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A non-patriarchal society: James Henry Lawrence (1773-1840) and *The Empire of the Nairs*

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The Age of Enlightenment and its aftermath were characterized by a strong opposition between an ideal of companionate marriage and matrimonial institutions based on hierarchy and indissolubility.

In most European countries, and because of the rule of presumption of paternity, the husband was necessarily seen as being legally responsible for the children brought into the world by his wife. He had the obligation to take care of these children – and of his wife as well. In exchange, he could demand strict obedience and loyalty from his spouse; children, inheriting his family name, would belong to his lineage. This is why marriage could be analyzed as an institution where women have been made the property of their husband.

Because divorce was generally not legal, marriage was with increasing frequency described as a “yoke”, and unhappy married people as the victims of an unfair law. A few authors, especially in England, had gradually become vocal about this way of organizing families and sexual relationships¹. For example, Thomas Holcroft or Mary Wollstonecraft thought the whole “sociability of love” had to be changed: not only marriage but courtship had to be modified in order for men and women to live more happily. Only a minority would ask for the complete abolition of marriage. Among them were the British philosopher William Godwin and the French legislator François Boissel (1728-1807). They would call for the end of marriage, but without giving lengthy elaboration to this idea.

It appears that at the end of the 18th Century, only one man is known to have thought differently about this question. His name was James Henry Lawrence (1773-1840). While Lawrence is almost forgotten today, he was a friend of the German Romantics, Goethe and Schiller, and well known within English radical circles, particularly in the Percy Bysshe Shelley nexus. Today, he is only familiar to a few specialists of Shelley and Goethe as the eccentric author of *The Empire of the Nairs, or the Rights of Women* (1811). This book, first written in German and published as an Essay in 1793, to which was later added a 1300-page novel, was edited and translated under a number of different titles, such as *Das Paradies der Liebe* (1801), *Le Panorama des boudoirs* (1816), *The Empire of the Nairs; or, the Panorama of Love* (1824), or *Plus de maris! Plus de pères!* (1837) until the late 1830s². We even know of an unauthorized edition, published between 1794 and 1801 by the Newgate group: *An Essay on the Nair System of Gallantry and inheritance; shewing its superiority over marriage, as insuring an indubitable genuineness of birth, and being more favorable to population, the rights of women, and the active disposition of men* [sic]³. So important was Lawrence’s *The Empire of the Nairs* that it attracted the

¹ See CHERNOCK, Ariane, 2009. *Men and the making of modern British feminism*, Stanford, CA., Stanford University Press.

² See the complete bibliography at the end of the chapter. I wish to thank Sylviane Rebaud, Nathalie Morello, Steve Sarson, Annick Cossic and Emrys Jones for their invaluable help on this chapter.

³ London: printed for J. Ridgeway and H. D. Symonds. This edition has been re-edited in 2005. See “An Essay on the Nair System”, in DAVIS, Michael T., MCCALMAN, Iain and PAROLIN, Christina, ed., *Newgate in Revolution: An Anthology of Radical Prison Literature in the Age of Revolution*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, p. 37-66. As the title shows, this later edition was written in “semi-phonetic” English, in accordance with the ideas of the agrarian radical Thomas Spence, who wanted to develop a method of reading and writing accessible to illiterate people. Lawrence will allude to this translation for which he had not been consulted in a later edition of his book: “whatever may be its success, [it] must

attention of 19th-century European radicals, most notably French feminists aligned to the Saint-Simonian movement, such as Claire Demar (1799-1833), Suzanne Voilquin (1801-1877), and Flora Tristan (1803-1844).

What James H. Lawrence proposed in *The Empire of the Nairs* was striking, and unusual: a society with neither marriage nor any acknowledgement of paternity. Lawrence argued that, in order to build a rational society for the greater good, the “sociability of love” had to be completely reimagined: women had to be able to choose their lovers whenever they wished, for one dance, one night or for life. In order to be able to do so, they had to be totally independent from men. Inspired by an Indian social caste called the Nairs, he came up with the idea of a matrilineal society free from patriarchy and characterized by free love. At a time when in Western Europe’s progressive circles spaces of sociability, whether political or familial, were being reassessed and reorganised, through several years of revolutions, in the light of a social contract, which despite its political liberalism remained patriarchal⁴, Lawrence’s promotion of a system in contradiction with bourgeois ethics stands out. Contrary to these values which shaped the invention of the domestic sphere and the separation of the private and public spheres⁵, this English author chose to disrupt the sociability of love in two of its main spaces: sexuality and family, which he put in the hands, and under the exclusive authority, of women.

