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Sources for a History of Women's Rights

Olympe de Gouges and the politicization of literature

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Sources for a History of Women's Rights

Olympe de Gouges and the politicization of literature

Valentina Altopiedi *

Never has historiographic research been so characterized by silence and forgetting as it has in the case of the history of the rights of women. Investigating the history of the rights of women means tackling a double silence: the silence of historiography, and the silence of the laws and of public debate. But the movements for the rights of women in the 19th and 20th centuries have their roots, as Lynn Hunt has shown, precisely in the French Revolution. On the long wave of the politicization of literature in the 18th century, the novels and plays of the revolutionary decade preserve the traces of a culture of emancipation which had to confront a historical practice of exclusion—when the false universal represented by the homme as the bearer of rights was challenged by Olympe de Gouges.

Il y a longtemps que l'on demande un second théâtre français pour la Capitale. C'est au Roi, au Gouvernement, aux Etats Généraux qu'il convient de le proposer: ils doivent en réformer d'inutiles, et créer celui qui manque à la Nation. Je voudrais que ce spectacle eût pour titre *Le Théâtre national, ou celui des femmes*.
(Olympe de Gouges, *Le bonheur primitif de l'homme*, 70-71)

That the history of women is one of silence and empty pages¹ which can only speak to the present by wearing different glasses to look at the past has almost become a commonplace of the historiographical debate. Yet, never has historiographic research been so characterized, at least until the 1980s, by silence and forgetting as it has in the case of the history of the rights of women.² Investigating the history of the rights of women means tackling a double silence:

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¹ Anna Rossi-Doria, *Dare forma al silenzio. Scritti di storia politica delle donne* (Roma: Viella, 2007).

² On the issue of the historiography of French Revolution and women's rights see Valentina Altopiedi, "La questione dei diritti delle donne nella storiografia della Rivoluzione francese", *Rivista storica italiana* II, 2019: 647-677.

the silence of a historiography that, barring some rare exceptions,¹ has long excluded from its research female thinkers, intellectuals, and activists as well as movements and works promoting a new language of rights and the silence of the laws and of public debate which, behind the supposed hypernymy of the concept of man as the bearer of rights (*Droits de l'homme*/Rights of Man, and to a lesser degree *Menschenrechte*), has, implicitly but categorically, excluded more than half of the community from the public sphere and from being recognized as bearers of rights.² But the history of rights is a history of progressive, and not irreversible, inclusion and the movements for the rights of women in the 19th and 20th centuries have their roots, as Lynn Hunt has shown, precisely in the French Revolution.³

The French Revolution certainly represents a turning point in the history of the rights of man and of woman. While Karen Green⁴ highlights the spread of the narrative on the natural submission of women, Charlotte Wells⁵ has clearly recognized the Revolution's merit in making people aware of their status as citizens and the rights attached to it. A rich historiographical debate has opened on the definition of citizen, related rights, and duties, especially in the context of gender history, which has focused on the characteristics of women's citizenship in the Revolution. While Geneviève Fraisse⁶ in her genealogical investi-

¹ Alphonse Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Colin, 1901).

² For further information see Dan Edelstein, *On the Spirit of Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge (Ma): Harvard UP, 2010); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton & Company, 2007); Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth, 1977); Marcello Flores, *Storia dei diritti umani* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008); Vincenzo Ferrone, *Storia dei diritti dell'uomo. L'Illuminismo e la costruzione del linguaggio politico dei moderni* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2014).

³ Lynn Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights. A Brief History with Documents*, second edition (Boston: Macmillan, 2016). Elisabeth Racz had already identified the Revolution as the moment when movements for the rights of women originated, interpreting previous demands as part of an intellectual tradition that was interested in questioning the statute of inferiority and equality between the sexes: Elisabeth Racz, "The Women's Rights Movement in the French Revolution", *Science and Society* 16, no. 2 (1952): 51-174.

⁴ Karen Green, "The Rights of Woman and the Equal Rights of Men", *Political Theory* 48, no. 5 (2020): 1-28, 20.

⁵ Charlotte C. Wells, *Law and Citizenship in Early Modern France* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 121.

