

First.

Ten Women Scientists for the Environment

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Chapter 2

Jeanne Baret: circumnavigating the world for the love of botany

by Giorgia Burzachechi

Nothing to lose

“I have nothing left to lose.” Jeanne Baret had experimented her disguise through the Parisian streets, perhaps taking advantage of the poor evening light. First a few steps around the Rue de Boulangers, where naturalist Philibert Commerson’s new apartment was located. Initially, she had been very careful not to cross the eyes of those she met on her trial hikes, for fear of being exposed. Then she had ventured longer walks and gradually more and more into the sunlight. She had begun to hold her head high and her gaze steady; she had even begun to greet passersby. Both men and women reciprocated her gaze on the street, with no incredulous or surprised reactions. She had wrapped her breasts tightly with linen bandages. Then she had chosen masculine clothes, nothing that would attract attention: a vest, inconspicuous slacks. Finally, she had cut her hair. Her new identity was believable, and above all, she knew how much Commerson needed her. She had to take courage and illustrate her plan to him.

This is the Paris of Louis XV, at the height of the Enlightenment. The early years of the regency of the king, known as the Beloved, had been marked by fashion and care in dress. French taste and style in the arts and architecture were imitated everywhere. The political ideas of French philosophers had great influence over other European countries, and the French language had spread everywhere as a cultured language. The *Ville Lumière*, the City of Enlightenment, was in the midst of a cultural ferment that was spreading throughout the nation. For some years, while facing censorship problems, Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste Le Rond d’Alembert, had launched into the publishing venture of the *Encyclopédie*, the first encyclopedic collection, thanks to which Enlightenment ideas could spread widely and whose introduction, the *Preliminary Discourse*, is considered the presentation of the ideals of the Enlightenment itself. François-Marie Arouet, under the much better known pseudonym of Voltaire, had published *Elements of Newton’s Philosophy*, a popular essay on the studies of mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton. The philosopher, together with Gabrielle-Émilie Marquise de Châtelet, had contributed to the dissemination of the works and thought of the scientist who enunciated the law of universal gravitation.

It was during these years of the great expansion of scientific thought that Philibert Commerson and Jeanne Baret decided to move to the French capital, where the botanist had taken up residence at the Jardin du Roi, one of the country’s oldest official science institutions.

Symbiotic relationships

According to parish records documenting her baptism, Jeanne Baret had been born on July 27, 1740, into a family of laborers in a small village in Burgundy, La Comelle. She had grown up tilling the soil and had survived the harsh winters, when there was nothing to harvest in the fields, thanks to the notions about aromatic and medicinal herbs that her mother had passed on to her.

Her passion for herbs had thus begun in his years spent with his family, during which he had learned the knowledge of herbaria, the “herb women” who through conoscence of leaves, roots, flowers, and shoots were able to cure diseases, but also bring new flavors to the table. Apparently, her mother was of Huguenot descent, a Protestant religious group with a great literary tradition, so she knew how to read and write, skills that she also taught to her daughter and were important for the business of gathering and preserving herbs. Over the years, Baret had reached an excellent knowledge of numerous plants, which she indicated by vernacular nomenclature and of which she knew so many therapeutic properties. After the death of her parents she could have chosen a safe future by marrying, but instead she decided to continue working by moving to Toulon-sur-Arroux. Here her life became intertwined with that of Philibert (also known as Philippe) Commerson, who in 1760 had arrived with his wife in the very same locality.

We can imagine that the arrival of such a famous naturalist immediately caught the young woman’s attention. But it is equally likely that the interest had been mutual. Baret’s deep botanical knowledge, so different from Commerson’s academic expertise, meant that a relationship of bi-univocal exchange of knowledge was established between the two: she brought tradition, he brought scientific rigor and cataloguing method.