The history of ideas of social and political equality between men and women, starting with Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges or Nicolas de Condorcet, is well known⁶. Lawrence’s *The Empire of the Nairs* put forward something very different and far more radical: women and men were social beings with the same sexual desires, the same needs for independence, the same intelligence – and they were both unreliable in matters of love and sexuality. Despite these similarities, men and women ought not to have the same rights: women – and women only – were to be granted the rights to property and family names. Lawrence is probably the first author to write that motherhood should be directly supported by society (i.e. not through marriage) and that *all* women ought to live materially, socially and legally “perfectly uncontrolled by any man” (LAWRENCE, 1811: xvii). Because he was thinking as an aristocrat, Lawrence placed an “indubitable birth⁷” as a condition of happiness, peace and prosperity for all. Given the fact that paternity is never certain, it was preferable to give only mothers the family rights. This is why Lawrence would propose to eradicate the word “father” and everything associated with paternal rights. These two elements, matrilineality and women’s independence, made his utopia not only a non-patriarchal society, but a famous yet under-studied utopia.

Matrilineality, women’s independence and men’s freedom

be more acceptable to the public than a literal translation of the first German edition”. LAWRENCE, James, 1811. *The Empire of the Nairs, or, The rights of women. An Utopian romance, in twelve books / by James Lawrence, author of “The bosom friend”, “Love, an allegory”, etc. in four volumes* London, T. Hookham, Jun. and E. T. Hookham, vi; subsequent references to this edition are included in parenthesis in the main body of the text.

⁴ See PATEMAN, Carole, 1989. *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Cambridge, Polity.

⁵ HEUER, Jennifer and VERJUS, Anne, 2002. “L’invention de la sphere domestique au sortir de la Révolution”, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 327, p. 1-28.

⁶ See RENDALL, Jane, 1985. *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860*, London, Macmillan; MOORE, Lisa Lynne, BROOKS, Joanna and WIGGINTON, Caroline, ed., 2012. *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*, New York, Oxford University Press.

⁷ This expression is taken from the title of his “Introduction” to *The Empire of the Nairs*, 1811.

What would later become *The Empire of the Nairs, or the Rights of Women* was first published as an essay in *Der neue Deutsche Merkur* in 1793: “Ueber die Vortheile des Systems der Galanterie und Erbfolge bey den Nayren⁸” (“*On the benefits of the Nairs’ System of Gallantry and inheritance*”). As the title indicated, the focus was both on love relationships and the means of transferring one’s name to one’s heirs. Neither the words “equality”, “freedom”, or “rights” appear in the first title. Yet, Lawrence’s essay addressed these matters by criticizing marriage and paternity; and second, by considering matrilineality, free love and women’s independence as a way of building a better society.

James Henry Lawrence was only twenty years old when he published “Ueber die Vortheile des Systems der Galanterie und Erbfolge bey den Nayren⁹”. This initial essay, about 50 pages long, was illustrated in 1801 by a 1300-page novel, first entitled *Das Paradies der Liebe*¹⁰ (The Paradise of Love), then *Das Reich der Nairen* (the Empire of the Nairs) in 1809¹¹. It was translated into English in 1811 by Lawrence, receiving its first women-centered title: *The Empire of the Nairs; or, the Rights of Women, An Utopian romance*. The initial Essay had then become a 43-page introduction entitled *An Essay on the Nair System of Gallantry and Inheritance; Shewing its advantages over marriage, in insuring an indubitable birth, and being favourable to the population, to the rights of women, and to the active genius of men*¹². We will rely on this 1811 version, despite a few (but not very important) differences with the German and French versions.

Lawrence began his “Introduction” to the 1811 novel by presenting the Nairs as a caste of nobles who had granted the Nairresses the privilege of having several lovers: “It is the privilege of the Nair lady to choose and change her lover” (LAWRENCE, 1811: i). The care of the children was devolved exclusively to the mother; and the name of a father was “unknown to a Nair child” (LAWRENCE, 1811: ii). While specifying that the novel intended to illustrate this system was built on his imagination, the author added that “many of the European anecdotes are founded on facts” (LAWRENCE, 1811: ii). Halfway between the utopia and the social analysis of marriage of his time, his “Paradise of the Mothersons” “was designed to shew the possibility of a nation’s reaching the highest civilization without marriage” (LAWRENCE, 1811: ii).

Lawrence attacked marriage as it was ordained: for the “comfort of the man, that of the women being disregarded” (LAWRENCE, 1811: x):

Wedlock is not only a cruel, but a partial yoke. Marriage is a prison that confines both man and wife; but, as, in a jail, one prisoner may exercise over an other (sic) the functions of a turnkey, so the husband is the most favoured of the two. (LAWRENCE, 1811: viii.)

⁸ LAWRENCE, James Henry, 1793. “Ueber die Vortheile des Systems der Galanterie und Erbfolge bey den Nayren”, in *Der neue Deutsche Merkur*, June, p. 160-99.

⁹ Still Lawrence was not a complete stranger to the world of letters. Two years before, he had published a 51-page poem, “The Bosom friend” (LAWRENCE, 1791), which had been named in one of the Annual Registers among “the most remarkable (sic) proæductions of the year” (LAWRENCE, 1828). The Annual Registers had recommended the poem to Wieland, Heyne and others German figures. Wieland, whom some called the “German Voltaire” was, at that time, the editor of *Der Deutsche Neue Merkur*. The powerful Weimar editor wrote he owed Lawrence “the warmest thanks for the honor that [he] did [him], in preferring [him] to the Editors of similar periodical publications”. This letter from Wieland to Lawrence was published (and never re-edited) in *The Lion*, on the 5th of December, 1828, p. 716.

