

Diderot is No Sexist! Understanding his Pensées by way of Le Rêve ...

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Denis Diderot's thoroughly material metaphysics undergirds prescient philosophical analyses; his thought is cutting-edge. His frequent use of female characters to reveal crucial insights is a significant motivating force of this paper. Diderot's female characters are not mere 'pretty little things.' Furthermore, when Diderot turns to outright discussion of the subjects of the nature and the socially dictated fate of women, his position is surprisingly modern. It is against this backdrop that his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, might seem to smack of sexism. Consideration of a varied collection of Diderot's works, alongside a number of commentaries thereupon, will allow me to dispel such a misread. I will demonstrate that the 'Jeune Homme' to whom the *Pensées* (of 1754) are addressed is a young *human*. It is, in fact, a female character, Julie de Lespinasse, of the *Rêve de d'Alibert* who will prove key to our analysis. Diderot is no Sexist. His thought and works merit consideration both on account of their relevance to current issues and for the novel ways in which they collectively intertwine to richly describe our material world and being.

From the exordium, added by Denis Diderot, to the edition of 1754 of his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*¹ [my emphases]:

AUX JEUNES GENS QUI SE DISPOSENT À L'ÉTUDE DE LA PHILOSOPHIE NATURELLE

Jeune Homme, prends et lis. Si tu peux aller jusqu'à la fin de cet Ouvrage,
tu ne seras pas incapable d'en entendre un meilleur. Comme je ne me suis moins
proposé de t'instruire que de t'exercer ; il m'importe que tu adoptes
me idées, ou
que tu les rejettes, pourvu qu'elles emploient toute ton attention. Un
plus habile
t'apprendra à connaître les forces de la Nature ; il me suffira de t'avoir
fait
essayer les tiennes.

¹ D. Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, C. Duflo (ed.), Paris, 2005, p. 59.

Denis Diderot's thoroughly materialist metaphysics undergirds prescient philosophical analyses; his forays into the field of ethics arguably tend toward what we today would class amongst the range of forward-looking alternative perspectives. It isn't just that Diderot sketches or even defends the cutting-edge which motivates this paper, but also his use of female characters to reveal crucial insights. Anyone familiar with the prolific author's body of work knows that Diderot's women are certainly not mere 'pretty little things.' So it is that his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* might seem to smack dissonantly of sexism, from the get-go. My intent is to dispel such a misreading by demonstrating that the *Pensées* are addressed to the intellectual everyman. To wit: although Diderot's use of '*jeune homme*' certainly seems, on a first read, to specify a gendered subcategory of *jeunes gens* to whom the *Pensées* are addressed, the term proves to be gender neutral. Yet again, Denis Diderot is ahead of his time. Demonstration of the truth of this final analysis requires a series of considerations.

Our discussion opens with a defense of the legitimacy of the claim that the *Pensées* might be read as sexist; we need to confirm the possibility of such an error in order to agree that the project at hand has merit. The plausibility (and fact!) of misconstrual established, we will turn to a survey of others of Diderot's works which, on inspection, all prove consistent with clear pro-female positions. (To say Diderot is 'pro-female' involves no claim that he is 'anti-male'².) This second stage of argument will necessitate a brief preliminary discussion of Diderot's atheistic, materialist metaphysics. Our philosopher's philosophical groundwork ultimately precludes any impermeable sex-based boundary standing on intellectual (which, in Diderot's case, is to say rational and emotional) potential³. Having recognized the clear and conscious presence of women in Diderot's works, we will be set to conclusively demonstrate that the 'young man' of the *Pensées* is assuredly not necessarily male. At the heart of this final position stands an argument which pulls in particular from the *Rêve de d'Alembert* wherein Julie de Lespinasse proves key to a telling reading of the suggestively troubling words we meet in the

² We will not take up the question of whether Diderot defends a modern 'feminist' stance. What we mean in saying that Diderot is no sexist is simply that Diderot's metaphysics neither favours nor privileges males over females. His metaphysics, of course, informs all of his philosophy.

³ This fact results from the nature of the human beast. Were a difference in intelligence actually connected to sexual orientation or gender, Diderot's account would identify and accommodate that fact. Male and female minds *may*, or may not, work differently but both permit the possibility of genius.

*Pensées*⁴. Our conclusion defended, a few remarks about reading Diderot and a further few about 'modernity' will be in order.

We humans tend to perceive our own times as more enlightened, more advanced, than previous eras. This widespread phenomenon gains legitimacy, where our focus is concerned, given the well-known instances of sexist portrayals of females in 18th century French literature. From Voltaire we have Cunegonde and Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves, females whose beauty and charms are motor forces in their respective works, and whose roles might well be summarized as representations of an idealized romantic insipidity. Rousseau give us the hyper-feminine Sophie. Even if, along with Denise Schaffer for example, we attempt a more sophisticated reading of Sophie's nature, and hence her education, it requires effort to reject the oft-encountered assessment of Rousseau's rather sexist account of women⁵. In their *La Femme au dix-huitième siècle*, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt provide a detailed assessment of the unique position in which girls and women were held during the 18th century⁶. Our 21st century vantage point finds us poised to see and read Enlightenment France as fundamentally sexist; we are neither all, nor uniformly, aware nor quick to think of at least some of those women who marched on Versailles or those few who, for instance, translated Newton's *Principia*, ruled Russia or engaged in prolonged philosophical exchanges with notable minds of their times⁷. Even academics in the know must, for the benefit of their readers, defend the claim that women were not uniformly regarded in a decidedly sexist manner in the 18th century⁸. We struggle with sexism today; we understand that the problem is at least in heavy measure historically rooted. So it is that even from our modern perspective the amended *Pensées* may strike the reader as a sexist work. We can see, too, that during the 18th century many a man (or woman) would

⁴ D. Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Paris, 2002.

⁵ From Schaffer's summation of her own work, we understand that Sophie's divided soul, «calls into question Rousseau's commitment to 'wholeness' as an ideal,» and that, «the real education provided by the pages of *Émile* — that of its readers — resembles Sophie's education more than *Émile's*.» See: D. Schaffer, *Reconsidering the Role of Sophie in Rousseau's Émile*, «Polity» 30, n. 4, 1998, pp. 607-626.

