

## **Outrageous Flirtation, Repressed Flirtation, and the Gallic Singularity:**

### **Alexis de Tocqueville on Men, Women, and Marriage in**

#### **Aristocratic France and Democratic America**

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In 1831, the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville and his best friend Gustave de Beaumont traveled from the France of Louis-Philippe to the America of Andrew Jackson. While their ostensible purpose was to research and write a useful report on prison reform, their actual purpose was to establish some distance between themselves and the new July Monarchy until they could decide how best to further their fledgling legal careers in the challenging political climate of post-revolutionary France. In addition to visiting prisons, speaking to prison wardens, and interviewing prison inmates, then, they also took copious notes on every other aspect of American life that they could observe as they traveled up, down, and around the United States and Canada from New York in the east to Michigan in the west and from Quebec in the north to New Orleans in the south. Shortly after they returned to France in 1832 and co-authored their report *On the Penitentiary System* in 1833, Alexis de Tocqueville published the two volumes of his famous *Democracy in America* in 1835 and 1840.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all further page references to *Democracy in America* will come from the authoritative Arthur Goldhammer translation for the Library of America edition: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Paperback Classics Edition, 2 vols., ed. Olivier Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (n.p.: Library of America, 2012). |

Many scholars have written on Tocqueville's comparative views of French and American democracy, but not nearly as many have taken an interest in his comparative views of French and American marriage and family life.<sup>2</sup> Those who have analyzed his views on women have typically focused on a series of questions about whether his portrayals of American women in particular are positive or negative, descriptive or prescriptive, accurate or inadequate.<sup>3</sup> My article here contributes to our special forum on "women in the French imaginary: historicizing the Gallic singularity" by shifting attention from the complex question of how Tocqueville viewed American women to the more broadly comparative (and equally complex) question of how Tocqueville ranked the relative social situations of American and French women in the 1830s.

The title of the article, which focuses on the contrast between "outrageous flirtation" and "repressed flirtation," makes reference to the text of an especially intriguing letter that Tocqueville wrote to his sister-in-law, Emilie de Belisle de Tocqueville, while he was travelling in Ohio in November 1831.

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have also worked with two important French critical editions of the work: Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique: première édition historico-critique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1990); and Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Pléiade edition, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, ed. André Jardin, with Jean-Claude Lamberti and James T. Schleifer (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Welch, for example, has recently identified some of the classic themes in Tocqueville studies as "Tocqueville and the Debate over Civil Society," "Tocqueville and Despotism," and "Tocqueville and Religion." In her typology, the study of women and gender in Tocqueville's work belongs to the more recent category of "New Tocquevilles." See Cheryl B. Welch, "Introduction: Tocqueville in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-20.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Feminist Interpretations of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Jill Locke and Eileen Hunt Botting (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), where both the vast majority of the essays and the vast majority of the books and articles in the extensive annotated bibliography of related works have to do with Tocqueville's views of American women on their own. For important studies of Tocqueville's comparative work on American women and French women, however, see Laura Janara, *Democracy Growing Up: Authority, Autonomy, and Passion in Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Laura Janara, "Democracy's Family Values," in *Feminist Interpretations of Tocqueville*, ed. Locke and Botting, 47-70; and Cheryl B. Welch, "Beyond the *Bon Ménagement*: Tocqueville and the Paradox of Liberal *Citoyennes*," in *Feminist Interpretations of Tocqueville*, ed. Locke and Botting, 19-46.

[...] I've already *roamed* this world quite a bit. I have seen people in positions different from ours but no proof that anyone is fundamentally better off. Here, for example, I see reduced versions of all the ugly political passions that our revolutions have made so glaring in France. But I will stop there for fear of *lapsing* into considerations of high politics, philosophy, metaphysics, economics, and ethics from which I would be unable to extricate myself without putting you to sleep. [*paragraph break added*]

In any case, I was saying that America is no better than France. Let me take for example what is called, in the style of madrigal, the fair sex. I confess that from a certain point of view, this country is the El Dorado of married men, and that one can almost certainly find perfect happiness here if one has no romantic imagination and asks nothing of one's wife other than to make tea and raise one's children [...]. In these two respects, American women excel. They are reasonable people who stick to the basics, as people say, who confine themselves to their teapots and never leave their homes once they have uttered the famous "yes." Yet despite this incontestable advantage, which I freely grant, I often find myself asking whether ultimately – note that I say ultimately – they do not bear a prodigious resemblance to European women. [*paragraph break added*]

I beg you, do not look at me as a woebegone philosopher, but hear my reasons. [...] My first and greatest reason is that before marrying, they all have a flirtation that surpasses our best efforts in this regard. To be sure, there is no question of love here in the strict sense, and that is a great boon for the tranquility of society. I have not heard of a single person hanged or drowned anywhere in

the Union since the Declaration of Independence. There are no fights, and there is no talk of impetuous actions. Young women are perfectly free to choose, and yet their choice always falls on the man whom the family notary would have chosen had he been consulted. As you can see, I am impartial. Yet it remains true that they are outrageously flirtatious.<sup>4</sup>

Tocqueville continues on for several paragraphs, and then he comes to the conclusion of his discussion this way:

As travelers invariably remark, the fact is that married women in America are nearly all languid and feeble. I am not far from thinking that they are all ill, afflicted with repressed flirtatiousness. Why not? Don't we daily see men turned [as] green as meadows from repressed ambition? [...] this is pure speculation, to which I do not personally attach much value. But I've said enough to prove that, all things considered, it's still better to live in France than in America.<sup>5</sup>

Tocqueville's suggestion that American wives are ill with the effort of repressing the outrageous flirtatiousness that they enjoyed as American girls seems to serve here as an indirect way of praising the proper amount of socially permissible flirtatiousness that lay at the supposed heart of the French sex/gender system at the same time. While this preference for France may not initially seem surprising from the pen of a French observer writing home from overseas, however, it is unexpected in this particular case because when Tocqueville went on to write up the results of his research travels across the United States in *Democracy in America* he ultimately

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<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Emilie de Belisle de Tocqueville, on the Ohio, 28 November 1831, in *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America: Their Friendship and Their Travels*, ed. Olivier Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 174-175.

