

# Call me sister!

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## ¡Llámenme hermana!

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### **Palabras clave**

Masonería; terminología de género; Francia; Reino Unido; Estados Unidos.

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on terminology and the importance of avoiding gendered discrimination in freemasonry. To address contemporary issues, we shall provide an historical context. For instance, the use of “sister” rather than “brother” in French lodges is still controversial. This can be related to the debate within the French Academy about the feminization of job titles. Although the historical and linguistic context is different for the mixed and feminine orders in France, the United Kingdom and the USA, there are some similitudes as far as gender is concerned.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo se centra en la importancia de la terminología para evitar la discriminación de género en la masonería. Aportamos el contexto histórico para tratar de temas contemporáneos. Por ejemplo, el uso del término “hermana” en vez de “hermano” en las logias francesas aún es controvertida. Eso puede deberse al debate en la Academia Francesa acerca de la feminización de títulos de trabajo. A pesar de que los contextos históricos y lingüísticos sean distintos para las órdenes mixtas y femeninas en Francia, Reino Unido y Estados Unidos, hay similitudes en cuanto al género se refiere.

## The historical background

The first lady freemason is said to have been Lady Aldworth St Leger, an aristocrat of French extraction, in county Doneraile, Ireland, between 1710 and 1713, ten years before the writing of Anderson's *Constitutions* and twelve years before the creation of the Grand Lodge of Ireland (1725), supposedly because she had been eavesdropping while her husband was holding a lodge in their castle. The exact facts are of course difficult to assess but there is no denying that Mrs Aldworth was considered a Mason at some point<sup>1</sup>. A memorial tablet in the Cathedral in Cork stipulates that "The Honourable Elizabeth Aldworth, wife of Richard Aldworth...born 1695, died 1775, [was] initiated into Masonry in Lodge n°44 at Doneraile Court in this County A.D. 1712". She is still known under the denomination of "the Lady freemason". Curiously, this was not deprecatory at all and the Provincial Grand Lodge of Munster was still displaying her Masonic apron in its Masonic Hall in 1966<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, she was the exception which confirmed the rule.

Andrew Prescott and Susan Sommers have pointed at the use of the word "sister" by Provincial Grand Master Thomas Dunckerley in 1783: "Thus, writing to the Grand Secretary Richard Heseltine in 1783, Dunckerley sent good wishes from Mrs Dunckerley, his daughter and her husband to 'Sister Heseltine & little folks'. Likewise, writing to Heseltine's successor William White in 1785 and 1786, Dunckerley repeatedly used the term 'Sister White' in sending greetings to White's wife. In another letter to White, Dunckerley referred to his wife as 'Sister Dunckerley'"<sup>3</sup>. Not only did Dunckerley have the habit of referring to the wives of freemasonry. Robert Péter has pointed at a lodge of women freemasons dedicated to Urania, the muse of astronomy who was dear to Queen Charlotte's heart. The lodge was set up to celebrate the queen's birthday, in May 1787. However, according to Prescott and Sommers, it only lasted for one day and no archive has survived<sup>4</sup>.

Another instance of a positive connotation of the term "lady" is the occurrence of "ladies' nights", among the lodges of the United Grand Lodge of England and other "regular" Grand Lodges. They generally consist in a formal meal and dance, once a year, and are designed to pay a tribute to the masons' wives and to reassure them concerning the propriety of Masonic proceedings.

However, generally speaking, examples of the negative connotation of female denominations in Masonry are far more numerous. Thus, Dean Swift wrote an anonymous piece meant to ridicule the presence or even the influence of women in Masonic lodges in his *Letter from the Grand Mistress of the Female Freemasons*, 1724<sup>5</sup>. Robert Péter has identified a skit on Freemasonry and women,

1 See Cecile "Révauger, Aldworth, née St Léger, Elizabeth (1692 ? 1693 ? 1695 ? – 1772)", in *Le Monde Maçonnique des Lumières*, eds. Cecile Révauger and Charles Porset (Paris: Champion, 2013), 1: 49-53.

2 Brother Jon Day, *Memoir of the Lady Freemason* (Cork, 1966), 22.

3 Susan Mitchell Sommers and Andrew Prescott, "Sister Dunckerley", in *Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours. XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, coord. by Charles Lemaire and Cécile Révauger (Bruxelles: *La Pensée et les Hommes*, 2011), n°82-83, 257-280. They quote Henry Sadler, Thomas Dunckerley, *His Life, Labours and Letters, including some Masonic and Naval Memorials of the 18th century* (London: Disprose and Bateman, 1991), 127, 202, 216, 233, 299.

