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► **To cite this version:**

Laurie Bréban. Women as the Measure of Moral Corruption: Diderot and the Luxury Quarrel. 2020. hal-03010879v2

**HAL Id: hal-03010879**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03010879v2>**

Preprint submitted on 14 Dec 2020 (v2), last revised 8 Jul 2021 (v3)

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# Women as the Measure of Moral Corruption: Diderot and the Luxury Quarrel

Laurie Bréban\*

## Abstract

This paper aims to offer a solution to Diderot's allegedly ambiguous complaint against the influence of men's despotism on women's morality, in his essay "Sur les femmes." Although such a complaint may appear as only a pretense, reading the essay in light of Diderot's writings dedicated to his materialist or political philosophy allows us to show that his criticism of men's despotism over women is not purely rhetorical, as sometimes claimed (see Trouille, 1994). Admittedly, the philosopher attributes to women a physiological propensity to immorality. But he does not view it as an inevitable outcome. On the contrary, he considers that this may be thwarted by economic and institutional factors, at the initiative of men, such as a proper sexual division of labor. However, Diderot does not believe that the opulence of the European society of his time is favorable to this because of the moral corruption which comes along with luxury. Thus, women's immorality would be the measure of the decadence of society.

**Keywords:** Denis Diderot, Women, Male Domination, Materialism, Sexual Division of Labor, Luxury, Conjectural History, Four Stages Theory

## Introduction

This paper aims to offer a solution to Diderot's allegedly ambiguous criticism of men's despotism over women in his essay "Sur les femmes." Whereas the position of Rousseau on women, in *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762), is relatively well-known, that of his "frère ennemi" (enemy brother) remains quite hidden (see Fontenay, 1981). As scholars of Diderot know, "Sur les femmes" constitutes a reply to Thomas's *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs, et l'esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles*, published in 1772. It first appeared in *La Correspondance littéraire* on April 1, 1772 and was then enriched two times—July 1, 1772 and April 1, 1777—again in *La Correspondance littéraire* with the help of documents collected for *L'Histoire des deux Indes* (see Versini, 1994). The paper relies on the most extended version of the text found in copies dating from circa 1780 (the year of publication of the third edition of *L'Histoire des deux Indes*), which are conserved at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* and reproduced by Versini in his 1994 edition of Diderot's complete philosophical works.

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Like the other writings which comprise the Diderotian corpus, “Sur les femmes” leads us to question the consistency of Diderot’s seemingly disparate thinking. According to some commentators, the essay not only contradicts the position that the philosopher expresses in other texts, such as *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* (see Fontenay, 1981: 102 and Biasci, 2017) or the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (see Lecoq, 1963).<sup>1</sup> It also contains an internal ambiguity which arises from the reasons that come to justify its main thesis, that is, the idea that women are morally inferior to men. These reasons are of two kinds that the secondary literature—with the exception of Biasci (2017)—finds difficult to reconcile. The first kind is not surprising when we consider the specificities of Diderot’s materialist philosophy. Women’s inferior morality would arise from their distinctive physiology, especially from “l’organe propre à [leur] sexe” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 952).<sup>2</sup> As Biasci (2017) rightly observes, the second kind of reason is related to the influence of men’s domination or, to take the author’s words, of “le despotisme de l’homme” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 950). Though Diderot deplores women’s “servitude” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 955), in “Sur les femmes,” he remains quite vague about the way in which men’s despotism influences women’s morality. As to the beneficial effects of the emancipation of women from “toute servitude” for which he calls, they are not explicitly addressed (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 950). This probably explains why some commentators believe that physiology constitutes the sole reason to which Diderot gives serious credit, men’s domination being secondary (see Lecoq, 1963). Trouille (1994) goes as far as to claim that it is put forward only for rhetorical purposes—she speaks of a “pseudo-feminist rhetoric”—as though recognizing that it could play a role in the author’s argument would lead to ascribing a progressive position to him.

Of course, Diderot’s words in “Sur les femmes” are far from feminist. Yet, both his analysis of female physiology and male domination are required in order to fully grasp what he has in mind. According to him, women would have a physiological propensity to immorality. However, as remarked by Lotterie (2013: 129–132), this would not constitute an inevitable outcome since this may be thwarted by the kind of activities that they practice. But this would depend on male–female relationships which structure the sexual division of labor. Following Diderot, these relationships would be characterized

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lecoq (1963), the author would be torn between two forms of naturalism—a hard one at work in the essay “Sur les femmes” and a soft one which could be found in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*—which would render his position hard to grasp. According to Fontenay (1981), Diderot would waver between claims of similitude, in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* for instance, and claims of specificity of the two sexes, in “Sur les femmes”; between subversive words on the identity of the two sexes and prejudices on women’s natural inferiority, which would render his position quite ambiguous (see Fontenay, 1981: 101–111). While asserting a complementarity between Diderot’s two claims on sexes—the one of similitude or rather complementarity embodied by the Galenic tradition and the one embodied by the Hippocratic tradition according to which women would have an immanent specificity whose seat would be the uterus—Biasci (2017) recognizes that the articulation of the author’s discourse is complex.

<sup>2</sup> References to Diderot’s writings are abbreviated as follows (see complete details in the references section). All indications to the pages of: (i) *Œuvres* refer to the edition of Diderot’s philosophical texts by Versini, L.; (ii) *Œuvres philosophiques* refer to the edition of Diderot’s philosophical texts by Delon, M. together with Negroni, B.; (iii) *Contes et romans* refer to the edition of Diderot’s tales and novels by Delon, M. together with Abramovici, J-C, Lafon, H. and Pujol, S. Other texts written or attributed to Diderot, such as *Mémoires pour Catherine II* or “Réflexion sur le courage des femmes”, are indicated by their title.

by women's submission to men that he presents as a constant law of nature; a law which would be founded on men's superior physiology and whose violation would threaten the harmony of society. Besides this constant, male–female relationships are said to evolve throughout history, with the progress of industry. Diderot's account of this evolution comes within his position on luxury where he famously argues that the opulence of the European society of his time would be detrimental to its morality and happiness (see Bénot, 2005: 124–137). Now, in “Sur les femmes,” the author claims that women would be the measure of this decadence. As material comfort would progress, consideration given to them would grow, which would show through the status that men would grant to them in the sexual division of labor. Up to a certain point, such an evolution would be detrimental to society, which would be reflected in women's immorality.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that they would be guilty of the corruption of society. Rather, Diderot considers that they would be its recipient because of the frivolous role that men would ascribe to them and which would disturb the fragile equilibrium of their body. As a result, if women's immorality clearly constitutes a threat to men's authority, this does not come from an intentional attempt by women, as it is sometimes asserted (see, for instance, Meeker 2003: 83), but from men's own actions.

Such a perspective on “Sur les femmes” does not only show the internal consistency of the essay. It is also the product of a reading that assumes a connection between various parts of Diderot's writings. It is thus in line with contributions that point out the links between “Sur les femmes” and texts such as *Le rêve de d'Alembert* or *Les Eléments de Physiologie* (see, for instance, Lotterie 2013 and Biasci 2017). More generally, the paper fuels Duflo's (2013a) thesis that there is a continuity between Diderot's materialist philosophy and his political thinking. It is indeed elements from his political philosophy, such as those expressed in *La Réfutation d'Helvétius* and *L'Histoire des deux Indes*, that render visible the consistency of “Sur les femmes,” although their connection with the essay was often neglected—with the notable exception of Tomaselli (1985) and Meeker (2003).

The paper starts by emphasizing the influence of Diderot's materialist philosophy on his treatment of women's morality as embedded in their physiology (§1.). As already noted by Duflo (2013a), Diderot views the human organism as an equilibrium between its various organs (§1.1.). Now, the female organism would be deprived of such an equilibrium because of the disturbing influence of their diaphragm and uterus on their brain, the organ involved in the calculation of pleasures and pains which leads to self-control and then to virtue. However, according to Diderot, this absence of self-control would not constitute an inevitable outcome. As recommended by Bordeu in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, women should strengthen their brain with specific activities in order to make it override their diaphragm and uterus, (§1.2.).