<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville, letter to Emilie de Belisle de Tocqueville, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 174-175.

argued that American women enjoyed the results of the better sex/gender system instead. As he put it when he published the second volume of this important work in 1840, “I, for one, do not hesitate to say that although women in the United States seldom venture outside the domestic sphere, where in some respects they remain quite dependent, nowhere has their position seemed to me to be higher” (II: 232).

My article seeks to understand Tocqueville’s apparent reversal by employing three successive reading strategies. The first section compares and contrasts the ways in which Tocqueville analyzed the American and French sex/gender systems in his letters home from the United States and in *Democracy in America*. The second section places Tocqueville’s ideas in comparative context by comparing and contrasting them with contemporary work on similar subjects by the French writers and thinkers Germaine de Staël, Gustave de Beaumont, and Michel Chevalier. The third and final section closes the article by exploring the extent to which Tocqueville’s views on what he described as a form of Gallic singularity also represent a kind of Tocquevillean singularity.

### **Alexis de Tocqueville as Private Writer and Public Commentator:**

#### **Women in Tocqueville’s Letters from the United States and in *Democracy in America***

Alexis de Tocqueville’s letter to Emilie de Belisle de Tocqueville is especially interesting in at least four different dimensions.<sup>6</sup> First of all, it indicates the extent to which Tocqueville,

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<sup>6</sup> Although I focus on just one of Tocqueville’s letters here, he actually wrote several on similar themes: the relative purity of American morals, the relative independence of American girls, the relative coldness of American relationships between men and women, and the relative subordination of American wives. See, for example, Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Emilie de Belisle de Tocqueville, New York, 9 June 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 36-37; Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Basil Hall, château de Bangy, 19 June 1836,

like many social observers before and after him, believed that he could use the status of women in any society as a key to understanding that society as a whole.<sup>7</sup> When he put his comparative case to Emilie in 1831, for example, he went straight from the assertion “that America is no better than France” to a discussion of “what is called ... the fair sex.” When he published the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835, he credited American women with shaping American mores, and when he published the second volume of *Democracy in America* in 1840 he included four successive chapters on “raising girls in the United States,” “how the traits of the girl can be divined in the wife,” “how equality of conditions helps to maintain good morals in America,” and “how the Americans understand the equality of man and woman.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, Tocqueville’s letter to Emilie highlights the importance that Tocqueville consistently placed on marriage as the chief event that governed the parameters of a woman’s life whether in the United States or in France. His entire discussion of American women here, for example, revolves around the differences in their behavior before and after the decisive moment when they “have uttered the famous yes.”<sup>9</sup> In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, he expanded on this theme when he opened his longest chapter on women and girls by observing that “although girls in America are less restricted than they are anywhere else, wives

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in Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. 2, 67-78. He also included discussions about the purity of American morals in his travel notebooks. See, for example, his interviews with Albert Gallatin and Francis Lieber in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 212-213, 238-240.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the otherwise very different works of Joseph de Maistre, Henri de Saint Simon, and Auguste Comte. On the long history of French debates over the woman question, see Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume 2, Part 3, “Influence of Democracy on Mores Properly So-Called,” Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12.

<sup>9</sup> The same is true of an earlier letter to Emilie on a similar comparison, where Tocqueville divides his discussion into two separate paragraphs on “married women” and “young men and women.” See Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Emilie de Tocqueville, New York, 9 June 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 36-37.

submit to greater obligations. A girl turns her father's house into a place of freedom and pleasure, [...] a wife lives in her husband's home as in a cloister" (II: 219).

Third, the letter suggests the extent to which Tocqueville's discussions of marriage and family arrangements in America always rested on implicit or explicit comparisons to marriage and family arrangements in France (and sometimes also in England). The American democratic practice of letting young women walk out freely with young men, for example, seemed striking chiefly because it contrasted with the French aristocratic practice of isolating daughters from society in convent schools. The American expectation that married women would confine themselves to the home, similarly, seemed striking chiefly because it contrasted with the French expectation that married women might come out into society instead.<sup>10</sup>

Fourth and last, however – and this is where the letter may be the most interesting for the study of French ideas about the so-called “Gallic singularity” – Tocqueville's letter to Emilie not only compares the United States and France but also concludes that France is better. Although this preference for France may not seem surprising from a French traveler in a foreign country, it *is* a surprising conclusion coming from Tocqueville because when he published the two volumes of *Democracy in America* less than ten years later, he famously and insistently came down on the side of the United States instead. In his initial chapter on “raising girls in the United States,” for example, he focused on the important ways in which an American girl could learn to grow up “thinking for herself, speaking freely, and acting on her own” (II: 216). Although he admitted to some ambivalence about the American system when he reported that he had “often been surprised and almost frightened by the singular skill and pleasing audacity with which young

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<sup>10</sup> Tocqueville had already laid out these themes in an earlier letter to Emilie as well. See note 8 above.

American girls marshal[led] thoughts and words while deftly negotiating the shoals of a sprightly conversation,” he nevertheless criticized the French “for giv[ing] women a timid, sheltered, almost cloistered upbringing” and then “suddenly abandon[ing] them, without guidance or assistance, to the disorders that are inseparable from democratic society” (II: 217).

When Tocqueville moved on to his chapter about “how equality of conditions helps to maintain good morals in America,” similarly, he compared and contrasted American democratic marriage practices and European aristocratic marriage practices only to conclude that American practices were the best:

Begin by noting that if democratic peoples grant women the right to choose their husbands freely, they are careful first to furnish their minds with the enlightenment and their wills with the strength that may be necessary for such a choice, whereas among aristocratic peoples the girls who furtively escape from paternal authority and fling themselves into the arms of a man whom they have not been granted either time to get to know or capacity to judge are without such guarantees” (II: 224-225).

American voluntary marriages, he continued, were a recipe for “the kind of deep, regular, and quiet affection that gives life its charm” (II: 227). European arranged marriages, by contrast, were a recipe for unsuccessful elopement, spousal estrangement, compensatory adultery, and all “the violent and capricious emotions that disturb and shorten [life]” instead (II: 227).