⁶ The brothers Goncourt's *La Femme au Dix-Huitième siècle*, published in 1882, offers a panoramic and fascinating window onto the place of women. It draws on art and records of all sorts. See: E. and J. de Goncourt, *La Femme au dix-huitième siècle*, Paris, 1980.

⁷ Émilie du Châtelet, Catherine the Great and Sophie Volland, respectively.

⁸ Clearly, though, to have acted in ways we might now describe as feminist is not of necessity to have been viewed in what we would class as a feminist light.

not hesitate to understand, by '*jeune homme*,' 'young male.' Then, as now, specificity of context aside, '*homme*' ambiguously referred exclusively to 'man' or inclusively to 'human'⁹. And though Diderot would surely have been aware of such a possible misread, on inspection it is clear that he would not have defended a gendered interpretation of the call tendered in the *Pensées*. In speaking of (and to) intellectual ability and inspiration, Diderot addresses humans and their potential.

Denis Diderot is a refreshing find. Those who have sampled his texts have certainly identified the radical nature, relative to his milieu, of a number of his thoughts. The fact is, Diderot's metaphysics defends a very different account of reality than do the majority, and best-known, of those positions which comprise our current touchstones regarding Enlightenment thought. Our philosopher is unique not only for his materialism, but for his atheism and his embracing of a marvellous admixture of reason and emotion. As P. P. Gossiaux reminds us in his treatment of Diderot's conceptualization of nature, reading Diderot requires (in Diderot's own words) that we constantly hold, «présent à l'esprit que la Nature n'est pas Dieu (*AT II, 7*)»¹⁰. Absent a divinely created difference between the weaker and the stronger sexes, which we find echoed in an extension between the paired likes of emotion and reason, or the petty and the serious, Diderot's materialism is set to discover that insofar as the intellectual potential is concerned, it is the human animal regardless of gender which is at play. Genius may lie in the male or the female of our species. From the closing lines of his entertaining and revelatory *Sur les femmes* : «Quand elles ont du génie, je leur en crois l'empreinte plus originale qu'en nous»¹¹. This fact denies neither gender- nor orientation-grounded differences in physical preference, predilection or propensity. Furthermore, that a woman may be adorable and sweet (by nature or nurture) cannot preclude the fact that she may be a genius — no more than a man's sexual

⁹ The University of Chicago's ARTFL website, providing access to (among other works) the 4th and 5th editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* confirms the exclusive and inclusive uses of '*homme*' during Diderot's time. See: *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, in *French Dictionaries of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries*, The ARTFL Project, Chicago, <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-d'autrefois>.

¹⁰ P. P. Gossiaux, *Nature*, in R. Mortier and R. Trousson (dirs.), *Dictionnaire de Diderot*, Paris, 1999, pp. 245-354.

¹¹D. Diderot, *Sur les femmes*, in A. Billy and M. Delon (eds.), *Sur les femmes et autres textes*, Paris, 2013, p. 96. Yes, a woman can be a genius. As befits her gender, her intellectual brilliance may well be one of particularly eccentric originality, as understanding of the French '*originale*' in the context of Diderot's opus makes clear. We will return to the line quoted at our paper's conclusion.

drive, physical appearance or comportment might preclude his own natural genius¹².

Diderot's truly enlightened understanding of the role and place of a woman's intellectual possibilities is borne out by the bulk of his works, as we shall see. The pieces we will survey are offered as representative of his thought, not only for their range in style but in subject matter; all include female characters who are far more than 'eye-candy' or foils whose sole function it is to support and privilege the glories of men. As always with Diderot, there is a deep intertwining of theme and thought which reflects his materialistic metaphysics of interconnection. A brief survey of the pertinent aspects of this ontological stance will facilitate our consideration of the rich brilliance of women in Diderot's works.

Robert Morin's *Diderot et l'imagination* explains the irreconcilability of Diderot's materialism with the existence of a god¹³:

Le vrai, c'est l'imperfection, qui n'est plus une sorte de chute ou de décadence par rapport à un premier principe comme Dieu, mais une conformité à la réalité du 'Grand Tout', mouvement évolutif.

No divine creation, humankind is rather the result of material combination and recombination. Gossiaux confirms Diderot's affirmation that the universe, «dans sa complexité, résulte du hasard»¹⁴. Diderot's thorough defence of the materialism he champions counters Berkeley's irritating idealism by arguing that the sceptic's refrain loses its oomph in face of the fact of interconnection, which is the stuff of the universe, ourselves included. The on-going experiment, a process of empirical discovery, ever more certainly demonstrates the materialist nature of existence — not only of that

¹² Diderot employs a richly developed notion of genius which builds upon ideas current during his time. Here we recognize that a genius has particularly heightened intellectual abilities where some combination of perception, discovery, learning, invention, creation and communication are concerned. Diderot himself is a genius of understanding and communication. He has been called "the great communicator" for this very reason. See: P. Zémor's, *Diderot, grand communicant*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», n. 18-19, 1995, pp. 45-91.

¹³ R. Morin, *Diderot et l'imagination*, Paris, 1987, p. 236.

¹⁴ P. P. Gossiaux, cit., p. 340.

which surrounds us, but of our very selves¹⁵. Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* really solidifies the proof. At the outset of this account, Diderot's fictionalized author tells us that idealism is, «la honte de l'esprit humain et de la philosophie [...] le plus difficile à combattre, quoique le plus absurde [...]»¹⁶. Toward the text's end we encounter Diderot's voice in the authorial lines¹⁷:

Je ne divine pas pourquoi le monde ne s'ennuie pas de lire et de ne rien apprendre, à moins que ce soit par la même raison qu'il y a dix heures que j'ai l'honneur de vous entretenir, sans m'ennuyer et sans vous rien dire.

