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A Feminine Enlightenment?

Women's Masonic Activity and Rituals in Late-Eighteenth-century Sweden

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The focus of the article is Duchess Hedwig Elisabeth Charlotte of Holstein-Gottorp and her involvement in Freemasonry, specifically through her lodge of adoption, which operated within the Stockholm royal castle in the late eighteenth century. More specifically, a Swedish-language adoption ritual derived from this context from the perspective of gender is analysed in the article. Accounting for the social and cultural context of late-eighteenth-century Sweden, the article pays particular attention to the construction of femininity in the women's masonic activities at the Swedish royal court. Though restricted to a highly concealed network within the elite, the article argues that masonic activities at the Swedish court supported elite women's agency by fostering social bonds that cut across other hierarchies of status and gender, and promoting what is referred to here as a masonic femininity. The article further problematizes analyses of adoption masonry as either repressive or emancipatory of women, suggesting that different adoption rituals had varying implications for the construction of gender.

Introduction

A watercolour painting from 1789 (Image 1), by the Swedish artist Pehr Höhrberg (1746–1816), shows a young woman standing in front of a table, bound by chains or ropes that are held by a group of men.[1] One man—seemingly in a leading role—extends a chalice towards her. This painting, kept in the archive and library of the Swedish Order of Freemasons, may depict a historical event that occurred on 2 May 1776, when the seventeen-year-old Duchess Hedwig Elizabeth Charlotte of Holstein-Gottorp (1759–1818) was admitted into Freemasonry.[2] The man with the chalice is most likely her husband, Duke Charles (1748–1818), Grand Master of Swedish Freemasonry and younger brother of King Gustav III. Charlotte's initiation took place in the duke's private *sanctuarium* in the Stockholm royal palace, a space frequented by a privileged elite within the aristocracy who engaged in magic and masonic ritual. Around this time, Charles also appointed Charlotte the Grand Mistress of a women's masonic lodge—a so-called lodge of adoption—that operated in the same quarters

1 In addition to the organizers and participants of the 2025 "Religion: Concealed and Revealed" conference (Turku/Åbo) and the anonymous reviewers, my thanks are extended to Henrik Bogdan, Susanna Hedenborg, and Andreas Önnerfors for reading the manuscript prior to publication.

2 See "Cette princesse a été réçue il y a quatre jours Franche Maçonne …", SFMOA 152.1.4.

Figure 1. Pehr Höhrberg, Untitled, 1789. Watercolour. Archive and Library of the Swedish Order of Freemasons, Stockholm. Used with permission. Image: Manon Hedenborg White. All rights reserved.

and gathered some of Charlotte's closest friends at court.

The second half of the eighteenth century was a transformative period for both class and gender in Europe. The decline of the nobility, and the advance of the *bourgeoisie*, coincided with a growing distinction between public and private spheres, with motherhood and domesticity increasingly seen as women's natural areas of activity (LeGates 1976; Marchini 2022; Nussbaum 1991). Enlightenment philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) believed women intellectually inferior and primarily suited for motherhood, citing aristocratic women's public lifestyles as evidence of the degeneracy of the upper classes (Landes 1984). Developments in anatomical study prompted increasing consideration of women's biological difference, and the subordination of women was increasingly motivated by reference to female biology (Laqueur 1994). However, wealth and status enabled exceptions to these broader cultural tendencies. Into the final decades of the eighteenth century, elite sociability—and especially court life—continued to traverse boundaries of public and private and offered aristocratic women a considerable degree of political influence,

often enacted informally through social networks (Chalus 2005; Hellsing 2013a).

An important forum for women's participation in civic society during the second half of the eighteenth century was through mixed and female masonic lodges. Though Freemasonry is often seen as a male-only activity, the involvement of women is well documented, and Charlotte was far from the only woman of her time to be admitted (Burke and Jacob 1996; Mahmud 2014; Snoek and Heidle 2008; Snoek 2012; Smith Allen 2021). Mixed and female lodges were organized differently, and participated in diverging ways in negotiations of gender (Berndtsson 2020, 142–48; Önnerfors 2008). Though lodges of adoption were organizationally subordinate to the male lodges, wealthier women from the upper strata of the nobility could enjoy greater autonomy than other women (Smith Allen 2021, 24–25).

In this article I will consider Duchess Charlotte and her lodge of adoption in the social and cultural context of late-eighteenth-century Sweden, paying particular attention to the construction of femininity in a Swedish-language ritual document likely to have been used within the lodge. Though restricted to a highly concealed and exclusive group, I will argue that the masonic networks and activities at the Swedish royal court supported select, elite women's agency by promoting what I will call a *masonic femininity*. I view femininities as clusters of characteristics and roles associated with women and womanhood, which are historically situated and culturally variant (Schippers 2007; Hedenborg White 2021). In any socio-cultural setting, there may be several concepts of femininity with varying degrees of contextual status, that relate to each other and to masculinities, and which are mediated through other hierarchies such as economic status. For instance, in the context of Enlightenment culture, feminine roles and ideals varied according to wealth and birth, with aristocratic women having greater opportunities to enact influence beyond the domestic sphere. With the concept of *masonic femininity*, I aim to highlight how mixed and female masonic orders translated masonic ideals onto female members, as well as how women themselves negotiated and inhabited masonic spaces and principles. The Swedish-language rituals associated with Charlotte's lodge of adoption emphasized values of industriousness, meritocratic attainment and spiritual and intellectual exploration as ideals for women Freemasons—values frequently associated with *bourgeois* masculinity and which were also celebrated in their male brethren. This highlights how adoption masonry of the late eighteenth century could enable select women to transcend the gendered conventions of their time, and in the concluding section I will briefly consider the duchess's political agency against this backdrop.