¹⁰ LAWRENCE, James Henry, 1801. *Das Paradies der Liebe*, in *Ungers Journalhandlung, Journal der Romane*, n° Stück 6-9, 4 volumes of 367, 324, 312 and 376 pages respectively.

¹¹ LAWRENCE, James Henry, 1809. *Das Reich der Nairen oder das Paradies der Liebe*, Unger.

¹² This title has a lot in common with the unauthorized edition of 1794/1801. The “indubitable genuinness of birth” has become “indubitable birth”, and the “active disposition of men”, their ‘active genius’.

Marriage created a legal obligation of faithfulness for couples, which was, according to Lawrence, contrary to the unstable and capricious nature of the “mind of man”: “There is implanted in the mind of man such a repugnance to restriction, that every pleasure ceases when it assumes the appearance of a duty” (LAWRENCE, 1811: iii). This was true for women as well as for men. And it was for these reasons that Lawrence argued that men ultimately could never be certain of their own paternity. In a world where “insuring an indubitable birth” was still crucial (not only for nobles), where letting a “stranger” invade the patrimony of a father’s “true” children was considered a catastrophe, the institution of paternity could only lead to more jealousy and discord in marriage, and ultimately more conflicts, violence and murders¹³. Just as marriage created the division between wives and prostitutes, paternity created the division between legitimate children and “bastards”. By removing the twin institutions of marriage and paternity, Lawrence believed society would become more peaceful, more egalitarian, and fairer for all.

Drawing on his own observations, Lawrence’s analyses were also based on a body of legislation that, in Western Europe, was consistent from the point of view of women’s rights. When he wrote the British version of his essay, in 1811, the French reforms in the law of marriage brought about by the Revolution had for the most part been abolished by the Civil Code of 1804. In England, as in the German countries, the wife must obey her husband; the husband was obliged to recognise as his own the children born of his marriage; the husband’s adultery was punished less severely than that of the wife; finally, except in Prussia, unmarried mothers were deprived of legal recourse against the father of their child¹⁴. Without rights, most of them were doomed to opprobrium and misery. Finally, divorce, allowed in Berlin, and introduced for two decades (1792-1816) into French law, became forbidden, before reappearing in 1884.

Lawrence’s ideas on marriage and paternity were not intended to give women and men equal rights. Yet, Lawrence quoted Wollstonecraft. He was also very fond of a German philosopher in favour of women’s education: Jakob Mauvillon (1743-1794). As he wrote, abolishing marriage “would be the abolition of the servitude of the one, nay, would increase the liberty and happiness of both sexes, and, far from being detrimental, would promote it” (LAWRENCE, 1811: xi). As an aristocrat and as a true liberal, he was more interested in promoting liberties than rights.

How did Lawrence envisage the organisation of society without marriage or paternity, and yet favour women’s independence *and* men’s “active life”? As Lawrence saw it, marriage was not only a way of making people unhappy, it had been created for the sole “comfort of the man”. Throughout his essay, he showed how women were the victims of patriarchal society, comparing them to slaves:

¹³ Indeed, later in his life (1827), Lawrence coined a word to describe the way that marriage, more than the individual, was responsible for the killing of one’s spouse. He would call this social fact a *mariticide*, indicting the institution and not the individual. The neologism appeared in two specific French and British editions of his essay, at the beginning of the 1830s, at a time when France was debating the reintroduction of divorce legislation. See LAWRENCE, James, 1828, *The Etonian out of bounds ; or, Poetry and Prose*, by Sir James Lawrence, London, published by Hunt and Clarke, N°4, York Street, Covent Garden, vol. 1, p. 171-186 ; and LAURENCE, Chevalier de [Lawrence, James Henry], 1837. *Plus de maris ! Plus de pères ! ou le Paradis des enfants de Dieu*, Paris, Roux éditeur, 34, rue des Gravilliers, Delaunay, Libraire au Palais-Royal, p. xvi.

¹⁴ GERHARD, Ute, 2000. “Legal Particularism and the Complexity of Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century Germany”, in STEINMETZ, Willibald, ed., *Private Law and Social Inequality in the Industrial Age. Comparing Legal Cultures in Britain, France, Germany and the United States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 137-155; GERHARD, Ute, 2016. “Droit civil et genre en Europe au dix-neuvième siècle”, in *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* n° 43 (1), p. 250-73.

Some people maintain that the woman was created for the use of the man; but, says the author of *Mann und Weib*, [Mauvillon] the West-Indian planter could with equal reason maintain that God had created for his use the negro in Africa. (LAWRENCE, 1811: ix).