The Commerson family had moved to Toulon-sur-Arroux shortly after the marriage between Philibert and Marie Antoinette Vivande Beau; here the man could indulge his interest in Swiss Tea (a mixture of twenty-two herbs), and she could remain close to her beloved brother, François. Jeanne Baret had begun serving in their home as a housekeeper and assistant to the scientist. In April 1762 the couple’s son François Archambeaud was born, but Antoinette died shortly thereafter due to complications of childbirth. Thus it was that Commerson, who had devoted his entire life to study, soon found himself also having to cope with the role of a widowed father with a household to manage. Unable to provide the necessary care for the infant, he took the decision to entrust him to his uncle, Pastor Beau, who would certainly raise him according to the dictates of Christianity.

There is no firm evidence of this, but it would seem that at that time Philibert and Jeanne were already lovers.

Commerson was an ambitious and driven scientist. He did not have an amiable disposition, but his stubbornness, diplomatic ability, and aristocratic connections led him to be one of the naturalist candidates on board the greatest French expeditions of recent times.

When too many rumors began to circulate about his relationship with Jeanne, Commerson decided to move to Paris. By the end of 1765 she was evidently pregnant and living under his roof, but there was no official relationship between the two. The parish priest himself had reported the unacceptable situation to his brother-in-law. So, together with his inseparable assistant, Commerson had come to the capital, where he had begun frequenting the Jardin du Roi, the botanical garden with a medical vocation in Paris. Thanks to his activities, he had succeeded in having this prestigious candidacy. Letters of reference in his favor had come from Voltaire, Queen Louisa Ulrica of Sweden, and Carl Nilsson Linnaeus (Linnaeus) in person. In those years, following the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the expansion of colonial empire was not only a project to assert one’s power, but also an economic necessity for all the great nations: England, France, Holland and Spain.

England had won imperial control of North America and India, and now continued with the discovery of new lands. France had had to surrender some areas and now needed to put what was left to good use. Each expedition must have on board a naturalist who could recognize, collect, and catalog the new species of flora and fauna encountered during the land explorations. The possibility had opened up for

Commerson to join the great enterprise headed by Louis-Antoine Comte de Bougainville, who had obtained permission from King Louis XV to circumnavigate the globe. But while the British navy allowed the presence of women on board, wives of officers and the sailors in key roles, the French crown categorically forbade it.

Commerson would have had many things to prepare if he had accepted the assignment, but he did not plan to give any tasks to Jeanne Baret. He had to find a new assistant who would be up to the demands. Moreover, his health was not the best: he had just recovered from what his biographers identified as pleurisy. He certainly was not in the ideal physical condition to take on a three-year ship voyage around the world.

During the time of his illness, it is known for certain that it was Baret who stayed by his side to take care of him, taking time and attention away from little Jean-Pierre, who had just been born, so much so that she decided to foster him. We cannot even imagine what the woman felt in making this resolution. On the other hand, there was nothing she could do but assist Commerson: if he died, she would also lose the roof over her head since, in the eyes of the law, she was nothing more than the housekeeper. In reality she was much more than that: she was a valuable support in scientific research, with an established role; so Jeanne took care of Commerson, and it cannot be ruled out that she was really in love with him.

The only option for both of them was therefore to break all existing laws, accept Baret's plan to conceal her identity and take her on a trip around the world pretending she was a man.

Distant Horizons

1765 had been the ugliest and most exhausting year Jeanne Baret had ever faced, the year in which she had lost everything: she had had to abandon little Jean-Pierre, she had had to accept Commerson's final refusal to marry her, then she had learned of the death of her child, and now she was about to lose a home to live in, and a man whom she was romantically attached. She could not go back to Toulon-sur-Arroux, there was nothing there for her, and without Philibert she would have nothing to live on in Paris. She had nothing to lose.

On the other hand, Philippe was cagey, he could hardly move, and above all, he would not easily find an assistant as skilled as Jeanne.

So it was decided: Jeanne Baret would leave with Commerson, who had officially been given the assignment of naturalist of the expedition.