A brief history of Freemasonry

The term Freemasonry denotes a number of related traditions that originated, gradually, from medieval stonemasons' guilds around the British Isles. The year 1646 witnessed the first-known initiation of a non-craftsman into a masonic lodge, and over the course of the 1600s such "gentlemen masons" gradually assumed stewardship of the lodges. Though early masonic lodges seem mostly to have been open to men, there are known instances of women being initiated in the late seventeenth and early

eighteenth centuries (Péter 2013, 77; Snoek 2012; Snoek 2014, 407). The Premier Grand Lodge of Freemasonry or the first masonic grand lodge was founded in London by four existing lodges around 1717, and the year 1723 marked the publication of the influential *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* by the Presbyterian clergyman James Anderson (1690/1691–1739). Translated into all major European languages, the *Constitutions* helped establish a shared masonic mythology that blended biblical narrative with pagan motifs. It is also the first-known document explicitly barring women from Freemasonry (Anderson 1723, 51; Snoek 2012, 9). Objections to women's involvement in masonry have been linked to the influence of the flourishing milieu of English gentlemen's clubs, women's social dependence and lack of autonomy or misogynist stereotypes of women's curiosity or lack of discretion. Male Freemasons also feared that the inclusion of women in lodges would prompt accusations of illicit sexuality, or sexual competition and jealousy among male brethren (Loiselle 2014, 82; Smith Allen 2021, 22–24).

On much of the European continent (though less so in Sweden, more on which below), eighteenth-century Freemasonry was part of the emerging, *bourgeois* public sphere (Habermas 1989), alongside phenomena such as *salons* (in which women played an important role) and clubs that facilitated meetings between members of different trades and economic strata (Jacob 1991; Koselleck 1988). However, masonic lodges distinguished themselves from other early-modern forms of voluntary organization through the emphasis on live ritual and the individual candidate's journey towards spiritual enlightenment through the uncovering of secret analogies. Around the year 1725, there is evidence for the three "Craft" degrees—Apprentice; Journeyman or Fellow of the Craft; and Master Mason—which remain foundational to (male) Freemasonry. The Craft degrees emphasize the symbolism of medieval stonemasonry and the core motif of King Solomon's temple. In the first degree, the candidate receives knowledge of the symbols of masonry. The second degree reveals analogues between the science of geometry and knowledge of the divine. The third degree introduces the legend of Hiram Abiff (Adoniram), Solomon's mythological architect, and the task of searching for the lost "Master-Mason's Word". According to masonic legend, Hiram Abiff was murdered for refusing to give up this word. King Solomon dispatched a search party, and Hiram's body was discovered and reinterred in the holy of holies within the temple. His tomb is inscribed with the lost word, revealed to be the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, and Jan A. M. Snoek (2003) and Henrik Bogdan (2014, 296–99) note parallels between the third-degree ritual and kabbalistic beliefs that humankind has lost the proper pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. Hiram is thus identified with God, and according to Bogdan (2014, 300) and Snoek (2003), the third-degree ritual can be interpreted as involving the candidate's *unio mystica* with the divine.

Freemasonry spread around Europe and the British colonies in the 1720s. The first half of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of high-degree rites that expanded and developed the symbolism of the Craft degrees, as well as masonic-style orders open to women. As noted by Andreas Önnerfors (2008),

there were important interactions between these movements, with male high-degree masons playing an important role in promoting rituals for women. The most influential of the early, mixed orders was Mops-Orden (The Order of the Pug), active from at least 1738, which imitated the structure of Freemasonry and featured reverence towards the pug dog as a symbol of fidelity. The exposure of the order in 1745 appears to have inspired the foundation of other mixed societies (Önnerfors 2008, 90; Önnerfors 2010, 156). Members of the "Order of the Pug" and other mixed orders were primarily drawn from the aristocracy, and male members were often masons, resulting in intellectual exchanges between the orders (Snoek 2014, 408–9). Lodges of "adoption" appeared in France from the 1740s, giving women access to a separate degree system parallel to that of the men's Craft degrees (Burke and Jacob 1996; Peter 2013, 77). As Snoek has argued, the term adoption initially meant initiation, and only later came to signify dependent status (more on which below). While adoption lodges opened in Jena (1748) and Copenhagen (1750), the best-documented early Adoption Rite is that of the Hague-based Loge de Juste, established in 1751 (Davies 2008; Snoek 2008, 4–5; Snoek 2012, 17). Adoption masonry spread across the European continent in the second half of the eighteenth century, with particular vitality in France. Although the inclusion of women faced greater resistance in the British Isles, several progressive English Freemasons argued for women's inclusion in the second half of the eighteenth century, which also witnessed the appearance of several all-female or adoption lodges (Péter 2013, 73–77; Snoek 2012, 10–13). In 1774, Grand Orient de France (GODF) officially recognized adoption lodges, simultaneously making them subordinate to male lodges (Snoek 2014, 410).

The Adoption Rite underwent numerous changes during the eighteenth century, yet retained many structural parallels with the men's degrees. Like male Freemasons, candidates at the adoption lodges were prepared and questioned, ceremonially guided into the lodge and subjected to ordeals, swore oaths of secrecy and obedience, and received passwords, signs and vestments particular to the degree. However, the symbolism of male and female Freemasonry differed, with the Adoption Rite showing similarities to the rituals of some elite male lodges in the "Harodim" tradition (Snoek 2012, 4–5, 91–114). Toning down the symbolism of medieval stonemasonry and the Temple of Solomon motif, the Adoption Rite emphasized a different set of motifs from the Book of Genesis: the Ark of Noah (Gen 6–9), signifying the heart fortified against destructive passions; the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), indicating the perils of pride; and Jacob's Ladder (Gen 28), representing the virtues allowing the seeker to reach heaven (Snoek 2012, 36, 84, *passim*; Collis 2012). Notably, the Adoption Rite did not identify the candidate with Hiram Abiff, but rather with the biblical Eve, recreating her consumption of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3) (Snoek 2012, 35–36, *passim*; Collis 2012). As we shall see, the Swedish-language Adoption Rite followed this general pattern.