4 Robert Péter, "The Fair Sex ? Gendering the Role of Women in Eighteenth Century English Freemasonry", in *Gender and Fraternal Orders in Europe*, coord. M. F. Cross, (London: Ashgate, 2010) ; Sommers & Prescott, 257-280.

5 Jonathan Swift, "Letter from the Grand Mistress of the Female Freemasons, 1724", in *Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1962).

'The Sisterhood of Free Sempstresses' (Seamstresses?) (1724)<sup>6</sup>. As to the *The Female Freemason* (1737) it was a humorous play meant to poke fun at freemasons<sup>7</sup>.

The French approach was different as references to lady masons were quite common in the eighteenth century. Contrary to the Masonic landscape in Britain and the States, there were mixed lodges as early as the 1730's. The first lodges of adoption, which included brothers and sisters, explicitly referred to the sisters and used feminine titles for all the offices. There were "Grand Mistresses of Adoption". The ritual of *La Vraie Maçonnerie d'Adoption*, by Guillemain de Saint Victor, refers to « sœurs inspectrice, Trésorière et Introdutrice »<sup>8</sup>. The higher degrees of the *Amazonnerie Anglaise* mentions the « Courageuse Généralissime »<sup>9</sup>.

Later in America when the Order of the Eastern Star was founded by Rob Morris and Macoy, sisters and brothers were recognized as such and given the specific titles of "Worthy Matron" and "Worthy Patron". Originally the rite practised by the Eastern Star drew inspiration from the French Rite of Adoption. However, after the split with the Grand Orient de France in 1877, Morris strongly denied having been influenced by the French in anyway and claimed he had invented the rite himself<sup>10</sup>.

When co-masonry was officially founded in France by George Martin and Maria Deraismes, the distinction between male and female titles never really came to the fore. Marie George Martin was simply called "la Gr. Maitr", an ambiguous phrase: it could have referred to "Grand Maitre" or "Grande Maitresse", probably "la Grand Maitre", i.e. the masculine noun with a feminine article. Sisters were clearly identified as such in all the minutes even if the offices remained in the masculine gender<sup>11</sup>. In Lodge Human Duty n°6, in London, « It [was] decided to use the terms Brother and Sister in speaking of members thereby maintaining the distinction of sex »<sup>12</sup>. However in Cobb's Organization, the *Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry*, founded in 1908, all the members were called « brothers » irrespective of their sex. In terms of gendered denominations, rules have varied in France, Britain and America, according to the different historical contexts. The cultural backgrounds still largely inform the debate on both sides of the Channel and of the Atlantic.

6 Robert Péter, "Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie dans la presse anglaise du XVIIIe siècle", in Révauger & Lemaire, 199-224.

7 Péter, "Les Femmes et la franc-maçonnerie", 199-224.

8 Guillemain de Saint Victor, *La Vraie Maçonnerie d'Adoption*, 1779.

9 *L'Amazonnerie anglaise*, 1770, 1775, 1779, 1780, see Jan Snoek, *Le Rite d'Adoption et l'initiation des femmes en franc-maçonnerie des Lumières à nos jours* (Paris: Dervy, 2012), 12, note 3 and 439-440. Ritual reprinted and commented upon by Cécile Révauger, *La Longue marche des franc-maçonnnes* (Paris: Dervy, 2018), 215-37.

10 "I wrote every word of the original lectures and composed the songs. For twenty-eight years I have been communicating it as my own origination. I am the founder of the system and no one can show any proof of its existence prior to 1849" and in 1884: "The degree called the Eastern star...is strictly my own imagination. By the aid of my papers, and the memory of Mrs. Morris, I recall even the trivial occurrences connected with the work- how I hesitated for a theme, how I dallied over a name, how I wrought face to face with the clock that I might keep my drama within due limits of time etc. The name was first settled upon, the Eastern Star." Rob Morris, 1877, quoted by Paul Rich et Guillermo De Los Reyes, "Recovering a Rite: The Amaranth, Queen of the South, and Eastern Star", *Heredom*, 1997, vol.6, 221.

11 Grande Loge Symbolique Ecosaise de France le Droit Humain, *Bulletin trimestriel de la maçonnerie mixte en France et à l'étranger*. 1895 and following years.

12 *Human Duty n°6, Lodge Minutes*, quoted by Pilcher Dayton, "Freemasonry and suffrage: the manifestation of social conscience", in *Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Masonic Orders*, coord. by Alexandra Heidle & Jan A. M. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 346.

## Political correctness in France and America, “inclusive language” and the debate within the French Academy

The notion of political correctness emerged in the United States but gained ground in France as well, in spite of different linguistic factors. Although it concerned race as much as gender, we shall only focus on the gender issue in this article.