Diderot pokes fun at the suggestion that exposure to knowledge which rides on the existence of an external world cannot teach because there is no truth in its empirically-gotten claims. He helps us to see that the connections woven through this 'solid' reality cannot be chimera (are not ideas, but material) and, thus, must disabuse us of our idealist doubts. Between the lines we glimpse his and his fictive author's smiles: author has connected with reader; '*le Grand Tout*' is absolutely material. Certitude, sensorially afforded, compounded over time, got by means of interaction with and observation of the interplay of material comprising all of nature, refutes idealism. Everything in the universe is and only is material, from dreams and ideas, through rays of light to human beings. The human mind is matter which grows in understanding — connections being forged — as it is impinged upon by any and every material encounter it undergoes.

In his response to metaphysical idealism lies the heart of Diderot's materialism: a constant interactive flux of material is all there is. Human interaction is just one wonderful aspect of this material burbling. Thus we expect, and find, Diderot's females to be characters who instantiate his metaphysics as well as other philosophical positions which the ever-fluxing foundation of his account grounds. To ask whether the female is ignored or cast aside

¹⁵ D. Diderot, *Conjecture [Grammaire]*, in *l'Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, D. Diderot and J. le Rond d'Alembert (eds.), in R. Morrissey and G. Roe (eds.), *ARTFL Encyclopédie Project*, Chicago, <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>. In *Conjecture*, Diderot provides a summary of the process of confirmation by repeated experience: «Il y a un certain point où nous cessons de conjecturer, & où nous assurons positivement». Of course, Diderot sets out complexities (which deny support the relevance of his position to claims relied upon here).

¹⁶ D. Diderot, *Lettre*, cit. p. 54.

¹⁷ D. Diderot, *Lettre*, *ibid*, p. 97.

in the *Pensées* is to wonder whether this particular text of Diderot's is singular in its acceptance of sexist cultural norms, or even whether it reveals a latent sexism on the part of its author.

Women do occur differently across the other many and sundry works which provide variations on what seems to be Diderot's solidly pro-female stance. We encounter females who, by gender or social position, are illustrative of the human condition generally. For instance, qua human beings, the several mothers portrayed in *La Religieuse* are subjects of nature and her laws¹⁸. Then again, as spouses or nuns, they are constrained by one or more men (husbands, priests, or God), by religious or social regulations and by their beliefs. Diderot often uses female interlocutors — whether they figure fictionally in texts or externally as their recipients. Consider Mirzoza of *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, Mlle de Lespinasse of the *Rêves* and the older woman to whom the *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* is addressed, each of whom represents impressive intellect and philosophical ability¹⁹. They provide literary incarnations of positions which Diderot mulls over or defends. Female characters also occasion comedic interludes running from simple humorous commentary on social mores through straightforward philosophical perspicuity. In this vein, for example, what reads as sexual freedom and promiscuity of the Otaïtiennes in the *Supplément du Voyage de Bougainville*, permits social and political commentary as well as laughter when a young priest repeatedly provides a desired stud service, all the while vociferously underscoring his religious faux pas²⁰. And so it continues. Susanne of *La Religieuse* is naïveté and goodness thrown into a world of evils, the product of a society gone wrong. We smile at Mirzoza, adorable in her philosopher's get-up, and yet marvel at her powers of reason. *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* features few women, and most are simple props. We understand that the work's major focus — free will, determinism, and moral responsibility — is a human issue illustrated by a collection of characters whose gender is, in the final analysis, inconsequential to that primary subject²¹. What we pull from this preliminary survey is that Diderot does in fact frequently give women significant roles. The female characters he creates are not the intellectual inferiors of men.

¹⁸ D. Diderot, *La Religieuse*, Paris, 1968.

¹⁹ D. Diderot, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, Paris, 1968. And: D. Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*, Paris, 1951.

²⁰ D. Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, M. Delon (ed.), Paris, 2002.

²¹ D. Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, Paris, 2000.

We need now elaborate a bit further our samplings of Diderot's female characters. Chronological order will enable us to see that his pro-female stance is neither a late nor a sluggish arrival in his thought. Subsequently, the *Rêve de d'Alembert* will be shown to be importantly linked to the *Pensées*.

Penned to earn money for a mistress and to demonstrate that he too could compose a bawdy item, *Les Bijoux* (published in 1748) is nevertheless more than merely a salacious tale. The work presents an assortment of women on whom the sultan Mangogul directs a magic ring, thus enabling their vaginas to speak²². What concerns us is the strength of character and mind of Mangogul's favourite, Mirzoza, in whom we see a philosophically talented man's intellectual equal. She is a thinking human being who passionately and rationally offers and considers hypotheses. As well, *Les Bijoux* reveals a man who begins to understand not only his own reticences but the power of his favourite woman. To read *Les Bijoux* is to laugh, snigger, think and also to recognize that women — beautiful though they may be — are not essentially vapid and are certainly not a categorically lesser sex.

Two women feature in the scientific discourse presented in the *Lettre sur les aveugles*. The first, *Madame*, is an intellectual to whom the work is addressed. This silent participant's presence is manifest throughout the piece whose tone is such that we understand her (a real life acquaintance of Diderot's) to be intelligent and interested in erudite discourse. The second was added about thirty years after the original publication date: Mademoiselle de Salignac, who commands the final and lengthiest addition to a list of *phénomènes* (which run a full fourteen pages) adjoined to the *Lettre*. This brilliant young blind woman (niece of Sophie Volland) with whom Diderot had in fact developed a friendship, confirmed for him, yet again, the enormous intellectual capacity of human beings which can instantiate in women. Mademoiselle de Salignac's beauty and grace are at least matched by her true genius and Diderot bemoans her passing at the age of 22: «[Q]uel chemin n'aurait-elle pas fait dans les sciences, si

²² Although well before Eve Enster's contemporary *The Vagina Monologues*, Diderot's is not the first fictional work to feature vaginas. As he often does, Diderot borrows and remodels ... to excellent effect. Unlike those of the *Monologues*, the *bijoux* in Diderot's tale speak, giving voice to their own quite competent minds. See: E. Enster, *The Vagina Monologues*, New York, 1998.