When Tocqueville discussed “how the Americans understand the equality of man and woman,” finally, he took the opportunity to praise the United States over France for several additional reasons that he also connected to the democratic nature of the American sex/gender



system. Where Tocqueville's earlier chapters had criticized the social practices of the French aristocracy, his final chapter started in a new way by criticizing certain "people in Europe who, confounding the various attributes of the sexes, claim to make man and woman into creatures not only equal but alike" (II: 229). Criticizing these excessively egalitarian opponents, whom he identified in his manuscript notes for the volume as Saint Simonian thinkers who espoused "the doctrine of the so-called emancipation of women,"<sup>11</sup> gave Tocqueville the chance to praise Americans for understanding the importance of maintaining sexual difference even in an egalitarian democracy:

[Americans] believed that because nature had made man and woman so different in physical and moral constitution, its clear purpose was to assign different uses to the diverse faculties of each. ... No country in the world has been more persistent than America in tracing clearly separated lines of action for the two sexes or in wanting both to proceed at an equal pace but along two permanently different paths (II: 229-230).

American women might display both "a manly intelligence" and "an energy that is nothing less than virile," but they still confined themselves to private life, stayed away from activities that required physical strength, "generally maintain[ed] a very delicate appearance," and "always remain[ed] women in manners" (II: 230).

Moving from a discussion of American sex roles to a related discussion of American family structures, Tocqueville criticized his excessively egalitarian contemporaries again when

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<sup>11</sup> See Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. 2, 178; Jean-Claude Lamberti, "Notes et variantes," in Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, ed. Jardin, with Lamberti and Schleifer, 1145.

he praised the way in which American marriages gave the husband authority over the wife in a way that he saw as more truly consistent with democratic ideals.

Americans [...] believed that every association needs a leader in order to be effective and that the natural leader of the conjugal association was the man. Hence they did not deny him the right to direct his helpmate, and they believed that in the small society consisting of husband and wife, as in the larger political society, the purpose of democracy is to regulate and legitimate necessary powers and not to destroy all power (II: 230).

Leaving aside his criticisms of radical sexual egalitarians to return to his earlier comparisons between democratic Americans and aristocratic Europeans, finally, Tocqueville contrasted “virtuous” American women with “adulterous [European] wives,” American men’s “respect” for women’s minds with European men’s “contempt” for them, American men’s general disapproval of seducers with European men’s acceptance and enjoyment of a sexual double standard, and American lawyers’ insistence on treating rape as a capital crime with French juries’ refusal to convict men for raping women at all (II: 231-232). Having thus compared American sex roles, family structures, and social attitudes with a series of general European and specific French ones, Tocqueville closed with a ringing endorsement of the American system and its benefits for democratic American women and men alike:

I, for one, do not hesitate to say that although women in the United States seldom venture outside the domestic sphere, where in some respects they remain quite dependent, nowhere has their position seemed to me to be higher. And now that I am nearing the end of this book, in which I have described so many considerable American accomplishments, if someone were to ask me what I think is primarily

responsible for the singular prosperity and growing power of this people, I would answer that it is the superiority of their women. (II: 232)

This conclusion is certainly a long way from Tocqueville's initial assertions to Emilie nine years earlier that "America is no better than France" and that "it's still better to live in France than America."

How can we reconcile the differences between the preference for France in Tocqueville's original letter to Emilie in 1831 and the preference for the United States in Tocqueville's later publication of the second volume of *Democracy in America* in 1840? Although there are clear differences in audience and genre between the private letter and the public book, Tocqueville repeated the themes and contents of his initial correspondence home from the United States in his two eventual volumes of *Democracy in America* often enough that the difference between the pro-French conclusion of his letter to Emilie and the pro-American conclusion of his section on "how the Americans understand the equality of man and woman" in the second volume of *Democracy in America* seems too significant to dismiss as a simple matter of tone or timing.<sup>12</sup> A more satisfying way to understand the continuity and contrast between Tocqueville's personal correspondence and his published work on French and American women is to use it as a way of highlighting the distinctive ambiguity of his larger political project. This ambiguity and its implications become clearer if we examine the similarities and differences between Tocqueville's representations of women in French aristocracy and American democracy with

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<sup>12</sup> Beaumont and Tocqueville took their letters home so seriously that they asked their friends and family members to keep them as sources for consultation upon their writers' return. Cheryl Welch, who characterizes the tone of Tocqueville's letters to Emilie as "somewhat arch," points out that their contents are nevertheless also consistent with the contents of the letters that he wrote "in a more serious and reflective vein" to his friend Eugène Stoffels. See Welch, "Beyond the *Bon Ménagement*," 28.

those of three other especially interesting and important French observers: Germaine de Staël, Gustave de Beaumont, and Michel Chevalier.

### **Alexis de Tocqueville in His Contemporary Context:**

#### **Women in the Works of Germaine de Staël, Gustave de Beaumont, and Michel Chevalier**

##### *Germaine de Staël: Women in France and England*

While Alexis de Tocqueville was organizing his notes and working on the manuscript of *Democracy in America*, he indicated that his section on “how the Americans understand the equality of man and woman” owed an important debt to the works of Germaine de Staël: “The ideas above are original only ... where they have to do with aristocracy or democracy. As to the others, they are to be found in other authors, principally Madame de Staël.”<sup>13</sup> Although Tocqueville did not indicate which of Staël’s works he was thinking of while he wrote, scholars who have studied other sections of *Democracy in America* all agree that he had an especially close engagement with one of her first major works, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, which she published in April 1800.<sup>14</sup> Staël defined her topic in an expansive fashion as the study of “the influence of religion, mores, and laws on literature, and ... the influence of literature on religion, mores and laws,” and almost every

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<sup>13</sup> Eduardo Nolla and Jean-Claude Lamberti indicate that Tocqueville included this passage in the margin of the title page for the manuscript version of volume 2, part 3, chapter 12. See Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. 2, 178; Jean-Claude Lamberti, “Notes et variantes,” in Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, ed. Jardin, with Lamberti and Schleifer, 1145.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, François Furet, “The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville’s Thought,” *The Tocqueville Review*, vol. 7 (1985-1986): 117–29; Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 258; Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 292, n. 99; 294, n. 127, n. 132, n. 135; Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville and the Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9, 171, 226-227, 246.

chapter in her resulting two-volume work on “literature considered in its relations with social institutions” includes at least one passage that explores women’s place in society and culture.<sup>15</sup>

Staël published *De la littérature*, which scholars have identified both as a pioneering work of comparative literature and as an early contribution to political science,<sup>16</sup> at a particularly tumultuous time in French history: less than eleven years after the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, less than eight years after the establishment of the first French republic in 1792, less than five years after the establishment of the Directory in 1795, and less than one year after Napoleon started his rise to political power by helping to establish the Consulate in 1799. She presented the work as a way of thinking through the implications of these recent revolutionary events and imagining what the future might look like in a better form of republican France:

In contemplating both the ruins and the hopes that the French revolution has ... confounded together, I have thought that it was important to know what power this revolution has exercised over enlightenment, and what results might result from it one day if order and republican liberty, morality, and independence were wisely and politically combined.”<sup>17</sup>

As she summed up her purpose in the introduction to the work, the first part would focus on “the successive examination of the principal celebrated epochs in the history of letters,” and the second part would show “the state of enlightenment and literature in

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<sup>15</sup> See Germaine de Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, as presented in the new Pléiade edition of Staël’s works, Madame de Staël, *Oeuvres*, ed. Catriona Seth, with the collaboration of Valérie Cossy (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Valérie Cossy and Catriona Seth, “Notice,” in Staël, *De la littérature*, 1470-1472; and Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), esp. 4, 180-206.

