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► **To cite this version:**

Maria Susana Seguin. MADAME DU CHATELET, CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHER. Ruth Hagenbruger,. "L'époque émilienne". Philosophy and sciences, 1700-1750, In press, Philosophy studies. hal-01907246

HAL Id: hal-01907246

<https://hal.science/hal-01907246>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2018

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MADAME DU CHATELET, CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHER.

Maria Susana Seguin

1. Introduction:

Émilie Du Châtelet was undoubtedly an extraordinary woman, who perhaps never claimed special status in the society of her era because she was a woman, who never truly asserted her difference or her unique nature as a woman, but who naturally occupied an intellectual arena in which she felt herself to be as legitimate as her interlocutors, even if they were men, and men of the stature of Voltaire, Euler, Maupertuis or Wolf. We should nevertheless avoid being influenced by the magnifying effect that this volume might produce or even giving way to admiration for this exceptional woman, either in her intellectual life or her personal choices. My objective in these pages will therefore be not so much to emphasise the elements constituting the specifically feminine originality of the work of Madame Du Châtelet than to attempt to explain in the most objective manner possible the general knowledge defining what is described here as the “Emilian Age”, and to do so by studying the position occupied by Émilie within a very particular facet of the intellectual life of the eighteenth-century – that of clandestine philosophical literature.

I will therefore attempt to demonstrate how the work of the Marquise Du Châtelet contributes to the definition and interpretation of a major field within Enlightenment thought, which is still sometimes ignored, that of the clandestine philosophical manuscripts, a corpus of which the *Examens de la Bible*, now attributed to Émilie, is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding examples¹. Here again, it would appear necessary to proceed with the greatest methodological caution, in order to avoid succumbing to another danger, namely that of applying anachronistic analytical matrices to the work of the Marquise. I would like, on the contrary, to return to the criteria by which the least well known work of Du Châtelet (unknown for good reason, since it has only recently been attributed to her²) is incorporated into this corpus, in order to reveal what this document tells us about her era; in other words, what we may learn about the relationship that Émilie maintained with the thought of her time and also what this work does or does not tell us, whether directly or indirectly, about the transformations occurring in the first half of the eighteenth-century.

¹ Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier Du Breteuil, Marquise Du Châtelet-Lomond, *Examens de la Bible*. ed. and annot. Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach, Paris, Editions Honoré Champion, “Libre pensée et Littérature Clandestine” series, 2011.

² On this subject, see the very rich introduction by Bertram E. Schwarzbach to the edition already cited.

2. Clandestine philosophical literature.

Let us begin with a brief definition of the corpus into which the *Examens de la Bible* by Madame Du Châtelet has been incorporated, and of which at least a summary knowledge is required for the purposes of assessing the significance of Émilie's work. What does it mean when we say that we are interested in "clandestine philosophical manuscripts", or, more broadly, but undoubtedly with greater fidelity to the complexity of the phenomenon, in "clandestine philosophical literature"? Viewed from the perspective of historical research³, the corpus of clandestine philosophical literature is composed of manuscript texts which have, since they were first identified by Gustave Lanson⁴ and Ira O. Wade⁵ continued to expand, according to the meticulous investigation conducted by Miguel Benitez⁶, to the point of encompassing 250 different titles in more than 2000 copies, held mostly in European, and in particular French, libraries (although there are large numbers in German libraries⁷) and whose covert circulation is proved by eyewitness accounts, correspondence, the presence of these titles in the catalogues of public or private libraries, or in inventories made after death, etc. The coherence of this corpus does not, however, meet an observable material criterion, much less amount to a declared desire on the part of the authors composing it to constitute a distinctive intellectual movement or to stoke a philosophical debate – at least, not in every case. This corpus has been constituted as such a posteriori by the researchers themselves, who have detected very strong elements of commonality in these scattered writings, who have identified their channels of production, circulation and reception, and demonstrated that, more

³ On this subject, see Geneviève Artigas-Menant : "Cent ans de réponses aux 'Questions diverses' de Lanson", *Problemata. Revue Internationale de philosophie*, Vol. 4, 3, 2013, pp.21-49. Maria Susana Seguin, "Quelques réflexions sur les auteurs de la littérature philosophique clandestine", in *Liberté de conscience et arts de penser. Mélanges en l'honneur d'Antony McKenna*. Studies collected by Christelle Bahier-Porte, Pierre-François Moreau and Delphine Reguig. Paris, Honoré Champion, 2017, pp.77-90.