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<sup>3</sup> This give credit to Bénot's (2005) thesis according to which, though the issue of luxury holds a reduce place within Diderot's work, in quantitative terms, it is still important as it comes along with a strong concern for institutions and mores (Bénot, 2005: 136).

It is here that political matters come into play and articulate with Diderot's materialist approach. Indeed, the author does not believe that the European society of his time offers women the means to control their passions. This is what allows us to understand the historical conjecture that Diderot adds to the last version of "Sur les femmes" in order to show that women's submission to men constitutes a constant and natural law (§2.). Although historical conjectures were frequently used during the Enlightenment in order to highlight the role of women in the progress of societies (see Tomaselli, 2001),<sup>4</sup> Diderot's approach presents some specificities—which are curiously ignored in Meek's famous book, *Social Science and The Ignoble Savage* (1976). Not only because the philosopher realized a critical comment of *De l'esprit* and *De l'homme* whose author is considered as one of the pioneers of the four stages theory, but also because Diderot's conjecture presents some typical features of this approach. It takes the form of a stadial theory, tracing the progress of European civilization through five successive stages, corresponding to distinct modes of subsistence, namely: (i) the savage stage, (ii) the pastoral stage, (iii) the agricultural stage, (iv) the commercial stage and what we can call (v) a "gallant stage" (§2.1.). Diderot's originality comes from this last stage—the previous ones being similar to those of the four stages theory—which allows him to take a position in the luxury quarrel. As indicated by the name of this last stage, the philosopher's position on luxury implies a judgment on the relations between men and women which structure the sexual division of labor. From this perspective, Diderot considers that an optimum is reached in commercial society in which activities ascribed to women are restricted to the domestic sphere which would be a source of virtue for them. After this stage, increase in wealth is such that men cease their productive activities and fall into idleness. The role of women is no longer to allow them to extend their industry but to divert them from boredom which would not be favorable to the control of their passions (§2.2.).

### **1. The Physiological Roots of Women's Immorality: The Disturbing Influence of The Matrix and The Diaphragm on The Brain**

At first sight, Diderot's position on women's morality may appear as quite trivial: they are said to be more sensitive than men, which would prevent them from making sound judgments. This would result in a weaker aptitude for subjugating their passions; passions that the philosopher considers more extreme than men's. Now, behind these trite statements lies a complex materialist approach to morality in which sensitivity takes a specific meaning because of its physiological origin. In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* or *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, Diderot presents animal organisms as organs networks. The prevailing organs of each network not only allow the philosopher to distinguish between animal species but also between human beings and, *a fortiori*, between men and women. From this perspective, woman appears as an "être de la nature" distinct from man (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 949).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Tomaselli, such an approach provides evidence that intellectual thinkers of the eighteenth century did not limit themselves to the development of a Science of Man but that they extended their project to the formulation of a Science of Woman (see Tomaselli, 1991).

Indeed, as pointed out by Duflo (2013a), the human organism is conceived by Diderot as an equilibrium—Diderot speaks of a “harmony”<sup>5</sup>—between its various parts; this equilibrium being stabilized by the authority of the brain over the rest of the body. Women’s physiology seems, however, to escape such a harmony, because of the disturbing influence of their diaphragm and uterus over their brain. This would be the physiological cause of their absence of self-control and then their weaker morality.

### *1.1. A Harmonious Functioning of the Economie Animale as The Origin of Individuals’ Morality*

Diderot distinguishes human beings from other animal species because of their specific physiological organization, characterized by a harmony between their various organs: a harmony that ensures the supremacy of their mind over the impressions arising from their organs. On the contrary, for other animals, their mind is dominated by one of their senses:

Toute l’âme du chien est au bout de son nez, et il va toujours flairant. Toute l’âme de l’aigle est dans son œil, et l’aigle va toujours regardant. Toute l’âme de la taupe est dans son oreille, et elle va toujours écoutant. Mais il n’en est pas ainsi de l’homme. Il est entre ses sens une telle harmonie qu’aucun ne prédomine assez sur les autres pour donner la loi à son entendement ; c’est son entendement au contraire, ou l’organe de sa raison qui est le plus fort. C’est un juge qui n’est ni corrompu ni subjugué par aucun des témoins ; il conserve toute son autorité, et il en use pour se perfectionner : il combine toutes sortes d’idées et de sensations, parce qu’il ne sent rien fortement. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 502)

One should not be mistaken about the meaning of “âme” in the above passage: in accordance with his opposition to the Cartesian dualism, Diderot views it as a material principle (see Duflo, 2013a: 34–7). And in the first dialogue of *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, while comparing a human being to a harpsichord, the author maintains that men are “instruments doués de sensibilité et de mémoire” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 352). Thus, under the pen of the materialist philosopher, “sensitivity” (*sensibilité*) takes a specific meaning. First, this is a physical sensitivity that he presents as the “propriété générale de la matière ou résultat” or “produit de l’organisation” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 353 and RH: 481).<sup>6</sup> It is as a material substance that human beings would then be blessed with sensitivity. Such sensitivity would diversify into all the organs of their body so that each would produce its own specific impressions<sup>7</sup> (see Zummo, 2010).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the human organism is viewed as a network of organs into which the impressions that arise from the various organs are reported and collated at the

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<sup>5</sup> See Diderot, *Œuvres Philosophiques*: 420 and 502.

<sup>6</sup> See also Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 417.

<sup>7</sup> “Mais cette sensibilité pure et simple, ce toucher, se diversifie par les organes émanés de chacun des brins ; un brin formant une oreille, donne naissance à une espèce de toucher que nous appelons bruit ou son ; un autre formant le palais, donne naissance à une seconde espèce de toucher que nous appelons saveur ; un troisième formant le nez et le tapissant, donne naissance à une troisième espèce de toucher que nous appelons odeur ; un quatrième formant un oeil, donne naissance à une quatrième espèce de toucher que nous appelons couleur [...] Le reste des brins va former autant d’autres espèces de toucher, qu’il y a de diversité entre les organes et les parties du corps.” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 375).

<sup>8</sup> According to Duflo (2013), this way of considering human body is close to the vitalist medicine of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Duflo, 2013: 72).

brain—which for that reason is called, the “origine du réseau” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 376).<sup>9</sup> In *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, in order to illustrate the specific role of the brain with regard to the rest of the body, Diderot uses the famous image of a spider—embodying the brain—alerted by the shaking of the lines of its web, representing the impressions of the other organs.<sup>10</sup> More particularly, Diderot considers that the brain is the seat of memory, a “faculté organique” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 351), which would render man: (i) conscious of the continuity of his own identity<sup>11</sup> and (ii) able to think and reason because it would allow him to have more than one idea in mind at the same time and thus, to perform the various operations of the mind—comparison and analogy<sup>12</sup> (see Creighton, 1956).

Now, the harmony of the body would be especially affected by the relations of the brain with the organs that are more directly connected with it. From this perspective, Diderot seems to grant a specific role to the diaphragm, which reflects the influence of the Encyclopedist physicians—and, in particular, of the vitalist physicians who started, from the Tome VIII, to write the medical articles of the *Encyclopédie* (see Duflo, 2013a: 61–85). According to them, the diaphragm would be one of the three main organs of the “(Economie animale,”<sup>13</sup> together with digestive organs and the brain. In the article, “Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog.”<sup>14</sup> it is presented as the true center of the nervous and aponeurotic system since it would communicate its “force sensitive, c’est-à-dire la tension, la mobilité, l’activité, le ton qu’excitent les sensations & les affections de l’âme” to all the parts of the body—and *vice-versa*. But it would have “une correspondance plus particulière avec les membranes du cerveau.”<sup>15</sup> For this reason, its disturbance or alteration would cause a disequilibrium which would give rise to mental phenomena (such as nightmares<sup>16</sup>) and even mental pathologies<sup>17</sup> (such as melancholy,<sup>18</sup> frenzy<sup>19</sup> and “paraphrénésie”<sup>20</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> This allows the Diderot to solve the issue of the unity of being: “c’est le rapport constant, invariable de toutes les impressions à cette origine commune qui constitue l’unité de l’animal” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 380).