<sup>17</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 13-14.

France since the revolution,” present “conjectures on what they should be, and on what they will be if one day we possess republican morality and liberty,” and explore the interconnected topics of “our current degradation and our possible amelioration.”<sup>18</sup>

While Staël primarily focused her attention on the emergence of French literature and its relationship with French society, she also indicated her interest in American literature and American society in the opening chapter of the second volume, where she turned her attention from the study of the past to the study of the future:

I believe ... that it is always interesting to examine what the character of literature should be in a great people, in an enlightened people, in a people [in whose country] there will have been established the liberty, political equality, and mores that accord with its institutions. There is only one nation in the universe to which these reflections can apply from the current moment onwards: these are the Americans.<sup>19</sup>

When she published the second edition of *De la littérature* less than a year later, she repeated her interest in the young United States in her new preface: “Each time that a new nation such as America ... makes progress towards civilization, the human species itself is perfected.”<sup>20</sup>

Staël’s views on the nature and importance of women’s contribution to the ideal republican society she hoped eventually to see in France and elsewhere are especially apparent in her successive and interconnected comparisons of southern Europe (“le Midi”) and northern Europe (“le Nord”), France and England, the Old Regime and the French Revolution, and the

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<sup>18</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 30-31.

<sup>19</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 205. For additional positive references, see Staël, *De la littérature*, 264-265, 281-282.

<sup>20</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 10.

past, the present, and the future. When she introduced her key contrast between the peoples of the Midi and the peoples of the North, for example, she not only admitted that “all my impressions, all my ideas carry to towards a preference for the literature of the north,” but also asserted both that “the poetry of the North is much more suitable to the spirit of a free people than the poetry of the South” and that “the northern peoples ... have always had a respect for women that was unknown to the peoples of the South; women enjoyed independence in the North whereas elsewhere they were condemned to servitude.”<sup>21</sup> When she introduced her ensuing comparison and contrast between “monarchical states” such as France and the “free people” of England, she observed that “tyrannical laws, gross desires, or corrupt principles have disposed of the fate of women in ancient republics, in Asia, and in France. Women have never enjoyed the happiness caused by domestic affections as they do in England.”<sup>22</sup> When she turned her attention to the topic of “women who cultivate letters” as a way of exploring the topic of women’s participation in the Old Regime, the French Revolution, and the republic of the future, she proclaimed that “to enlighten, instruct, and perfect women like men, [and] nations like individuals, is still the best secret for all the reasonable goals, and all the social and political relations, to which one wants to assure a durable foundation.”<sup>23</sup>

Staël compared the political, social, and cultural upheaval that had accompanied the conflict between North and South during the fall of the Roman Empire with the upheaval that was accompanying the on-going conflict between republic and monarchy as a result of the French Revolution. Where “the mixture between the peoples of the North and those of the South” had initially resulted in “barbarity for a certain amount of time,” she explained, it had

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<sup>21</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 129-130, 130, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 150, 151, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 239.

eventually produced a new and improved Europe with “very great progress for enlightenment and civilization.” Approaching the recent political and cultural clashes of the French Revolution from the same perspective, she simultaneously praised “the introduction of a new class in the government of France,” deplored the pervasive effects of the revolutionary terror that had both “introduced vulgarity of language, manners, and opinions” and “harvested men, characters, sentiments, and ideas,” and looked forward to a better republican future when “this revolution can, in the long run, enlighten a greater mass of men.”<sup>24</sup>

As Staël turned her attention from the study of men to the situation of women, she offered a similar picture of past, present, and future in which the aristocratic culture of Louis XIV had had positive attributes, the events of the French Revolution that destroyed the old regime had introduced a new set of negative attributes, and the republic of the future might nevertheless bring improvements over aristocratic monarchy and revolutionary republic alike. When she opened her chapter on “women of letters,” for example, she proclaimed, “I believe there will be an epoch in which philosopher legislators will give serious attention to the education that women should receive, the civil laws that protect them, the duties that it is necessary to impose upon them, and the happiness that can be their guarantee.”<sup>25</sup> Drawing comparisons and contrasts between the classical Greek and Roman republics of the past, the revolutionary republic of the present, and the ideal French republic of the future, she observed:

In every free country, the education of women has been directed according to the spirit of the constitution that was established there. ... If one wanted the principal motive of the French republic to be the emulation of enlightenment and

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<sup>24</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 206.

<sup>25</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 234.



philosophy, it would be very reasonable to encourage women to cultivate their spirit so that men could converse with them about ideas that captivated their interest.<sup>26</sup>

Staël had earlier identified England as the free country whose women enjoyed the greatest happiness, but she ultimately advocated a different model for French women. Although she argued that “if the French could give to their women all the virtues of British women, their retiring mores, their taste for solitude, they would do well to prefer such qualities to all the gifts of a scintillating spirit,” for example, she eventually concluded that it would be better for the French republic if French women kept their intelligence, their ideas, and their witty and elevated conversational skills because “if there no longer existed in France any women enlightened enough for their judgment to count, or noble enough in their manners to inspire a veritable respect, the opinion of society would no longer have any power over men’s actions.”<sup>27</sup> Connecting the French past to the French present with an expression of hope for the French future, she concluded:

I firmly believe that under the Old Regime, where opinion exercised such a salutary empire, that empire was the work of women who were distinguished by their spirit and their character. ... During the course of the revolution, it was these same women who once more gave the most proof of devotion and energy. Men in France will never be able to be republican enough to dispense entirely with the independence and the natural pride of women.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 236.

