Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell

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12. Sophie de Grouchy or Sophie de Condorcet
8 April 1764–8 September 1822

Fig. 12. Sophie de Grouchy or Sophie de Condorcet, self portrait. Photo by Branor (2013). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/Sophiedecondorcet.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Lettres sur la Sympathie

Lettre II

La sympathie dont nous sommes susceptibles pour les maux physiques, et qui est une partie de ce que nous comprenons sous le nom d'humanité, serait un sentiment trop peu durable pour être souvent utile, mon cher C***, si nous n'étions capables de réflexion autant que de sensibilité ; mais comme la réflexion prolonge les idées que nous ont apportées nos sens, elle étend et conserve en nous l'effet de la vue de la douleur, et l'on peut dire que c'est elle qui nous rend véritablement humains. En effet, c'est la réflexion qui fixe dans notre âme la présence d'un mal que nos yeux n'ont vu qu'un moment, et qui nous porte à le soulager pour en

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effacer l'idée importune et douloureuse ; c'est la réflexion qui, venant au secours de notre mobilité naturelle, force notre compassion à être active en lui offrant de nouveau les objets qui n'avaient fait sur elle qu'une impression momentanée ; c'est la réflexion qui, à la vue de la douleur, nous rappelant que nous sommes sujets de ce tyran destructeur de la vie, comme l'être que nous en voyons opprimé, nous rapproche de lui par un mouvement d'émotion et d'attendrissement sur nous-mêmes, et nous intéresse à ses maux, même lorsqu'ils pourraient plutôt repousser qu'attirer notre sensibilité ; c'est la réflexion enfin qui, par les habitudes qu'elle donne à notre sensibilité, en prolongeant ses mouvements, fait que l'humanité devient dans nos âmes, un sentiment actif et permanent qui, brûlant de s'exercer, va sans attendre qu'on l'excite, chercher le bonheur des hommes dans les travaux des sciences, dans les méditations de la nature, de l'expérience, et de la philosophie, ou qui, s'attachant à la douleur et à l'infortune, la suit partout, et en devient le consolateur, le dieu. Le sentiment de l'humanité est donc en quelque sorte, un germe déposé au fond du cœur de l'homme par la nature, et que la faculté de réfléchir va féconder et développer.

Mais quelques animaux, dira-t-on, sont susceptibles de pitié, et ne le sont pas de réflexion ?[1]

1 Bernier, Marc André, and Deidre Dawson, eds, *Les Lettres sur la sympathie de Sophie de Grouchy: philosophie morale et réforme sociale* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), pp. 38–39.

Translation: The sympathy of which we are capable for physical pains, and which is a part of what we comprehend under the name humanity, would be too short-lasting a feeling to be often useful, my dear C***, if we were incapable of reflection as much as of sensibility; but as reflection prolongs the ideas that our senses have brought us, it extends and conserves in us the effect of the sight of suffering, and one may say that it is this which makes us truly human. In fact, it is reflection which fixes in our soul the presence of a pain that our eyes have only seen a moment, and which leads us to remedy it to erase its importunate and painful idea; it is reflection which, coming to the help of our natural mobility, forces our compassion to be active in offering it again objects which had made only a momentary impression on it; it is reflection, which at the sight of pain, reminding us that we are subject to this life-destroying tyrant, like the being that we see oppressed by it, brings us toward them by a movement of emotion and tenderness directed toward ourselves, and interests us in their pains, even when they might rather repulse than attract our sensibility; it is reflection finally which, by the habits it gives to our sensibility, in prolonging its movements, makes humanity become an active and permanent sentiment in our souls which, burning to exercise itself, goes ahead without waiting to be excited, looking for the happiness of men in the works of the sciences, in the meditations of nature, of experience, and of philosophy, or which, attaching itself to pain and misfortune, follows it everywhere, and becomes its consoler, its god. The sentiment of humanity is thus in some sort a grain deposited at the bottom of man's heart by nature, and which the faculty of reflection will fertilize and develop.

But some animals, some will say, are capable of pity, and not of reflection?