<sup>10</sup> This is through the character of Mademoiselle de l’Espinasse that Diderot introduces this image—“Imaginez une araignée au centre de sa toile. Ébranlez un fil, et vous verrez l’animal alerte accourir. Eh bien ! si les fils que l’insecte tire de ses intestins, et y rappelle quand il lui plaît, faisaient partie sensible de lui-même ?” ; image completed by her interlocutor, Doctor Bordeu—“Je vous entends. Vous imaginez en vous, quelque part, dans un recoin de votre tête, celui, par exemple, qu’on appelle les méninges, un ou plusieurs points où se rapportent toutes les sensations excitées sur la longueur des fils.” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 372).

<sup>11</sup> “c’est la mémoire de toutes ces impressions successives qui fait pour chaque animal l’histoire de sa vie et de son soi” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 380).

<sup>12</sup> “c’est la mémoire et la comparaison qui s’ensuivent nécessairement de toutes ces impressions qui font la pensée et le raisonnement” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 380).

<sup>13</sup> Art. (Economie, XI: 363.

<sup>14</sup> Art. Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog., V: 792. This article was written, before the Tome VIII, by Arnulphe D’Aumont which was not a vitalist but a mechanist physician.

<sup>15</sup> Art. Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog., V: 792.

<sup>16</sup> Art. Cauchemar, II: 783.

<sup>17</sup> On mental pathologies in the *Encyclopédie*, see Rey (1989).

<sup>18</sup> Art. Mélancholie, X: 308–11.

<sup>19</sup> Art. Phrénésie, XII: 530–1.

It is these very ideas that we find exposed by Diderot, in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*,<sup>21</sup> *Les éléments de physiologie*<sup>22</sup> or *Réfutation d'Helvétius*.<sup>23</sup> Now, according to the author, the disharmony of the human organism would not only have medical but also moral consequences. As suggested by the aforementioned article “Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog.,” the physical manifestations of the diaphragm would give rise to a physical but also to a “moral” sensitivity, through their influence on the soul affections.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, Diderot distinguishes various characters from sensitive ones to insensitive ones—according to the mobility of their diaphragm<sup>25</sup>:

ses [le diaphragme] oscillations ou crispations sont plus ou moins fortes dans un être que dans un autre : c'est elle qui caractérise les âmes pusillanimes et les âmes fortes [...] C'est grâce à sa diversité qu'au même moment où je suis transporté d'admiration et de joie, où mes larmes coulent, l'un me dit : « Je ne sens pas cela, j'ai le cœur velu... ; » l'autre me fait une plaisanterie très-burlesque [...] Celui qui a le diaphragme très-mobile cherche les scènes tragiques ou les fuit, parce qu'il peut arriver qu'il en soit trop vivement affecté et qu'il reste, après le spectacle, ce que nous appelons le cœur serré. Celui qui a cet organe inflexible, raide et obtus ne les cherche ni ne les évite, elles ne lui font rien. Vous pouvez faire de cet homme ou un lieutenant criminel ou un bourreau, ou un boucher, ou un chirurgien, ou un médecin. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 515–6)

More especially, Diderot considers that the mobility of the diaphragm is the source of specific quality: it would make “les hommes compatissants et moraux” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 515–6). One must not be mistaken by such a claim. What Diderot means here by “moraux” is not a greater capacity for virtue but rather a stronger sensitivity to others' emotions. On the contrary, from a moral point of view, the author condemns sensibility of the soul. This condemnation occurs in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* through the voice of his character Bordeu, who considers sensitivity as “la qualité dominante des êtres médiocres”<sup>26</sup>. “Mais qu'est-ce qu'un être sensible?”, he asks.

Un être abandonné à la discrétion du diaphragme. Un mot touchant a-t-il frappé l'oreille, un phénomène singulier a-t-il frappé l'oeil, et voilà tout à coup le tumulte intérieur qui s'élève, tous les brins du faisceau qui s'agitent, le frisson qui se répand, l'horreur qui saisit, les larmes qui coulent, les soupirs qui suffoquent, la voix qui s'interrompt, l'origine du faisceau qui ne sait ce

<sup>20</sup> Art. Paraphrénésie, XI: 921–922.

<sup>21</sup> Voir Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 394.

<sup>22</sup> “Il y a une sympathie très marquée entre le diaphragme, et le cerveau. Si le diaphragme se crispe violemment, l'homme souffre et s'attriste ; si l'homme souffre et s'attriste, le diaphragme se crispe violemment : diaphragme, cerveau, organes peu connus” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 439).

<sup>23</sup> “Mais outre la sensibilité physique commune à toutes les parties de l'animal, il en est une autre tout autrement énergique, commune à tous les animaux et propre à un organe particulier [...] : c'est la sensibilité du diaphragme, cette membrane nerveuse et mince qui coupe en deux cavités la capacité intérieure. C'est là le siège de toutes nos peines et de tous nos plaisirs” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 515).

<sup>24</sup> See again the article Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog., V: 792 but also, for instance, the following extract from the *Eléments de physiologie*: “Si le diaphragme se crispe violemment, l'homme souffre et s'attriste” (EP: 439).

<sup>25</sup> This way of defining individuals' character according to their physiological specificities should be set in the broader context of Diderot's criticism to dualism (see, for instance, the entry “Ame”, EP: 416–9; on Diderot's criticism of dualism, see Duflo, 2013: 25–41).

<sup>26</sup> One might question the likening of Diderot's position to the one expressed by Bordeu in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. However, it might be recalled that during the second dialogue of the text, the character rephrases and explains theses pronounced by d'Alembert while dreaming; theses that are themselves formulated by the character Diderot during the first dialogue. Moreover, as reminded by Duflo (2013b: 197), in a letter to Sophie Volland, Diderot is proud to claim that he has put his ideas in the mouth of a man who dreams.



qu'il devient ; plus de sang-froid, plus de raison, plus de jugement, plus d'instinct, plus de ressource. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 394)

The extreme mobility of the diaphragm would then be detrimental to the equilibrium of the human organism because it would constitute an obstacle to the functioning of the brain, which would lose its authority over the other organs. And this would have moral consequences. This is evident again, in the second dialogue of *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, in Bordeu's answer to Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse's praise of sensitivity, to which she claims to be prey.<sup>27</sup> While the latter considers it to be a condition of aesthetic pleasure,<sup>28</sup> the former, who claims to belong to the class of insensitive souls, claims that such a pleasure would not be "pure" as it would not rely on sound judgments: "[j]e sais jouir aussi," he says to Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse,

je sais admirer [...] J'ai du plaisir pur ; ma censure en est beaucoup plus sévère, mon éloge plus flatteur et plus réfléchi. Est-ce qu'il y a une mauvaise tragédie pour des âmes aussi mobiles que la vôtre ? Combien de fois n'avez-vous pas rougi, à la lecture, des transports que vous aviez éprouvés au spectacle, et réciproquement ? [...] *Ce n'est donc pas à l'être sensible comme vous, c'est à l'être tranquille et froid comme moi qu'il appartient de dire : Cela est vrai, cela est bon, cela est beau...* (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 395; my italics)