<sup>27</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 237.

<sup>28</sup> Staël, *De la littérature*, 238.

Staël and Tocqueville shared a belief that women's influence would be the key to social improvement, but they differed in several key respects. Where Staël presented France as the primary country from which others could learn, for example, Tocqueville focused on the United States. Where Staël focused her attention on the contrast between monarchy and republic, similarly, Tocqueville focused his attention on the related but not entirely identical contrast between aristocracy and democracy. Most importantly of all, however, where Staël placed her hopes for the future in the example of independent French women conducting sparkling conversation in public, Tocqueville placed his hopes for the future in the example of self-sacrificing American wives running stable households in private.

*Gustave de Beaumont: Women in France and the United States*

While Tocqueville was writing *Democracy in America*, Beaumont was working on the novel *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*. The two works have an important reciprocal relationship not only because the two men traveled together but also because each signaled the importance of the other's work when he published his own. When Tocqueville introduced the first volume of *Democracy in America*, for example, he noted that he had decided to focus his volume on American political culture because he was expecting Beaumont to focus on American civil society: "[S]oon another author will set the principal traits of the American character before the reader. By concealing the gravity of his portrait beneath a light veil, he will adorn the truth with greater charm than I am capable of."<sup>29</sup> When Beaumont wrote the preface for *Marie*, similarly, he reported that he had chosen to focus on mores because Tocqueville was already

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<sup>29</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Goldhammer, 1:15.

writing on institutions: “At the very moment when my book will be published, another will appear which will shed the most brilliant illumination upon the democratic institutions of the United States.”<sup>30</sup>

While Tocqueville and Beaumont agreed that Beaumont’s special subject was the study of race relations in America,<sup>31</sup> Beaumont’s work also enables us to pursue his views on gender relations. Like Tocqueville, he wrote letters home to his family while he was in America, like Tocqueville he used his experiences of travel across the United States to inform his published work, and like Tocqueville he included a special section on American women in a prominent location in his finished piece on American society. Unlike Tocqueville, however, he consistently used his letters, his eventual novel, and that novel’s extensive notes to declare his preference for French girls’ education, French courtship practices, and French marriage relations instead.

One of Beaumont’s very first letters home to his father, which he signed and dated from New York on 16 May 1831, featured several paragraphs on the purity of American morals, the nature of the American family, and the behavior of American women before and after marriage.<sup>32</sup>

Morals are extremely pure here. It is said to be very rare for a woman to behave improperly. There are no unhappy marriages here to speak of. People gather

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<sup>30</sup> Gustave de Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery in the United States: A Novel of Jacksonian America*, ed. Alvis L. Tinnin, trans. Barbara Chapman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 3-4. For the original French-language edition, see Gustave de Beaumont, *Marie, ou l’esclavage aux Etats-Unis: Tableau de moeurs américaines*, 2 vols. (Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1835).

<sup>31</sup> See Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 6; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I:15.

<sup>32</sup> Gustave de Beaumont to his father, New York, 16 May 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 16-17. Beaumont continued his exploration of similar ideas about the relative freedom of American girls, the relative fidelity of French wives, and the reasons why he would prefer to marry a French woman instead in additional letters to his brother Jules, Albany, 4 July 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 65; and to his sister-in-law Félicie, Philadelphia, 26 October 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 153.

frequently here during the winter, but gatherings are mostly limited to the family. Unmarried men lavish their attention exclusively on single girls. When a woman marries, she is devoted exclusively to her husband. Until she is engaged, however, she will behave quite freely in her relations with men. For instance, girls can be seen strolling about on their own. Young men can approach them or go to the country alone with them, and people find this all quite natural. The parents of a young woman see nothing wrong with her receiving men at home, but this life of liberty ends the day she marries.<sup>33</sup>

Although Beaumont presented American practices of family life in a positive light, however, he also explained that he would prefer not to take an American wife himself “because any number of unwelcome consequences might follow from such a union.”<sup>34</sup>

As Beaumont tried to explain the reasons for the ways in which American marriage and family life were so distinctively different from French marriage and family life, he resorted to a series of observations about comparative American and French religion, economic organization, and temperament:

First and foremost, society is ruled by the spirit of religion. Nowhere else are religious ideas respected as they are here. [...] Second, as I was telling you, there is only one class here, the *merchants*, all of whom have the same interest and are competing for only one thing, *wealth*. Here there is no idle class, and there is no

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<sup>33</sup> Beaumont to his father, New York, 16 May 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 16. For Tocqueville’s remarkably similar observations on the same topic, see Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Emilie de Belisle de Tocqueville, New York, 9 June 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 36-37.

<sup>34</sup> Gustave de Beaumont to his father, New York, 16 May 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 16-17.

group of men who, if they weren't busy seducing women, would have nothing else to do. [...] In addition, the American temperament is more cold-blooded than ours. People here therefore find that it is in their interest to be moral. The religion in which they believe commands them to be so, and their blood, rather than stand in their way, encourages this religious disposition or predilection to behave morally.<sup>35</sup>

When Beaumont published the novel *Marie*, he included these and other observations on the American sex/gender system and its differences from the French sex/gender system in a prominent location from the end of the first chapter, through the whole of the second chapter, and on into a lengthy "note on American women" at the end of the first volume.<sup>36</sup>

*Marie* tells the story of an unnamed French traveler to the United States who meets a French expatriate named Ludovic in an isolated cabin in the American wilderness. Beaumont sets the tale in "about the year 1831," introduces the traveler as a young man who has "resolved to go to America with the intention of settling there," presents his motivation for the journey as a personal reaction to French political divisions in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1830, indicates the itinerary of his journey from New York to Michigan, and describes his meeting with Ludovic in a clearing near the Saginaw River that divides the "vast prairies" of the Midwest on one bank from the "magnificent primeval forest" on the other.<sup>37</sup> While the two men start by speaking about France, they rapidly move on to what Beaumont describes as "the principal subject of their conversation, America."<sup>38</sup> Although they share a common language from their

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<sup>35</sup> Gustave de Beaumont to his father, New York, 16 May 1831, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, ed. Zunz, 17.

<sup>36</sup> For the original arrangement of the text and the associated notes, see Beaumont, *Marie, ou l'esclavage*.