Another note: Diderot likely borrowed the few truly salacious items featured in *Les Bijoux*. If true, we would have additional confirmation that our philosopher's writing is, above all else, an expression of his passion for philosophy. The suggestion is offered by Antoine Adams in his preface to the text. See: A. Adams, *Préface*, in *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, Paris, 1968, p. 15.

des jours plus longs lui avait été accordés !»²³. Salignac's story furnishes not only further empirical proof of the human mind's ability to richly conceptualize even when denied ocular vision (that very sense which most of us regard as an absolute necessity) but also that the power of a human intellect can manifest in women.

In 1762, eight years after the publication of the *Pensées*, Diderot had published his *Éloge de Richardson auteur des romans de « Pamela » de « Clarisse » et de « Grandisson »*²⁴. The work was, and continues to be, received as the excessively emotive ranting of an obsessed admirer. J. Assézat and M. G. Tourneaux contend that the popularity of this piece contributed to Diderot's being classed as a less than rigorous thinker: «Nous croyons que ce morceau coloré est trop coloré [...] que c'est un de ceux qui a le plus nui, puisque c'est un de ceux qui a été le plus lu, à la mémoire de Diderot»²⁵. If so, Diderot has been wrongly undervalued for a misread of a little piece²⁶. Frankly, one needs exposure to more than a single item from his oeuvre in order to fully appreciate what Diderot offers. His works stand in interconnection, by way of which they reflect and confirm his metaphysics. For example, those who have enjoyed his *Salons* and the *Éloge* will note similarities between the persuasive and argumentative strategies both works employ²⁷. To read the one helps us to grasp the full force of the other. Having experienced the *Salons*, one understands how the *Éloge* is not 'too colourful' in any damning sense. In both pieces, genius is at work; both demonstrate that emotion in play with reason inspires.

«[T]u peins l'espèce humain,» Diderot tells Richardson, whom he addresses in the *Éloge*²⁸. Our philosopher's enthusiastic response to the author of *Clarisse* illustrates the fact that in Richardson he finds someone who has succeeded in producing a novel of unique moral value. Diderot presages the analysis of the contemporary American

²³ D. Diderot, *Lettre*, cit., p. 116.

²⁴ D. Diderot, *Éloge de Richardson auteur des romans de « Pamela » de « Clarisse » et de « Grandisson »*, 1761. URL: http://fr.m.wildsource.org/wiki/Éloge_de_Richardson/Notice, consulted: 2017-02-15.

²⁵ J. Assézat and M. Garnier Tourneaux, *Notice préliminaire à l'Éloge de Richardson*. URL: http://fr.m.wildsource.org/wiki/Éloge_de_Richardson/Notice, consulted: 2017-02-15, p. 2.

²⁶ For defense of this suggestion, see: J. Christie, *Denis Diderot, Samuel Richardson and the Colour of Philosophy*, «le Monde Français au Dix-Huitième Siècle», 5 (1), 2020.

²⁷ D. Diderot, *Salons*, M. Delon (ed.), Paris, 2008. And, D. Diderot, *Éloge*, cit.

²⁸ D. Diderot, *Éloge*, cit. p. 8.

philosopher Martha Nussbaum who describes «finely aware and richly responsible» novels as the missing piece of moral philosophic pedagogy²⁹. In Diderot's words, certain novels, «élèvent l'esprit, qui touchent l'âme, qui respirent partout l'amour du bien»³⁰. As the *Lettre*, the *Éloge* is a straightforwardly scientific, which is to say first and foremost a philosophical, piece. In the *Éloge*, the importance of women as creatures who exemplify critical aspects of human being is made clear. Given their roles in the 18th century, women were regarded as inhabiting, and thus befitting depiction of, the territory of emotion³¹. To study them — to read about them — is to be profoundly touched, it is to be helped to think deeply and to learn about humankind. For Diderot, increased (experiential) understanding is the goal which results in human beings who literally reverberate with knowledge and the passion it inspires. Women are an integral part of the process, both as items of study and as being who undertake such study. It is not just their appeal that makes them relevant.

La Religieuse appeared near the end of the century (1796) and was certainly influenced by Richardson's style. As usual, though, it bears Diderot's unique stamp, a stamp remarkable for the quest it embodies: original ways to discuss and present philosophically significant ideas. The series of nearly gothic, certainly noire, images which comprise the tale are designed to mark heart and mind. Diderot's metaphysics entail that to thus impress the feeling thinking human is to nurture reflection. In *La Religieuse* Diderot does not hide his convictions concerning the dangers of the artifice contrived by the social fabric of his century whereby women might find themselves cloistered away, restrained and abused. In contemplating the fate of these women, the reader might be brought to more deeply feel and understand their plight. At play in this novel is the mythical idea of woman: young and innocent girls, protective and nurturing mothers, splendid and charming angels, conniving and powerful matrons, or beguiling and mysterious temptresses. In an important sense, *La Religieuse* surpasses *Clarisse* as it is not only a commentary on women and society, not only an essential part of that moral pedagogical puzzle we aim to flesh out, but also part of a complex and complete philosophical framework. If we read *La Religieuse* in the context of Diderot's other works, we feel its full force. In addition to ethics, metaphysics and epistemology are at

²⁹ M. Nussbaum, 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': *Literature and the Moral Imagination*, Chapter 5, in M. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York, 1990.

³⁰ *Éloge*, cit., p. 1.

³¹ Again, the brothers Goncourt provide fascinating summary of such matters.

issue. Such a project cannot but underscore the importance of thinking about women as well as the fact that despite what society may contrive for them, women are not ontologically lesser.

Jacques le fataliste proves to be a vehicle for a discussion of determinism and responsibility; morality is thus in play. Here there is no female philosopher. There really is no fully-fledged male philosopher either, as the novel's namesake neither explains nor defends his opinions. Jacques just repeats *con brio*. Nevertheless, this tale illustrates the reality that, as human beings, women are fundamentally like men — we come in all sorts and are subject to the determinism of our materialist world. Gender is simply a predisposition to attract and to be attracted by certain others; men fit women and women fit men³². Gender governs many aspects of human life but neither occasions nor precludes intellectual brilliance. For Diderot, the theme is recurrent and important.