The woman probably did not foresee the context in which she would find herself: the only woman on a ship with no escape route, with three hundred men, in precarious hygienic conditions, with drinking water and food supplies that would gradually dwindle as the crossing progressed. The ship would also face adverse weather conditions or pirate attack. But the flow of her life had brought her there and now she could no longer back out.

Not least of all, it is safe to assume that the idea of this great experience, the chance to see new places and the opportunity to touch hitherto unknown plant species, insinuated in her the seed of a desire for knowledge. It was a unique circumstance, and that it could happen to her, of very humble origins, was even more so.

Jeanne Baret was leaving nothing behind, but before her departure Commerson had to do a lot of paperwork, including drafting a will in the event that she did not return from the expedition. He even determined what would state of his corpse: he would donate it to science. He also arranged a bequest for Jeanne, just as if she were not with him on the crossing. "To Jeanne Baret, also known as Jeanne de Bonnefoy," he left money, his late wife's clothes, furniture, and his books, but above all he allowed her to stay in the apartment for a year after the news of his death, during which she would be able to organize all the natural history finds and then send them to the Royal Collection.

The scientist's reputation was to remain spotless even in case Jeanne was unmasked during the trip. On the other hand, the botanist, by referring to her in his wills as "Jeanne de Bonnefoy," had left her an escape route. Her brother-in-law, Parson Beau, had strongly opposed their eventual union, and in case there were disputes over the possessions left by Commerson after his death, Mme. de Bonnefoy could have cashed in and would then have been forever separated from the facts of Toulon-sur- Arroux.

Jeanne, now becoming Jean, a young boy looking for work, left Paris on December 15, 1766, bound for the port of Rochefort where the *Étoile*, the ship that would accompany her on her round-the-world voyage, was waiting for her. The vessel would sail alone: ahead was the *Boudeuse*, on which commander Louis-Antoine de Bougainville was traveling.

For the first time Jeanne Baret had left her environment, her habits, to travel with a new identity. As scripted, she arrived at the port in the guise of Jean and asked to join the crew, offering her services as the naturalist's assistant. In contrast, Commerson had pretended that the preparations had absorbed him so much that he had not been able to find a suitable associate, so meeting the young man at the port seemed providential in everyone's eyes. The captain of the *Étoile*, François Chenard de Giraudais, offered to surrender his large and secluded cabin to Commerson, who, in this way, could comfortably organize all his instruments and books.

For almost two months, preparations fermented on the ship to accumulate the provisions and materials needed for the long voyage: the *Étoile* was, in fact, the "pantry" ship of the larger and faster *Boudeuse*. At that time, Baret tried not to draw attention to himself, and when she felt uncomfortable, she took refuge in the scientist's cabin away from the gazes of the rest of the crew.

Finally, on February 1, 1767, the *Étoile* unfurled her sails and left to the port of the island of Aix, where refueling operations had been completed. The next port to drop anchor would be in Brazil.

The first few days of sailing were not easy for Baret, but neither were they easy for Commerson. The two fell sick, and it was arduous for her to cope with the disease, keep her disguise on, and continue working on what she had been hired to do: provide assistance to the naturalist. The only thing that made her feel safe was the fact that she could find refuge in the botanist's cabin. But already in the very first days at sea, rumors about a woman on board began to circulate. The one who most supported this theory was François Vivès, ship's doctor, who immediately conflicted with that strange botanist-assistant couple. The alternative to the thesis of a female presence was that the two had been guilty of sodomy. Either way, Captain La Giraudais could not remain indifferent to this talk and demanded that Jean sleep among the other men of his rank. This was not an easy change for Baret. At night she could not get to sleep: the anxiety of an attack, of being unmasked and perhaps even raped did not let her rest; soon she began to carry a gun, while during the day, exhausted, she took refuge in Commerson's cabin.