Marie Louise Sophie de Grouchy was the daughter of François Jacques de Grouchy, Marquis de Grouchy, and Marie Gilberte Henriette Fréteau de Pény. Grouchy was born in Meulan in 1764 and died in Paris in 1822. In 1786, she married the mathematician and philosopher Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet. She was twenty-two, he was forty-two and a prominent Academician. After her marriage, Sophie de Condorcet started a salon attended by Turgot, Beaumarchais, Gouges, Staël, and many philosophers alongside foreign visitors such as Jefferson, Beccaria, and possibly Adam Smith. This salon later played an important role in Girondin politics. Condorcet allowed the Cercle Social, committed to equal rights for women, to meet at her house; her interest in women's rights may have helped to shape her husband's essay of 1790, "Sur l'admission des femmes au droit de cité." In 1793, after denouncing the Jacobin constitution, her husband went into hiding. Condorcet visited him secretly, encouraging him to write. The marquis composed his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795), which she later edited; Condorcet filed for divorce, with her husband's consent, since that would allow wife and daughter to keep the family assets. In 1794, he left hiding, was identified, and was handed over to the authorities. He was found dead in prison the next morning, likely by his own hand. Condorcet had her husband's last works published posthumously. Left penniless by his proscription and death, which preceded their planned divorce, Condorcet supported herself, her daughter, and her younger sister. She opened a shop to survive, putting aside her writing and translation work. Highly educated for her day, she became fluent in English and Italian and translated Adam Smith and Thomas Paine. Her most important publication is her eight *Lettres sur la sympathie,* added in 1798 to her translation of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). The translation was standard for the ensuing two centuries, while its eight letters on sympathy were largely ignored. In 1799, Condorcet resumed her salon, working between 1801 and 1804 to publish her husband's complete works. To the end, she adhered to her husband's political views, and under Consulate and Empire, her salon became a meeting place for opponents of the regime such as Fauriel. She witnessed the Bourbon reaction after 1815, dying in 1822 as she prepared a new edition of her husband's works.

The above passage opens Letter Two of the eight *Lettres sur la sympathie* Condorcet appended to her translation of Smith in 1798, though the

text is some years older—her husband mentions the letters in his will, written in 1794. Letter Two opens with extended praise of reflection as a sort of mortar strengthening the brickwork of compassionate experience. Adam Smith belongs with Hutcheson and Hume to a Scottish tradition keen to find in sympathy a counterbalance to the self-interest promoted by Hobbes or La Rochefoucauld and central to the science of economics today. Condorcet is distinguished perhaps by a shift of emphasis: where Smith sees sympathy as a sort of spectacle retold in the viewing mind, Condorcet presents it in more material terms, as a chemistry of the heart, suggests a modern reviewer.[2] Condorcet seems untroubled by Smith's observation that we can have sympathy for the dead, though they do not contribute to it; the C*** her letters all address is her brother-in-law the *idéologue* Cabanis, whose *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* (1802) cite her letters and codify a thoroughgoing materialist view of mind in the tradition of Condillac. Reducing mind to matter is a major undertaking, equivalent to Laplace's reduction of the heavens to Newtonian physics in his contemporary *Mécanique céleste* (1796), and it may have seemed more important than following Smith's theater metaphor. Condorcet does allege in Letter One that her English was poor as she began—"je n'entendais pas assez l'anglais pour lire l'original"—but that seems to have been corrected. Let us note that Rousseau also rejects Smith's theater metaphor, choosing instead to focus on pity; but much of this may be the detail that Condorcet feels can resolve into final unity, offering new tools to rehabilitate affectivity in moral thought.

Women enjoyed a longstanding premodern role as mediators of cutting-edge thought, and Condorcet, whose translation of Smith precedes her letters, follows in that tradition—it has been argued that her translator's lexicon is more physical than Smith's, which would be atypical for a rendering from English into French. Du Châtelet, who died in 1749, preceded her, translating Newton's *Principia mathematica* (1687) in the 1740s, but women translated a good deal throughout this period, it was a commonly exploited genre. Du Châtelet and Staël also

2 Marc André Bernier, "Les métamorphoses de la sympathie au siècle des Lumières", in *Les Lettres sur la sympathie (1798) de Sophie de Grouchy: philosophie morale et réforme sociale*, ed. Marc André Bernier and Deidre Dawson (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), p. 14.

shared Condorcet's interest in moral philosophy. Condorcet meanwhile began her career as a translator through work on a text defending the early French Revolution by James Mackintosh, the Scottish Whig leader, in 1792.

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