Twelve years before his death, thus two dozen after having written *Les Bijoux*, Diderot penned the philosophical triptych which concludes with the *Supplément*. The *Supplément* (published in 1772) affords a compendium of ideas which fascinated Diderot during his fertile career. Here, in a tale set in the South Seas, we once again find a work of (historically and socially based) fiction shot through with philosophical discussion and insight. The elder Otaïtien, the paired characters A and B, and Orou in turn voice social, political, metaphysical or moral philosophical analyses or arguments. Women play a role similar to that of the courtesans (though not of Mirzoza) in *Les Bijoux*, or of those females with whom Jacques passingly frolics. They all illustrate natural truths of human nature: attraction and lust are part of our material being, life is in fact inextricably tied to philosophy and all is connected. The text is clear: a life 'closer to nature' and less caught up in the many and heavy chains the likes of which Europeans have forged in creating their societies, certainly does not negate human intellectual potential. That Mirzoza has no counterpart in Diderot's tropical tale in no way argues that women outside of European latitudes are intellectually lacking. The *Supplément* does, however, feature two female characters noteworthy of the pro-female considerations they frame.

The parable of Miss Polly Baker as well as the appearance of an officer's domestic who turns out to be a female in male disguise are telling³³. Polly's is a tale of a woman's skill in matters juridic as well

³² This is precisely what Mademoiselle de Lespinasse is after in *Le Rêve* when she offers that men and women are, reciprocally, monsters: «L'homme n'est peut-être que le monstre de la femme, ou la femme [...] de l'homme». Bordeu fleshes out the picture. *Le Rêve*, cit., p. 121.

³³ D. Diderot, *Supplément*, cit., pp. 64-67 and 47-47, respectively.

as amorous. The sailor in disguise, who is only — and immediately — recognized as such by Otaitien men, juxtaposes the obfuscating power of European stereotypes with a more natural man's ability to register the pull of a woman. So too, the *Supplément* touches on injustices which European women are dealt as well as the effects of contrived rules and the fact that there just will be women capable and desirous of doing what men have traditionally done. Yet again, Diderot helps us to see that one must think of and about women in order to understand man — all human beings — and our world. The lesson is ontological and moral.

Seven varied works thus confirm the complex and essential place of women (of woman) in Diderot's understanding of the world, and so of his philosophy. No mere caprice leads him to include women in his writing. Thus, when we identify the dismissal of women by the *Pensées*, we do more than simply suggest that female characters (or an otherwise acknowledged presence of *la femme*) ought to be there just because they are included in his other works or simply because they are pretty diversions. Our concern runs deeper, for it identifies that Diderot's developed philosophical position really does assume an equal place for women such that when he directly speaks to his readership he cannot consistently do so from a stance which explicitly denies females a place in that group. So we ask whether, in the *Pensées*, written after he had penned works expressing clearly pro-female thought, Diderot perhaps waxed overtly sexist and took pains in 1754, to add the «*court préambule*» and a final «*observation*» in both of which he exclusively addresses young men³⁴. Such an answer would seem a bit glib³⁵.

On the glib reading of the *Pensées* we are lead to conclude that Diderot at once speaks to young males who realistically comprise the group of future scientists and philosophers, and that he voices his own dangerously provocative (or pragmatic?) assessment of his era, and nothing more. This reading sees in the *Pensées* a manual whose goal it is to inspire new philosophers and thinkers (most certainly male). It also regards the work, in the words of Colas Duflo, who describes the tone set by the opening address quoted at the

³⁴ The concluding «*observation*» of 1754 opens: «Je t'ai dit, jeune homme [...]». D. Diderot, *Pensées*, cit. p.119.

³⁵ In the *Pensées* we find women mentioned where *moles* are discussed, only because it is in the uterus that these biological cell masses arise. This is no pro-female (nor pro-male) item. An additional item is worthy of emphasis: even though the date of the *Pensées* is early in the development of Diderot's thought, it does not precede every of the pro-female works we have considered here.

outset of this paper, as, «*un peu grandiloquent*»³⁶. This interpretation fails to recognize that Diderot's opening and closing remarks could only be regarded as such were the work grandiosely aimed at his established intellectual equals or at mature thinkers; it then might well carry a condescending and sexist tone. But it is neither so aimed nor of such a tone. The accusation might stick were the *Pensées* strictly pedagogical, but they are not. Diderot chose to wrap this work in inspirational words addressed to those who might be stimulated to become intellectual thinkers and doers. Just as he had already used emotional writing in the service of pedagogical communication, Diderot had already shown himself quite capable of sarcasm as well as the subtle presentation of scathing or sensitive ideas. The reader needs to consider Diderot's tone and style across a variety of his works to see that, insofar as the identification of its readership is concerned, the *Pensées* are neither sarcastic nor subtle. The work describes yet another variation on Diderot's forms of expression. It stands as a motivational appeal on a personal level designed to excite and inspire all manner of scientifically gifted intellectuals to take up the mantle and learn more — to forge ever more connections in the fields of understanding, and to share them with us all.

Diderot *tutoie*-s the reader whom he hopes to inspire. Familiar in register, he speaks to the youthful. His postscript demonstrates the desire to create an inspirational link between his own intellectual enthusiasm and that which he helps the gifted reader to realize within his (or, as we will confirm, *her*) youthfully passionate intellectual self. If we note a bit of humour in the postscript, where Diderot reminds Newtonians that a hypothesis is not a fact, it is surely because the philosopher hopes that by the end of the short text, the student-reader who has persevered will understand a jibe. A mature genius *might* be insulted by Diderot's address and concluding remarks, by his familiarity, teacherly energies, or perhaps his apparently snide tone³⁷. A student will not; a student will laugh, be inspired and joyfully take up the challenge. It is this 'young man' whom we want to prove to be gender-free: our philosopher is no sexist. Julie de Lespinasse of *Le Rêve de d'ALembert* holds the key to this final step of our argument.