Scholars disagree on the gender politics of the adoption lodges in the late eighteenth century. Some have proposed that French women's high degree of participation in Freemasonry can be linked to

the influence of the *salons*, through which wealthy French women were already accustomed to taking a leading role in public life (Burke and Jacob 1996; Snoek 2012, 14–15). Dena Goodman (1994, 104–5; 253–55), conversely, has argued that the growth of Freemasonry represented a masculinization of the French Enlightenment and a backlash against the status and influence of the *salonnière*. By identifying the candidate with Eve, Goodman (1994, 256–59) writes, adoption masonry emphasized a view of women as sinful and allowed male Freemasons to maintain "moral and political authority" over women based on "male-determined judgments of virtue, merit, and beauty".

Janet M. Burke and Margaret C. Jacob have disputed Goodman's argument, claiming that adoption masonry supported women's agency in Enlightenment culture and offered a "separate ritual identity", providing a creative reworking of the Eve myth that presented Freemasonry as the pathway to pre-lapsarian restoration for both men and women (Burke and Jacob 1996, 524–26, 534; see also Collis 2012). The Adoption Rite's use of the Eve myth, according to Burke and Jacob, is thus not a simplistic replication of biblical notions of women's guilt, but represents a redemptive retelling where Freemasonry is represented as the path to enlightenment for both sexes (Burke and Jacob 1996, 525–26).

An assessment of the gender politics of adoption masonry is complicated by variations in the Adoption Rite. Some eighteenth-century adoption rituals included passages about women's inferiority and the subservience of Freemason women to their male peers (Snoek 2012, 47–48). Other rituals included explicitly feminist sentiments, however, and Snoek has also suggested a redemptive reading of the women's second-degree ritual, noting as significant that Eve receives the fruit from the grand master—who in eighteenth-century masonic ritual stands in for God—rather than the serpent. Snoek thus suggests the ritual presents Eve as a salvific figure (Snoek 2012; Snoek 2014, 411). Though I find Burke, Jacob and Snoek's analyses convincing, the social organization and rituals of adoption lodges varied, with different implications for the construction of femininity, to which I return below.

Freemasonry in the Swedish age of Enlightenment

I concur with scholars who have seen the term Enlightenment as applicable to Sweden, acknowledging the plurality of Enlightenment culture (e.g. Jarrick 1992; Bredsdorff 2004; Berndtsson 2020). Though Sweden had no anti-religious intellectual culture like that of France, and the Lutheran state church maintained a firm grip well into the nineteenth century, eighteenth-century Sweden produced several movements for democracy, science and reason as well as a "relaxation of religious orthodoxy", with both Enlightenment thought and pietist ideals of the individual's relationship with God gradually incorporated into the state church (Hedenborg 2023, 163). The Age of Liberty, lasting from 1719 to 1772, witnessed a restriction of the monarchy and the vestment of legislative power within the four estates: nobles, priests, burghers and peasants.

The paradoxes of the Swedish Enlightenment are encapsulated by the figure of King Gustav III, whose self-coup in 1772 ended the Age of Liberty. An admirer of Voltaire and an adherent

of enlightened absolutism, Gustav limited the freedom of the press and significantly curtailed the power of the Riksdag of the Estates. He also expanded religious tolerance, legalizing Catholic and Jewish presence in Sweden, ending torture and abolishing capital punishment for several crimes including double adultery and witchcraft. Swedish cultural life was strongly impacted by France during the Gustavian period, and Gustav's reign saw a decline in scientific research in favour of the fine arts, which the king supported through numerous ventures, such as by founding the Swedish Academy. In the 1780s, Gustav III extended his own sovereignty, limiting the power of the aristocracy while courting the favour of the other estates. Of relevance for the present discussion, the king had esoteric interests, supporting the Behmenist preacher Anders Collin (1754–1830) in the 1780s, and engaging in magic, alchemy and Freemasonry (Lekeby 2010a, 40, 50–51).

Swedish Freemasonry originated in the French tradition and was brought to Sweden by Count Axel Wrede-Sparre (1708–72) in 1735, and lodges were established in Stockholm and Gothenburg in the mid-eighteenth century. Foreign high-degree rites were also introduced to Sweden during this period. Duke Charles, appointed Grand Master of Swedish Freemasonry in 1774, later drew from these in standardizing the Swedish Rite (Bogdan 2023b, 80). In emphasizing chivalric motifs and the mythology of the Knights Templar within the Swedish Rite, Charles and his masonic brethren mirrored broader tendencies in European Freemasonry. This turn towards romantic mythology and esotericism has been related to a loss of privileges for the nobility across large parts of Europe, including Sweden, in the late eighteenth century, with leader figures in society increasingly chosen for pragmatic and utilitarian reasons (Edenborg 2002, 39; Lekeby 2010a, 15; Bogdan 2023a, 25). Swedish Freemasonry during this period was thus, paradoxically, "both progressive and conservative" (Lekeby 2010a)[3], embracing notions of brotherhood and equality but also increasingly emphasizing the mythology of knighthood in the higher degrees.