Lawrence believed girls should be educated in the same way and alongside boys. Echoing Wollstonecraft on this matter, he was a true advocate of women's rights to education: "There are many things which a woman need not study, but there is nothing that she should be hindered from knowing." (LAWRENCE, 1811: xxviii). Like many authors he admired (Jakob Mauvillon, Theodor Hippel) Lawrence did not necessarily see women's education as an end in itself, but as a means to strengthen either their ability to educate children, or the "union of two strangers" which would "not have the same prospects of stability as one between a couple who have had every opportunity of knowing each other" (LAWRENCE, 1811: xliii). In many ways, Lawrence shared his views with the advocates of the rights of women. But his project, as described in his introduction, was larger. Women's rights and independence were a consequence of his willingness to build a society for the greater good. And a non-patriarchal society was a means to ensure an "indubitable birth", his ultimate goal.

Unlike Wollstonecraft in her writings, Lawrence was also a proponent of free love. In this matter like in any other, women "might follow their inclinations with so little restraint as their brothers" (LAWRENCE, 1811: xvii). But in a world with limited and unreliable contraception, and which offered women only insufficiently remunerative trades, how could women survive, let alone thrive, as independent beings without a marriage contract? How, given the vulnerabilities of human nature, could one build a rational society? William Godwin and François Boissel (1728-1807) responded to this problem idealistically by relying on men's morality, with fathers - or the community - caring for mothers and children: ideally, newborns would immediately enter an inclusive, peaceful and prosperous community that would generously support them and men, in the end, would be responsible for "their" children. The mother being ultimately (or in fact) the sole carer of the child was disregarded entirely.

Although he too claimed to be a utopian thinker, Lawrence was less optimistic and far more pragmatic than Godwin and Boissel. Where Godwin imagined a society of elective ties that would collectively take care of children, Lawrence remained in a setting where childbirth and parenting were not choices but one's destiny. In a society that would not control contraception, it was more than a destiny, it was almost inevitable for sexually active women. In doing so, Lawrence resisted the temptation of "laissez-faire" in matters of parental responsibility. Where others shared the optimism of French legislators when they introduced, in Year II, the right of an unmarried man to recognize (or not) the children he wanted, pretending that this right was necessarily accompanied by the moral obligation to recognize any child he believed to be his own, thinkers like Boissel or Godwin preferred to find collective solutions to the consequences of free love for mothers and children. Lawrence, who was less idealistic, decided to give women the means not to depend on a man's good will to provide for the children born of these common-law unions. He did not count either on being able to appeal to better human beings. Rather, he dealt with men and women as they were: unfaithful, weak, and unreliable. This is the reason why Lawrence focused on how women could gain economic and social independence:

[L]et every female live perfectly uncontrolled by any man, and enjoying every freedom, which the males only have hitherto enjoyed; let her choose and change her lover as she please, and of whatever rank he may be. At her decease, let her possessions be divided among her children. Let

the inheritance of her daughters descend in like manner to their offspring; and the inheritance of her sons fall, at their decease, to their sisters, and to their sisters' children. (LAWRENCE, 1811: xvii)

To mothers without any assets, the public treasury would give a “fixed sum, according to the number of their children¹⁵” (LAWRENCE, 1811: xxxii). Being independent was not enough: children would bear their mother's name, and “inherit the honors of her family” (LAWRENCE, 1811: xxxii). As for men, they would live on rents paid by their mother. Being freed of all family responsibilities, they could accomplish their active disposition, that is: working, going to war or travelling.

The first question that comes to mind when faced with such a system is that of its inclusion of what has since been called essentialist thinking: thus women seem to be sent back, or even reduced, to their bodily capacities. The idea of a gender-neutral individual had no place in such a configuration. In a society without contraception, a woman had to be sterile or chaste to claim to escape her reproductive capacity. However, Lawrence did not force women to become mothers; he never linked their independence to their maternal “condition”. They inherited from their mothers, brothers and uncles, like sons did. A man passed on his property only in a collateral line, since he was never a father but at the most a brother or uncle. Since women's independence was ensured in a systemic way by this inheritance law, there was no obligation for them to become mothers in order to survive. Unlike 19th-century society, which relegated unmarried women to its margins and, unless they attempted the risks of the big city and prostitution, placed them under the control of institutions (the Church or the family) whose reputation depended in part on their sexual behaviour, Lawrence's utopia did not place women before the alternative of “celibacy and marginality” or “marriage and subordination”. By abolishing marriage, he not only removed the distinction between honourable and dishonoured women, but also between mothers and others. None would be dependent on a father, lover or husband for survival.

This way of separating parental duties, trying to build a rational society while taking into account the realities of human nature, and putting an end to the family unit while maintaining the lineage at the very core of society, is what made Lawrence's utopia so different from the others: an important, innovative and in a way, a feminist utopia.

An erratic but everlasting standing

Lawrence's utopia was unparalleled. Lawrence stood as a well-known “eccentric” and somehow lonely advocate of matrilineality. He built his system after having read Mary Wollstonecraft, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (1741-1796), and Jakob Mauvillon (1743-1794), all three of whom championed women's education. He might have consulted other sources on the Nairs, which were probably available at the Göttingen Library: articles by d'Holbach, Diderot, and others in the *Encyclopédie*, for example; or books by Pyrrard, Montesquieu or Grose who mentioned the “Nays” as a caste where the custom of one wife being common to a number prevailed¹⁶.

