Participation in the Secret Space of Enlightenment

Since the revealing book L’Ordre des Franc-Maçons trahi et les secrets des Mopses révélé was spread throughout Europe in the 1740’s, women of the educated elite of Enlightenment could claim participation in the secret space that men had created in initiatory societies. It was just a matter of time until the discourse of Enlightenment would include women into the construction of the “realm of happiness and felicity”, a key concept of the 18th century. Literary and Scientific Academies made the acceptance of female members an issue of honour that proved their truly enlightened nature. In the context of this development it was inevitable that, eventually, women broke into the symbolic world of freemasons, with its allusions to chivalric ideals.

We can interpret, for example, the order of the Mopses, founded around 1740, as a ritual and social play, arranged by Masons as a travesty of true Freemasonry, and adapted to what was supposed to attract women by using the pug dog as a symbol of fidelity. Yet, the Mopses had a system of initiation rituals, the message of which is close to that of Freemasonry. The step from Freemasonry for men to that for women was not a big one. From the perspective of women, it must have been attractive to belong to a society which was known for its values and age, a society surrounded by rumours. Freemasonry was discussed in educated newspapers and journals. It generated a considerable amount of printed pages throughout the 18th century.

1 Önnerfors forthcoming.
There may be several reasons for the establishment of mixed forms of Freemasonry. Women who were married or related to Freemasons lived in close contact with persons involved in the brotherhood and thus might have got a good impression of this cultural phenomenon of the time. This may have created a desire to take part in masonic rituals. The attractiveness of an order like the Mopse was too low, the moral message too underdeveloped to catch the attention of the educated elite in the long run. Therefore a shift took place from a basically social order to an order with a strongly developed moral message and a stronger ritual play. Men were often instrumental in the creation of mixed masonic lodges and orders. To let women take part in masonic rituals may therefore be interpreted as a sign of early developed ideas on gender equality, but also as an indication of a strong belief in the ideational potential of Freemasonry. To establish mixed lodges was a means of spreading masonic ideology, which was believed to play a key role in the ennoblement and enlightenment of mankind. There might also have existed internal reasons within male Freemasonry for the establishment and acceptance of mixed lodges and orders. From this perspective it is striking that the creation of higher degrees with chivalric rituals—which from a gender perspective may be interpreted as the construction of a truly and consistently male sphere—runs parallel with the establishment of mixed lodges. Even more striking is that the same people seem to have been involved in the creation of both these very male and female spaces. There is an important interplay between the development of organisation, ritual motives and symbols. Research into Freemasonry has hitherto largely ignored these connections. The chivalric, templar and very influential masonic order of the Strict Observance (in the following abbreviated as SO) has been subject to substantial research. But it has up to now been ignored completely that there existed plans to establish a female branch of it.2

*Are There Lady Knights?*

Before we examine the plans of the SO closer, it may be interesting to mention a couple of recent findings in masonic archives. A masonic “Loge de Dames” was founded in Copenhagen quite early. The first

---

2 Or was it a try to re-establish a female branch of the mediaeval knightly orders?