The perspective of gender complicates the relationship between eighteenth-century Freemasonry and the *bourgeois* public sphere. Prior to the French Revolution, most Freemason women were drawn from the aristocracy (Snoek 2012, 33; Loiselle 2014, 85; Smith Allen 2021, 40). The Swedish context also challenges the characterization of eighteenth-century male masonic lodges as nodes of *bourgeois* culture, or as hubs for sociability outside class strictures (Gustafsson 2024). Out of the more than 4,000 Freemasons active in Sweden in the late eighteenth century, roughly two thirds were military officers, public officials or administrators of state, church or academy, while only a small portion were independent tradesmen (Simonsen 2006). To an even greater extent, Charles and Charlotte's esoteric network was spatially and socially a private circle *within* the courtly and masonic elite, with the women's lodge as a profoundly exclusive space. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, masonic activities at the Swedish royal court evinced a paradoxical blend of *bourgeois* values and aristocratic mysticism, which also supported alternative ways of constructing and inhabiting femininity.

3 English translation by author.

Duchess Charlotte and her lodge of adoption

Charlotte's lodge, confirmed in Paris on 8 May 1776, was one of the earliest-known adoption lodges to appear outside France under the new GODF regulations (Önnerfors 2008, 106–11). Several of the duchess's closest female friends were part of the new lodge: her long-term confidante Sophie von Fersen (later Piper, 1757–1816), the latter's elder sister, Hedda Klinckowström (née von Fersen, 1753–1792), lady of the bedchamber to queen Sophia Magdalena, and Ulrika Catharina Koskull (later Brahe, 1759–1805), maid of honour to the duchess (Lekeby 2010a, 33; Lekeby 2010b, 177–78). A fifth woman, Charlotte Gyldenstolpe (1766–1825), was at a later time probably also initiated.[4] In accordance with the 1774 adoption lodge regulations instituted by GODF, Charlotte and her masonic sisters operated under the supervision of Charles's lodge: as Grand Master, the duke opened and closed the adoption lodge, and "Scottish Masters"—brothers of the fifth degree or higher—had access to the women's gatherings.

The archive of the Swedish Order of Freemasons holds a collection of "esoterica" related to the activities of Charles and his associates (see Lekeby 2011), which includes two potential sources that may have provided the ritual basis for Charlotte's lodge. Of these, "Loix et Statuts de la Maçonnerie des Dames" (The laws and statutes of women's Freemasonry, SFMOA 152.1.1) is particularly interesting.[5] The manuscript is undated, though as argued by Önnerfors (2010, 107) it was certainly produced after 1760, based on a reference to "Scottish Masters", established around this year as the fifth degree of the Swedish Rite. Written in Swedish in an unknown hand, the rituals show a clear attempt to incorporate the tradition of French adoption masonry into a Swedish context. The structure of three degrees paralleling the men's Craft degrees offers an accessible point of comparison to male Freemasonry and enables analysis of how femininity was constructed in the lodge.[6]

In what follows, I will analyse the symbolism in the Swedish-language ritual from a gender perspective. All primary source quotations below are derived directly from the handwritten manuscript, which has previously been transcribed and published by Jonas Andersson and Andreas Önnerfors, and later translated into English (Andersson and Önnerfors 2006; Önnerfors 2008). For

4 Charlotte Gyldenstolpe's initiation is not documented; however, she signed a + after her name in her application to join the Stockholm lodge of DELU, "Den gula rosen", in 1803, which is a common practice of identification among Freemasons, also used by Charles and Charlotte. See "Ansökningar till D.E.L.U.", SFMOA 149.8.1.

5 The other is a collection of rituals in French, accompanied by a number of illustrations. "L'Adoption ou Maçonnerie de Dames", SFMOA, 152.1.2.

6 The first and second-degree rituals are similar to those described by Snoek 2012, 36–44, derived from a manuscript dating from 1770, with some variations. In the second degree, the 1770 manuscript has the candidate being greeted with the cry of "Vivat!" rather than "Eve!" Instead of her lips being sealed with the trowel *after* her consumption of the forbidden fruit, the Grand Master passes the trowel over her lips *before* giving her the fruit to eat, which she does, without touching the pips. The third degree with the striking of the box and the heart being revealed is also highly similar.

the purposes of this article, I have undertaken my own transcription and translation from the original manuscript, though my transcription and translation diverges only in minor points from the previously published transcript and translation. Though it seems highly likely the Swedish-language rituals were used in the Stockholm adoption lodge, their frequency and longevity is unclear, as is the extent of Charlotte's involvement in their scripting. If the rituals were scripted closer to her own initiation into Freemasonry in 1776, when Charlotte herself was very young, her contribution may have been limited. As noted in a subsequent section, however, the duchess developed wide-ranging esoteric interests from the 1780s onwards, and it is likely that she was at least a co-author if the rituals were scripted during this time or later (cf. Lekeby 2010a, 31, 55, 408; 2010b, 181, 189–90).

The Apprentice degree

In the Apprentice degree, the tracing board shows the Tower of Babel, Jacob's ladder and Noah's Ark.[7] Before entering the lodge, the candidate is questioned whether she is prepared to enter the order with righteousness, perseverance and secrecy, before she is divested of an accessory such as an earring or sleeve, as well as one of her garters. She is subsequently blindfolded and handed a trowel, which is said to symbolize her willingness to work, after which she is led into the lodge by another sister.

7 Tracing boards can be considered a pedagogical or mnemonic device of the masonic lodge, which are used during initiations to display the symbolism of the associated degree. During the eighteenth century, removable floor cloths were frequently used as tracing boards.