<sup>37</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 9-11.

<sup>38</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 14.

former French home, however, they have very different ideas about the new country they are discussing now. As Beaumont sets the scene: “while the traveler continued to express his admiration of it, the hermit opposed his views with judicious comments, sometimes even with pointed irony.”<sup>39</sup>

Their disagreement comes to a head over the question of how to understand the condition of American women when the traveler looks out over a lake and exclaims: “Tell me – speak freely – what more could one desire for happiness if the love of a young American girl should lend its charms and enchantments to this solitary retreat?”<sup>40</sup> He continues by drawing an extended contrast between the “dirt and corruption” of Europe, where women marry for “diamonds, a title, [or] freedom,” and the purity of the United States, where “marriage is not a business, nor is love a commodity.” Praising America as a place where women’s “gentle voices ... never echo the passion of greed,” and men and women marry only “because they love each other,” he concludes by asking again, “Would it not be losing an opportunity for tranquil but delicious felicity not to seek the love of an American girl?”<sup>41</sup>

Ludovic responds to the traveler’s repeated questions by praising French women over American women in a lengthy speech that takes up the entirety of the second chapter of *Marie*. In the first sentence of the chapter, for example, he starts out by observing that “American women generally have well-informed minds but little imagination, and more reason than sensibility.” Comparing French and American educational practices, he praises the way in which French parents shelter their daughters with “tender solicitude” while criticizing the results of the way in which American parents raise their daughters to enjoy a greater “liberty,” protect them

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<sup>39</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 14-15.

from the consequences of any “stormy billows of passion” by teaching them to “place [their] trust in reason,” and thus “deprive [American girls] of two qualities which are so charming in youth: candor and naïveté.”<sup>42</sup> Comparing French and American courtship practices, he counters the French traveler’s belief that American women marry for love by arguing that American women are actually more pragmatic in their marriage choices than French women: “Within in this pragmatic [American] society, where everyone is engaged in business, American girls have theirs too: that of finding a husband.”<sup>43</sup> Comparing French and American marriages, finally, he argues that French marriage is easier and more pleasurable for women than American marriage:

In our country, the young girl exchanges the swaddling bands of infancy for the bonds of matrimony; but these new bonds rest lightly upon her. In taking a husband, she gains the right to join the outside world; by engaging herself, she becomes free. Then begins the life of parties, pleasures, conquests. In America, on the contrary, the gay life is the young girl’s; she retires from worldly pleasures to live among the austere duties of the domestic hearth. ... In the United States, a woman ceases to be free on the day when, in France, she becomes so.<sup>44</sup>

Although Ludovic does admire the ways in which American morals are purer than European morals in ways that “European society, corrupt as it is, cannot conceive of,” he turns even his admiration here into a criticism of the American man’s excessive interest in business, his lack of interest in the fine arts, his freedom from the military service that might force him to an extended bachelor existence, and his ability to marry anyone he wants almost as soon as he meets her: “Completely engrossed in practical matters, the American man has neither the time

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<sup>42</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 16-17.

<sup>43</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 19-20.

nor the temperament for tender sentiments or gallantry; he is gallant once in his life, when he wishes to marry.” The unfortunate result, in his view, is that “women, so tender by nature, [also] take on the imprint of that prosaic, rational world.”<sup>45</sup> He ends his speech with the conclusion that “American women merit your esteem, but not your enthusiasm; they can conform to a chilly society, but their hearts are not made for the burning passions of the wilderness.”<sup>46</sup>

While the French traveler initially responds by protesting, Beaumont leaves no doubt that the readers of *Marie* should eventually side with Ludovic. Although the non-fictional “note on American women” that Beaumont appended to the chapter “on women” opens by claiming that “the most striking trait in the women of America is their superiority to the men of the same country,” for example, the majority of the note shows how the differences between superior American women and inferior American men pose problems for American marriages: “Whatever the closeness of the bond that unites the couple, there is still a barrier between them, separating soul from body, and mind from matter.”<sup>47</sup> Ludovic’s story of his own unhappy attempt to marry the American woman he loves, which takes up the bulk of the novel itself, leaves the traveler “plunged ... into a profound reverie.” In the final paragraph of *Marie*, Beaumont reports that the French traveler has given up on his American dreams and returned to France: “I am told that shortly thereafter he left New York for Le Havre. On seeing the shores of France, which he had thought never to see again, he wept with joy. Returned to his dear fatherland, he never left it more.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 20, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 216-217.

<sup>48</sup> Beaumont, *Marie, or Slavery*, 187.



Beaumont and Tocqueville made strikingly similar observations about the comparison and contrast between the American and French sex/gender systems. Both reported that American girls were freer to go out into society than French girls, for example, both shared the concern that American girls' education might give American women a masculine cast of mind, and both observed that American girls gave up their early independence when they grew up to become American wives. While both Beaumont and Tocqueville admired the resulting purity of American morals, however, their relative valuations of French and American women ultimately diverged when Beaumont closed *Marie* by sending his French traveler home with a preference for France while Tocqueville closed his parallel sections of *Democracy in America* by praising American women's key role in the maintenance of American democracy. Where Beaumont ended *Marie* by suggesting the superiority of French women and French society over those of the United States, then, Tocqueville ended his sections on women in *Democracy in America* by suggesting the superiority of American women and American society over those of France.<sup>49</sup>

*Michel Chevalier: Women in the United States, England, and France*

Unlike Staël's *De la littérature* and Beaumont's *Marie*, Michel Chevalier's *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord* is a book that Tocqueville most likely never read before he completed the

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<sup>49</sup> Nolla's "historico-critical" edition of *Democracy in America* indicates that Tocqueville's notes on his manuscript included the statement "Say clearly somewhere that the women of America strike me as markedly superior to the men." Tocqueville's published text itself, however, suggests that the comparison he wants to make is the one between women in America and women in other countries, and this is the conclusion that his earliest American readers drew. Compare Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. 2, 180; with Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II: 232; and see Olivier Zunz, "Tocqueville and the Americans: *Democracy in America* as Read by Nineteenth-Century Americans," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Welch, esp. 370-371.