¹⁵ In the 1817 (French) version of the book, Lawrence speaks of a “pension proportionnée à la quantité de ses enfants” (LAWRENCE, 1817. *Le panorama des boudoirs, op. cit.*, xxxix) (“a pension proportionate to the number of her children”). In French, a pension is more like a salary, but Lawrence does not elaborate on this idea. And a “fixed sum” might as well be given on a regular basis, like a salary. It is therefore difficult to know exactly what Lawrence meant by a “fixed sum”.

¹⁶ PYRRARD, 1619 [1609]. *Voyage de François Pyrrard de Laval ...aux Indes Orientales, Maldives, Moluques, Brésil*, Paris: Chez Samuel Thiboust, au Palais en la galerie des Prisonniers et chez la veuve Remy Dallin au mont St. Hilaire;

Several articles of the *Encyclopedia* mentioned the Nairs. This was the case of that of Diderot, entitled “Espèce humaine” (Human Species), in which the philosopher also mentioned the “Naires” (sic) as a people where men “can only have one wife, but their wives can take as many husbands as they like” (“ne peuvent avoir qu’une femme, mais leurs femmes peuvent prendre autant de maris qu’il leur plait¹⁷”). Antoine-Gaspard Boucher d’Argis quoted them in his articles on “marriage” and on “nobility”. Neither was as precise or as biting as Baron d’Holbach, who denounced the feeling of superiority of this “class”.

Lawrence was well known in literary circles in Germany, even before Wieland published his first essay, as noted earlier. While Schiller was critical of him¹⁸, he nevertheless played a crucial part in having the 1300-page novel published in 1801. At the time Lawrence was living in Weimar, probably renting a room¹⁹ to Karoline von Wolzogen, a well-known novelist by that time, and Schiller’s sister-in-law. Lawrence had first been introduced to Schiller by Joseph Charles Mellish (1769-1823), an Etonian who called him his “gutter Freund von mir” (his good friend)²⁰. We have evidence that Schiller read Lawrence’s English manuscript of *Das Paradies der Liebe* and recommended it to Unger, his own editor, who had it published in his *Journal der Romane* in 1801²¹:

An Englishman who now lives here has written a witty work in the taste of Boccaz, consisting of several novellas, which are pushed into each other and united for one purpose in a pleasant whole. He wants to have this work, which amounts to 3 or 4 volumes, translated into German before it is published in England, and offers it to you under cheap conditions. The article does not seem to me to be a bad speculation, after what I have read from it²².

MONTESQUIEU, 1749 [1748]. *De l’Esprit des Loix, ou Du rapport que les Loix doivent avoir avec la Constitution de chaque Gouvernement, les Mœurs, le Climat, la Religion, le Commerce, etc.* . . . , Genève, chez Barrillot & Fils; GROSE, John Henry, 1772 [1757]. *A voyage to the East-Indies*, London, S. Hooper.

¹⁷ DIDEROT, “Espèce humaine”, in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, DIDEROT, Denis and D’ALEMBERT, Jean le Rond, ed., University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Autumn 2017 Edition, MORRISSEY, Robert and ROE, Glenn, ed., <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>, vol. 8, p. 345.

¹⁸ See the letter he wrote to his friend Körner in 1803, asking if he had read *Das Paradies der Liebe*, calling it a “possierliches Product”, and describing it as a book “not without interest and merit” despite its crudeness: “Das Sujet, in der Form des Candide bearbeitet, hätte sehr glücklich ausfallen können; und auch so ist es, bei aller Rohheit, nicht ohne Interesse u. Verdienst.” Schiller to Gottfried Körner, 7th January 1803. <https://www.friedrich-schiller-archiv.de/briefe-schillers/briefwechsel-mit-gottfried-koerner/schiller-an-gottfried-koerner-7-januar-1803/>

¹⁹ According to Landgraf, Charlotte von Schiller would call Lawrence “das Haustier der Schwester” (her sister’s pet), which meant either he was living with her as a guest, or he was a very close friend of the family (“Charlotte nennt ihn das “Haustier” der Schwester, was vielleicht heissen mag, dass er bei ihr im Hause wohnte, aber auch nur für Hausfreund gesetzt sein kann”). LANDGRAF, Hugo [1933]. *Ritter Lawrence, ein weimarischer Engländer*, Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, p. 12.

²⁰ “Mellisch an Schiller”, November 1799, in URLICHS, Ludwig von, 1877. *Briefe an Schiller*, Stuttgart, Cotta, II, p. 336.

²¹ *Das Paradies der Liebe: in zwölf Büchern*. Unger, 1801.