After being led into the lodge, and consenting to take the oath of the degree, the candidate's blindfold is removed. A brother of the lodge serves in the role of *frère terrible*, the angel who, positioned at the entrance of the Garden of Eden, prevented Adam and Eve from returning to paradise (Gen 2:24). While *frère terrible* raises a "flaming Sword" above the candidate's head, she swears an oath following the dictation of the Grand Master (Duke Charles) to preserve the secrets of Freemasonry, as well as to "Listen: be obedient, to Work, and to keep silent". The Grand Mistress places the first-degree apron on the initiate, affixing a silver trowel to her breast, reflecting the Craft degree: a silver trowel is also presented to male Apprentice candidates. The initiate also receives white garters decorated with roses, seemingly paralleling the white gloves traditionally offered to male Apprentices. She is further instructed to wear white clothes, earrings and gloves while in the lodge. The candidate receives the sign and word of the degree. This is stated as being "Flix Fox", meaning "the School of Virtue", and is said to indicate Freemasonry. The ritual script mentions that some lodges substitute the word "Eve", which is claimed to mean "the Origin of all living beings". As we shall see, Eve holds a more prominent position in the Compagnonne degree.

The Grand Master subsequently urges the initiate to consider the Apprentice catechism, which expounds on the symbolism of the tracing board. It is stated that Apprentices are admitted between "the Tower of Babylon, Jacob's Ladder and at the foot of Noah's Ark". The tower is said to symbolize "pride", which Freemasons must overcome. The ladder is described as "full of secrets", its two rails symbolizing the love of

God and one's fellow human being, whereas the five rungs symbolize the "virtues, which originate from a noble soul". Noah's Ark is claimed to symbolize "the human heart, which is carried and driven by its passions, even as the Ark by the waters of the Flood".

The Compagnonne degree

In the second degree, a painting showing two images is positioned opposite to the altar. Firstly, it shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, standing by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and eating the fruit while the serpent wraps itself around the tree. Secondly, it shows a human skull with cross-bones. Before the painting stands a small, artificial fruit tree decorated with real apples. The tracing board, placed in front of the altar, shows the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Beneath the tree is the god Neptune, carrying a whale, from which a river issues forth into the garden. The tracing board also shows the banishment of Adam and Eve from paradise.

As in the Apprentice degree, the candidate is brought, blindfolded, into the lodge. On her entrance, all present cry out, twice, the name: "Eve!" The Grand Master queries the candidate whether she has the strength to withstand the "terrible tests" before her, and warns her that the slightest sign of weakness will result in her banishment from the order. Having reassured the Grand Master of her perseverance, the candidate is led around the lodge by a masonic brother while a sister rattles a chain. For her first trial, the candidate's hand is held over a live flame. Having successfully passed this first ordeal, the candidate is brought to the painting, and her eyes are uncovered. The accompanying brother instructs her as follows:

> Do you behold, my Sister, Disobedience and its consequences? Here the first Human's bite of the Apple: there, its descendants' death. To diminish and ameliorate this Punishment, Freemasonry is a necessary means: as the pure enactment of virtue teaches one patiently to withstand this fatal Moment.

Having passed this second trial, the initiate is brought to the altar and wrapped with chains, while *frère terrible* holds an "oil branch" above her head. This, it is claimed, is a "peace sign", and below it the candidate kneels and swears to uphold the secrets of the second degree, as well as promising "not to eat of any forbidden fruit". The tree is subsequently brought out. Referring to it as the "holy Fruit", the Grand Master picks an apple from the tree and presents it to the initiate, stating: "My Sister, we are convinced that Thou shalt keep Thy promise, but our Order commands that Thou truthfully prove this by eating this Apple". After the initiate does so, all present clap their aprons and cry out: "Eve! Eve!" Thereafter, the Grand Master uses a trowel to seal the initiate's mouth with almond paste, with the words: "I now place the seal of Secrecy and Wisdom on Thy lips; remember this, never to open Thy mouth, but to speak well of Thy Brothers and Sisters, and never to reveal the secrets of Freemasonry". The initiate then receives the apron, garters and trowel of the second degree. The new Compagnonne is instructed to carry this tool as a reminder of her duty to act as a role model for the sisters of the first degree. She receives the password of the second degree, Belba (an anagram of "Babel"), which it is claimed means "Peace and Unity, which have been

regained through the toppling of the Tower of Disorder".

As in the Apprentice degree, the Compagnonne catechism expounds on the secrets of the second degree. It is said that the fruit symbolizes "sweetness", and that the sealing of the candidate's lips means that her "mouth should be kept closed for all the secrets of the Order". It is further stated that sisters of the Compagnonne degree should refrain from consuming the pips of the apple, as "the apple's Pips are the origin and Seed of the forbidden fruit". It is said that one arises to the degree of Compagnonne through one's own trowel and virtue, and that the word "Eve" reminds the sister of her origins, showing her what she is and what she ought to be. It is further stated that Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden because of their disobedience, and that the river in the garden symbolizes the force of human appetites, against which only the principles of Freemasonry provide protection.

The Mistress degree

The third-degree tracing board integrates and adds to the biblical symbolism of the previous two degrees, showing a rainbow, Noah's sacrifice, Abraham's sacrifice, Noah's Ark on mount Ararat, the Tower of Babel, the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife being turned into a salt statue, Joseph's dream and Joseph in the well. The other central features of the lodge are, firstly, a stair or ladder with five rungs, and secondly, a mechanical chest or box, on which a chisel, a club and a hammer are placed. In the third-degree catechism, the rails of the ladder are said to symbolize the love for God and one's fellow man, while the rungs represent the virtues of "Wisdom, Prudence, Peacefulness, Love and Industriousness".