second of the two volumes of *Democracy in America* in 1840.<sup>50</sup> Because Chevalier visited America in the same decade as Tocqueville, however, Chevalier's observations on his two-year visit from 1833 to 1835 give special insight into the question of how a French traveler who approached America at roughly the same time, but from a different political perspective, might see it similarly or differently.<sup>51</sup> This is especially the case because Tocqueville criticized the Saint-Simonians' "extravagant ideas" on relations between men and women in the notes for his chapter on "how the Americans understand the equality of man and woman,"<sup>52</sup> and Chevalier was himself an important leader in the Saint-Simonian movement in the years leading up to his departure for the United States in 1833.<sup>53</sup>

Chevalier introduced the first edition of his collected *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord* in 1836 by describing the United States as the key connection between what he saw, in classic Saint-Simonian fashion, as two distinct streams of "Eastern" and "Western" civilization: "America, placed between two civilizations, is called to high destinies and ... the progress made by the people of the New World is a matter of deepest interest to the whole human race."<sup>54</sup> Having characterized every shift in civilization as one that engaged "great questions touching the relation of man to God, to his fellows, and to the universe, and of domestic, social, and political

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<sup>50</sup> See John William Ward, "Editor's Introduction," in Michel Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America*, trans. T. G. Bradford, ed. John William Ward (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), ix.

<sup>51</sup> On the wide range of French travelers to the United States in this period, see Jeremy Jennings, "French Visions of America from Tocqueville to the Civil War," in *America through European Eyes: British and French Reflections on the New World from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Aurélien Craiutu and Jeffrey C. Isaac (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 161-184.

<sup>52</sup> See Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. 2, 178; Jean-Claude Lamberti, "Notes et variantes," in Tocqueville, *Démocratie en Amérique*, in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, ed. Jardin, with Lamberti and Schleifer, 1145

<sup>53</sup> See Ward, "Editor's Introduction," in Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, v-xii; Jean Walch, *Michel Chevalier: Economiste saint-simonien, 1806-1879* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1975), 11-36.

<sup>54</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 3. For the original French editions of Chevalier's work, see Michel Chevalier, *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1836); and Michel Chevalier, *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord*, revised and expanded 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1837).

order,” he set himself the task of exploring the implications of American ascendancy “politically,” “religiously,” “morally,” “intellectually,” and “industrially.”<sup>55</sup> Seeking especially to understand the relationship between the United States and Europe, he presented the United States as the best representative of “Teutonic Europe,” “the people of the North and England,” and “the Protestant and Anglo-Saxon population,” and France as the best representative of “Latin Europe,” “the South,” and the Catholic population.<sup>56</sup> As he compared and contrasted these two peoples, he simultaneously observed American industrial superiority, looked for ways in which the French might adapt American institutions and customs without losing their own national character, and urged the French to act as soon as possible to regain what they had lost in the way of national and international preeminence in Europe and abroad.

Chevalier’s first and most striking comparison of the American and French sex/gender systems and their implications occurs in his chapter on the industrial town of Lowell, which he described as a prosperous city of 15,000 inhabitants, situated on the banks of the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, furnished with “huge factories, five, six, or seven stories high,” “small wooden houses, ... very neat, very snug,” “brick houses in the English style ... simple but tasteful without and comfortable within,” “fancy-goods shops and milliners’ rooms without number,” “vast hotels in the American style,” and “canals, waterwheels, waterfalls, bridges, banks, schools, and libraries.”<sup>57</sup> After the prosperity of the town, the aspect that most strikes him is the number and safety of the young women who work there, and here is where his comparative comments on the United States and France begin:

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<sup>55</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 6-7.

<sup>57</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 129.

In France, it would be difficult to conceive of a state of things in which young girls, generally pretty, should be separated from their families, fifty or a hundred miles from home, in a town in which their parents could have no one to advise and watch over them. It is a fact, however, with a small number of cases which only prove the rule, that this state of things has yet had no bad effects in Lowell. The manners of the English race are totally different from those of us French; all their habits and all their notions wholly unlike ours.<sup>58</sup>

Chevalier explained the difference by focusing on the implications of the religious differences between the two countries:

The Protestant education, much more than our Catholic discipline, draws round each individual a line over which it is difficult to step. The consequence is more coldness in domestic relations, the more or less complete absence of the stronger feelings of the soul, but, in turn, everyone is obliged and accustomed to show more respect for the feelings of others.<sup>59</sup>

Although Chevalier saw the difficulties of replacing emotion with reason in this way, he ultimately concluded that the trade-off was worth it:

It must be acknowledged that under this rigorous system there is a somber hue, an air of listlessness, thrown over society; but, when one reflects on the dangers to which the opposite system exposes the daughter of the poor, who has no one to look out for her, when one counts the victims, however slight may be his

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<sup>58</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 138-139.

<sup>59</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 139.

sympathies for humanity, it is difficult to deny that Anglo-American prudery, all things considered, is fully worth our ease and freedom of manners, whatever may be their attractions.<sup>60</sup>

Although Chevalier returned often to the interconnected topics of American industrial prosperity, the relative well-being of American women compared to British and European women, and the importance of the United States as a positive model for France,<sup>61</sup> however, his *Lettres sur l’Amerique du Nord* also include a letter on American politics and religion that suggests some intriguing ways in which he thought the United States might not always provide an appropriate example for France to follow. Writing from Bedford Springs, he compared the political processions he had seen in and around New York and Philadelphia, the Methodist camp meetings he had seen in the western states, and the Catholic religious festivals he remembered from his childhood in his French home town. Thinking about the similarities and differences in the rituals, the symbols, the nature of the participants, and the quality of the public responses, he argued that the American political processions were the least interesting because they were the most masculine: “women do not and cannot have a place in them.”<sup>62</sup>

Although Chevalier acknowledged that “the representative system” had become a permanently necessary ingredient for any modern political regime, then, he also argued that the American form of democratic government might not be appropriate for France because American and French sex/gender systems were too different. Repeating his charge that

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<sup>60</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 294, where he argues that industrial prosperity is what enables Americans to marry for love instead of money; and Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 330, where he argues that the general prosperity of the United States relative to Europe is what accounts for the greater physical beauty of Anglo-American women.

<sup>62</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 308.