⁴ G. Lanson, "Questions diverses sur l'histoire de l'esprit philosophique en France avant 1750", *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1912, 19, pp.1-29, 293-317.

⁵ I. O. Wade, *The clandestine Organization and diffusion of philosophic ideas in France from 1700 to 1750*, Princeton, 1938, republ. New York, 1967.

⁶ Reference should be made here to the very important inventorial work carried out by Miguel Benítez in *La Face cachée des Lumières*, Paris: Universitas, Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1996, and which will be further developed in the Spanish edition of the same work, *La Cara oculta de la Luces*, Valencia, Biblioteca valenciana, Ideas series, 2003. *La Lettre clandestine* regularly announces the discovery of new copies of previously inventoried texts or the existence of new titles that may be entered into the clandestine corpus. The entirety of the corpus of clandestine philosophical literature can now be consulted at the digital platform philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr, which is regularly updated, to which we will refer from now on.

⁷ Maria Susana Seguin, "Exégèse biblique et critique philosophique dans les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins conservés en Allemagne", in *Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie. Libertinage et Religion en Europe au temps des Lumières*, Saint-Étienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2009, pp.51-61.

than being the result of a specific, concerted intention, this corpus is symptomatic of a transformation whose significance was sometimes lost on the authors themselves⁸.

Which criteria may be used to define this corpus? As far as its nature is concerned, it is composed essentially of manuscript copies, as was until recently the case for the texts of Madame Du Châtelet, distributed without the name of the author, or with sibylline attributions, whose dissemination did not necessarily precede a final printing stage. There are copies based on printed works that are now rare (such as, for example, the *Cymbalum mundi* by Bonaventure des Périers⁹), manuscripts that were in fact printed subsequently, in the great majority of cases, by someone other than the author (as in the case of the *Doutes sur la religion*, attributed to Dumarsais and published by Voltaire in his *Évangile de la raison*¹⁰), often long after they had died (as with the *Mémoires des sentiments et des pensées de Jean Meslier*¹¹). There are, evidently, manuscripts in existence that would have been impossible to distribute in printed form within the context of the censorship of the first half of the eighteenth-century. These include the famous *Traité des trois imposteurs*, whose composition may perhaps be dated back to the last years of the seventeenth-century but which was not printed, through the efforts of Baron d'Holbach, until 1768, while the circulation of the manuscript version of the text throughout the eighteenth-century made it the most widely diffused clandestine philosophical text and the manuscript version even continued to be diffused at the same time as the printed version¹². There are, however, numerous manuscripts that have remained anonymous and unpublished until the present day, or which have only been published as a result of contemporary research, such as *l'Analyse de la religion chrétienne*¹³, as well as the *Notes* and *Preuves* (to which we will return), and in particular the manuscript that interests us here, the *Examens de la Bible* by Madame Du Châtelet¹⁴.

⁸ See the various thematic issues of *La Lettre clandestine* devoted to the problems associated with the appellation and description of the clandestine corpus, such as “Tendances actuelles dans la recherche sur les clandestins à l’âge classique” (5 / 1996), “L’identification du texte clandestin aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles” (7 / 1998), or “Anonymat et clandestinité aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles” (8 / 1999). On the relationship between clandestine literature and the intellectual life of the period, in addition to the issues devoted to the major authors of the Enlightenment, see also “Protestants, protestantisme et pensée clandestine” (13 / 2004), “Les matérialismes dans la littérature clandestine de l’âge classique” (14 / 2005-2006), “Les Relations franco-anglaises aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: périodiques et manuscrits clandestins” (15 / 2007), “La littérature philosophique clandestine et les sciences” (18 / 2010).

⁹ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/34>.

¹⁰ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/36>.

¹¹ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/122>.

¹² <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/189>. See the issue devoted to this text by *La Lettre clandestine* 24 / 2016.

¹³ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/163>.

¹⁴ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/28>.

The material criterion (the manuscript form) is not, however, sufficient to situate this text within the corpus with which we are concerned. Numerous writings were disseminated in manuscript form during the eighteenth-century. From ephemera to Jansenist literature, and public forms of correspondence, the manuscript continued to be employed on a regular basis for the dissemination and circulation of works and ideas, even if it was particularly suited to the clandestine dissemination of polemical texts such as those found in our corpus. We might go even further: the intellectual and material history of reading and the book tells us that the various forms assumed by clandestine philosophy (manuscripts, publication outside France, secret publication within France, etc.) constitute one of the specific configurations of intellectual life of the eighteenth-century, that adopted by a substantial number of works which, for various reasons, evade the strict requirements imposed by the publishing market and the implementation of royal and religious censorship, in other words, the majority of the texts¹⁵ – from controversial works of every type to religious literature identified as heterodox (Protestant or Jansenist), pornographic literature and, even, the simplest novel, at least up to the middle of the century¹⁶.