As in the previous degrees, the candidate is blindfolded before being led into the lodge. After her eyes are uncovered, the candidate's shoes are removed and she is instructed to climb the ladder, guided by a brother and sister. On reaching the top, the Grand Master addresses the candidate: "Lucky art Thou, my Sister, to have reached that Step, whose ascension many thousands strive towards". She is then helped to descend. She approaches the altar, where *frère terrible* places a sword against her throat and she swears the oath of the third degree, declaring: "By the sacrifices of Noah, Abraham and Jacob I promise and assure this venerable Society of Masters an eternal Fealty, Friendship and Secrecy". The new Mistress is then led to the chest and instructed to strike five blows to it with the available working tools. The fifth blow of the hammer causes a heart to emerge from an opening in the chest, after which the Grand Master declares:

> Behold, my Sister, that Masonry is a labour of the heart: Over the heart it grants us dominion: We know that from the hardest and most unrelenting come the most compassionate and tender.

Thus instructed, the initiate receives the apron, headband and trowel of the Mistress degree. She is instructed in the sign and word of the Mistress degree: "O Volzaire", said to mean "the Clearly Shining Light".

The catechism of the third degree expounds on the symbolism of the tracing board. The rainbow is said to connote God's covenant with Noah, with Noah's sacrifice representing an "Offering of Gratitude

after the Flood". Abraham's sacrifice is said to mean submission to God's will. As in the Apprentice degree, it is repeated that Noah's Ark symbolizes the human heart "driven by its passions". Further exposition on the symbolism of the Ark is provided. It is claimed the four-legged animals serve as a reminder to "trample our desires underfoot", whereas the birds "teach us to elevate our thoughts in Honour of the highest and Greatest Master". Noah is said to have waterproofed his Ark with pitch, providing a reminder to "equip our hearts with Prudence and caution, to resist the Envy of the Profane". The Tower of Babel is said to represent "pride". It is further explained that the Tower of Babel was built by Nimrod and constructed from "improper inclinations" and that its toppling reminds us that humans "without religion are […] but Weakness". The burning of Sodom is said to illustrate "the revenge of heaven on Perjurers", teaching humankind "never to stray from the path of virtue", whereas the fate of Lot's wife is a reminder not to "seek to explore secrets that are to remain hidden to us". The sun, moon and stars represent commitment to the laws of Freemasonry, while the representation of Joseph in the well is a reminder of virtue and patience in the face of humiliation and persecution. Jacob's dream, in turn, represents the "peace and Stillness" of the masonic lodge.

Masonic femininity in Charlotte's lodge of adoption

Women's standing has been a persistent point of contention in Freemasonry. As anti-masonic propaganda has accused Freemasons, variously, of sexual licentiousness and sodomy, masons have encouraged as well as opposed women's participation (Jacob 1991, 6; Beachy 2010; Loiselle 2014, 91–99). While women have been initiated throughout most of masonic history, the gender politics of mixed and female masonic orders have varied, complicating generalizations about masonic constructions of femininity. As noted above, some eighteenth-century adoption rituals included passages about women's inferiority and the subservience of Freemason women to their male peers (Snoek 2012, 47–48). As Snoek has highlighted, there were versions of the Compagnonne ritual in which the candidate was duped into eating the fruit, and then scolded for her transgression, lending support to the interpretation of adoption rituals as essentially replicating a misogynist narrative of women's sinfulness. Other versions of the same ritual went in the complete opposite direction by critiquing the historical exclusion of women from Freemasonry as an error, or including higher degrees that further emphasized women's ritual authority and prompted Freemason women to take up arms, study the sciences and challenge male dominance (Burke and Jacob 1996, 531–33).

The Swedish-language adoption rituals I have examined above seem to occupy a gender-political middle ground. In congruence with French tradition established by GODF 1774, the duchess's lodge of adoption was clearly subordinate to Charles's lodge. As seen above, the duke as Grand Master formally opened and closed the women's lodge, and his brethren of the fifth degree or higher had access to the women's rituals, serving as ritual officers during the initiations. Charles and his brethren thus had the arguable advantage of being able to compare the women's rituals with

the men's, granting them a more comprehensive understanding of the larger symbolism of Freemasonry (Berndtsson 2020, 146). Charlotte's lodge does not appear to have incorporated any explicit critiques of the exclusion of women from Freemasonry, nor of women's lower status in society, as in some French adoption rituals.

At the same time, the Swedish adoption rituals do not feature any statements about women's inferiority. On the contrary, they associated masonic femininity with ritual agency as well as authority. As highlighted above, the candidate was prepared and led into the lodge by a woman Freemason in the first degree, and in the second degree, she was neither duped nor admonished for consuming the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Instead, she was taught how to consume the fruit without incurring divine wrath—by steering clear of the pips—after which her lips were sealed, symbolizing her guarding of the secrets of Freemasonry. The ritual makes no mention of sin, instead suggesting woman's search for knowledge may be *warranted*, as long as her discoveries are protected by appropriate secrecy. Snoek's analysis of the story of Eve as a redemptive retelling is applicable to the Swedish Compagnonne ritual. As Snoek (2012, 53; 2014, 411) stresses, the Compagnonne ritual makes a significant departure from the Book of Genesis in that the Grand Master, rather than the serpent, presents the apple to Eve. "[I]n all eighteenth-century masonic rituals", Snoek contends (2014, 411), the Grand Master represents God. A possible interpretation of the Compagnonne ritual is thus that it is God himself who presents Eve with the forbidden fruit, allowing her full knowledge of good and evil and the ability to live a life of true virtue. Though this reading is complicated by versions of the Compagnonne ritual that emphasize women's inferiority, the Swedish Adoption Rite did not feature any such statements, and lends itself more easily to a redemptive interpretation.

