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Gabrielle Suchon on the Rehabilitation of Female Curiosity

After long being regarded as an intellectual vice associated with lust, pride, and original sin, curiosity was partially rehabilitated in the seventeenth century. At that time, it became common to distinguish between two types of curiosity, one good, which enables one to increase one's knowledge and go further in the search for truth, and the other bad, conceived as an excessive desire for inappropriate or unnecessary knowledge (Kenny, 2004). Yet this partial rehabilitation of curiosity was far from sex-neutral: while good curiosity was largely confined to men, women were increasingly described as prone to a negative form of curiosity, both vain and impertinent, leading them to seek unsuitable knowledge or pry into other people's secrets and indulge in malicious gossip (Cottegnies, Parageau, and Thompson, 2016).

Defenses of female curiosity were not, however, entirely non-existent. In this paper, I will examine a major contribution on the subject, which has so far received little attention: that of Gabrielle Suchon. In her *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693), Suchon devotes two chapters to curiosity, combating the traditional narratives that make it a vice and a passion to be eradicated, especially in women; but the topic of curiosity recurs throughout the second part of the *Traité*, "La Science," in which Suchon advocates women's right to knowledge.

My aim is to highlight the importance and originality of her theory of curiosity, which stands out from other influential discussions of female curiosity at the same period, such as those by Madeleine de Scudéry in her conversation-novella *Célinde* (1661) and in *La Morale du monde* (1686), or by Fénelon in his *De l'éducation des filles* (1687). My analysis will be divided into three parts.

In the first part, I will examine the way Suchon rehabilitates curiosity as a natural passion and an ungendered necessity, without which the human mind withers away. Far from being detrimental to women, this passion is essential for them to develop their rational minds and gain access to the knowledge that they are deprived of because of men; it is actually this deprivation, Suchon argues, that is at the root of the defects commonly associated with female curiosity, such as slander and vanity.

Although natural, the passion of curiosity is bound to wane if it is not nurtured and cultivated. The second part of my analysis will focus on the following questions: how can curiosity be aroused in oneself or in others? How can one regain this appetite for knowledge when it has been extinguished? This drying up of curiosity mainly affects women who, being deprived of education, end up losing their taste for knowledge and devoting themselves to prejudicial activities such as gossip, coquetry, gambling, and so on. I will investigate the different ways in which Suchon aimed to rekindle women's curiosity through her own writings. This

presupposes, first of all, making knowledge desirable, legitimate and accessible to women; it also means enlightening them about their intellectual abilities, so that they develop a proper self-esteem, which is a necessary condition for stimulating curiosity—all elements that Suchon sets out to implement in her *Traité de la morale et de la politique*.

Finally, even if curiosity is in itself a good and innocent passion, it can nevertheless turn bad if one does not know how to govern it properly. The last part of my analysis will thus look at the conditions required to make good use of curiosity. In particular, I will focus on the other passions and virtues that are essential to this end, including moderation, prudence, humility, attention, assiduity, discretion, and love of solitude. In addition to the *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, it will be useful to examine Suchon's *Du célibat volontaire* (1700), which provides valuable information on the passions and virtues needed to make progress on the path to knowledge.