The inclusive language is more problematical in France than in America. English as a language is not as gendered as French: in French the masculine and feminine genders are omnipresent while there is no such thing as a neutral gender. Therefore using the inclusive language necessitates accumulating a number of dots or slashes such as: “le/la chercheur.se.s” which makes the spelling rather complex and tends to discourage people in spite of their good will. It is much easier to speak of “the chair” than of “le/la président.e”. This is why French people are more reluctant to use the inclusive language than American people.

However, when the male gender is used, supposedly as neutral or generic, the female gender is deliberately obliterated. For instance, calling a general practitioner “docteur” when a woman is concerned simply hides her gender. “Madame l’ambassadeur” used to be considered as the only possible appellation. For a long time, the Académie française, the venerable institution composed of renowned authors such as D’Ormesson or Marguerite Yourcenar and in charge of maintaining the high standards of the French language, totally refused to adopt the feminine gender for jobs which had always been identified as masculine, alleging that using the female gender would be detrimental to the prestige of the function. One should say “l’ambassadeur” and not “l’ambassadrice” (“l’ambassadrice” could only refer to the ambassador’s wife) and “le ministre” and not “la ministre” because ambassadors and ministers hold functions which should be considered as “neutral”. There was a debate between those holding this view and the feminists who refused to be acceptable only if they remained invisible in the public sphere. In 1984, under President Mitterand, Minister Yvette Roudy, the minister in charge of women’s rights (who happened to be a member of GLFF, *Grande Loge Féminine de France*) entrusted feminist writer Benoite Groult with a committee in charge of working on the problem of gendered terminology. Due to political changes of governments, the issue was dropped for a number of years until 1997, under Prime Minister Jospin, when four women ministers succeeded in being called “Madame la Ministre” instead of “Madame le Ministre”. In 1999 an official guidebook, approved by the government, was entitled “Femme, j’écris ton nom”<sup>13</sup>. Although the Académie française strongly reacted against it, they eventually had to accept a compromise. On October 10, 2014, the Académie française issued a statement recommending that each woman should be allowed to use the female gender to identify her job or function if she so wished: she could call herself “professeure” or “doctoresse” or “docteur” (several possible variations) or simply “Madame la Ministre” (French articles “le” or “la” being omnipresent, they strongly contribute to a gendered language).

It seems that a similar attitude has prevailed in America and that many people think that women should have a choice between the neutral and the gendered title. When looking for the

13 “Femme, j’écris ton nom”, *La Documentation française*, 1999, 124.

appropriate form, if such a notion has any meaning, I found the following directions concerning the use of “chair”, “chairman”, “chairwoman”:

“The person who fills the role of “chair” is usually elected by the members of their board or committee to serve in the highest position of that organization. A man or a woman may be a chair, but the traditional title “chairman” is gender neutral. For reasons of political correctness or modern preference, chairperson has crept into use as a replacement. Chairwoman is sometimes used, especially if there are male and female chairs. When in doubt, ask the occupant what form of address they prefer. **Use the title she prefers if you know it.** Some female chairs prefer to just be called “chair.” Others might like chairwoman or another honorific. Some female chairs even prefer the term “chairman” and do not care about its gendered distinction.<sup>14</sup>”

The words “Chairman” or “chairwoman” seem to have been abandoned and replaced by “chair”, as *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style* advocates after suggesting that the gender-neutral forms are gaining ground. However, in practice, things are not so simple. For example, the United States Senate’s website uses a different terminology to refer to party leadership and to the senate committees: concerning party leadership, the heads are called “chairpersons” (“policy committee chairpersons” and “senatorial campaign committee chairs”) while the senate committees are presided by “chairmen” and “chairwomen”<sup>15</sup>.

The Linguistic Society of America has tried to provide guidelines concerning the use of inclusive language:

“Sexist practices are those that contribute to demeaning or ignoring women (or men) or to stereotyping either sex; sexism is often not a matter of intention but of effect [...]

To avoid triggering such inferences, use, for example, *professor* rather than *female professor* or *nurse* rather than *male nurse* [...] We encourage all linguists to consider the possible reactions of their potential audience to their writing and, in so doing, to choose expository practices and content that is positive, inclusive, and respectful.<sup>16</sup>”

Today, irrespective of the use of the neutral gender, an effort is made to encourage mutual respect and to avoid the dominance of male gender in America as in France. This is not simply a matter of political correctness, this reflects a real evolution of mentalities, although some people seem to be resisting change. We may wonder if Masons are not among those who resist most ...