The interpretation that the Adoption Rite emphasizes a notion of woman as spiritual seeker and saviour is supported by the third degree of the Swedish rituals, in which the aspiring Mistress is helped onto the ladder by a sister and brother. Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28), referenced already in the first degree, connects earth to heaven. An interpretation of the aspiring Mistress's successful scaling of the ladder is thus that of *unio mystica* with the divine, paralleling the third degree of men's Freemasonry (Snoek 2003; Bogdan 2014). Jacob's ladder has frequently been interpreted as a metaphor for Christ (e.g. Steinmetz 1986), which could support the interpretation that the female candidate—having learned how to search for knowledge without incurring divine wrath—arises to become a Christ-like figure with the help of her fellow Freemasons. In all three degrees, the Grand Mistress presents the newly initiated sister with the material signs and symbols of the degree, further indicating ritual authority as an aspect of masonic femininity in the Stockholm lodge.

Diligence, industry and meritocracy have been seen as aspects of an eighteenth-century *bourgeois* masculinity that was central to Freemasonry. In other writings, Charlotte praised diligence and industriousness as aspects of the ideal aristocratic male (Hellsing 2013c). Like most variations of the Adoption Rite, the rituals of Charlotte's lodge toned down the symbolism of medieval stonemasonry. While this

can be interpreted as reflecting the association of stone-craft with men and masculinities, it is interesting to note the continued emphasis on the symbolic connection between physical labour and spiritual development in the rituals written for (primarily aristocratic) women. This connection is epitomized by the instrument of the trowel. Associated with bricklaying, the trowel is a common symbol in male Freemasonry and near ubiquitous in the Adoption Rite (Snoek 2012, 30). In the Swedish-language Adoption Rite, the trowel features in all three degrees. Before entering the lodge, the aspiring Apprentice is handed a trowel "as a symbol of her not refusing to work". On her initiation, she is granted a silver trowel as a reminder of the importance of industriousness, and instructed that "diligence and hard work" will grant her success as a Freemason. In the second degree, the Compagnonne receives a new trowel, said to remind her of the diligence she ought to model for the sisters of the first degree. It is also stressed that the candidate achieves her status through her own virtue and trowel, the latter symbolizing her willingness to work. In the third degree, the newly appointed Mistress is "put […] to work", and asked to wield tools associated with stonemasonry to make the heart emerge from the chest. Although frequented by a select group of highly elite women (and men), it is notable that the adoption rituals of the Stockholm lodge thus promoted industry, diligence and meritocratic attainment as aspects of an idealized masonic femininity, symbolically flouting eighteenth-century conventions of gender and social status by presenting women as builders.

The Swedish third-degree ritual emphasizes Freemasonry as a "labour of the heart". While this could be interpreted as referring to notions of feminine softness and emotion, mirroring the growing emphasis on motherhood and domesticity as the epitome of culturally sanctioned femininity in the late eighteenth century, the notion of Freemasonry as a labour of love, or of the heart, was also pervasive in men's Freemasonry of the time. In other words, the masonic femininity celebrated and crafted through the Swedish-language Adoption Rite encompassed virtues notably like those celebrated in male masons. The female candidate is praised for her industriousness and spiritual and intellectual exploration, and asked to display perseverance, secrecy and courage. Although organizationally Charlotte's lodge was subordinate to Charles's, the Swedish-language rituals stress fellowship—rather than hierarchy—among masonic brothers and sisters. The rituals feature no references to feminized roles such as wife, mother or carer. Instead, through the retelling of the myth of Eden and the climbing of Jacob's ladder, an ideal vision of woman is presented as seeker of enlightenment.

Male high-degree masons were often central to establishing gender-mixed lodges and orders. Önnerfors (2017) suggests this can be seen as an instance of early ideas of gender equality, but that it also evinces a strong belief in the benefits of masonic activity in enlightening humankind. Indeed, the support of male Freemasons was a prerequisite for Charlotte's lodge. Kjell Lekeby has contended that Duke Charles's "broad esoteric interests and liberal views on women"[8] were essential to the women's lodge being allowed to open

8 English translation by author.

in the Stockholm royal palace in 1776 (Lekeby 2010b, 175). Charlotte's interest in Freemasonry was also supported by the court magus and royal secretary Carl Adolf Boheman (1764–1831) in the early 1790s, who promoted women's initiation into Freemasonry and described it as "unreasonable", "unfair" and "biased" to exclude them from "light, truth and ennoblement" (Lekeby 2010a, 31; Lekeby 2010b, 184).[9] Boheman may have played a role, around 1800, when Charlotte was allowed to study the three foundational degrees of the men's Swedish Rite, so as to better understand the symbolism of the adoption rituals and share this knowledge with her sisters.[10] Charlotte wrote a summary of the three degrees, commenting on the exclusion of women from regular Freemasonry, writing: "Our sex is not created for violent battles, we could not withstand the difficulties or dangers to which the warrior is exposed when defending his fatherland" (quoted in Lekeby 2010b, 183).[11] In other words, Charlotte saw the exclusion of women from regular Freemasonry as being due to women's physical limitations, rather than moral or spiritual deficiencies (cf. Lekeby 2010b, 183).

As noted by Tim Berndtsson (2020, 145), initiatory orders of the eighteenth century could provide idealized models of gender towards which initiates were expected to strive. Some significant gender differences within the Swedish-language Adoption Rite discussed in this article may be noted. Charlotte's suggestion that women were not suited to martial power—which she saw as the province of male Freemasons—highlights how the lodge of adoption did not offer egalitarian gender roles in a modern sense, and that some qualitative differences were ascribed to masonic masculinity and femininity. Nonetheless, the ideal femininity conveyed in the Swedish rituals subverted the growing emphasis on motherhood and domesticity as women's primary spheres of activity, lauding virtues that Freemason men were also expected to embody.