In order to understand what is at stake in this passage, it is necessary to consider how it relates to Diderot's conception of morality. According to the materialist philosopher, morality is embedded in human physiology which prompts the human species to pursue self-preservation (Duflo, 2013b: 397–420). This tendency towards self-preservation takes the form, at the individual level, of the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain—in a nutshell, the pursuit of happiness.<sup>29</sup> On this last point, Diderot agrees with Helvétius that "[p]laisir et douleur sont et seront toujours les seuls principes des actions des hommes" (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 489).<sup>30</sup> But although he considers that the search for pleasure is what leads to virtue and, consequently, that virtue contributes to happiness, he does not believe that virtuous actions necessarily arise from the pursuit of any kind of pleasure. Indeed, Diderot insists that self-preservation requires the assistance of our fellow human beings and that it is threatened by their hostility. So that all self-gratifying actions which would be detrimental to the other may be the source of greater pains to come, for the one who committed it. This is what we can derive from the following example, exposed in *Réfutation d'Helvétius*:

Si un homme seul était plus fort que tous les hommes qui l'entourent, peut-être vieillirait-il sans avoir d'autres idées claires que celles de la force et de la faiblesse ; mais il ne tarde pas à connaître le ressentiment, puisqu'il l'éprouve, et à savoir que la flèche qui le frappera par derrière traversera sa poitrine, l'étendra mort sur place, et que cette flèche peut partir de la main d'un enfant. Qu'en conclura-t-il ? Qu'il est dangereux de faire injure à l'enfant ? (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 534)

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<sup>27</sup> "Je me reconnais" (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 394)

<sup>28</sup> As reflected by her reply to Bordeu: "Mais si je ne puis jouir de la musique sublime ni de la scène touchante qu'à cette condition?" (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 395)

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the entry "Passions, Volonté, liberté" of the *Eléments de physiologie*.

<sup>30</sup> However, he criticizes Helvétius for having reduced the motivation of human action to *physical* pleasure and pain.

Thus, what would lead the strong man to abstain from injuring his fellows is the prospect of the consequences of the latter's resentment, which he would foresee because of their identical physiology.<sup>31</sup> This illustration shows that the practice of virtue, for Diderot, relies on the pursuit of one's own *well-understood* happiness, that is to say, on his right anticipation and calculation of pleasures and pains.<sup>32</sup> Now, such operations require experience and the use of reason.<sup>33</sup> We then better understand why Bordeu considers that his pleasure is "purer" than that of Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse. Certainly, the former's sensations are more tenuous than those of the latter. However, the use of reason allows the physician to avoid pain and to favor more stable pleasures:

BORDEU – [...] vous aurez alternativement des peines et des plaisirs violents, que vous passerez votre vie à rire et à pleurer, et que vous ne serez jamais qu'un enfant. MADEMOISELLE DE L'ESPINASSE – Je m'y résous. BORDEU – Et vous espérez en être plus heureuse ? MADEMOISELLE DE L'ESPINASSE – Je n'en sais rien. BORDEU – Mademoiselle, cette qualité si prisée, qui ne conduit à rien de grand, ne s'exerce presque jamais fortement sans douleur, ou faiblement sans ennui ; ou l'on bâille, ou l'on est ivre. Vous vous prêtez sans mesure à la sensation d'une musique délicieuse ; vous vous laissez entraîner au charme d'une scène pathétique ; votre diaphragme se serre, le plaisir est passé, et il ne vous reste qu'un étouffement qui dure toute la soirée. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 395)

Fortunately for human morality, such a use of reason would not be the privilege of insensitive souls. It may be trained in order to overcome the extreme mobility of the diaphragm, so that the latter would not constitute an unavoidable fact.<sup>34</sup> As Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse says: "On est ferme, si, *d'habitude ou d'organisation*, l'origine du faisceau domine les filets; faible, au contraire, si elle en est dominée" (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 390; my italics). Hence, Bordeu's recommendation: "Fortifions l'origine du réseau, c'est tout ce que nous avons de mieux à faire." (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 395).

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<sup>31</sup> If Diderot recognizes that human beings are characterized by an identical physiology, he nevertheless considers that none of them can be reduced to another, with regard to his physiological organization. And this is what gives rise to distinct characters among human species. Indeed, following him, a distinct physiological organization should lead to feel distinct impressions and thus to combine distinct ideas: "chaque homme est entraîné par son organisation, [...] à combiner de préférence telles et telles idées plutôt que telles ou telles autres" (RH: 491). Now, Diderot emphasizes that, with regard to organization, no individual can be reduced to another: "[E]st-il possible que l'organisation étant différente, la sensation soit la même ? Telle est sa diversité, que si chaque individu pouvait se créer une langue analogue à ce qu'il est, il y aurait autant de langues que d'individus ; un homme ne dirait ni bonjour, ni adieu comme un autre" (RH: 459). He then distinguishes different kinds of characters with distinct intellectual and moral dispositions which precisely find their roots in physiological organization: "[L]'homme apporte [...] en naissant des dispositions organiques et naturelles à dire et faire des sottises, à se nuire à lui-même et à ses semblables, à écouter ou négliger les conseils de ses parents, à la diligence ou à la paresse, à la justice ou à la colère, au respect ou au mépris des lois" (RH: 585–6).

<sup>32</sup> "Lorsque vous avez défini l'homme, vous avez dit que c'était un animal qui combine des idées. Quelles idées combine-t-il, si ce n'est celles de son repos, de son bonheur, de sa sécurité, idées très-voisines de la notion de justice ? *Utilitas justis prope mater et æqui.*" (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 534)

<sup>33</sup> "Un homme naturellement méchant a senti par l'*expérience* et la *réflexion* les inconvénients de la méchanceté ; il reste méchant et fait le bien." (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 476–7 ; my italics)

<sup>34</sup> "Le grand homme, s'il a malheureusement reçu cette disposition naturelle [the extreme mobility of the diaphragm], s'occupera sans relâche à l'affaiblir, à la dominer, à se rendre maître de ses mouvements et à conserver à l'origine du faisceau tout son empire. Alors il se possédera au milieu des plus grands dangers, il jugera froidement, mais sainement." (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 394)

Of course, for Diderot, such a recommendation only applies to people having sufficient intellectual faculties, which would depend again on physiological data, that is, the conformation of the brain. Now, with regard to the reversibility of an intellectual deficit, the author is much more pessimistic than with what concerns morality, especially if it is the consequence of a bad conformation of the brain—not of a bad education:

Quand la bonté et la méchanceté tiendraient autant à l'organisation que le génie et la stupidité, il ne faudrait pas les confondre, non plus que les dispositions intérieures et les actions. Je m'explique. Un homme naturellement méchant a senti par l'expérience et la réflexion les inconvénients de la méchanceté ; il reste méchant et fait le bien. Un homme à demi sot a senti par l'expérience et par la réflexion les avantages de l'esprit ; il voudrait bien en avoir, mais il a beau faire, il n'en a point : il pense, agit et parle comme un sot (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 476–7)

Thus, Diderot does not imagine that someone with an intellectual deficit can become a genius, thanks to education, as nothing can be done to improve the conformation of his brain – and this is his main opposition to Helvétius (see, for instance, Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 456–9).