The texts of clandestine philosophical literature are therefore characterised by the fact that in addition to their covert diffusion, anonymity or false attribution, and their manuscript form, they are “philosophical” in the broader sense attributed to this term by the Enlightenment, that defined precisely by the article “Philosophe” in the *Encyclopédie*, and which was extracted, as we now know, from one of the manuscripts¹⁷ within the corpus being examined here. They deal in a critical, subversive or impious spirit with essentially metaphysical or religious questions while combatting prejudice through rational reflection (philosophical, historical and scientific reason). These are, thus, for the most part heterodox writings, to the extent that in the majority of cases the ideas that they condemn concern the tenets of the faith: God himself (his existence, his essence and his relationship with the world); the human soul (its spirituality and immortality); revelation (authenticity or coherence of the Biblical scriptures, validity of the prophecies and miracles, strength of exegesis); the historical religions in general (their origins, their relationship with the political world, the crimes committed in their name in the course of history), and Christianity in particular, especially Catholicism, through its history,

¹⁵ On this subject see H.-J. Martin and R. Chartier, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française*, vol. II, Paris, Promodis, 1984.

¹⁶ Françoise Weil *L'Interdiction du roman et la librairie: 1728-1750*. Paris: Aux Amateurs de livres, 1986. See also *Livres interdits, livres persécutés: 1720-1770*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999.

¹⁷ The manuscript in question is *Le philosophe*, written by Dumarsais, and published for the first time in *Nouvelles Libertés de penser*, published covertly at Amsterdam in 1743. <http://philosophie-clandestine.humanum.fr/ms/144>.

dogmata, mysteries and morality. However, this constant factor within the field and the critical process may rest upon highly varied philosophical orientations, from naturalism to materialism, from atheism to pantheism or deism, and reflect the influence of Descartes, Bayle, Hobbes or Spinoza, not to mention the *libertins érudits* of the seventeenth-century.

3. The *Examens de la Bible* within the clandestine corpus:

Considered from this perspective, the *Examens de la Bible* by Madame Du Châtelet fall within the definition of the clandestine corpus. Without entering into a detailed analysis here, as Bertram Schwarzbach has done in a highly apposite manner in his introduction to the edition of the text, we are able to state that the work produced by Émilie satisfies these criteria, both in terms of its material character (its status as an anonymous manuscript work, at least until recently), and its methodological and philosophical approach. Thus, the treatise presents a critical commentary of each of the books of the Bible, subverting the apologetical method of the period, in particular that of the model of the genre, Father Augustin Calmet, who at the beginning of the century had authored a *Commentaire de la Bible* which Voltaire would later adopt as one of his preferred targets¹⁸. And finally, through the systematicity of the selected method, Du Châtelet puts the Christian religion, and Catholicism in particular, on trial by attacking the very foundations of Christian theology (the scriptures), employing all of the angles of attack characteristic of clandestine philosophical literature: denunciation of revelation¹⁹, absurdity of the prophecies²⁰ and miracles²¹, immorality of the Old Testament²², contradictions in the Gospel texts²³, etc. The manuscript thus subjects the Bible, book after book, to a rational reading whose arguments are derived from historical and scientific reasoning, the critical use of apologetical sources, as well as an internal analysis of the work

¹⁸ Dom Augustin Calmet, *Commentaire littéraire sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*, Paris, publ. Pierre Emery, 1707-1717, 26 volumes.

¹⁹ By way of example, Du Châtelet writes: “Que l’on compare ce passage avec le Lévitique et qu’on voye si Dieu a pu inspirer l’auteur du Lévitique et les prophètes qui lui donne[nt] si positivement le démenti”, “Examen du Lévitique”, *Examens de la Bible*, ed. cit., p.229.

²⁰ There are numerous examples of this type of criticism. Consider, for instance, the commentary authored by Du Châtelet concerning a prophecy of the Old Testament: “Le reste de la prophétie de Jacob est dans ce goût là et ressemble aux discours d’un homme qui a un violent transport au cerveau et dont les discours n’ont ni sens ni tête” (ibid., p.195).