³⁶ See: C. Duflo, *Introduction to Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, Paris, 2005, pp. 9-54. The description quoted comes from Duflo's generally excellent and hugely informative introduction, p. 27.

³⁷ Not every genius, nor every academic, would be thus insulted. What insults surely reflects the ego of the one who takes offence. Here we focus on the fact that the reader to whom the *Pensées* are directed is not being purposefully insulted. What's more, s/he is not likely the sort nor at a developmental stage inclined to take umbrage at the address Diderot offers.

Diderot's decision to add personalizing introductory and concluding remarks to the *Pensées* distinguishes the work from pure argumentation or theoretical discussion. To repeat: the piece is designed to set fresh minds and hearts a-trembling, to inspire them to join the burgeoning frontiers of science and philosophy³⁸. Men and women alike will be touched. With Diderot it simply cannot be that the *Pensées* are written for an exclusively male audience. At this juncture the claim seems plausible; it remains to be solidly confirmed.

We began by noting that *homme* first appears with a capital H and thus can be read as referring to all humans (where the capital denotes species or kind rather than a gendered subset thereof). The works just surveyed bear up this reading, providing a sort of preliminary defence of the claim that '*Homme*' refers to *human kind*. The argument needs to be clinched. An analysis of four of the characters in the dialogue of *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* will furnish the key to our proof. The characters: the philosopher Diderot is an empiricist and materialist, d'Alembert is a mathematician specializing in geometry, doctor Bordeu is an experimental scientist and defender of the real Diderot's philosophical positions, and Mademoiselle de Lespinasse is ... Mademoiselle de Lespinasse. The four are friends.

Julie de Lespinasse proves an intelligent match for intellectual discussion with her male counterparts despite her gender or her novice status where their more developed scientific, philosophical and mathematical experiences and knowledge are concerned³⁹. The objection that her ideas are at times underdeveloped or even misguided, such that she represents a sort of permanent feminine mental immaturity, fails when we quickly see that she is ready — in fact passionately motivated — to reconsider, to think and to extend her thoughts. Julie is a philosopher from whom questions abound; probing thought toward sound conclusion truly motivates her. The *tête-à-têtes* she holds with Bordeu are proof of this claim. What distinguishes Julie de Lespinasse from her cohorts is that she is unconstrained, unfashioned, not yet determined by years of study and grooming in a chosen field. It is not that the men cannot modify

³⁸ Reference to the idea of the interconnectivity of all things, to an increasing understanding of this metaphysical reality, and so Diderot's use, for instance, of the images of harpsichords and spiderwebs, is intended. These metaphors depict our constitution, our ways of knowing and being. Anne Beate Maruseth's *Harmonique* is insightful in this regard: A. B. Maruseth, *Harmonique*, in S. Audidière, J.-C. Boudin and C. Duflo (eds.), *l'Encyclopédie du Rêve de d'Alembert de Diderot*, Paris, 2006.

³⁹ To say 'developed' is not to say 'correct'; the discussions presented indicate that Julie often sees more presciently and accurately than do her male interlocutors.

their ideas, in fact such work is a hallmark of each of their real world and fictively relevant scientific-cum-intellectual personae. Their positions do not completely enchain them. Yet, as the character of d'Alembert illustrates, an intellectual well-established in his field will be at least a bit constrained by his commitments, by the positions he champions and in which he is invested.⁴⁰ The freedom of thought which distinguishes Mademoiselle de Lespinasse is that of the newcomer to whom the *Pensées* speak. Beneath her becoming exterior, she is in effect that '*jeune homme*'.

In a significant sense, Julie de Lespinasse is nude while the other characters are attired. The males are fairly well trussed up in intellectual garb which reflects at once their academic thoughts and achievements. In this regard, their clothing also indicates positions which, in the 18th century, carried a form of respect often considered a man's due⁴¹. The importance of Julie's figurative nudity must not be underrated. We would be remiss to fail to notice that it serves as an instance of that metaphoric imagery which Diderot so appreciates, and often employs. Diderot describes the attire of the participants in the *Pensées*. It is thus a short step for the reader to the recognition that Julie's everyday attire is simply that of a woman. Intellectually, academically, she is not yet dressed. This nudity englobes Julie's beauty, in both its physical and intellectual aspects, while conjuring up recognition of her state of readiness to become a fully-fledged new mind. To speak of nudity is not to overstep the bounds of relevance to Diderot, even where issues of mind are concerned.

The frontispiece of the *Encyclopédie* features a reproduction of an engraving by Prévost. As Diderot informs us, in his explanation accompanying the image, the nearly nude female figure representing Truth (surrounded by the sciences, arts and faculties of human spirit such as the imagination) illustrates the breadth and variety of knowledge of which humans are capable⁴². The effect of Truth is emblematic: «nude and voluptuous, she is awesome»⁴³. The possibility of attaining Truth without the hindrance, the veil, of

⁴⁰ It is commonplace: older scientists, for instance, are not all easily able to embrace paradigm shifts which require that they see the world differently or even that they relinquish positions they long defended.

⁴¹ That a riddle about an operating surgeon is resolved only when one recognizes that *she* is the patient's *mother* was successful well into the 20th century is a telling comment here.

⁴² Diderot, *Explication du frontispice de l'Encyclopédie*, in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, cit.

⁴³ Joël Castonguay-Bélanger is responsible for this apt turn of phrase, spoken in the Fall of 2016.

clothing exists. One needs, as Diderot often says — following Descartes' rationalist method — to see clearly and distinctly. Our philosopher, of course, additionally insists on the importance and power of feeling, of emotion. The attainment of truth will involve a connection of perspectives, and so we understand the importance of the *ligue philosophique* of which Diderot speaks in the *Pensées*⁴⁴.