### 1.2. *Women's Physiological Organization: A Disturbed Economy*

If Diderot characterizes a human being by the equilibrium between the organs of his body, then woman such as he described her appears to be a separate being marked by the disharmony of her organism; a disharmony which tends to have moral consequences. Indeed, in “Sur les femmes,” Diderot maintains that women have a lower morality than men:

[N]’oubliez pas que, faute de réflexion et de principes, rien ne pénètre jusqu’à une certaine profondeur de conviction dans l’entendement des femmes ; que les idées de justice, de vertu, de vice, de bonté, de méchanceté, nagent à la superficie de leur âme ; qu’elles ont conservé l’amour-propre et l’intérêt personnel avec toute l’énergie de nature (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958; my italics)

Thus, they would have a stronger tendency than men to some vices such as, for instance, pride,<sup>35</sup> “machievellianism” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958) and seduction which seems to be their privileged means to reach their ends.<sup>36</sup> As suggested by the beginning of the quotation, women’s poor morality would be due to an intellectual deficit—a “*lack of reflection*”—which would constitute an obstacle to the achievement of operations of the mind, involved in the aforementioned calculation of pleasures and pain (see *supra*, §1.1). Now, Diderot does not seem to consider that such a deficit is due to a bad conformation of their brain. In *Réfutation d’Helvétius*, while showing his agreement with Helvétius’s claim according to which there would be very few women of genius (see Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 498), he rather put to the fore other physiological specificities due to their sexual

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<sup>35</sup> “L’orgueil est plus leur vice que le nôtre.” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 951)

<sup>36</sup> “Si vous les aimez, elles vous perdront [...] Toutes méritent d’entendre ce qu’un [...] poète [...] adresse à l’une d’entre elles : ‘votre cœur insolent Tend bien moins à l’amour qu’à subjuguier l’amant’ [...] Elles simuleront l’ivresse de la passion, si elles ont un grand intérêt à vous tromper ; elles l’éprouveront, sans s’oublier. Le moment où elles seront tout à leur projet sera quelquefois celui même de leur abandon” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 951).

organ, such as menstruation, pregnancy and delivery. Thus, to Helvétius's accusation against the bad education that they receive, he adds:

Mais leur organisation délicate, mais leur assujettissement à une maladie périodique, à des grossesses, à des couches, leur permettent-ils cette force et cette continuité de méditation que vous appelez la créatrice du génie et à laquelle vous attribuez toute importante découverte ? Elles font les premiers pas plus vite, mais elles sont plutôt lasses et s'arrêtent plus promptement. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 498)

Beyond the ignorance caused by the manifestations of the matrix, which would prevent women from benefiting from an education consistent with the development of a potential genius, the organ would be able to override the brain, disturbing the equilibrium of their body. Thus, Diderot takes another look at the classical idea according to which women would be the slaves of their uteri<sup>37</sup> In “Sur les femmes,” the organ is said to be “susceptible de spasmes terribles, disposant d'elle[s]” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 952), in the same manner as “l'âme du chien est au bout de son nez, [...] l'âme de l'aigle est dans son œil” and “l'âme de la taupe est dans son oreille” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 502). Here again, Diderot is in line with the physicians of the *Encyclopédie*<sup>38</sup> who consider that the matrix, like the diaphragm, has a direct connection with the brain, so that its disruption would “sympathetically” affect the latter and then be responsible for psychic phenomena, especially mental pathologies referred to as hysterical because of their physiological origin (melancholy, vapors, etc.).<sup>39</sup> Thus, Diderot claims that the manifestations of the uterus—that he goes as far as to call “bête féroce”—create in women's imaginations “des fantômes de toute espèce” or “[des] idées extraordinaires” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 952).

In addition to this physiological specificity, Diderot adds another specificity, equally disruptive to the equilibrium of women's bodies, which concerns their alleged stronger sensibility. He then supposes that they have “une âme plus mobile” and “des organes plus délicats.” Of course, the former feature refers to the diaphragm whose mobility is presumably the source that Diderot ascribes to their alleged propensity to emotional contagion<sup>40</sup>—to the “émotions épidémiques et populaires” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 949).<sup>41</sup> The mobility of the diaphragm together with the physiological manifestations of the matrix seems to be the cause of the extreme passions that the author grants to women— “un être” that he considers as “extrême dans sa force et dans sa faiblesse”:

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<sup>37</sup> This idea is already at work in *Les bijoux indiscrets*.

<sup>38</sup> According to Biasci (2017), such an idea would reveal the influence of the Hippocratic tradition—according to which women would have an immanent specificity whose seat would be the uterus—on Diderot.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Art. Fureur utérine, *nymphomania, furor uterinus*, VII: 378-81; Art. Hystérique, adj. ὑστερικὸς, *uterinus*, (Med.), VIII: 420 ; Art. Hystérique, (*passion ou affection*.), VIII: 420; Art. Mélancholie, X: 308-11; Art. Vapeurs, *en Médecine*, XVI: 836-7.

<sup>40</sup> As noticed by Belleguic (2007), in the “Diderotian world,” there is a connection between femininity and contagion.

<sup>41</sup> As we have seen, the author considers that sensitivity to others' emotions is a function of the mobility of diaphragm (see *supra*, §1.1)

C'est surtout dans la passion de l'amour, les accès de la jalousie, les transports de la tendresse maternelle, les instants de la superstition, la manière dont elles partagent les émotions épidémiques et populaires, que les femmes étonnent, belles comme les séraphins de Klopstok, terribles comme les diables de Milton. J'ai vu l'amour, la jalousie, la superstition, la colère, portés dans les femmes à un point que l'homme n'éprouva jamais. (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 949)

Now, it is clear that for the author, women, as such, are not able to control their passions—they are said to be deprived from “cette fermeté naturelle ou acquise” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 953). Within Diderot's conception, women typically correspond to the kind of person for whom, to take the words of Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*: “l'origine du faisceau” is “[s]ous l'anarchie, où tous les filets du réseau sont soulevés contre leur chef, et où il n'y a plus d'autorité supreme.” However, as we have seen in the previous subsection about men, as long as this does not come from a bad conformation of the brain, this should not constitute an inevitable outcome.<sup>42</sup> Although this idea did not apply to women especially, nonetheless in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Bordeu gives two illustrations of women succeeding in recovering from vapors:

MADemoiselle DE L'ESPINASSE – Dans les vapeurs, sorte d'anarchie qui nous est si particulière. BORDEU - C'est l'image d'une administration faible, où chacun tire à soi l'autorité du maître. Je ne connais qu'un moyen de guérir ; il est difficile, mais sûr ; c'est que l'origine du réseau sensible, cette partie qui constitue le soi, puisse être affectée d'un motif violent de recouvrer son autorité. MADemoiselle DE L'ESPINASSE – Et qu'en arrive-t-il ? BORDEU – Il en arrive qu'il la recouvre en effet [...] Une femme tomba à la suite d'une couche, dans l'état vaporeux le plus effrayant ; c'étaient des pleurs et des ris involontaires, des étouffements, des convulsions, des gonflements de gorge, du silence morne, des cris aigus, tout ce qu'il y a de pis : cela dura plusieurs années. Elle aimait passionnément, et elle crut s'apercevoir que son amant, fatigué de sa maladie, commençait à se détacher ; alors elle résolut de guérir ou de périr. Il s'établit en elle une guerre civile dans laquelle c'était tantôt le maître qui l'emportait, tantôt c'étaient les sujets. S'il arrivait que l'action des filets du réseau fût égale à la réaction de leur origine, elle tombait comme morte ; on la portait sur son lit où elle restait des heures entières sans mouvement et presque sans vie ; d'autres fois elle en était quitte pour des lassitudes, une défaillance générale, une extinction qui semblait devoir être finale. Elle persista six mois dans cet état de lutte. La révolte commençait toujours par les filets ; elle la sentait arriver. Au premier symptôme elle se levait, elle courait, elle se livrait aux exercices les plus violents ; elle montait, elle descendait ses escaliers ; elle sciait du bois, elle bêchait la terre. L'organe de sa volonté, l'origine du faisceau se roidissait ; elle se disait à elle-même : vaincre ou mourir. Après un nombre infini de victoires et de défaites, le chef resta le maître, et les sujets devinrent si soumis que, quoique cette femme ait éprouvé toutes sortes de peines domestiques, et qu'elle ait essayé différentes maladies, il n'a plus été question de vapeurs. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 389–90)

BORDEU – une jeune femme avait donné dans quelques écarts. Elle prit un jour le parti de fermer sa porte au plaisir. La voilà seule, la voilà mélancolique et vaporeuse. Elle me fit appeler. Je lui conseillai de prendre l'habit de paysanne, de bêcher la terre toute la journée, de coucher sur la paille et de vivre de pain dur. Ce régime ne lui plut pas. Voyagez donc, lui dis-je. Elle fit le tour de l'Europe, et retrouva la santé sur les grands chemins. (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 390)

In accordance with the prescriptions included in the article “VAPEURS” of the *Encyclopédie*, Bordeu's recommendation to women subject to this pathology is to avoid idleness and to engage in

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<sup>42</sup> “Dans les grands accès de passion, dans les délires, dans les périls imminents, si le maître porte toutes les forces de ses sujets vers un point, l'animal le plus faible montre une force incroyable.” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 388–9)

physical activities.<sup>43</sup> This is also a recommendation that Diderot more generally addresses to people prey to violent passions, in “Sur les femmes”:

Les distractions d’une vie occupée et contentieuse rompent nos passions. La femme couve les siennes : c’est un point fixe, sur lequel son oisiveté ou la frivolité de ses fonctions tient son regard sans cesse attaché. (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 949–50)

But the author does not seem to believe that women are in a position to mobilize such means, not because of their physiology but because of the influence of men’s authority on them.