⁶ Geneviève Fraisse, *Muse de la raison. La démocratie exclusive et la différence des sexes* (Aix-en-

gation of women's emancipation saw in the "democracy based on exclusion", established by revolutionaries, the opening of new emancipatory strategies, Dominique Godineau¹ theorized a broad definition of citizenship by studying the political action of the club of Republican Citizens Revolutionaries and emphasizing the priority of the request to be armed over the claim of the right to vote. In recent years, historiographic research has focused on investigating the forms of *de facto* citizenship and has highlight the speech, political action, living and working conditions of women during the Revolution.² To overcome the ideological and political clash between those who interpret the revolutionary episode as intrinsically misogynist, focusing on the exclusion of women from the political sphere,³ and those who see a moment of openness emphasizing their freedom of action, Anne Verjus has shown how in the eyes of revolutionaries the question of the "citizens without citizenship" was not a contradiction, since the revolutionaries implied a political thought based on the unity of interest of both men and women.⁴

Certainly, it is undeniable that the solemn proclamation of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* on the 26th August 1789 inaugurated a lively debate on what Hilda Smith⁵ has defined as the false universal represented by

Provence: Alinéa, 1989).

¹ Dominique Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses: les femmes du peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1988).

² Clyde Plumauzille, *Prostitution et Révolution. Les femmes publiques dans la cité républicaine (1789-1804)* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2016); Éliane Viennot, *Et la modernité fut masculine. La France, les femmes et le pouvoir 1789-1804* (Paris: Paris 2016); Lisa Dicaprio, *The Origins of the Welfare State. Women, Work and the French Revolution* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Christine Fauré, "Doléances, déclarations et pétitions, trois formes de la parole publique des femmes sous la Révolution", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 344, no. 2 (2006): 5-25; Suzanne Desan, *Constitutional Amazons. Jacobin's Women's Clubs in the French Revolution*, in *Re-Creating Authority in Revolutionary France*, eds. Bryant T. Ragan and Elizabeth A. Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992), 11-35.

³ Evelyne Morin-Rotureau, ed., *1789-1799: combats de femmes. La Révolution exclut les citoyennes*, Collection Mémoires no. 96 (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2003); Christine Fauré, "Les constituants de 1789 avaient-ils la volonté délibérée d'évincer les femmes de la vie politique?", *History of European Ideas* 15 (1992): 537-542; Christine Fauré, *La démocratie sans les femmes. Essai sur le libéralisme en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

⁴ Anne Verjus, *Le cens de la famille. Les femmes et le vote, 1789-1848* (Paris: Belin, 2002), 19.

⁵ Hilda Smith, *All Men and Both Sexes: Gender, Politics, and the False Universal in England, 1640-1832* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2002).

the *homme* as the bearer of rights, which Olympe de Gouges contested by elaborating the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*.¹ It is particularly worth noting that in the 18th century, as evidenced by the *Encyclopédie* itself, *homme* had a complex² polysemous and hyperomnic meaning that encompassed the entire human species, including the female gender.³ Considering in this regard that in the article “Homme (morale)”, Le Roy stated that “women owe to delicate and sensitive organs more vivid passions than are those of men”, while Barthez, in an apparent disorder of references to Galen, Hippocrates, and other physicians of antiquity, showed how anatomists had “always regarded in some way the woman as a failed man”,⁴ underlining that only the Christian religion “established (...) a real superiority in the man, nevertheless retaining the rights of equality to the woman”.⁵ Furthermore, it should be also noted that in the spring of 1793 the deputies Romme and Guyomar claimed that the French women citizens should have enjoyed political rights on the basis of the broad meaning of the term *homme*. Guyomar, in the work *Le partisan de l'égalité politique entre les individus*⁶ published as annexed to the session of the Convention held on the 29th April 1793, attacked the deputies who defended “a privileged caste, a formal aristocracy of men” (“une caste privilégiée, une aristocratie formelle des hommes”),⁷ specifying that the term *homme* should be understood in the latin sense and therefore indicating also the woman. At the same time Gilbert Romme in the session of the Convention of the 17th April 1793, speaking

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, in *Les droits de la femme* ([Paris]: s.n., 1791); Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne et autres textes*, preface by Geneviève Fraisse (Paris: Librio, 2021).