Intellectually, a 'nude', an unencumbered, start is a good start. It is the point from which the *jeune homme* begins the study of Nature. Unconstrained by the ready-made garb of any field of study (or even by a dressing gown which is already less restrictive than waking world intellectual attire, as d'Alembert in his bedclothes illustrates in *Le Rêve*), a fresh arrival's mind stands a better chance of determining a unique approach to Truth. Mademoiselle de Lespinasse's intellectual nudity is fortuitous; it is essential to Diderot's plot.

The unhampered state of mind in which Julie participates in *Le Rêve* does not impede, but motivates, her; her verve is unrestrained. She incarnates the philosophical spirit of the Enlightenment. She does not want discussions to end and she dares consider scandalous topics, hesitating only momentarily where social diktats might curb a less spirited, less bright mind. With a healthy admixture of passion, Julie tries to find and follow solid reasoning — truth her goal. Everything fascinates her. She is a *jeune homme* setting off on a metaphorical journey of exploration. But she is female. How and why might this choice of Diderot's matter?

It is my continuation that Julie de Lespinasse is gendered at one level of the text, while at another she is genderless. At this second level, Mademoiselle de Lespinasse is the intellectual everyman, the young or youthful human. At the first level, her character certainly sports female garb, she is lovely and Bordeu finds her attractive. (We should recognize that Julie's beauty and attractiveness hold at the second level as well. Intellectual ardor and magnetism exist; the physical is not absolutely apart from the intellectual.) Thus Julie keeps us reading, she makes the story lively. When *elle ressent* — she senses/feels — the dreaming d'Alembert's orgasm and climax (and allows him to kiss her), she registers an intellectual and physical climax⁴⁵. This young woman understands and shares physical and intellectual energies, two fields of human experience which rock a sleeping mathematician. It is Julie who brings us to recognize, indeed to feel and to know, that her role must be filled by a woman.

⁴⁴ *Pensées*, cit., p. 60.

⁴⁵ *Rêve*, cit. p. 115.

In *Le Rêve*, as in *Jacques*, Diderot has penned a page-turner. In the former, it is the young female protagonist who makes us want to keep reading. Colas Duflo aptly remarks that, «*Le Rêve de d'Alembert* perdrait beaucoup de son charme sans le personnage de Mlle de Lespinasse,» whom he reads, «surtout [... comme ...] la femme pour qui le discours philosophique se fait aussi discours séduisant et séducteur, l'esprit sans préjugés métaphysiques appris au collègue»⁴⁶. Duflo's conclusion is insufficient. His final analysis is that philosophy is worthwhile for Julie — for the female character — as it entertains. At bottom this claim threatens to see Diderot relegate Julie de Lespinasse, and perhaps so all women, to the categorically lesser position of children in need of amusement, or to that of lovely little human butterflies attracted to 'sweets.' It is difficult not to read Duflo's analysis as suffering from maladies of which many a modern-day feminist would hope to disabuse him. Duflo certainly correctly identifies the ground level of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, that her female presence is essential to the tale. However, he neglects her important philosophical role. It is the latter which ultimately defends the conclusion that the *Pensées* reflect no sexism in their author.

Return to the intellectually unconstrained Julie: her sex and her gender have absolutely no importance at the level of philosophy wherein Diderot conceives of the intellect, mentality, verve and promise of the *Jeune Homme* to whom the *Pensées* are addressed. The very same argument would hold were Julie male. Even if the lived biology of a man is not that of a woman, both can enjoy a philosophically rich life. Individual ability and drive determine the intellectual possibilities of each human. That said, in *Le Rêve* the men are clothed and we are privy to the effects of their attire; the character who models the 'young human' *must* be female.

In the 18th century, doctors, philosophers and mathematicians were overwhelmingly male⁴⁷. And, Diderot's desire with the *Pensées* was to encourage the formation, even the birth, of thinkers fresh to philosophical thought. As Duflo points out in his introduction to *Le Rêve*, Diderot had to include a character who was not yet

⁴⁶ *Introduction to Le Rêve*, cit., p. 33-34. The passage concludes:

L'interlocutrice bienveillante dont l'écoute oscille entre la naïveté. la complicité et le doute, celle enfin qui ne laisse jamais oublier que la philosophie n'a d'audience et peut-être même de légitimité qu'à la condition d'être — aussi — une activité distrayante.

⁴⁷ With the exception of rarities, such as Émilie du Châtelet who translated Newton into French, women were cast rather more as Rousseau described them, incapable of complex thought. That women were at the time best thought fit for botanical studies (a field not yet regarded as a complex science) bears mentioning.

indoctrinated. We have seen that in the *Pensées* 'homme' is an unrestricted variable to be variously replaced (by the male or the female, or both at once). But, the character in the role of foil in the *Rêve* had to be female. A young man titillated at d'Alembert's bedside would have been too scandalous, likely to the point of overshadowing the philosophy presented. It seems Diderot rarely touched on male homosexuality more than fleetingly in his writings⁴⁸. Lesbianism appears to have struck him as less dangerous and more pressing an issue, or perhaps as more prevalent⁴⁹. Regardless, neither a young eroticized homosexual male nor lesbian would have worked in this story which presents caricatures of actual persons of intellect open to ideas as well as to humour⁵⁰. The *Rêve* is not designed as a commentary on social mores.

So we have it: Mademoiselle de Lespinasse stands as that very sort of '*jeune homme*' to whom Diderot speaks in his *Pensées*. Her gender is irrelevant. She is that human being so gifted with fine intelligence and motivating energies such that she is driven to discover the very sorts of things which are described in the *Pensées*. She is as of yet unencumbered by a set philosophy. If she retains her verve, her freshness of spirit and desire to uncover truths, she will be well-poised to uncover new verities or, at least, to help promulgate those already uncovered. Thus, Julie is a *jeune homme*, which is to say, she is the human of youthful and inquisitive spirit

⁴⁸ One finds what may be vague allusions to physical attraction between men, such as that in *Les Bijoux* when Cyclophide describes male 'bijoux' which remain indolent. Or yet again, the possibility of a young man who was «usé, mal né, ou maléficié.» For both of which see: *Les Bijoux*, cit., p. 100. In *Sur les femmes* Diderot mentions that there are «des hommes qui sont femmes » whom he'd not befriend (!) cit. p. 97. Others discuss the deep love and jealousy as well as the apparent physical attraction Grimm occasions in Diderot (see the article *Amitié* in the *Dictionnaire de Diderot*, cit., p. 22).