American society was “wholly masculine,” Chevalier expanded his criticism by comparing the subordination of American women with the combined authority and sociability of French women:

Woman, who in all countries, has little of the spirit of the representative system, here possesses no authority [at all]; there are no salons in the United States. [...] But among us it would be sheer fanaticism to set up the representative system as the pivot of social life. [...] Among us, women have a real power, although not elaborated in the articles of the Charter; and our national character has many feminine, I will not say effeminate, characteristics.<sup>63</sup>

Even Chevalier’s contrast between excessively masculine America and preferably feminine (but not effeminate) France, however, ends with admiration for the way in which the British complement their cold parliamentary system by spending their warm youthful energy on their colonies, and the Americans similarly complement their own chilly representative government by spending their own warm youthful energy on settling the west. Chevalier had ended his discussion of the Lowell mill girls by suggesting that the French could increase the prosperity of their laboring classes by expanding their settlements in Algeria, and he ended his discussion of political and religious assemblies with a similar suggestion that the French should follow the British and American examples by complementing their experiment in representative government with “some [similarly] vast enterprise in which some may play a part before the eyes of the world, and others may enjoy the spectacle of their prowess.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 312.

<sup>64</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 313.

Chevalier closed his *Lettres de sur l'Amérique du Nord* with a final letter that summed up the superiority of the American system in a long list of ways that included intellectual, economic, and gender dimensions. American farmers were better educated than French peasants, for example, better able to reconcile “the great scriptural traditions” with “the principles of modern science as taught by Bacon and Descartes,” “the doctrine of moral and religious independence proclaimed by Luther,” and “the still more recent notions of political freedom.”<sup>65</sup> American men and women of any rank, similarly, were more respectful of marriage, family, and household ties than French men and women of any rank: adultery and seduction were rare among Americans, laboring men tried as far as possible to spare their wives work, and “a woman, whatever may be the condition and fortune of her husband, is sure of commanding universal respect and attention.”<sup>66</sup> Although Chevalier closed his final letter by arguing in defense of France that “it would be a mistake to infer from what has been said that American civilization is superior to our own,”<sup>67</sup> he nevertheless devoted his final sentence to a reminder of how far France had to go to equal or surpass the prosperity of the United States and its people:

It depends upon us to give our social order the advantage over the United States by raising our urban and rural lower class from the ignorance and brutal degradation in which they are plunged and by developing their powers and qualities in conformity with our national disposition and the character of our race.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 411.

<sup>66</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 412.

<sup>67</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 418.

<sup>68</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics*, 419.

Although Chevalier focused his attention on the circumstances of the urban and rural American laboring classes and Tocqueville generally had more to say about the circumstances of the northern and southern American professional and planter classes, both writers shared remarkably similar ideas about the comparisons and contrasts between the American and French sex/gender systems. Both agreed, for example, that American girls had more independence, that American morals were purer, and that the result was an American society in which emotions are chillier, more masculine, and more restrained. Where Chevalier was equally insistent both on the ways in which the United States might serve as a model for France and on the ways in which France might adapt the American model better to suit its own national tradition and culture, however, Tocqueville was less clear about whether democracy would ultimately be good either for the United States or for France.

### **Conclusion: Gallic Singularity and Tocquevillean Singularity**

*Democracy in America* has been open to many competing interpretations in the near-century since it appeared.<sup>69</sup> Conservative admirers, for example, have focused on Tocqueville's defense of states' rights and local institutions against federal programs and centralizing systems. Liberal admirers, by contrast, have focused on Tocqueville's worries about the tyranny of the majority, his criticisms of American race relations, and his anxieties about whether or not democracy itself could survive. Although Tocqueville claimed that he would not have written as critically as he had if he had not believed that such a critical view could alert readers to problems

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<sup>69</sup> For the initial French, British, and American reception of Tocqueville's work, for example, see Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); and Zunz, "Tocqueville and the Americans," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Welch, 359-396.



that they might avoid with warning, he nevertheless ended the second volume of his book by acknowledging his “fears” as well as his “hopes” (II: 358).

Tocqueville’s ambivalent approach to the implications of American democracy is especially notable if we compare and contrast his work with the contemporary examples of Germaine de Staël, Gustave de Beaumont, and Michel Chevalier. Staël, for example, opens *De la littérature* with a defense of her commitment to social perfectability, ranks the educated sociability of French women over the isolated domesticity of British women, and puts the future of the French republic in their hands. Beaumont devotes *Marie* to a scathing criticism of the distance between American democratic ideals and American racist realities, gives his main character a lengthy speech that supports French patterns of courtship and marriage over American ones, and ends the novel with his narrator’s relieved and happy return to France. Chevalier’s collected *Lettres sur l’Amérique du Nord* admire the industrial prosperity of American cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts, highlight the moral purity of the American society that enables the Lowell mill girls to live and work on their own, and urge the people and government officials of France to work to catch up.

Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, by contrast, offers a more ambivalent response to American democracy and its implications for political, intellectual, social, and cultural life on many different levels. When Tocqueville sums up his “general view of the subject” in the final chapter of the second and final volume, for example, he observes:

Nearly all extremes are being softened and blunted. Almost anything that stands out is being wiped out and replaced by something average – neither as high nor as low, neither as brilliant nor as obscure as what the world once knew. The sight of

such uniformity saddens and chills me, and I am tempted to mourn for the society that is no more. (II: 356)

Despite his evident grief at the passage of aristocracy, however, he sets this grief aside in the service of what he presents as an overwhelmingly compelling divine preference for democracy:

It is natural to believe that what is most satisfying to the eye of man's creator and keeper is not the singular prosperity of a few but the greater well-being of all: what seems decadence to me is therefore progress in his eyes; what pains me pleases him. Equality is less lofty, perhaps, but more just, and its justice is the source of its grandeur and its beauty. (II: 357)

Tocqueville may have looked at his present day and set his face resolutely forward to the democratic future, but he could not help regretting certain aspects of the aristocratic past. The result is a paradoxical comparative thinker who eventually rejected the appeal of the Gallic singularity, preferred the American sex/gender system, and hailed American women as the foundation of American democracy – and yet nevertheless also insisted that sexual equality was not the same as sexual sameness, prescribed a special form of democracy in which men were in charge of politics and women were in charge of mores, and ultimately seems to have contradicted his assertions about the central importance of American women when he devoted the vast majority of his pages in both volumes of *Democracy in America* to the study of relations among American men.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For more on this point, see Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, "The Whole Moral and Intellectual State of a People': Tocqueville on Men, Women, and Mores in Europe and the United States," in *The Anthem Companion to Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Daniel Gordon (London, New York, and Delhi: Anthem Press, forthcoming).

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