² In the introduction to his article “Homme (morale)” Charles-Georges Le Roy (*Encyclopédie*, vol. 8, 274) wrote that “this word has no. precise meaning except insofar as it reminds us of all that we are; but what we are do cannot be included in a definition” (“ce mot n’a de signification précise, qu’autant qu’il nous rappelle tout ce que nous sommes; mais ce que nous sommes no. peut pas être compris dans une définition”).

³ For a lexical analysis see Nicole Arnold and Annie Geffroy, “Les femmes de l’*Encyclopédie* font-elles partie du genre humain?”, *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie*, 31-32 (April 2002), ht ps://doi.org/10.4000/rde.126.

⁴ Paul Joseph Barthez, “Femme” in *Encyclopédie*, vol. 6, 469.

⁵ Mallet, “Femme”, 469.

⁶ Pierre Guyomar, *Le partisan de l'égalité politique entre les individus ou problème très important de l'égalité en droits et de l'inégalité en fait* (Paris: De l'imprimerie nationale, [1793]).

⁷ Guyomar, *Le partisan de l'égalité politique*, 6.

on behalf of the committee for the analysis of the draft Constitution, claimed the enjoyment of political rights for “any human of either sex” (“tout homme de l’un et de l’autre sexe”).¹

Olympe de Gouges, whose studies are spreading over the last few years,² was, however, neither the first nor the only person to denounce the limits of the Revolution in terms of the recognition of rights: Marie-Madeleine Jodin,³ Mary Wollstonecraft,⁴ Etta Palm d’Aelders,⁵ Madame de Cambis⁶ and naturally Nicolas de Condorcet,⁷ albeit from different perspectives and angles, also claimed that the moment had come to recognize the imprescriptible rights of women. In an analogous way, political writings as the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* on which most of the recent historiography has focused,⁸

¹ Gilbert Romme, “Exposé des différents projets de déclaration des droits lu dans la séance du 17 avril 1793”, *Archives parlementaires de 1789 à 1860: recueil complet des débats législatifs & politiques des Chambres françaises* (Paris: Librairie administrative de P. Dupont, 1862), vol. 62, 263-269: 267.

² Carol L. Sherman, *Reading Olympe de Gouges* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Oliver Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges: des droits de la femme à la guillotine* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014); Michel Faucheux, *Olympe de Gouges* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018); Chiara Ravera, *Olympe de Gouges* (Roma: Elemento 15, 2019). Annamaria Loche, *La libertà ou la mort. Il progetto politico di Olympe de Gouges. Postfazione di Thomas Casadei* (Modena: Mucchi editore, 2021); Oliver Riž, “Le sacre retardé d’une écrivaine: Olympe de Gouges”, *La Révolution française* 20 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4000/lrf.5014>; Maricla Boggio, *Olympe de Gouges al tempo della Rivoluzione* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2021); Thomas Casadei and Lorenzo Milazzo, eds., *Un dialogo su Olympe de Gouges: donne, schiavitù, cittadinanza* (Pisa: ETS, 2021). For further information about Olympe de Gouges’s historiography see Valentina Altopiedi, “Olympe de Gouges: storia e storiografia dell’autrice della *Dichiarazione dei diritti della donna e della cittadina*”, *Lessico di Etica pubblica* 2 (2018): 72-81.

³ Marie-Madeleine Jodin, *Vues législatives pour les femmes adressées à l’Assemblée Nationale* (Angers: Chez Mame, 1790). For further information see Valentina Altopiedi, *Donne in Rivoluzione. Marie-Madeleine Jodin e i diritti della cittadina. Con l’edizione dei Pareri legislative per le donne indirizzati all’Assemblea nazionale* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2021); Valentina Altopiedi, “Da criminali a (quasi) cittadine: Marie-Madeleine Jodin e il caso delle *femmes publiques* nella Rivoluzione francese”, *Diciottesimo secolo* 6 (2021): 169-177, <https://doi.org/10.36253/ds-12727>.

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Johnson, 1792).

⁵ Etta Palm d’Aelders, *Appel aux Françaises sur la régénération des mœurs, et la nécessité de l’influence des femmes dans un gouvernement libre* (Paris: De l’Imprimerie du Cercle Social, 1791).

