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Émile Du Châtelet and her "Examens de la Bible": a radical clandestine woman philosopher

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CAN WE TALK ABOUT A FEMININE CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHY?
MADAME DU CHATELET AND HER *EXAMENS DE LA BIBLE*

Introduction :

It seems difficult, in the context of a reflection on the radical thought in the early moderns period, not to address the role played by clandestine philosophical literature in the elaboration and circulation of the most controversial ideas. The researches carried out during the last thirty years have definitely proved the importance of this underground movement which has even modified the traditional historiography of the Enlightenment. It seems difficult also, thinking on the place of women in radical thought, not to mention the name of Émilie Du Châtelet, symbol of the woman philosopher (“femme philosophe”) of the French Enlightenment. The Marquise has not only translated Newton or Mandeville, she realized her own scientific experimentations, debated with philosophers and scientists of her time and thus defied the dominant masculine thought.¹ But Émilie Du Châtelet goes even further: she is also the author of one of the most virulent clandestine philosophical manuscripts against religion : the *Examens de la Bible*². But may we recognize in Madame Du Châtelet's work the particular mark of a feminine thought, different from that of the other authors of this complex corpus ? In order to analyze this question, I would like to articulate my reflection in three steps : First, a brief review of the main characteristics of the clandestine philosophical literature into which the *Examens de la Bible* by Madame Du Châtelet are included ; secondly, the elements that, in Émilie Du Châtelet's work, can appear as characteristics of a feminine writing ; finally, a quick comparison of the *Examens* with other works in the clandestine corpus attacking the biblical writings.

1. The clandestine philosophical literature:

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

¹ Véronique Le Ru, *Émilie Du Châtelet philosophe*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2019.

² Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier Du Breteuil, Marquise Du Châtelet-Lomond, *Examens de la Bible*. Édités et annotés par Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach, Paris, Editions Honoré Champion, collection « Libre pensée et Littérature Clandestine », 2011.

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

Gustave Lanson⁴ and Ira O. Wade⁵ continued to expand, according to the meticulous investigation conducted by Miguel Benitez and completed by international collaborations⁶, to the point of encompassing 335 different titles in more than 2500 copies, held mostly in European, and in particular French, libraries. A covert circulation of all this texts 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 than being the result of a specific, concerted intention, this corpus is symptomatic of a transformation whose significance was sometimes lost on the authors themselves⁷.

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 Périers⁸), 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*

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 Lucas*, 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 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).

⁸ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/34>.

religion, attributed to Dumarsais and published by Voltaire in his *Évangile de la raison*⁹), often long after they had died (as with the *Mémoires des sentiments et des pensées de Jean Meslier*¹⁰). 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 version¹¹. 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, in particular, the manuscript that interests us here, the *Examens de la Bible* by Madame Du Châtelet¹².

The material criterion (the manuscript form) is not, however, sufficient to situate this text within the corpus with which we are concerned. 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 texts¹³ – 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 century¹⁴.

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 from one of the clandestine philosophical manuscripts¹⁵. They deal in a critical, subversive or

⁹ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/36>.

¹⁰ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/122>.

¹¹ <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/189>. See the issue devoted to this text by *La Lettre clandestine* 24 / 2016.

¹² <http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/28>.

¹³ On this subject see H.-J. Martin and R. Chartier, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française*, vol. II, Paris, Promodis, 1984.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.huma-num.fr/ms/144>.

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, 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, and the *libertins érudits* of the seventeenth-century.

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 (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, 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 targets¹⁶. And finally, through the systematicity of the selected method, Émilie 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 revelation¹⁷, absurdity of the prophecies¹⁸ and miracles¹⁹, immorality of the Old Testament²⁰, contradictions in the Gospel texts²¹, etc.

¹⁶ Dom Augustin Calmet, *Commentaire littéraire sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*, Paris, publ. Pierre Emery, 1707-1717, 26 volumes.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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.

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 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.