²¹ Once again, there are numerous examples of this. We may consider one example that summarises the position adopted by the Marquise: “Voilà donc l’histoire du Pentateuque finie, il faut avoüer que c’était bien la peine de faire tant de miracles et tant de mal aux hommes pour faire sortir les Israelites d’un beau et bon pays comme l’Égypte [...]”. ibid., p.280.

²² “Mais elle [la bru de Judas] envoya à Judas avant d’aller au bucher le gage qu’elle avait reçu de luy; ce qui luy sauva la vie quoique par là, elle eut joint l’inceste à l’adultère”. ibid., p.189.

²³ Hence, regarding the genealogy of Jesus she writes: “Or Joseph n’étant que le pere putatif de Jesus, et n’y ayant rien mis du sien, autant valoit-il faire la généalogie de Mahomet que la sienne pour donner celle de J[ésus] C[hrist]. Mais cette généalogie si absurde à rapporter, fourmille de contradictions”. ibid., p.614.

for the purposes of demonstrating its human nature, its imperfections and therefore the impossibility of it conveying a particular revealed message and imposing any kind of universal morality. Through its choice of methodology (attacking the founding texts of the Christian religion) and the strength of the criticism offered, the *Examens* of Madame Du Châtelet constitute one of the most systematic and effective clandestine philosophical manuscripts of the first half of the eighteenth-century, and appear to complete the intellectual output of this exceptional woman by bringing a new dimension to her already rich and influential work. This would also help to explain the cloak of anonymity under which this manuscript has reached us, as well as the profane legend that has developed over time concerning the author and her philosophical intentions.

And yet, to draw such a conclusion would appear to me to betray the reality of the clandestine philosophical manuscripts in all their great complexity. Indeed, research conducted over the last few years has demonstrated that clandestine literature, and to an even greater extent the choice of the manuscript form, satisfied not only the requirement for protection of the authors and readers, a mode of transmission adapted to certain circles of initiates, but also constituted an economic and intellectual choice²⁴. The manuscript form, which predominates in the clandestine philosophical corpus, appears to be consistent with a particular trait of this literature, often conceived not merely as the preferred medium of a thought that is polemical in itself, but also as a malleable material, which could be reused by other readers who, in turn, became copyists and authors, and thereby participated in the drafting and dissemination of a form of thought that was as much individual as collective, the expression of both powerful personalities and a social phenomenon, the articulation of a “crisis of conscience”, to quote the title of the work by Paul Hazard, in which the names of individuals were less important than the network of meanings constructed by the texts, and in which the beauty of the structure was often less significant than the strength of the arguments.

It was therefore because it combined heterodox content with a medium compatible with dynamic thinking, which was constantly being refined and could easily be adapted to the conditions associated with clandestine dissemination, that this corpus represented a particularly formidable weapon of the philosophical “underground” of the late seventeenth-

²⁴ François Moureau: “La plume et le plomb” and “Clandestinité et ventes publiques” in [F. Moureau ed.] *De bonne main. La communication manuscrite au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Universitatis; Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1993, pp.5-16 and pp.143-175; and *La Plume et le plomb*, Paris, PUPS, 2006, preface by Robert Darnton. See also Alain Mothu, “Le manuscrit philosophique clandestin existe-t-il?”, in Jean-Louis Lebrave and Almuth Gresillon, *Écrire aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Genèse de textes littéraires et philosophiques*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2000, pp.59-74. *La L. C. 7*, 1998, *L’Identification du texte clandestin aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*. G. Artigas-Menant, *Du secret des clandestins à la propagande voltairienne*, Paris Champion, 2001.

century and a large part of the eighteenth. It was, moreover, also the reason why, at an early stage, Gustave Lanson was able to produce the first list of clandestine philosophical manuscripts, since he had identified it, correctly, as a major source for the most controversial ideas of the Enlightenment authors.

It is, however, difficult, given the current state of knowledge, to state that Madame Du Châtelet intended to participate in the diffusion of this highly polemical work, or that she was aware, at the moment at which she wrote this impressive manuscript²⁵, of the existence of other manuscripts of the same nature. What is known about her life at Cirey, in the company of Voltaire, allows us to do no more than to elaborate a number of more or less plausible hypotheses, based on quite limited testimony, which is not always well informed²⁶ and which cannot for the present be compared with other sources: daily readings of the Bible in the company of Voltaire, the composition of a very large work devoted to the scriptures, also polemical in nature.