Charlotte and her lodge sisters were not only active within masonic circles, but also exercised political agency. This agency was enabled by their socio-economic status, highlighting the importance of considering how femininity intersects with social and economic position. However, My Hellsing (e.g. 2013a, 79) suggests that Duchess Charlotte held an unusual degree of political agency, even for an aristocratic woman of her time. Indeed, Charlotte and her masonic sisters played a key role in the opposition towards Gustav III in 1789 (Hellsing 2013a, 88; Hellsing 2013b, 5). Protesting against the king's actions at the 1789 Riksdag of the Estates, and the attendant imprisonment or house arrest of several prominent noblemen, the Freemasons Hedda Klinckowström (née von Fersen) and Ulrika Brahe (née Koskull) provoked the king's outrage by ignoring his social invitations, choosing to socialize instead with Duchess Charlotte and her sister-in-law,

9 English translation by author.

10 The Swedish National Archives contain Charlotte's summary of the three initial degrees of the Swedish Rite. It is unclear how Charlotte gained access to these manuals. Though the duke and duchess's political opponents suggested that Boheman personally shared the rituals with Charlotte, Lekeby lends credence to Boheman's own account, according to which the duke granted Charlotte's request to study the three initial degrees. See Lekeby 2010b, 182.

11 English translation by author.

Princess Sophie Albertine. The same year, Charlotte conspired (unsuccessfully) with her fellow Freemason Gustav Adolf Reuterholm (1756–1813) to assassinate the king and place Duke Charles on the throne (Hellsing 2013a, 76–79; Hellsing 2013b, 9).

The overlaps between the duke's and duchess's masonic network and the political opposition towards Gustav III that developed in the 1780s prompt the question whether, and to what extent, the duchess's masonic involvement supported her agency in the socio-political sphere. Although the formation of the court masonic network predates widespread aristocratic opposition to the king, the social ties fostered among the masonic brethren at the Swedish royal court may have helped solidify political opposition to Gustav III. Freemasonry provided a forum for the duke and duchess to socialize with their closest friends, probably under less surveillance than was generally the case at the Swedish royal court of the 1780s. Royal family members' support staff were generally appointed by the king and played a considerable role in such surveillance. The women of Charlotte's adoption lodge were, significantly, not the same as her own ladies-in-waiting, suggesting that masonic activity allowed Charlotte and her friends to cultivate networks that cut across formalized court roles. While I am cautious of overstating the political aspects of Charlotte's involvement in masonic networks, the positive vision of masonic femininity expressed within her adoption lodge may also have supported the political agency of herself and her lodge sisters.

Charlotte's adoption lodge was probably operational at least until 1789, and possibly longer.[12] In her diary, Charlotte wrote that her "study of the occult sciences offered her a rich field for ceaseless intellectual work" (quoted in Lekeby 2010a, 31), and that Duke Charles had included her in "several secret gatherings" as well as experiments with somnambulism in 1789 (Lekeby 2010a, 408).[13] The duchess wrote that these gatherings did not satisfy her curiosity, and that she wished to continue her studies in the occult (Lekeby 2010b, 181). She was also rumoured to have assisted in an alchemical operation in the duke's private laboratory, burning her hand with phosphorus during the experiment (Lekeby 2010a, 55). As of 1802, the duke and duchess had both joined "Den gula rosen" (The Yellow Rose), a mixed-gender lodge of the Illuminist order DELU (interpreted as *Deus Est Lux Universalis*), established by Boheman in Stockholm. Women played an important ritual role in the lodge, working alongside male officiants and presiding over the initiations of new female members (Lekeby 2010b, 189–90). The adoption lodge sisters Ulrika Brahe and Charlotte Stierneld (*née* Gyldenstolpe) both joined Den gula rosen, as did a third woman, Charlotte Ruuth (*née* Wahrendorff). Countesses Ehrensvärd and Frölich were also suggested for admission, though their initiation was not finalized. In February 1803, King Gustav Adolph IV,

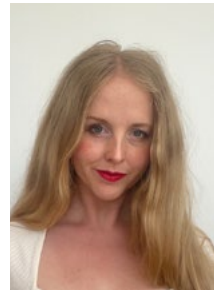
12 In 1789, Reuterholm consulted an oracle in Rome about a number of questions, including his own position in relation to Gustav III, and regarding Freemasonry in Sweden. He queried the oracle, "If we should continue to initiate sisters in Sweden?" This suggests women were still being initiated in Charlotte's private lodge at the time. Lekeby 2010b, 176, 181–82. English translation by author.

13 English translation by author.

who feared the influence of secret societies at the court, ordered Boheman's arrest and suspended Charles's and Charlotte's esoteric network. While there is no indication the duchess participated in any lodge activities after 1803, her private records suggest she maintained her interest in esoteric study, and further research is needed to shed light in this area.

Conclusion

I have considered Duchess Charlotte and her lodge of adoption in the context of late-eighteenth-century gender and class relations. As scholars have pointed out, Sweden had no pronounced anti-religious culture like that of France, yet the term Enlightenment is nonetheless relevant for highlighting how eighteenth-century Sweden witnessed movements for reason and democracy, as well as a relaxation of Church orthodoxy which allowed the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment outside the state church. The movement of Illuminism, which drew on older esotericism and radical pietism, emphasized subjective experience and redemption through rediscovery of our divine nature, and shaped the worldview of Duke Charles, Duchess Charlotte and their associates in important ways. Rather than a counter-reaction to Enlightenment values, pietism and Illuminism may be regarded as aspects of a more broadly conceived Enlightenment culture, expressed in different ways in different countries (Lekeby 2010a, 179–80; 2010b, 18–19). As the analysis of the Swedish-language Adoption Rite has suggested, masonic activity and organization also allowed select women to participate in these aspects of Enlightenment culture, celebrating values of industry as well as spiritual search in men and women alike. ■



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