But the separation was not enough to eliminate suspicion, so the captain had to get to the bottom of the matter, demanding a dialogue directly with Baret. Face to face with La Giraudais, Jean did not admit that she was a woman, but that she was "like the keepers of the harems of the Ottoman emperors": a eunuch. In fact, this version intrigued the crew even more, but this way Baret could at least get permission to go back to sleep in Commerson's cabin.

The baptism of the equator

In seafaring tradition, the crossing of the equator, an ancient ceremony dedicated to the god Neptune, has been celebrated for centuries. Old sea dogs also call this ritual the *baptism of the equator*, which features all those who cross the equatorial line for the first time. Each nation has its own customs for celebrating this moment, and today it is mostly celebrated in a joking manner, but in the past the ritual could also involve violent practices.

Of course, in the 18th century the determination of latitude coordinates was not precise, and was done through the observation of the sun, but according to shipboard calculations on March 22, 1767, the *Étoile* would pass from the north to the south Atlantic. The calm sea and clear sky contrasted with the hectic preparations of the days leading up to the event. All the senior sailors had gone to great lengths in organizing the baptism of the newcomers, among whom were also the officers, who were, however, called upon to undergo lighter trials. Once their turn was over, it was on to the simple sailors. Among them was also Baret. The ceremony was about to turn into a carnivalesque and goliardic ritual. The woman was terrified, afraid of being discovered. In fact, all the baptizers were forced to stand naked on the deck with their skin smeared with tar or oil and chicken feathers. There were those who danced wearing sheepskins and horns, some wiggled like a monkey, and all shouted animalistic cries accompanied by the sound of beating pots and pans. Baret refused to denude herself entirely so as not to reveal the bands compressing her breasts, but she could do nothing to avoid undergoing the ritual. It seems that the baptism involved immersion in a sort of pool made in the open sea, protected from possible shark attacks, surrounded by the frightening spectacle of dances, choruses and masks. That evening, after the baptism, there were no words Commerson could utter to console her. Jeanne was physically exhausted and psychologically terrified – the fear of being discovered had been devastating. In addition, she needed to clean up her robes and the linen bandages that swaddled her: the skin under the layers of the bandage was beginning to chafe.

The planned route was to proceed along Africa northeast, off which La Giraudais' ship crossed the equatorial line, and then approach Brazil. During those days of the voyage, the stress caused by having to sustain her deception, the terror that at any moment she might be attacked by the crew, and the heat of the scorching sun in the sea desert they were passing through had caused a physical breakdown for Jeanne; in addition, the skin under her bandage had become inflamed due to severe dermatitis.

On April 8, 1767, at last the desolate panorama of water as far as the eye could see began to change: land! It was only a short while away and they would drop anchor again: they had reached South America, they were a few kilometers north of Rio de Janeiro.

The discovery

The *Étoile*, having fulfilled all the bureaucratic requirements for docking, prepared to rejoin with the *Boudeuse*. One of the first ports he called at was Montevideo, where Commerson revealed to the assistant his complicity in a clandestine activity: the ship was in fact also carrying a secret cargo of products destined for the irregular trade in which the botanist had taken part.

In mid-May came the order from Bougainville to reach Rio de Janeiro, and about a month later, in June, they were ready to receive the inspection of the expedition's captain. In those days terrible news reached the sailors: father Buet, the ship's pastor, who had gone ashore in the Brazilian city, had been horribly murdered, probably by some drunks, on a street in the port area.

While the lives of seafarers were punctuated by these events, Jeanne Baret and Commerson were preparing for their first exploration in the new land. But the naturalist's health condition was not optimal: worrying ulcers had formed on his legs that hindered his movement. The ship's doctor warned him that if they worsened, he would risk the amputation of his lower limbs. Certainly, in that situation, it was not advisable for him to explore new lands.

The naturalist then simply disembarked, found a suitable and sufficiently airy place to spend the day, camped there, and waited for Jeanne to do all the work. Meanwhile, Baret did not spare herself: she went deeper and deeper into the Brazilian wilderness, going back and forth throughout the day, carrying plant and insect specimens. She worked so hard that she earned the epithet "Commerson's beast of burden." There are not many accounts of her physical appearance, but this nickname was documented in Bougainville's logbook. She was very strong; we can imagine that she had the strong, muscular build of someone who grew up working in the fields, but toned and agile.