However, neither our knowledge of Émilie's library, nor Voltaire's correspondence from this period provides us with any indication of the presence of clandestine literature within the Cirey coterie at the time at which the *Examens* were composed, while some of the most important works contained within this corpus (*Examen de la religion*, *Traité des trois imposteurs*, *Analyse de la religion*, *Doutes sur la religion adressés au père Malebranche*, and indeed the *Testament de Meslier*) were already being circulated and, in certain cases, widely disseminated. In fact, from a purely material perspective, Émilie would have had opportunity to read these texts even before her withdrawal to Cirey, in the salons that she frequented, for example, where she would have come into contact with some of the actors of the clandestine milieu, such as Fontenelle; but nothing in her biography or her public or personal writings allows us to assert this²⁷.

We ought, undoubtedly, to undertake a detailed analysis of the *Examens*, comparing them meticulously with other manuscripts found in the clandestine corpus; and it is highly probable that we will find numerous points of congruity between the *Examens* of Madame Du Châtelet and the arguments used in other clandestine manuscripts, without this proximity

²⁵ In his edition, Bertram E. Schwarzbach demonstrates that the *Examens* must have been composed after 1736 and probably after 1742 in the case of the New Testament books.

²⁶ On this subject, see the introduction by Bertram E. Schwarzbach already cited.

²⁷ The recent identification of the collection of manuscripts by Florent Du Châtelet, the son of Émilie, currently conserved at the Bibliothèque Mazarine does, nevertheless, open new avenues of research in this subject. It is still too early, however, to claim that some of these writings might have belonged to Émilie. On this point, see my paper given at the Émilie Du Châtelet conference organised by Ulla Kölving and Andrew Brown, Paris, Archives Nationales, 17-18 November 2017.

allowing us to put forward a particular phenomenon as an influence, given that the clandestine philosophical literature mobilises a common critical content which means that the significance of each text emerges not so much in the similarities as in the differences. It is possible that examination of these recently discovered manuscripts, which unfortunately remain inaccessible, might begin to provide answers to these questions. However, since we have not yet viewed these texts, it is better to confine our efforts to what we actually know.

4. Émilie Du Châtelet, clandestine philosopher:

Nevertheless, the special status of the *Examens de la Bible* within the context of the clandestine corpus, and the provisional nature of our knowledge of them, will allow us to draw two key lessons in order to improve our understanding of this corpus and the place of the *Examens* in the intellectual history of the first half of the eighteenth-century. On the one hand, it would appear obvious that even though Émilie was unaware that she was participating in the creation of a highly influential intellectual movement, the reception given to her work reinforced her position as a “clandestine philosopher”. The manuscripts still extant (one copy in a private collection, one copy in the Royal Library of Belgium²⁸ and the collection held by the Troyes Public Library²⁹, which also includes the *Analyse de la religion chrétienne* as well as the attached *Notes* and *Preuves*), reveal that the *Examens de la Bible* were not only disseminated in manuscript form during the eighteenth-century, but that they were specifically regarded as forming part of the clandestine family (in fact, B. Schwarzbach even suggests that the *Examens* may have influenced the author of the *Preuves*³⁰) even when the name of the author remained unknown or no more than a tradition that could not be corroborated. This intellectual proximity, the dissemination of the text, the aura and mystery associated with the years spent with Voltaire at Cirey, undoubtedly helped to forge the “legend of the manuscript” with the Marquise engaged in secret combat against the church and its teaching. The image of the clandestine philosopher Émilie Du Châtelet is therefore, in reflection of the clandestine corpus, as much the result of a single, radical and highly-informed work as a social and intellectual construct, created *a posteriori* by the possible intellectual proximity of the readers of the second-half of the eighteenth-century with the work – a methodological, critical and philosophical identity with other texts within the clandestine corpus.

²⁸ Bruxelles-B.R. 15188-15189.

²⁹ Troyes-B.M. 2376-2377.

³⁰ Bertram E. Schwarzbach, “Preface”, *op.cit.*, pp.19-21.

However, even if we suppose that Madame du Châtelet had never read any of these clandestine writings, or that there was no reception, either direct or indirect, of her own observations on the Bible during the eighteenth-century (at the time when clandestine writings were being actively disseminated), the *Examens de la Bible* still bear witness to the existence of a state of mind shared by many of the other authors engaged in clandestine philosophical activity, in its methodological rigour, and in the strength of the rational criticism on which the text is based. This is precisely where one of the most unusual characteristics of the corpus of clandestine literature is to be found, which Émilie's manuscript also reinforces.