²² “Ein Engländer, der jetzt hier lebt, hat ein geistreiches Werk im Geschmack des Boccaz geschrieben, aus mehreren Novellen bestehend, die in einander geschoben und zu Einem Zweck in einem angenehmen Ganzen vereinigt sind. Er will dieß Werk, welches 3 bis 4 Bändchen beträgt, deutsch übersetzen lassen, eh es in England herauskommt, und bietet es Ihnen an, unter billigen Bedingungen. Der Artikel scheint mir keine schlimme Spekulation, nach dem einzelnen was ich daraus gelesen.“ Schiller to Friedrich Unger, 28. November 1800. Schiller’s letter is to be found on the [friedrich-schiller-archiv: https://www.friedrich-schiller-archiv.de/briefe-schillers/andere-briefe/schiller-an-friedrich-unger-28-november-1800/](https://www.friedrich-schiller-archiv.de/briefe-schillers/andere-briefe/schiller-an-friedrich-unger-28-november-1800/) We cannot know for sure if Lawrence translated his novel from English to German. The German edition makes no mention of a translation.

Wieland, when reading the book, was more than reserved, almost indignant, talking about a “shameful work²³”, promising Lawrence would no longer be tolerated in good society.

Lawrence is remembered today among German scholars mainly because he shared a lasting friendship with Goethe. They had met in December 1799, when Goethe had invited Lawrence to attend Voltaire’s *Mohamet*, in Weimar²⁴. It is Goethe who, in 1809, having read *Das Reich der Nairen*, sent it to Eichstädt, the publisher of Jena’s literary journal (*Jenaischen Literature-Zeitung*). According to Lawrence, Goethe had been speaking highly of his book, as he recalls from one of Goethe’s letters: “the other day in Vienna, when my name was pronounced in society, a lady asked me if I had not written a book that she had heard praised by Goethe last summer in Toeplitz²⁵”. Goethe would call him a “vieljährige Freunde” (a long-term friend), in a letter to Thomas Carlyle²⁶; in 1829, Lawrence was asked, among other English friends of Goethe, to pose for the painter Johann Joseph Schmeller (1796-1841)²⁷.

The German philosopher would eventually say of Lawrence that he was “a madman of brilliant wit” (“un fou de beaucoup d’esprit²⁸”), admitting he would be much more appreciative of his writings if his approach to the relationship between the sexes had not become a kind of “idée fixe²⁹”. Lawrence lived for many years in Weimar, providing poems to the journal founded by Otilie von Goethe, *Das Chaos*.

In Britain, Lawrence met Godwin and other radicals who shared his views³⁰. Among them was the American politician, Aaron Burr (1756-1836) – a devoted follower of Wollstonecraft. Having borrowed *The Empire* from Godwin, he noted in his diary: “The fellow has stolen a good many of my ideas, but I am glad of it. The subject will always be new in my hands³¹.” A few days later, having introduced himself to the author as “one who had read his book with pleasure, and wished to know the author”, Burr stayed an hour at Lawrence’s place, on George Street, promising to meet again³². Later in his life, Lawrence would recall that Burr had invited him to go back with

²³ “Ich begreife nicht, wo Hr. Hunger die Unverschämtheit hergenommen hat, ein so schändliches Werk zu verlegen, noch wie es öffentlich unter den Augen eines so tugendreichen u Exemplarischen Ehepaars wie der König und die Königin von Preussen zu Berlin gedruckt und verkauft werden konnte.” WIELAND, Christoph Martin. *Wielands Briefwechsel*. Elfter Band (Januar 1791-Juni 1793), Zweiter Teil: Anmerkungen, Bearbeitet von Uta Motschmann, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2003, p. 697.

²⁴ Goethes Werke. Weimarer Ausgabe, III. Abteilung, Bd. 2, S. 272-278.

²⁵ “...als neulich in Wien mein Name von ohngefahr in der Gesellschaft ausgesprochen wurde, fragte mich eine Dame, ob ich ein Buch nicht geschrieben hatte, das sie den vorigen Sommer zu Töplitz von Göthe hatte loben hören”. See “J. H. Lawrence an Goethe 18. 8. 1809 (Scott S. 25)”, in GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von, 1999. *Begegnungen und Gespräche*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Verlag, vol. VI, 1806-1808, p. 527.

²⁶ GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von, 1828. *Goethes sämtliche Werke*, vol. 40, G. Müller, 19 (15 janvier 1828).

²⁷ For the Goethe “letter”, see at the Taylor Institution, Oxford, Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 1749-1832 (1829): [Letter], 1829 Nov. 15, Weimar, [to] “Herr Ritter Lawrence” [James Henry Lawrence, 1773-1840]. [By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe]. -- [1 p.] ; 13 cm. The portrait, a drawing, is kept at the Goethe und Schiller Archiv in Weimar.

²⁸ Soret, 23rd April, 1830, in GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von, 1910. *Goethes Gespräche*. Gesamtausgabe, Neu herausgegeben von Flodoard Frhr. Von Biederman, Leipzig: F. W. v. Biedermann, vol. 4, p. 263.

²⁹ “C’est selon Goethe le travail d’un fou de beaucoup d’esprit et il ferait beaucoup plus de cas des écrits de Laurence, si sa manière d’envisager les rapports entre les sexes n’était pas devenue chez lui une espèce d’idée fixe.” *Ibid*.