## **2. The Historical Roots of Women’s Morality: Mode of Subsistence and Sexual Division of Labor**

Notwithstanding the influence that Diderot grants to physiology on women’s morality, in “Sur les femmes” he does not consider that their propensity to idleness and frivolity is due to their organic specificities but rather to the influence of the sexual division of labor decided by men in the European society of his time. In order to justify such a claim, the author makes use of an historical conjecture that he already used, almost word for word, in *L’Histoire des deux Indes*, while dealing with women’s situation on the banks of the Orinoco river at the moment of the Europeans’ settlement (§2.1.). This conjecture feeds Diderot’s recurring idea according to which “il y a pareillement un terme dans la civilisation” (Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 613); a term beyond which humans’ happiness and morality are compromised. The specificity, here, is that women’s morality constitutes the measure of this term that corresponds to the commercial society, a kind of society in which the domestic activities that are granted to them are supposed to favor their virtue. Beyond this term, the corrupting effect of luxury negatively affects women’s morality because of the frivolous activities into which men limit them (§2.2.).

### *2.1. An Historical Conjecture about Women’s Submission to Men*

The historical conjecture that Diderot uses in “Sur les femmes” is not the first of its kind, in his writings. For instance, in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, while challenging the famous tyrannical maxim: “divide and rule,” he explicitly conjectures about the origin of society as a savage and isolated natural state,<sup>44</sup> in order to emphasize what tends to promote its force—its members’ unity and not their division. This is the same kind of conjecture that he uses, in *Réfutation d’Helvétius*, in order to show that there is a limit to the process of civilization, beyond which the happiness of mankind is not guaranteed.

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<sup>43</sup> In the article “Vapeurs” of the *Encyclopédie*, the pathology is said to be stimulated by greed, physical idleness, frivolity, vanity or debauchery (see Art. Vapeurs, en *Médecine*, XVI: 836–7). Far from being original, such a therapy was already defended by Leibniz (see Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 1247).

<sup>44</sup> “On a imaginé bien des origines à la société : beau texte pour cette sorte d’oiseaux qui s’engraissent dans le brouillard et qu’on appelle métaphysiciens [...] Puisque chacun rêve à sa manière sur ce sujet, il me sera bien permis de rêver aussi.” (*Mémoires pour Catherine II*: 174)

It is worth noting that Diderot signed the article of the *Encyclopédie*, “CONJECTURE”,<sup>45</sup> in which the concept is presented as a judgement of causality founded on plausible but not certain proofs derived from experience.<sup>46</sup> Still in the *Encyclopédie*, the philosopher proposes to call for historical conjectures—“des suppositions philosophiques”; “quelqu’hypothèse vraisemblable”<sup>47</sup> or “la conjecture et l’histoire hypothétique”<sup>48</sup>—about the origin and the progress of an art when they are ignored, in order to enlighten but also to provide new insights about it.<sup>49</sup> Thus, contrary to Ottaviani’s (1991) claim, historical conjectures do not only have a didactic function, within Diderot’s perspective. They also constitute a means to produce knowledge which is not inconsistent with the experimental approach of history that Ottaviani (1991) thinks he identifies in *L’Histoire des deux Indes*, since Diderot believes that they must be founded on experience (see Rioux-Beaulne, 2008). Thus, as observed by Duflo (2013a: 126–7) and Tomaselli (2015), historical conjectures are used by Diderot in his contributions to Raynal’s book.

This is precisely the means that he adopts in the passage of “Sur les femmes” extracted from *L’Histoire des deux Indes* in order to show that women’s submission to men forms a natural law whose violation—which could only be the effect of superstition—would represent a threat to the harmony of society. We recognize here a recurrent theme in Diderot’s writings, according to which the promotion of moral, legal or religious laws in conflict with human nature is destructive for society (see Duflo, 2013b: 412–6).<sup>50</sup> As underlined by Duflo (2013b), natural laws here refer to the rules which regulate human physiological organization. And according to these rules, men would have a physiological superiority over women which would manifest in their superior strength and intelligence. This is what would provide foundation to the latter’s submission. Now, according to Diderot, by establishing the case of the Mariana Islands as an exception to this rule, historians would have failed to show that the submission of women to men constitutes “une loi bien connue, générale et constante de la nature” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 955). To their accounts, the author then substitutes a conjecture that he seems to consider more efficient than historians’ facts, in order to establish this natural law.

However, at the beginning of the passage, Diderot remains ambiguous in his approach. In order to emphasize the persistence of women’s submission to men, he starts by comparing different kinds of societies—“les nations sauvages,” “les pays policés” and the “peuples pasteurs” (Diderot, *Œuvres*:

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<sup>45</sup> Art. Conjecture, s. f. (Gram.), III: 870.

<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the sense of the word “conjecture, for Diderot, see Anderson (2014).

<sup>47</sup> See the article Art, s. m. (Ordre encyclop. Entendement. Mémoire. Histoire de la Nature. Histoire de la nature employée. Art.), I: 714.

<sup>48</sup> See the article Encyclopédie, s. f. (Philosoph.), V: 647.

<sup>49</sup> “*Avantages de cette méthode*. En s’y prenant ainsi, les progrès d’un Art seroient exposés d’une manière plus instructive & plus claire, que par son histoire véritable, quand on la sauroit. Les obstacles qu’on auroit eu à surmonter pour le perfectionner se présenteroient dans un ordre entierement naturel, & l’explication fynthétique des démarches successives de l’Art en faciliteroit l’intelligence aux esprits les plus ordinaires, & mettroit les Artistes sur la voie qu’ils auroient à suivre pour approcher davantage de la perfection.” (Art, I: 714; my italics)

<sup>50</sup> This topic constitutes, for instance, the core of his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*.

956). But soon after, this comparison takes an historical turn and proves to be a stadial theory of history.<sup>51</sup> The starting point of this conjecture is the same as in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II* and *Réfutation d'Helvétius*: a savage state in which isolated human beings have to gather in order to fight nature, a redoubtable enemy.<sup>52</sup> Now, in “Sur les femmes,” Diderot does not limit himself in opposing a savage state to a civil one as he does, for instance, in the aforementioned writings. Close to the four-stages theory, usually associated with the French and Scottish Enlightenment (see Meek, 1976), he identifies various degrees of civilization, corresponding to successive stages of development, or in Meek’s (1976) words, to successive modes of subsistence.

