* (Auch, in the Southwest of France): the five lodges asked permission to initiate about six women between themselves. Grand Master Jean Michel Quillardet answered that nothing in the Constitutions of the Grand Orient of France prevented the initiation of a woman (this is not the case for the GLFF, which very carefully worded its Constitutions so that no man can ever be admitted.). The five lodges

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<sup>22</sup> Yves Hivert-Messeca, « Desmons, Frédéric (1832-1911) », in : *Encyclopédie Maçonnique*, ed. Eric Saunier (Paris : Hachette, 2000), 212.

<sup>23</sup> I feel honored to have been invited in December 2012 to give a talk to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first lodge in Luxemburg which admitted women, Lodge *Liberté*.

obtained positive answers from the *Conseil de l'Ordre*. The first initiation of a woman took place at Lodge *Combats* on May 24, 2008. The *Conseil de l'Ordre* demanded the advice of the *Justice Maçonnique* (the official committee in charge of Masonic jurisprudence) which confirmed the regularity of the initiation of the new sisters. Yet the Convent in 2009 voted against the initiation of women. The Convent of 2010 eventually voted in favour of the liberty of each lodge to initiate or not to initiate women. The new regulation avoids the word "mixité" ("co-Masonry") and merely stipulates that the Grand Orient should recruit members irrespective of gender.

Since 2010, out of a global 52 000 members, the Grand Orient of France has admitted about 1,200 women, either through the initiation of new sisters or through the affiliation of sisters from other grand lodges. Between 300 and 400 applications are currently under study. There are more lodges admitting women in some areas than others. Paris, central and Western France have a leading role. The Mediterranean South and French regions outside Europe (i.e. in the Caribbean and Indian oceans) are more reluctant to initiate women<sup>24</sup>.

There is still a long way to go for women inside the Grand Orient of France. Of course a number of brothers have had nightmares at the very idea of a grand mistress someday. And yet the nightmare has just come true in Luxembourg, thirty years after the first lodge of the Grand Orient of Luxemburg admitted women.

A significant evolution has been the full recognition of Olivia Chaumont, a transgender initiated at the Grand Orient of France as a brother. She has since been elected worshipful master/mistress of her lodge as well as deputy, which has allowed her to take part in the annual assemblies of the Grand Orient of France. She gave a seminal talk, together with another member of her lodge, Nicolas Froeliger, at the Bordeaux conference in June 2010<sup>25</sup>.

Although not revolutionary in itself, if one considers the global picture, i.e. 250 years of history since the birth of the Grand Orient of France, the decision made in 2010 to admit women has nevertheless revolutionized the French Masonic landscape.

The DH, the historical co-Masonry grand lodge, is not very supportive, as can be seen through the fact that the constitutions have still not been revised: whereas traditionally brothers of the DH were allowed dual membership with the Grand Orient of France, the DH has not yet quite decided to extend this right to sisters.

The GLFF stubbornly refuses to allow dual membership with the Grand Orient of France, thus compelling the sisters who want to join the Grand Orient of France to resign from the GLFF. Such a stance can be accounted for by the fact they are afraid of losing membership. Yet there are also a number of ideological and ritual issues. Whereas the first sisters of the GLFF were proud to obtain the charter of the French Rite from the Grand Orient of France (Fred Zeller officially delivered the charter to Liberté Morte, an impressive figure of the GLFF, in 1972), many sisters now consider the French Rite as too committed to the life of the city and prefer the very symbolical approach shared by the sisters of the Ancient and

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<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Ludovic Marcos, the director of the Museum of Freemasonry in Paris for the figures mentioned above.

<sup>25</sup> Nicolas Froeliger and Olivia Chaumont, *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours* 82-83, 345-359.

Accepted Scottish Rite. Finally, although the first members of the GLFF were often feminists as well as women committed to the separation of church and state, supporting the French ideal of "laïcité," many members now openly profess their Catholic faith or put forward spiritual claims and are reluctant to condone secularism.

The GLDF and the *GLNF* (*Grande Loge Nationale Française*, in all its different shapes) remain aloof, unconcerned with the debate on co-Masonry within the Grand Orient of France.

## Conclusion

In France women have had a choice between co-Masonry and women only-lodges since the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition they are now allowed within the historical grand lodge, the Grand Orient of France (which dates back to 1773 and is thus the oldest French grand lodge, as the GLDF only dates back to 1894). While the GLDF refuses to admit women, either as members or visitors, individual brothers generally treat women Freemasons with courtesy, occasionally enjoying paying a visit to women-only lodges or the mixed orders. In the United States, however, co-Masonry is not recognized by the mainstream grand lodges and women belonging to the Eastern Star, although much respected, are not considered Masons, neither by the American grand lodges nor by themselves.

The presence of women in Freemasonry has almost ceased to be an issue in France, whereas it is still a fantasy or a nightmare for a lot of English-speaking brethren. Women in the world have a long way to go in Freemasonry, but the dream is bound to come true someday.

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