³⁰ In Godwin's diary, there are 19 references to James Henry Lawrence. According to one of Godwin's biographers, the two men had known each other since September 1796 (ST CLAIR, William, 1989. *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, London, Faber, p. 264). However, the name “Chevalier Lawrence” (in French) does not appear in his diary until 1802. Godwin mentioned in January 1810 he took a look at the “Nairs” (probably the manuscript, given the date): “Nairs, çala” [meaning he went rather quickly through the book], after having met Lawrence. See <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/index2.html>.

³¹ BURR, Aaron, 1838. *The Private Journal of Aaron Burr*, vol. 2, p. 319 (February 25, 1812).

³² BURR, Aaron, 1838. *The Private Journal of Aaron Burr*, vol. 2, 342 (March 10, 1812).

him to America where they would both establish a “république nairaise³³”? Nothing of this sort happened.

More importantly, at least for posterity, Lawrence was much admired by Percy Shelley, maybe the most famous early nineteenth-century critic of marriage. On the 17th of August, 1812, Shelley wrote a letter of admiration to Lawrence:

Your “Empire of the Nairs,” which I read this spring, succeeded in making me a perfect convert to its doctrines. I then retained no doubts of the evils of marriage, — Mrs. Wollstonecraft reasons too well for that ; but I had been dull enough not to perceive the greatest argument against it, until developed in the “Nairs,” viz., prostitution both legal and illegal³⁴.

Some of Shelley’s work, in particular *Queen Mab* (1813), *Laon and Cythna* (1817) and *Rosalind and Helen* (1819), is said to have been inspired by Lawrence’s apology for free love³⁵. Mary Shelley, who counted *The Empire of the Nairs* among her readings in the fall of 1814, is said to have written *Frankenstein* in reply to Lawrence (Neff, 1996). Richard Carlile also knew Lawrence and in 1828 he published his essay in his journal, *The Lion*³⁶. Carlile had probably read *The Empire of the Nairs* when he published *Every Woman’s book* in 1826³⁷. This made Lawrence one of the forerunners in the fight for sexual reform.

While searching for a way to a better society, Lawrence’s originality was to propose a solution to a widely shared diagnosis, namely the uncertainty of paternal filiations³⁸. In contrast to the patriarchy reinforced by existing legal codes, especially the French Civil code, he chose matrilineality. It is not only an original choice but, until then, one that had not been heard of. As we have seen, he raised the enthusiasm of some, the skepticism of others, but also the scandalized rejection of the English conservative press³⁹. But the fact that he was of interest to the Saint-Simonians also shows that the author of *The Empire of the Nairs* was appreciated and influential beyond the circle of defenders of free love, who were more androcentric than feminist⁴⁰. One of these French Saint-Simonians, Suzanne Voilquin, who had already quoted extensively from Lawrence in the feminist journal *La femme nouvelle*, [*La femme nouvelle. Apostolat des femmes*, ca. 1832: 71, 83-86, 190, 219], reiterated his idea that all mothers should be property owners:

³³ LAURENCE, Chevalier de [Lawrence, James Henry], 1837. *Plus de maris ! Plus de pères ! ou le Paradis des enfants de Dieu*, Paris, Roux éditeur, 34, rue des Gravilliers, Delaunay, Libraire au Palais-Royal, p. iii.

³⁴ “To James Henry Lawrence” (17 August 1812). *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, INGPEN, Roger, ed., vol. 1, London, 1909, p. 356-7.

³⁵ McDONALD, Daniel J., 1912. “The Radicalism of Shelley and Its Sources”, PhD diss., Washington, DC; PECK, Walter Edwin, 1925. “Shelley’s Indebtedness to Sir Thomas Lawrence”. *Modern Language Notes* 40 (4), p. 246-49. [The author is wrong on Lawrence’s name, of course].

³⁶ See *The Lion* (21 November 1828), vol. 2, no. 21, p. 653–72; and (13 March 1829), vol. 3, no. 11, pp. 346–9; *The Lion* (16 January 1829), vol. 3, no. 3, p. 84–89; see also Carlile’s own intervention into the debate: *The Lion* (19 December 1828), vol. 2, no. 25, p. 780–1.

³⁷ *Every Woman’s Book or What is love?* promoted birth control and sexual emancipation for women. Though Carlile claimed to have read *The Empire of the Nairs* just before he published excerpts from it, there are good reasons to doubt this claim as far too many details and similarities exist between *The Empire of the Nairs* and *Every Woman’s book*. See BUSH, M.L., 1998. *What is love?: Richard Carlile’s Philosophy of Sex*, London and New York, Verso, p.35.

³⁸ MAINARDI, Patricia, 2003. *Husbands, Wives and Lovers: Marriage and its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press.

³⁹ VERJUS, Anne, 2019. “Une société sans pères peut-elle être féministe?: *L’empire des Nairs* de James H. Lawrence”, *French Historical Studies*, 42 (3), p. 359-389.