2. The *Examens de la Bible*, a feminine philosophy ?

These elements does lead us to examine which allows (or not) to define this manuscript as particularly “feminine”, or, more, as “feminist”. We must not forget that the clandestine work of Madame du Châtelet has reached us anonymously and has been attributed to her with certainty only after several years of a very precise research by the modern editor of the text, Bertram Schwarzbach (who had nevertheless refused to attribute this manuscript to Madame Du Châtelet for years). Certainly, a form of legend ran from the last years of the eighteenth-century, which attributed to Émilie “a commentary of ten volumes on the Bible.” This is essentially what can be read in a correspondence between Condorcet and Turgot, in 1772, which did not attribute this text to Émilie alone, but to the collaboration of the Marquise, Voltaire and even Saint-Lambert, Emilie's last lover.²² Doubt therefore remained about the reality of this attribution as well as about the role that Voltaire could actually play in the composition of this manuscript.

One of the elements, and not least, analyzed by Bertram Schwarzbach in his edition will have been “the feminine part” or even “the feminist one” of the *Examens de la Bible*, which could indicate that the author of the manuscript is a woman. I will not return here to this work,

²⁰ “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.

²¹ 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.

²² Letter from Condorcet to Turgot, 14 June 1772, letter LXVII, in *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet et de Turgot 1770-1779*, éd. Charles Henry, Paris, 1883 ; Genève, Slatkine reprints, 1970, p. 87.

the critical edition of the manuscript does so very methodically in the very long introduction to the text. In fact, the attribution of the *Examens de la Bible* to Émilie Du Châtelet can no longer be challenged. However, I retain here some points necessary to complete this analysis.

Some textual clues, but very weak, seem to indicate a woman author: on one of these three preserved copies of this manuscript, we note the presence of five adjectives or feminine verbal forms of the past (in French) and which seem to indicate a female speaker²³. But these elements also seem too insignificant, in the context of a very large manuscript, to constitute a definitive proof: none of the three known manuscripts of the *Examens de la Bible* was written by the hand of Emilie, for example. These cases may also be the consequence of a simple transcription mistake especially when we know the relative rigor of the work of the copyists of the time.

The interest that the author of the manuscript gives to women of the Bible appears, however, as more interesting for us: Madame Du Châtelet is particularly interested in the place that the Bible gives to women, often subject to male interests. She criticizes Abraham, who twice wanted to prostitute his wife Sara²⁴, or who put his concubine Hagar out, left to herself in the desert, because of the jealousy of his wife²⁵. She admires Sephora, Moses' wife, who had the courage to circumcise his own son to save him from the angel who wanted to kill him²⁶. Or the strength of Abigail who protected his first husband, Nabal, who had refused to help King David, the one who will later become her husband²⁷.

The author of the manuscript also demonstrates a sure knowledge of the feminine and family life. She attaches importance, for example, to Joseph's place in the education of the young Jesus²⁸ and to the delicacy that some women can show in the relationship with their husbands. She is also interested in the intimate life of women, as well as their sexuality: she offers explanations on the nature of menstrual blood²⁹ and discusses the conventional wisdom regarding the question of women's purity after childbirth (especially after the birth of a girl)³⁰. She uses this knowledge above all to mock religion, as in the case of one Capuchin who claimed to be able to take on the pain caused by childbirth³¹. From the moral point of view, she takes the defense of adulterous women, especially that mentioned in chapter 8 of the book

²³ *Examens de la Bible*, *op. cit.*, « Introduction », p. 38-39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 178-179.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107, 207.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 343-344.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 647.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 646.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 642.

of John, unfairly accused by society and especially by men, whose she denounces the recurring infidelities³². On this point, she does not even spare the figure of Jesus: his proximity to several “holy women” during his travels seems to her very suspicious, and the nature of his relationship with Mary Magdalene does not seem to make any doubt, even if she's not shocked by this relationship³³. Émilie also makes fun of the need for purity that weighs on young women and mentions that there are many ways to simulate lost virginity³⁴.