Indeed, the research conducted over the last few years has made it possible to redefine the image of the corpus provided by the very individuals who facilitated its discovery. In particular, the work of identifying the authors of the texts, which remains one of the most important areas within the research field and perhaps even one of the hardest to bring to a complete conclusion, has substantially modified the view that Lanson and Ira O. Wade had formed of clandestine philosophy. The successful identification of various authors, including that of Du Châtelet, the identifications pending, and also the progressive discovery of the milieux in which the writings were disseminated and received, have allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the world of clandestine philosophy and, even though the phenomenon still harbours many areas of uncertainty, to describe its workings as well as the meaning that should be attributed to its characteristic practices.

Indeed, it would now seem difficult to reduce clandestine philosophy to the actions of a coterie conscious of its role in the drafting and dissemination of controversial ideas and able to organise its activity so as to evade the snares of religious and political censorship, as Ira O. Wade suggested³¹. Admittedly, it is obvious that some of the authors knew each other and frequented the same circles; thus, an author such as Fréret, to whom we have attributed the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*³², an eminent orientalist and member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, moved in the same circles as Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, translator of Tasso and probable author of *Opinions des anciens sur l'origine du monde*³³. Dumarsais, Boindin and Levesque de Burigny gravitated around the Duke of Noailles and the

³¹ I am referring here in particular to clandestine activity occurring before 1750, as identified by Lanson and Wade, but the analysis may also be extended further, to include the place occupied by clandestine literature in the struggle for the Enlightenment, as we will see subsequently. On this subject, see the highly instructive article by Geneviève Artigas-Menant, "Du labeur clandestin à la propagande philosophique", in Jean Dagen and Philippe Roger (eds.), *Un Siècle de Deux cents Ans? Les XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: continuités et discontinuités*, Paris, Desjonquères, 2004, pp.293-304

³² N. Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, critical ed. by Sergio Landucci, Firenze, Olschki, 1986.

³³ Manuscript edited by Abbé Le Mascrier under the title *Le Monde, son origine, son antiquité. De l'âme et de son immortalité*, [Paris] 1751.

Count of Boulainvilliers, who was himself heavily involved in the production and dissemination of clandestine writings. They would meet at Procope, in the society salons, most likely in the social circles of the *académies*, since some of the authors associated with the clandestine world were directly involved with them, following the example of Fontenelle, the first perpetual secretary of the Académie des Sciences between 1699 and 1740, member also of the Académie Française and the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in which he was admittedly less active but nevertheless familiar with its members, such as Fréret, and in which he even held the post of royal censor³⁴. The learned circles, as well as those of the royal administration or finances, would appear to provide highly fertile ground for the development of the critical spirit characteristic of clandestine philosophical literature which it would undoubtedly be useful to explore in even greater depth³⁵, even though its role in the production and dissemination of critical literature appears to have been firmly established.

However, to this first group, this clandestine cell, we must add another, which neither Lanson nor Wade took into account in their respective studies, and which takes us away from the Parisian circles while furnishing us with an undoubtedly more accurate conception of the true nature of the clandestine nexus and the difficulty associated with its interpretation. This involves actors, who are not secondary but more peripheral, who come into contact with the clandestine world itself, contributing to it in a more or less direct fashion, but whose principal activity distances them from the primary networks for the production and dissemination of texts and whose intention to participate in an organised network as such is not always obvious. We will consider one example here³⁶.

Benoît de Maillet, the author of *Telliamed*³⁷, whose dissemination in manuscript form is attested from 1720, was seen regularly in the circles of the royal administration and corresponded regularly with some of the actors of Parisian intellectual life from whom he

³⁴ See Fabrice Charton, “Fontenelle, secrétaire perpétuel de l’Académie royale des Sciences”, *Revue Fontenelle*, 6/7, Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2010, pp.295-310.

³⁵ Issue 20 / 2012 of *La Lettre clandestine* was thus devoted to “L’érudition et la littérature philosophique clandestine”. The relationship of clandestine actors with academic society and networks of political power, such as that of Abée Bignon, for example, also merits further research.

³⁶ We might add the highly curious, but also extremely enlightening, example of Thomas Pichon, reader and collector of clandestine manuscripts, who was heavily involved in the dissemination of these texts in the first part of the century, whose papers were discovered by Geneviève Artigas-Menant at Vire. See her book *Lumières clandestines. Les papiers de Thomas Pichon*. Paris, H. Champion, 2001, “Libre pensée et littérature clandestine” series. We might also mention the case of Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, civil engineer, author of *Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages* and *Recherches sur le despotisme oriental*, an associate of the Encyclopedists, whose direct relationship with the world of clandestine philosophy remains little known.