⁴⁰ CARAFELLI, Annette Wheeler, 1996. “The Transgressive Double Standard : Shelleyan Utopianism and Feminist Social History”, in BENNETT, Betty and CURRAN, Stuart, ed., *Shelley : Poet and Legislator of the World*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 98-100.

O you, men of devotion, men of conscience, who in all religions, in all parties, desire the betterment of the people, do you want to put an end to these bloody riots, do you want without jolt to succeed in relieving the poor classes of the burden of the misery that overwhelms them, cut the evil at its root, transform property, make all mothers possess, then rely on them for the care that childhood and old age require⁴¹?

Equally feminist and equally St. Simonian, Claire Demar, who wrote *Ma Loi d'avenir* (My Law of the Future) in defence of Lawrence, followed the author of *The Empire of the Nairs* in his idea of entrusting only women with the care of children by paying them for their work; but she detached herself from him when she advocated the abolition of motherhood. This would free women from the protection of men who would no longer pay the price of their bodies, and allow them to live by their own capacity and work. To this end, Demar proposed to carry the newborn child from the womb of the “*mère du sang*” (“blood mother”) to the arms of the “*mère sociale, de la nourrice fonctionnaire*” (the social mother, the civil servant nurse) who would then receive remuneration for her works according to her capacity⁴². The French feminist Flora Tristan also read Lawrence, but retained other aspects of his thought, notably his conviction that marriage is criminogenic⁴³.

Lawrence's book, while achieving a subversive reputation during the Romantic period, received very little attention after 1848. Mandating the abolition of marriage and paternity made his utopia alien to the core principles of bourgeois society that flourished in the second half of the 19th century. The matrilineal ideas of the *Empire of the Nairs* would not be taken up, far from it, by the other proponents of Saint-Simonism, or even Fourierism, at least if we judge by its remarkable absence in the works on these movements⁴⁴. Scientists such as Lewis Henry Morgan (1851) or Johann Jakob Bachofen (1861), who, a few years later, became interested in matrilineal societies, would see them as earlier stages of a linear progress culminating in patriarchy⁴⁵. This made *The Empire of the Nairs* one of the most famous and yet under-studied utopias we know of today; a non-patriarchal yet lineage-centred way of thinking about free love and motherhood, which demonstrates that Lawrence's unusual, aristocratic yet rational meditations on a society without patriarchy deserves to be brought out of the shadows of the past.

Through his utopia, Lawrence went against the critical reflections of his time regarding romantic sociability. Where his most radical contemporaries, such as Godwin or Boissel, who were aware of the problematic nature of a marriage instituted as the appropriation of women, proposed that men and women renounce marriage and live in community, Lawrence imagined a sociability of love disconnected from any idea of community of life between lovers. In *L'Empire des Nairs*, women live with women and children, men live with men. Both sexes, when they wish to meet, do

⁴¹ [Demar], *Ma loi d'avenir, par Claire Demar, 1833, ouvrage posthume, publié par Suzanne, Paris, au bureau de la tribune des femmes, 1834*, p. 20. The original sentence is as follows: “Ô vous, hommes de dévouement (sic), de conscience qui, dans toutes les religions, dans tous les partis, désirez l'amélioration du peuple, voulez-vous faire cesser ces émeutes sanglantes, voulez-vous sans secousse arriver à décharger les classes pauvres du fardeau de la misère qui les accable, coupez le mal à sa racine, transformez la propriété, faites que toutes les mères possèdent, alors reposez-vous sur elles des soins qu'exigent l'enfance et la vieillesse.”

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴³ TRISTAN, Flora, 1838. “A messieurs les membres de la chambre des députés”, signé Flora Tristan, daté du 10 décembre 1838. Imprimerie de Mme Huzard, 7 rue de l'Éperon, 8 pages. Un exemplaire de cette brochure imprimée est conservé aux AN, C 2163, n°70

⁴⁴ DEVANCE, Louis, 1973. *La question de la famille dans la pensée socialiste française de Fourier à Proudhon*, thèse de 3e cycle d'histoire, Université de Dijon; BEECHER, Jonathan, 1993. *Fourier: le visionnaire et son monde*, Paris, Fayard.

⁴⁵ GOETNER-ABENDROTH, HEIDE, 2019 [2012]. *Les Sociétés matriarcales. Recherches sur les cultures autochtones à travers le monde*, Paris, Des Femmes, p. 39.

so at balls, in the evening, for a night or for life, as they wish. In the society imagined by Lawrence, sexuality neither justifies nor conditions the cohabitation of men and women who love each other or who wish to come together. This is true even though free sexuality, and not just a renewed sociability of love, is the ultimate goal of his utopia.

Lawrence is no different from the legislators of his time who built the various civil codes around regulating women's bodies. But unlike his contemporaries, he did not entrust this regulating to fathers and husbands. Since it is women who are primarily concerned with the fruitful consequences of their sociability of love, *they* must have the material means to the responsibility for them. These are feminist overtones in the works of the author of the *Empire of the Nairs* which would take decades to be heard. For his part, Lawrence died in 1840, leaving behind these works that are almost forgotten today but nevertheless resonate more than ever.

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