⁴⁹ The topic looms large in *La Religieuse*, for instance.

⁵⁰ The work is not an inquiry into sexual preference. How or whether sexual preferences might have been relevant in a modernized version of the tale is another issue. I suspect it would be irrelevant to the analysis at hand.

whom Diderot hopes to inspire. '*Jeune Homme*' of the exordium is bereft of gendered implications⁵¹.

A few closing remarks are in order. First, it behooves us to notice that '*jeune homme*' can be conceived of as referring to both genders at once or as ignoring gender altogether. In saying «*Homme*» (capital H), it is to every human in their philosophical, explorative, knowledge-seeking guise that Diderot should be understood to speak. Thus we refute the charge that our philosopher has revealed a sexist bent in the *Pensées* by explaining that he has shown himself either to address males and females, or that he simply ignores gender when the ability to take up philosophy and to learn is being discussed. Of course Diderot identifies a plenitude of differences between men and women (many of which are socially or politically described artifacts) — the other of his works surveyed here suffice to demonstrate that he does so. However, that he sees and writes about differences between men and women does not mean that Diderot fails to recognize the existence of a level at which men and women are simply human beings. As we have shown, Mademoiselle de Lespinasse helps us to see this complex fact. On one level she is a mademoiselle, at another she is a human being. Furthermore, it would be as incorrect to read her as an honorary male as it is to see her as a mere child entertained by (adult) men. For a lovely intellectual interval, Diderot's vision of humanity permits us to forget the male/female distinction. This strikes me as an enormous and valuable gift, one we would do well to accept and take up with the '*jeunes hommes*' of our own era. It is a moral insight which issues from a materialist metaphysics, offered by a gifted philosopher who champions reason coupled with feeling.

An aside about Diderot's *Sur les femmes* (published in 1772) is in order⁵². The essay responds to an all-too-male, exclusively

⁵¹ Adopting words stripped of certain aspects of their more typical connotations is a practice which Diderot honed. Over the course of the *Salons*, for instance, he speaks of the magic created by painters of genius. We understand that their powers are of a kind with those of prestidigitators, not sorcerers. And, he uses biblical terms to evoke the effect of light created by stunning paintings. Throughout, Diderot makes it clear that '*le grand tout*' is comprised exclusively of matter, yet it can and does affect us very deeply in ways which we can helpfully describe as magic or divine. We must simply recognize that these terms indicate feelings which are, and which defend, purely materialist accounts. To subtract the religious implications from 'divine', for example, is not to strip the word of reference or meaning. Its etymology helps us to understand the depths of feeling which it connotes. For example, from the *Salon* of 1765 where Diderot and Grimm discuss a work of Fragonard's, and Grimm proves himself aware of the ideas Diderot has just conveyed by way of a dream recounted: «[Fragonard] a toute la magie, toute l'intelligence et toute la machine pittoresque.» See: D. Diderot, *Salons*, cit., p. 161.

⁵² D. Diderot, cit., pp. 79-99.

rationalist, perspective on women offered by Antoine Léonard Thomas. Our philosopher provides his own (rationally and emotionally) insightful commentary about the 'plight' of women in societies around the globe. He notes, «Le symbole des femmes en général est celle de l'Apocalypse, sur le front de laquelle il est écrit : MYSTÈRE.⁵³» And (as noted above, footnote 10), he concludes: «Quand elles ont du génie, je leur en crois l'empreinte plus original qu'en nous.⁵⁴» Women are not merely men in different wrapping. Women are not, by design, less intellectually capable than are men. Society molds women painfully, but they are as capable of genius and so of great discovery and contribution to the search for truth as are men. A close reading of *Sur les femmes* could, I think, uncover even further depths to Diderot's pro-female position⁵⁵.

Finally, if *Le Rêve* serves as key to the *Pensées*, the opposite holds true as well. Without having read the latter it would be difficult to understand that we may, or really must, appreciate Mademoiselle de Lespinasse at two levels. Diderot's works reflect the interconnection which his metaphysics defends. Interconnection cannot but infuse his ideas and his texts. To read just one of Diderot's works in isolation (or, to read an earlier work without considering how his more mature thoughts help us to understand what, early on, he was working toward) is to deny oneself the full experience of Diderot's skills as an author and of his rich thought⁵⁶. If

⁵³ Ibid., p. 96.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 99.

⁵⁵ The reading suggested here would mesh nicely with remarks made by A and B at the close of the *Supplément*:

B. Toujours les femmes ; on ne saurait faire un pas sans les rencontrer à travers son chemin.

[...]

B. Et qu'en penseraient-elles ?

A. Peut-être le contraire de ce qu'elles en diraient.

We recall that the piece opens with a dialogue between A and B, establishing that a thick fog— an atmospheric metaphor representing ignorance — will dissipate over the course of the work. Women are an unavoidable mystery, but that doesn't mean that their abilities are completely incomprehensible. Women can understand, can learn and can be brilliant. By needs they must (even if society often warps and bends them by its dictates). See: D. Diderot, cit., pp. 94-95.

⁵⁶ To claim that the *Pensées* date to Diderot's intellectual youth (and so to sexism along with theism), is not to successfully defend the work as sexist. We have identified earlier works of pro-female stance. And, we might add that had Diderot been concerned with his choice of words in the 1754 edition of the *Pensées*, he could easily rewritten them. Diderot did rework his pieces (as the addition of the exordium and the final observation in the work in question attest). He did not. The mature Diderot, I offer, was too little (if at all) perturbed by the misread those might make who do not sufficiently understand the totality of his thought. The defense provided in this essay aligns with such a position.

we trace the connections between two of his creations (which are themselves entwined in the entirety of his philosophy), we confirm that Denis Diderot is no sexist. What he is is a genius whose prescient works continue to inspire us all to further reading and bolder reflection.