Baret was overwhelmed by the lush landscape of that land unfolding before her eyes for the first time. Amid all those specimens she was spoiled for choice, but her gaze was drawn to a plant with an intense magenta color. Being an expert on herbs, it must not have been just the aesthetic aspect that attracted her. It was a creeper with bright green leaves and delicate elongated cream-colored flowers framed by deep fuchsia bracts.

At the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris there is a notebook in which Commerson jotted down the plants Jeanne catalogued and in which there must also have been indications of remedies to stop gangrene. Unfortunately, the notebook is not intact, and therefore there is no trace of these indications, but it is possible to speculate that, given Baret's great knowledge of the therapeutic properties of plants, she was the one who was in charge of that section and that she chose, among the many, the one we call *bougainvillea* to find a remedy for the naturalist's health problems.

Of course, this is only a hypothesis, based on the relationship of mutual dependence that existed between the two. What is certain is that Commerson soon understood the value of that new plant, to which he decided to give it precisely the name by which we know it today in honor of the expedition's captain, in the hope that pleasing the captain would help him see his own name in science books. At the time of the presentation of the discovery to Bougainville, however, his hopes went up in smoke. Instead of celebrating Commerson's discovery, the captain reacted by placing him under arrest and confining him in his cabin for several weeks. Bougainville – now he was certain – had discovered Baret's secret, and for that he had decided to punish the clandestine's direct superior. Punishing her would, moreover, have been an open admission of the fact that, against the law, there was a woman among the crew of his expedition.

Life at sea

On July 15, 1767, the ships finally left Rio, and ten days later Véron, *Étoile's* astronomer, announced that there would be a solar eclipse, an exceptional event also described in the captain's logbook, although the cloud-covered sky did not fully appreciate the spectacle.

A few days later, due to a minor accident, the *Étoile* had to repair to the Río de la Plata area, and on the last day of July the crew dropped anchor again in Montevideo. A little late, but refreshed by that stop, they sailed south on November 14. In the meantime, the work of the naturalist and his assistant had resumed with great fervor: so many specimens had to be carefully stowed and catalogued. Baret was

committed to her work and took every possible opportunity to disembark and go exploring.

During those days she was able to witness another unique and fascinating spectacle: the ship was proceeding on a bed of luminous water. Baret was witnessing for the first time in her life the phenomenon of marine bioluminescence. This is actually a fairly common feature among marine organisms, due to chemical-physical reactions, but the effect is always surprising, and it was even more so for the brave young woman born in La Comelle and now on her way to new and distant destinations. The passage through the Strait of Magellan was not as pleasant: documentation is scarce, but it seems that adverse winds raged against the ships. It was during this difficult navigation that Baret first saw animals unknown to her: whales, penguins and even dolphins, swimming swiftly in the waters of the strait. It was thanks to these observations that Commerson's cephalorhynchus (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) was later identified – a dolphin characterized by a black head and tail with a white body, named after the naturalist, who first spotted it. Finally, on December 4, they were able to reach the Land of Fire and Ice. Weather conditions and also poor knowledge of those coasts made several stops necessary. By the time they managed to reach the Pacific, the collection of specimens had been greatly expanded thanks to Baret's tireless work. Meanwhile, however, living conditions on the ship were rapidly deteriorating. By early March 1768, food and water rations were scarce. Tempers began to flare causing tensions among the men on board, whose health conditions, moreover, were not optimal. Baret, whose true identity was now suspected by many, tried never to let her guard down: one mistake could be fatal.

Only in early April the crew managed to reach what would later be called Tahiti, but the captain, who had no knowledge of those islands, decided to christen it Nouvelle Cythère, New Cythera, after the Greek island from whose waters, according to myth, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, was born.