³⁷ *Telliamed, ou Entretiens d’un philosophe indien avec un missionnaire français sur la diminution de la mer, la formation de la terre, l’origine de l’homme*. London [Amsterdam], 1748.

was, however, separated for a major part of his life owing to his political duties³⁸. Maillet submitted, for example, his *Traité sur la diminution de la mer* (the alternative title for *Telliamed*) to the secretary of the Académie des Sciences, Fontenelle, at whose request, if we are to believe the correspondence, he developed his hypothesis of the marine origin of life³⁹. We also know that Maillet uses some of the texts within the clandestine corpus in the composition of his own treatise⁴⁰. However, the very essence of the arguments constituting Maillet's thesis against the Christian religion, the power and originality of its materialism, is derived from his experience in the field, from his observation of nature itself which contradicts the historical understanding of the physical history of the earth imposed by the Bible⁴¹. Maillet's work thus forms part of the clandestine world not merely because of the position occupied by the author within the intellectual circles of the period, and which appear reduced in scope overall, or due to the polemical dimension peculiar to the text he produced (Maillet is persuaded to write a scientific treatise), but owing to its utility to other participants in clandestine philosophy, directly involved in the dissemination of this type of argument, as proved by the posthumous editions to which the text was subject, in a slightly amended form, through the efforts of Abbé Le Mascrier⁴².

The clandestine world benefitted additionally from a third group of authors who appear to have been entirely, or almost, cut off from the political and philosophical networks, but whose polemical power illustrates the very strength of the phenomenon for which they became the most paradigmatic representatives and, given their position, probably the most

³⁸ Thanks to the protection of minister Pontchartrain, he was appointed Consul in Egypt, then Livorno, and then finally "General Assessor to the Ports of the Levant and Barbary Coast", before retiring to Marseille, where he spent his final years. See Fritz Neubert, *Einleitung in eine kritische Ausgabe von B. de Maillets "Telliamed, ou Entretiens d'un philosophe indien avec un missionnaire français"*, Berlin, B. Ebering, 1920; Claudine Cohen, *La Genèse de Telliamed. Benoît de Maillet et l'histoire naturelle à l'aube des Lumières*. Doctoral thesis at University of Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1989, 2 vol.; Miguel Benítez, "Un nouveau système du monde: *Telliamed*" (series of articles), in *La Face cachée des Lumières. Recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l'âge classique*, Paris, Universitas / Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1996, pp.213-304; Geneviève Artigas-Menant, "*Telliamed* palimpseste. L'Indien, le missionnaire et le scribe", in Antony McKenna and Alain Mothu, *La Philosophie clandestine à l'Âge classique*, Paris, Universitas / Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1997, pp.129-142. See also my own work, *Science et religion dans la pensée française du XVIIIe siècle. Le mythe du déluge universel*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2001, pp.157-166 and 308-310.

³⁹ See the article by Miguel Benítez, "Benoît de Maillet et la littérature clandestine", in *La Face cachée des Lumières*, op. cit., pp.223-225; see also Geneviève Artigas-Menant, "Une continuation des *Entretiens*: Benoît de Maillet, disciple de Fontenelle", *Corpus* 1990 /13, "Fontenelle", pp.113-123.

⁴⁰ Maillet borrows certain sections from the manuscript of *Opinion des Anciens sur l'origine du Monde*, attributed to Jean-Baptiste Mirabaud.

⁴¹ On this subject, see M.S. Seguin, "Cosmologie et théorie de la terre chez Benoît de Maillet: réflexions sur l'imaginaire scientifique de *Telliamed*", *Corpus, revue de philosophie*, 59/2011, "*Telliamed*", *Corpus des Œuvres de philosophie en langue française*, pp.31-53.

⁴² After the first edition of 1748, produced by Abbé Le Mascrier, the text was republished in 1755. Benoît de Maillet, *Telliamed, ou Entretiens d'un philosophe indien avec un missionnaire français sur la diminution de la mer*, La Haye, Pierre Gosse, 1755. While awaiting the edition currently being prepared by Geneviève Artigas-Menant, see that published at Paris, Fayard, *Corpus des œuvres philosophiques en langue française*, 1984.

paradoxical. Indeed, how is it possible to link Meslier, the simple curé of the small village of Étréigny, whose ideas were developed far from the ferment of Paris and its fashionable society with the network that would give his philosophical “testament” all the force of an incontrovertible witness against the Catholic religion and even transform, as did Voltaire, his militant atheism into a form of philosophical deism? And how are we to explain the relationship with the author of the *Difficultés sur la religion*, Robert Challe, who was also far removed from learned and wordly social circles, even cultivating anonymity out of deep philosophical conviction, who we now consider to be the “father of French deism”⁴³, and from the clandestine networks that would create another legend for him, that of the materialist, atheist “philosopher-soldier”⁴⁴ actively engaged in the struggle for the Enlightenment?