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14 <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/386956/chairman-chairwoman-or-chairperson>  
<http://www.formsofaddress.info/Chairwoman.html>

15 <https://www.senate.gov/history/officers.htm>; <https://www.senate.gov/history/leader.htm>

16 Linguistic Society of America, Advancing the Scientific Study of Language; <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/guidelines-inclusive-language>

## Brothers and sisters today, in France, Britain and America

Again, linguistic factors inform the debate. The words “Masons” or “freemasons” at first sight seem to be gender neutral, but this is not quite the case: the phrase “women masons/freemasons” is used to specify that sisters are concerned whereas “men masons” would be considered as a statement of the obvious. In French “francs-maçons” is supposed to be gender neutral but the feminine form definitely exists, “franc-maçonnes”. In the eighteenth century the phrase “franches maçonnes” was to be found in some instances. So, in English, the word “masons”, given the fact that the language is less gendered than in French, could be considered as inclusive in spite of the remark above, but in French this is not the case at all for the word “franc-maçon”, although some people will claim the contrary. Therefore, “Franc-maçonne” seems to be the only possibility to avoid sexism.

The problem is even more acute concerning the use of “brother” and “sister”. Several Masons, for different reasons, have claimed that the word “brother” was gender neutral. Although common sense indicates that theirs is a fallacious argument, yet it is worth investigating.

Among the first to refer to “brothers” when actually pointing at women masons, were the members of Rev. Cobb’s organization, The HFAM *Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry*, founded in 1908, which was to become *The Order of Women Freemasons* fifty years later (1958)<sup>17</sup>. Cobb’s successor, Marion Halsey, called herself “Brother Marion Halsey, Grand Master”. In deliberately avoiding the use of “sister”, the HFAM was probably trying to ingratiate the UGLE and to obtain their recognition, which proved to no avail of course. It seems that women free-masons today still call each other “brothers”.

In the French *Droit Humain*, all the offices are gendered, and always male: “frère or soeur orateur”, “frère or soeur premier surveillant”, whether a man or a woman holds them. When the *Droit Humain* was founded in France, brothers and sisters were committed to the emancipation of women, women’s vote, the civil code regulating women’s rights at home and in the workplace, and the linguistic issues were totally minor, even irrelevant as nobody cared at the time. However, this is no longer the case in twenty-first century France and the members of the *Droit Humain* have failed to reconsider the issue.

In America, in the *Order of the Eastern Star*, which is composed of the relatives of Masons, but not considered as Masonic, titles are not gender blind: women are actually visible, as they used to be in the old French adoption lodges. Thus, the presiding officers are “a Worthy Matron” and a “Worthy Patron”. A “Conductress” and an “Associate Conductress” lead visitors and are in charge of initiations. Female names drawn from the Bible are given to five officers, “Adah, Ruth, Esther, Martha and Electra”.

In France the *Grande Loge Féminine de France*, also in the wake of the old lodges of adoption, and in the twentieth century context of the emancipation of women, used feminine terms from

17 Ann Pilcher-Dayton, *The Open Door: The History of the Order of Women Freemasons 1908–2008* (London: Order of Women Freemasons, 2008).

the start: “Grande Maitresse”, “première surveillante”, “oratrice”, “trésorière” and so on. Of course, some brothers are being ironical and suggest that “maitresse” makes them think of “mistress” but today they have to confess their sexism if they want to perpetuate such an assertion.

The GODF, the *Grand Orient de France*, the largest masculine Grand Lodge, made a historical decision in 2010 by opening itself to women: although the GODF still denies belonging to comasonry, it now recruits members irrespective of their gender. Today out of roughly 55 000 members, about 3500 are women, in 671 lodges out of 1338.

Yet some brothers are still resisting change, even inside the GODF: members are required to say “Mes frères et mes soeurs” instead of “Mes soeurs et mes frères” on the pretext that brothers have been members for a longer time and that they are more numerous... The offices are to remain masculine. Thus, a woman occupying the office of senior warden is to be called “Soeur Premier Surveillant”. This is better than “Brother Senior Warden” but as the French language makes a real distinction between “surveillant” and “surveillante”, the phrase is a little surprising. Sisters are admitted, but invited to remain as invisible as possible. Of course, not all members of the GODF endorse this view. Changes will take time but are inevitable.

To conclude, “Call me sister” is more important than it seems at first sight. This is not simply a matter of words. As always, language is dynamic, not static, as it reflects cultural and political evolutions. While the American, British and French societies care about the feelings of men and women, and also of a third gender, and endeavour to put an end to sexual discrimination, Masons cannot remain the only people to impose masculinity or at best to accept women while striving to make them invisible and preventing them from clearly identifying themselves as such. Paradoxically, brothers are not the only ones to be convinced of doing so as several sisters have blindly obeyed those requirements, out of respect for traditions. “Call me sister” is still an issue, both for “brothers” and “sisters”. Terminology is more important than it seems. The right choice of words may help freemasons dispose of the glass ceiling for women.

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