Unmasked

There are different versions among the various accounts about what happened on this island, but they all agree as to the incredible beauty of the Tahitian women who just like goddesses enchanted the nearly four hundred French sailors aboard the ship. Indeed, it seems that the local men made it clear to the crew with eloquent gestures that they could choose among their women and join them on the beach. Bougainville himself in his logbook recounts this fact, but does not say what was the conduct of the men on his ship. The logbooks suggest that the indigenous people held sexual behaviors that were perceived as abnormal, if not outright aggressive, by the newly landed French. According to the captain's logbook, the European sailors were bewildered and almost frightened by the attitudes of the islanders. There are, however, a couple of pages, from a few weeks later, that report the facts about Baret. Certainly, many suspicions were already circulating about her; on the other hand, it also seemed far-fetched that Commerson's "beast of burden," with her fortitude, her dedication to work, her endurance to the conditions of sea and climate, could be a woman. Yet what happened in Tahiti removed all doubt, and it was the natives who provided the certainty, after a brief look at the assistant. As soon as Baret set foot on the island, ready to begin her specimen collection, she was immediately surrounded by the local men. Just as they had planned to offer their women to visitors, they now wanted to take their welcome gift. Baret screamed and some sailors rushed to her aid, escorting her back to the ship. When, shaken and exhausted from months at sea, she found herself in the presence of the captain, Baret finally broke down and admitted that she was a woman disguised as a

man. But her thoughts were immediately to exonerate her mentor, saying that she had met him at the port of Rochefort and kept her true identity concealed from him as well. This version had probably been prepared months before, perhaps during the very period when the naturalist had been confined to his cabin. On the other hand, Commerson was careful not to recount the Tahiti episode in his logbook. Not a word about the unmasking of his assistant. However, he thought it appropriate to talk about the Tahitians and made reference to the sexual habits of the locals.

After this incident, the stay continued fairly quietly. That land was rich in fruits, roots, fish. It was a paradise. One plant in particular caught the attention of the naturalist and his assistant: the breadfruit tree. *Artocarpus* is widespread in that area, and it produces large fruits that, when cooked, take on a taste and texture reminiscent of those of warm bread.

After the stop in Tahiti, one of the islanders was allowed to travel on the *Étoile*. This was Aotourou, an indigenous man who later learned French and lived in Paris. His accounts about Baret's misadventure on the island describe a different scene than the one witnessed by the Europeans: the men actually did not want to attack her; on the contrary, they had recognized in her a *mahu*, that is, a person of one sex who dresses in the shoes of the other sex, a figure who in Tahitian tradition holds positions of prestige.

Aotourou, during his time on the expedition, became friends with Baret, despite language barriers.

The horror

All the fears, fears, and anxieties that had haunted Jeanne Baret's sleep but also her wakefulness for fifteen months took place on the island now called New Ireland in Papua New Guinea.

After leaving Tahiti, the expedition proceeded through the New Hebrides archipelago (now the independent state of Vanuatu), and the Solomon Islands and, in June 1768, landed in New Ireland. The virgin forests there stretched as far as the eye could see, and an exciting novelty caught the young woman's attention: a beautiful insect that resembled a leaf. It was the *Phyllium siccifolium*, which is native to Malaysia itself and still fascinates those who see it.

By now life in the expedition flowed almost normally. But just when Baret thought she had achieved a certain stability, her existence was shaken by a terrible episode in which she risked death and which would mark her forever. Some armed men, taking advantage of one of the rare moments when she did not carry a gun, attacked her, pinned her down and raped her repeatedly until she lost consciousness.

After the violence Baret was brought to the ship, treated and kept in an induced sleep under close observation.

During this time the ship left New Ireland and crossed the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago. In September they arrived in Dutch territory, on the Moluccas, and soon afterwards set their sights on Jakarta, on the island of Java.