The author of the *Examens*, however, is not always supportive of female turpitude : she condemns Esther, who agreed to spend a night with Ahasuerus before deciding on her future³⁵, and condemns Ruth, who slept with the wealthy Boaz to force him to marry her, because she has done nothing but prostitute herself³⁶. But these critics are not made in the name of Christian morality: the case of Judith story offers a very interesting counterexample, because she is the model of a stupid prudery, which does not prevent her from being also very bloodthirsty³⁷.

Can we deduce from these arguments that the text brings a feminine, even a feminist vision of Biblical criticism? The question is not easy, because Madame Du Chatelet's *Examens de la Bible* are the only clandestine philosophical manuscript written by a woman that we have been able to identify to this day. We can only compare it to the critical practices of other manuscripts of the same period, which approach the biblical writings with the same polemical intent.

3. The *Examens* in the context of clandestinity:

On this point, it is obvious that the text of Madame Du Châtelet appears as original. A manuscript like *L'Analyse de la religion chrétienne*, anonymous, also proceeds to the systematic commentary of some Biblical passages but does not seem to give the same place to the problematic of the woman. Admittedly, the intention of the text is not, as in the case of Madame Du Châtelet, to read in a precise way each chapter of the Holy Scriptures, and the author skips many passages that the method chosen by Émilie cannot ignore. But the author of the *Analyse* is not interested in the matriarchs of the Old Testament, nor in the sexual life of women, except to point out the moral contradictions inherent in a supposed revealed book.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 781.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 747, 801-802.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 488-489.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 478-483.

Another clandestine manuscript contemporary to that of Emilie, whose author might have known of the *Examens de la Bible*, according to Bertram Schwarzbach, can also serve here as a piece of comparison. It is a text conceived as a complement of the preceding one, and which bears the title of *Preuves citées dans la Religion chrétienne analysées sans y être rapportées*³⁸. In this text, the anonymous author offers a systematic reading of all the books of the Old Testament and thus crosses the same stories that Émilie comments. However, again, he does not dwell on the cases evoked by the *Examens*, or if he does, it is not according to the same method. If Sarah's case is of interest to this author, it is to denounce the absurdity of her motherhood at more than 90 years old. But the behavior of Abigail, Esther or Ruth elicits no comment, except doubts about the author of the books that relate their stories. Only one case deserves our attention, however, it is the story of the rape of Dinah, reported by chapter 29 of Genesis, which could have interested Emilie but she does not comment. The anonymous author of *Les Preuves*, who builds his criticism of the Bible on scholarly chronological calculations and historical comparisons, is astonished less by the violence perpetrated on a 7-year-old girl by an adult, than by the improbability of the rest of the story: the many children that Jacob was able to father at the age of 85 and especially the age of Simon and Levi, Dinah's brothers who kill all the men of the city of Salem to avenge the honor of their sister, when they are only 11 and 12 years old ...³⁹

An obvious thematic difference emerges when we compare Émilie Du Châtelet's *Examens* with other clandestine manuscripts of the same period. The choice of systematicity in the criticism of the Bible could, it is true, explain Emilie's attention to feminine stories, despite some omissions. But, on the other hand, this seems to correspond more to a real interest in the status of women in Holy scriptures and in religion and in the consequences that these readings may have in Émilie's time. The difference is also methodological: Émilie Du Châtelet does not appeal to historical or chronological arguments, like the author of the *Preuves*, whose criticism is much more scholarly. But basically, the intention of both authors remains the same: to denounce the absurdity of the Bible and the morality that follows. To denounce, on the name of reason, and not in the name of gender specificity: the case of women are yet more examples, and not the main reason for Madame Du Châtelet's criticism.

Other problems remain in deciding the nature of an intentionally feminine, even feminist, polemic of the *Examens de la Bible*. Indeed, if the circulation of the work of Madame Du Châtelet is attested by numerous proofs, nothing allows us to say, in the current

³⁸ A copy of this manuscript is also preserved in the same volume as one of the copies of Madame Du Châtelet's *Examens*.