Originally, Diderot’s variant of stadial theory was not composed of four but of five stages, the four first stages being relatively familiar: (i) the savage stage (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 956), (ii) the pastoral stage (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 956–7), (iii) the agricultural stage (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957) and (iv) the commercial stage (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957). However, the last stage is quite specific to Diderot’s essay “Sur les femmes.” Let’s call it (v) the gallant stage—Diderot refers to the “nations galantes” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958). All along this history of civilization—and consistently with what Meek (1976) considers as one of the characteristics of the four-stages theory—material comfort progresses, and customs change correspondingly. Each stage refers to specific mores, granting a specific status to women, which would influence family ties. Of course, in all stages, a constant remains, that is, women’s submission to men, even if this submission expresses itself differently, according to their status. As a result, men would be in a position to determine women’s status according to their own needs. In other words, they would take the initiative of the sexual division of labor. For instance, in the savage state depicted by Diderot, men use their physiological superiority to give themselves the most esteemed tasks—hunting and fishing—and to concede to women the most degrading, typically, gathering. Such a tyranny, the author writes, would be the price paid by women to benefit from men’s protection:

Chez les peuples qui n’accordent leur estime qu’à la force et au courage, la faiblesse est toujours tyrannisée, pour le prix de la protection qu’on lui accorde. Les femmes y vivent dans l’opprobre. Les travaux regardés comme abjects sont leur partage. Des mains accoutumées à manier des armes ou la rame se croiraient avilies par des occupations sédentaires, par celles même de l’agriculture. (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 956)

In the commercial society, the sexual division of labor is viewed as more favorable to them than in the savage state. Because of the extension of their commercial relationships, men must now associate “la vigilance des femmes” to their “talents.” In the commercial stage, women’s role is actually restricted to domestic activities—“des occupations obscures ou sérieuses”—consisting in watching the family

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<sup>51</sup> On the continental variants of the four-stages theory applied to women history, during the eighteenth century, see Tomaselli (1985).

<sup>52</sup> For instance, in *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, Diderot writes that “Si l’homme trouve en naissant un ennemi, et un ennemi redoutable, si cet ennemi est infatigable, s’il est sans cesse poursuivi, s’il ne peut se promettre quelque supériorité que par des forces réunies, il a dû être porté de très bonne heure à cette réunion de forces. Cet ennemi, c’est la nature, et la lutte de l’homme contre la nature est le premier principe de la société. La nature l’assaille par les besoins qu’elle lui a donnés et par les dangers auxquels elle l’a exposé ; il a à combattre l’inclémence des saisons, les disettes, les maladies et les animaux.” (*Mémoires pour Catherine II*: 174–5).



home but also the men's shop floor, in order to allow them to dedicate themselves to industrial and commercial activities. Now, far from being depreciated, such activities are said to arouse the "autorité, le respect et l'attachement de tout ce qui les entoure" (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957).

More generally, Diderot considers the sexual division of labor to be increasingly favorable to women, in the successive stages of history. This would be the consequence of the growing esteem that they would receive and which itself would arise from the progress of material comfort (see Tomaselli, 1985). Indeed, Diderot assumes that this progress results in more time dedicated to leisure, as less effort is needed to survive. Thus, whereas the "savages" from the first stage would constantly fight for their survival, the "peuples pasteurs" would benefit from a safer existence allowing them to "s'occuper un peu davantage du soin de la rendre agréable" (Diderot, *Œuvres*, 956–7). As a result, in this latter stage, relations between men and women would no longer be based on physical necessities only but also on sentiments arising from the possibility of an aesthetic judgment, afforded by leisure. In the agricultural stage, Diderot writes, the "relations des deux sexes se perfectionnent" (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957). They are rationalized for patrimonial considerations because of the institutionalization of private property and the inequality of fortunes deriving from it. This evolution is supposed to attract "des égards aux femmes" —to women better endowed, of course—and to give them "quelque dignité" (Diderot, *Œuvres*, 957). The process goes on in commercial societies in which "[e]lles reçoivent une nouvelle importance de la création des arts et du commerce" and then in the last stage in which "les femmes sont recherchées avec empressement, et pour les qualités aimables qu'elles tiennent de la nature, et pour celles qu'elles ont reçues de l'éducation" (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957). Up to the commercial stage, Diderot views such an evolution as desirable. However, his judgment becomes different while considering the gallant stage that he adds to the traditional four-stages theory. This is what we are going to show in the next subsection.

## 2.2. *Women's immorality as a Sign of the Fall of Commercial Society*

Diderot's appraisal of the desirability of a society and its evolution is made in the context of the luxury quarrel. It relies on moral considerations regarding the various modes of subsistence represented by the five stages of his conjecture. From this perspective, he considers that there is a limit to the progress of industry above which more material comfort would be detrimental to the morality of society and inconsistent with human happiness.<sup>53</sup> Such a conception of the evolution of societies, which is regarded as cyclical by the literature,<sup>54</sup> is already at work in Diderot's other writings such as the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* and the *Réfutation d'Hélvétius* (Goggi, 1997). And, each time, this gives rise to the author's attempt to identify an optimal state of society between nature and civilization—although he believes that such a state is unstable.

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<sup>53</sup> About the vision of progress during the Enlightenment and the "paradox of perfectibility," see Lotterie (1998).

<sup>54</sup> On the materialist roots of Diderot cyclical view of history, see Mason (1996).

Interestingly, in the passage of “Sur les femmes” extracted from *L’Histoire des deux Indes*—a publication in which Diderot is considered ambiguous regarding his conception (either cyclical or linear) of history (see Mason, 1996 and Strugnell, 1999)—women are presented literally as the *measure* of this optimal state. They are regarded as “autant de thermomètres des moindres vicissitudes des mœurs et des usages” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958). Their morality is supposed to reflect the customs of society and depend on the status that men grant to them. And although Diderot views this status as progressing with material comfort, he does not believe that it comes along with an increase in women’s morality. If the adversity to which the savage is confronted in order to satisfy his basic needs, in the first stage of history, would not be conducive to women’s morality, as shown by the illustration of the alleged infanticide of the Native American from the banks of the Orinoco River,<sup>55</sup> the opulence of the gallant stage would not be less corrupting.

Indeed, Diderot considers that an optimum is reached with the commercial stage, in which women’s activities are restricted to the domestic sphere, that would be reflected in their character. Far from regretting women’s exclusion from the public sphere, the author claims that this renders them virtuous (see Meeker, 2003: 82–3):

Comme l’habitude de la galanterie, du luxe, de la dissipation, ne les a pas encore dégoûtées des occupations obscures ou sérieuses, elles se livrent sans réserve et avec succès à des fonctions dont elles se trouvent honorées. La retraite qu’exige ce genre de vie, leur rend chère et familière la pratique de toutes vertus domestiques. (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957)

After this stage, Diderot believes that more material comfort is corrupting, which would again be apparent in women’s character that would tend, this time, to be vicious. In the gallant stage, men would become sufficiently wealthy to turn away from productive activities. They would no longer have to make an effort to satisfy their needs but simply to prevent boredom:<sup>56</sup>

Vient enfin le temps où l’on est dégoûté du travail par l’accroissement des fortunes. Le soin principal est de prévenir l’ennui, de multiplier les amusements, d’étendre les jouissances. (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957)

Leisure would then become idleness and there would be no more sexual division of “labor.” Women would acquire a new status—a public one, this time<sup>57</sup>—which would consist in entertaining men with “les qualités aimables qu’elles tiennent de la nature, et pour celles qu’elles ont reçues de l’éducation.”

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<sup>55</sup> “Écoutez le discours d’une Indienne des rives de l’Orénoque ; et écoutez-le, si vous le pouvez, sans en être ému. Le missionnaire jésuite, Gumilla, lui reprochait d’avoir fait mourir une fille dont elle était accouchée, en lui coupant le nombril trop court : « Plût à Dieu, Père, lui dit-elle, plût à Dieu qu’au moment où ma mère me mit au monde, elle eût eu assez d’amour et de compassion, pour épargner à son enfant tout ce que j’ai enduré et tout ce que j’endurerai jusqu’à la fin de mes jours ! Si ma mère m’eût étouffée en naissant, je serais morte ; mais je n’aurais pas senti la mort, et j’aurais échappé à la plus malheureuse des conditions [...] ».” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 954)

<sup>56</sup> Of course, Diderot is well aware of wealth inequalities within the society of his time, which is supposed to be represented by the gallant stage. Thus, in *Réfutation d’Hévétius*, he emphasizes that only the rich live in idleness, the poor still being obliged to accomplish laborious task in order to satisfy their basic needs (see Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 611–4).