After days of suffering and delirium, Jeanne Baret slowly regained her strength. She was certain that her voyage was coming to an end and that captain Bougainville could no longer tolerate the presence of a woman aboard his ship. Moreover, almost two months after the rape, she now had no doubt: she was pregnant.

The captain did not let her off and they continued to the volcanic island of Rakata, then crossed the Indian Ocean until they reached the Mauritius Islands, opposite Madagascar. Once again fate had a plan for her.

A new landing

On November 7, 1768, nineteen months after the expedition began, the *Étoile* and the *Boudeuse* docked in Port Louis. Jeanne Baret disembarked, but this time she was also leaving the ship psychologically. She was pregnant, she was tired, she needed rest. A job opportunity also presented itself to Commerson, and the captain, on November 15, was happy to agree that the naturalist should leave the expedition to stay in Mauritius. Baret had been hired directly by the scientist, so he had no formal obligations to fulfill. This became his home for the next seven years.

The two were employed by Pierre Poivre of the French East India Company, later steward of Mauritius, where he established the Pamplemousses Botanical Garden (now called Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Garden). Baret and Commerson also made many expeditions to Madagascar, but there is no record of the child Jeanne was carrying. Years later, however, in 1803, the interpreter of the naturalist Bézac, who had previously had exchanges with Baret and Commerson, tells of a man in the latter's employ nicknamed "Bonnetoy." By a strange coincidence, the very nickname that "Jean" Baret used.

On March 14, 1773, in Mauritius, Philibert Commerson died. Jeanne had lost the man who had been her safe harbour for decades. In the following years Baret seems to have worked as a maid. It was during this new life that she met Jean Dubernat, a soldier in the French Royal-Comtois infantry regiment. Just like her, he was born in a small French village in Dordogne, a department in the New Aquitaine region. On May 17, 1774, they married in the parish of Port Louis, Mauritius. They returned to France; thus Jeanne Baret completed the round-the-world voyage, becoming the first woman to circumnavigate the globe. Back home, she was finally able to collect the inheritance left to her by Philibert Commerson. Subsequently, the French navy granted her a pension of 200 *livres* for her merits:

Jeanne Baret, thanks to a disguise, circumnavigated the globe on one of the vessels commanded by de Bougainville. She devoted herself in particular to assisting de Commerson, a doctor and botanist, and shared the latter's work and dangers with great courage. Her behavior was exemplary and de Bougainville acknowledged her numerous merits [...]. His Highness was kind-hearted enough to grant this remarkable woman a pension of 200 *livres* to be taken from the invalid fund, and this pension will be paid from January 1, 1785.

Pretending to be men

For centuries, science was something that women had almost no access to. Something only for men. Perhaps because of this, women have ceased to pursue their own desires for knowledge? Not at all. Women, the female scientists, have shed their feminine clothes and assumed masculine identities.

It mattered little if they contravened laws deemed divine, disobeyed kings and broke social patterns by running afoul of prejudices deemed immovable.

This was done by the aforementioned Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil Marquise de Châtelet (1706-1749), a woman of high social standing who did not remain confined to the imposed roles of the aristocracy: she studied science, led a worldly, sometimes extravagant life, and had many passionate lovers (she was also sentimentally linked to Voltaire). She dressed as a man to frequent scientific cafes and is still considered the first French scientist, a woman of unquestionable

intelligence whose work contributed to the popularization of the theories of Leibniz and Newton.

Disguising herself as a man was, in short, not such an unusual practice for women who wanted access to scientific knowledge. But the Marquise de Châtelet belonged to an affluent social class, a condition that certainly did not make it easier to be a woman scientist, but it did give her more opportunities to access the tools useful to crown this ambition.

Jeanne Baret was thus a special case: born in a tiny village in the heart of France (which still counts less than two hundred souls), was of very humble origins. Yet, lacking economic resources or aristocratic entourage, equipped only by willpower and great courage, she achieved unimaginable results in terms of scientific progress.

It is basically to her that we must say thank you if our summers are graced by the blooming bougainvilleas.