³⁹ Ms Mazarine 1193, fol. 22-26v.

state of our knowledge, that Madame du Châtelet has intended to participate to the diffusion of this highly polemical work, or that she was aware, at the moment when she wrote this manuscript, 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 informed⁴⁰ and which cannot for the present be compared with other sources: daily readings of the Bible, 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 adressées 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 this. There are, just five annotations of her hand on the manuscript of the *Examen de la religion* that belonged to Voltaire, and which is preserved today with the rest of his Library in St. Petersburg, but this unique case is very limited and does not allow us to draw general conclusions.

We may emphasize here a very small last point: a passage in which the author is revealed, perhaps, not in front of the reader, but in front of herself. When she comments on the story of Esther, the author of the *Examens de la Bible* gives us a brief reflection on the stupid education given to "Christian princesses", who are forced to learn the holy story by heart and without thinking, and who then feel compelled to imitate the bad example of the biblical princess who exterminated all those who did not think like her⁴¹. It is may be possible to recognize the same person who, translating Mandeville (another manuscript work of Madame du Châtelet)⁴², wondered why no great comedy, no great history, no great painting

⁴⁰ On this subject, see the introduction by Bertram E. Schwarzbach already cited.

⁴¹ *Examens de la Bible*, p. 494.

⁴² Ana Rodrigues, « Emilie du Châtelet, a Bibliography » in Ruth Hagengruber (éd.), *Emilie du Châtelet between Leibniz and Newton*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2012, p. 207-246. See also Elena Muceni, « De la mauvaise éducation des filles », in *La Lettre clandestine* 27/2019, p. 215-237.

was, in the eighteenth-century, the work of a woman, and which proposed to “involve women in all the rights of humanity, and especially those of mind.” And Emily insists again: “This new education would be, in all things, a great benefit to the human race. Women would be better off and men would gain a new subject of emulation”⁴³. May be, this interpretation is probably influenced by our current knowledge of the life and work of Madame Du Châtelet, but we must not forget that, despite the “feminist” scope of this preface, she remained in the manuscripts of *Émilie* until today and never circulated.

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 some 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 Belgium⁴⁴ and the collection held by the Troyes Public Library⁴⁵, 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*⁴⁶) 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.

⁴³ *Émilie du Châtelet, Préface du traducteur*, Ms. Russian National Library of Saint Petersburg, Voltaire Collection, IX, pxx. My translation.

⁴⁴ Bruxelles-B.R. 15188-15189.

⁴⁵ Troyes-B.M. 2376-2377.

⁴⁶ Bertram E. Schwarzbach, “Preface”, *op.cit.*, pp.19-21.

It is the same of the “feminist” nature of its work. This character is not self-evident in the text, so much so that the receipt of the *Examens* will not have been very different from that of other anonymous works of this same corpus. The eighteenth-century readers Condorcet and Turgot did not see in the text the work of a woman, but the legend of the collaboration of Emilie with Voltaire. It is also that the first critic could have conceived the text, following the research conducted by Ira O. Wade on the intellectual collaboration between Voltaire and Madame Du Châtelet during their stay at Cirey⁴⁷. And even Bertram Schwarzbach will have needed a long and patient analysis of the text, in a critical edition way, to convince himself that the *Examens de la Bible* are the work of Émilie, and nothing but Émilie ...

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, including women, 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.

Conclusion:

This is undoubtedly the main lesson we can draw from the very special case of Madame Du Châtelet's *Examens de la Bible* : the clandestine philosophical literature is not only an intellectual phenomenon in itself, but the expression of a profound disruption 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 reason, aspiring to become a “philosophe” like any other⁴⁸.

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

⁴⁷ Ira O. Wade, *Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet. An Essay on the intellectual activity at Cirey*, Princeton, University Press, 1941 (réimp. New York, Octagon, 1967).

⁴⁸ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680-1715)*, Paris, 1935.

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 philosophy⁴⁹. 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 Émilie Du Châtelet in her role as the author of this kind 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. No doubt therefore, Émilie du Châtelet occupies a major place as a “clandestine philosopher” and as a radical thinker of the French Enlightenment.

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⁴⁹ 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.