5. Conclusion:

Clandestine philosophical literature – and this is undoubtedly the major lesson that all these years of research have given us, clearly illuminating the work undertaken by the Marquise – is not merely an intellectual phenomenon in itself, that described by Lanson and Wade, but the expression of a profound disruption beginning at the end of the seventeenth-century, and indeed earlier if we examine in detail the extent of the corpus, which extends, during the first half of the eighteenth century, across various sections of Ancien Régime society, from the aristocracy to the provincial petite bourgeoisie, from worldly society to places of residence far from the capital, from the highly masculine world of the learned and academic milieux, to the private world of a woman of reason⁴⁵. And it is in this sense that the case of Émilie Du Châtelet would seem particularly enlightening, and might suggest a number of comments which I present by way of conclusion.

There is one major lesson to be drawn from the work of Émilie Du Châtelet herself. She remains, to this day, the only female author of clandestine philosophical manuscripts that we have been able to identify. She is even, in all probability, the only woman to have written a text of this nature, which is without a doubt one of the most methodical and most virulent directed against revealed religions and Catholicism in particular, most likely composed without any knowledge of the extent of the phenomenon of clandestine philosophy, and at a

⁴³ Frédéric Deloffre, “Robert Challe: père du déisme français”, article cit..

⁴⁴ A substantially rewritten version of the manuscript penned by Robert Challe, expurgated of its deism, was later published through the efforts of d’Holbach and de Naigeon, and attributed to a mysterious “philosopher-soldier”, the sole indication of the true identity of the author. *Le militaire philosophe ou Difficultés sur la religion proposées au R.P. Malebranche*, par un ancien officier, 1768.

⁴⁵ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680-1715)*, Paris, 1935.

time when the drafting of this type of manuscript had begun to decline significantly in favour of the routine printing of texts⁴⁶. This fact provides confirmation, were it needed, of the extraordinary intellectual life of Émilie Du Châtelet which had an extensive impact on the scientific and philosophical output, both official and clandestine, of her time.

However, the second lesson is that the existence of this manuscript, within the context that I have attempted to describe briefly here, also shows us the scope of a phenomenon affecting every social class, every intellectual sphere, and which, indeed, also relates to a female audience. Although the case of Du Châtelet in her role as the author of this type of text remains exceptional to this day, that of the reception of these writings among her female contemporaries is still a work in progress and has not yet been sufficiently explored, although it seems to me that it may still produce many surprises.

Finally, the case of Émilie Du Châtelet, the “clandestine philosopher”, appears to show us the extent to which the life and work of this exceptional woman constitute an extraordinary means of studying the highly significant transformations undergone by French thought during the years from 1700 to 1750 – a period during which the most radical ideas of the later works of the authors whose names left their mark on the century were forged. Regardless of whether or not the *Examens* of Émilie inspired the *Bible Enfin Expliquée* and other polemical works written by Voltaire, or whether she was influenced by her reading of other authors engaged in clandestine philosophy (as we are occasionally tempted to believe), or whether, on the contrary, Émilie’s work inspired those authors, Émilie Du Châtelet occupies a prominent position as a “clandestine philosopher” of the eighteenth-century.

As in her other intellectual activities, or perhaps more, in this case Du Châtelet naturally assumed, completely, a position that she did not demand for herself, in the same way that she did not, for complex reasons, sign her manuscript. Nevertheless, even though Émilie did not allow her name to be associated with clandestine philosophical literature, even though she did not, it would appear to me, stamp her name on the period to the extent of making the first half of the eighteenth-century an “Emilian Age”, the complexity, diversity and richness of her work, and especially her output as a “clandestine philosopher” made her unreservedly, passionately and definitively a woman of the Enlightenment.

⁴⁶ The publication of *Nouvelles libertés de penser*, a collection of clandestine texts, at Amsterdam, in 1743, opened a new era in the dissemination of clandestine philosophical literature which reached its fulfilment, during the 1760s, thanks to the editorial work of Voltaire and the circle around d’Holbach.

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