<sup>57</sup> On Diderot’s warning on the dangers of women’s acquisition of a public status, see Meeker (2003).

By contrast with the “occupations obscures ou sérieuses” of the commercial stage, women’s activities are now described as frivolous and libertine—they henceforth get “l’habitude de la galanterie, du luxe, de la dissipation” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 957). As a result of men’s own idleness, they would now become idle, spending their time in gallant affairs. However, as we have seen, Diderot considers frivolity and idleness as unfavorable to women’s control of their passions (see *supra*, §1.2.). And this is what he has in mind, in “Sur les femmes,” while denouncing the negative influence of men’s tyranny over women. But that is not all!

In gallant nations, men would actually be doubly guilty of women’s immorality. They would not only confine them to gallantry. At the same time, they would promulgate chastity and continence — especially for women—as a strong moral obligation; such a moral obligation being in complete contradiction to the irrepressible natural laws of human physiology. This would have two unfortunate consequences. The first concerns women’s sensitivity to moral sanction:

Pourquoi l’incontinence, ce délit si pardonnable en lui-même, cette action si indifférente par sa nature, si peu libre par son attrait, a-t-elle une influence si pernicieuse sur la moralité des femmes ? C’est, je crois, la suite de l’importance que nous y avons attachée. Quel sera le frein d’une femme déshonorée à ses yeux et aux yeux de ses concitoyens ? Quel appui les autres vertus trouveront-elles au fond de son âme, lorsque rien ne peut plus aggraver sa honte ? (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 959)

As in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, Diderot claims that moral laws, which would be inconsistent with the functioning of human physiology, would encourage the practice of vice (see Duflo, 2013b: 426–437). And women’s weakness would be such that the shame of vice would trap them into a downward spiral. They would no longer be sensitive to moral sanction so that, in the calculation of pleasure and pain which guides their behavior, blame and praise would not give rise to sensations able to counterbalance the pleasure of the vicious actions towards which there are now inclined:

On a mis tant d’importance à la galanterie, qu’il semble qu’il ne reste aucune vertu à celle qui a franchi ce pas [...] Le mépris de l’opinion publique, un des plus grands efforts de la sagesse, se sépare rarement dans un être faible et timide du mépris de soi-même. On n’a point cet héroïsme avec la conscience du vice. Celle qui ne se respecte plus cesse bientôt d’être sensible au blâme et à la louange ; et sans l’effroi de ces deux respectables fantômes, j’ignore quelle sera la règle de sa conduite. Il n’y a plus que la fureur du plaisir qui puisse la dédommager du sacrifice qu’elle a fait. Elle le sent ; elle se le dit ; et affranchies de la contrainte de la considération publique, elle s’y livre sans réserve (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 959)

More importantly, and this is the second consequence of men’s despotism, women’s immorality would have a retroactive effect on society as a whole: “La femme corrompue” says Diderot, “propage la corruption” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 959). They would not only set a bad example or be responsible for the extension of prostitution (Diderot, *Oeuvres*: 958–60). They would also threaten family ties which would be no longer necessary:

Sous l’empire de ces mœurs, l’amour conjugal est dédaigné ; et ce dédain affaiblit le sentiment de la tendresse maternelle, s’il ne l’éteint pas. Les devoirs les plus sacrés et les plus doux deviennent importuns ; et lorsqu’on les a négligés ou rompus, la nature ne les renoue plus. La femme qui se

laisse approcher d'un autre que de son mari, n'aime plus sa famille, et n'en est plus respectée. Les nœuds du sang se relâchent. Les naissances sont incertaines, et le fils ne reconnaît plus son père, ni le père son fils (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 960)

Paradoxically, the conclusion of Diderot's conjecture is that luxury leads men to grant too much importance to women jeopardizing what the author still considers a natural law, that is, their authority over them and with it, the order of society. This is in substance the message of the rare extract of *L'Histoire des deux Indes* that the author does not use in "Sur les femmes" but that nonetheless continues the description of the gallant stage:

Leurs liaisons s'étendent. La vie retirée ne leur convient plus. Il leur faut un rôle plus éclatant. Jetées sur le théâtre du monde, elles deviennent l'âme de tous les plaisirs, et le mobile des affaires les plus importantes. Le bonheur souverain est de leur plaire, et la grande ambition d'en obtenir quelques préférences. Alors renaît entre les deux sexes la liberté de l'état de nature, avec cette différence remarquable que dans la cité souvent l'époux tient moins à sa femme et la femme à son époux, qu'au fond des forêts ; que les enfants confiés en naissant à des mercenaires ne sont plus un lien ; et que l'inconstance qui n'aurait aucune suite fâcheuse chez la plupart des peuples sauvages, influe sur la tranquillité domestique et sur le bonheur chez les nations policées, où elle est un des principaux symptômes d'une corruption générale et de l'extinction de toutes les affections honnêtes. (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17)

Thus, as noticed by Meeker (2003), women's subjugation to men would not be as stable as Diderot pretends. However, contrary to Meeker's (2003: 83) interpretation, the threat against men's authority in the gallant nations does not come from an intentional attempt by women to act directly on history but from men's authority itself.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

Reading "Sur les femmes" in light of Diderot's writings dedicated to his materialist or political philosophy allowed us to show that his complaint against the influence of men's despotism on women's morality was not purely rhetorical, as sometimes claimed (see, for instance, Trouille, 1994). For all of that, this did not lead us to ascribe a feminist position to him. As we have seen, the way men exercise their authority over women, which varies according to the mode of subsistence and the sexual division of labor which characterizes it, can alleviate or, conversely, exacerbate the latter's physiological disequilibrium. Diderot considers men's authority as especially prejudicial in the gallant stage of society. In the commercial stage, on the contrary, he believes that it is quite beneficial as it provides women with the occupations that allow them to command their passions. Now, if we look more closely at the said occupations, there is nothing more than domestic activities.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Note that this contradicts a position defended some thirty years ago in a paper published in the *Mercure de France* under the title "Réflexion sur le courage des femmes" (1945) and attributed to Diderot (see Booy, 1976). In this work, the author precisely accuses the sexual division of labor established with the birth of commerce. The reason that he put to the fore contrasts with the one advanced in "Sur les femmes." According to him, by restricting women to domestic activities and extracting them from the public sphere, such a division of labor would prevent them from experimenting and acquiring self-control. The contradiction between "Réflexion sur le courage des femmes" and "Sur les femmes" could lead us to call into question the provenance of the former paper. However, it remains that the ingredients of these orthogonal positions are exactly the same—self-control, progress, men's despotism.

Such a perspective on Diderot’s reply to Thomas may in turn allow us to highlight other parts of his writings. Versini (1994) rightfully considers “Sur les femmes” of the “même famille” as *La Religieuse*. It might indeed seem to the careful reader that Diderot provides the same appraisal of the influence of men’s despotism on women’s morality in both texts. *La Religieuse* also offers a criticism of idleness that women endure—including outside the convent—and of its devastating effects on their morality. It is certainly no coincidence that the sole virtuous female character of the novel is the laundrywoman for whom Suzanne ends up working. Outside these similarities, our reading of “Sur les femmes” provides additional reasons to credit Lotterie’s (2017) thesis according to which Suzanne would be an “*hermaphrodite narrator*.” The way the character introduces herself—as “une fille de dix-sept à dix-huit ans” with “une fermeté peu commune” (Diderot, *Contes et romans*: 256)—may indeed be considered as bizarre, with regards to what Diderot claims about women’s ability to control their passions in the essay. Unless these words aimed at arousing suspicion of a hoax whose victim, the Marquis of Croismare, was the original recipient of the nun’s memoirs and at giving some clues as to the true author of Suzanne’s memoirs, that is, Diderot himself!<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> On the history of the novel and Diderot’s mystification, see Paige (2011).

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<sup>60</sup> Bracketed names notify that the attributed author of the text did not sign it.

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