⁶ Madame Cambis, *Du sort actuel des femmes* (Paris: De l’Imprimerie du Cercle social, 1791).

⁷ Nicolas de Condorcet, *Lettres d’un bourgeois de New-Haven à un citoyen de Virginie, sur l’inutilité de partager le pouvoir législatif entre plusieurs corps*, 1788.

⁸ See Riž, “Le sacre retardé d’une écrivaine: Olympe de Gouges”.

were neither the only nor the principal means used to put forward and argue a claim to the rights of citizenship for women. On the long wave of the politicization of literature in the 18th century, the novels and plays of the revolutionary decade preserve the traces of a culture of emancipation which had to confront a historical practice of exclusion. Indeed, even though the Revolution had provided French female citizens with a language and specific practices for claiming rights,¹ studies on the history of literature have pointed out how, despite the now discredited theory of the mediocre quality and quantity of the literary production of the age of revolution, the novel continued to be one of the most widespread and successful literary genres above all for the French *femmes de lettres*. Taking advantage of an editorial market based on the reception by genre of novelistic literature, some female authors managed to attain considerable economic success and at the same time nurture a reflection on the female condition in revolutionary France.² In analysing the French translation³ of Jane Austen,⁴ Valéry Cossy has shown how, while in England female writing had “three pos-

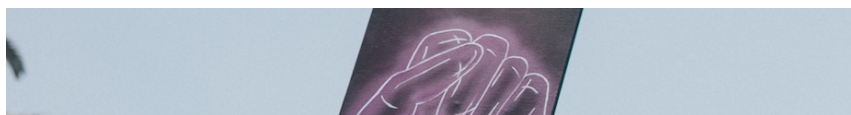
¹ Clyde Plumauzille and Guillaume Mazeau, “Penser avec le genre: trouble dans la citoyenneté révolutionnaire”, *La Révolution française* 9 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/lrf.1458>; C. Fauré, “Doléances, déclarations et pétitions, trois formes de la parole publique des femmes sous la Révolution”, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 344 (2006): 5-25, 6.

² For further information see Erica Joy Mannucci, *Baionette nel focolare. La Rivoluzione francese e la ragione delle donne* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016); Jean-Marie Roulin and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin, *Fictions de la Révolution* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017); Huguette Krief, *Entre terreur et vertu: et la fiction se fit politique (1789-1800)* (Paris: Champion éditeur, 2010); Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment. How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001); Carla Hesse, “Reading Signatures: Female Authorship and Revolutionary Law in France, 1750-1850”, *Eighteenth Century Studies* 22, no. 3 (1989): 469-487; Carla Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris (1789-1810)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

³ Concerning the theme of translation, authentic “tools of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism” (László Kontler, “What is the (Historians’) Enlightenment Today?”, *European Review of History* 13, no. 3 [2006]: 357-371), see Shelly Charles, “Réécritures féminines du patrimoine romanesque au tournant des Lumières”, in *La tradition des romans de femmes XVIII^e-XIX^e*, ed. by Catherine Mariette-Clot and Damien Zanone (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012); Stefanie Stockhorst, ed., *Cultural Transfer through Translation* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2010); and issue 12 published in 2017 of the journal *La Révolution Française*, edited by Patrice Bret and Jean-Luc Chappey, entitled “Pratiques et enjeux scientifiques, intellectuels et politiques de la traduction (vers 1660-vers 1840)”.

⁴ Valérie Cossy, *Jane Austen (1775-1817), Isabelle de Montlieu (1751-1832): autorité, identité et légitimité de la romancière en France et en Angleterre au tournant du dix-neuvième siècle*, in *La tradition des romans des femmes*, ed. by Catherine Mariette-Clot and Damien Zanone, 91-203 (Paris: Champion, 2012).

sible positions: from ‘feminine’ conformism to the subversive ‘feminist’, and the definition of a specific ‘female’ identity content” (“trois positionnements possible: du conformisme ‘feminine’ au subversive ‘feminist’ en passant par la définition d’un contenu identitaire spécifique ‘female’”)¹, in France there were no other roads apart from the binary division of male writing as opposed to female writing. Moreover, through a detailed analysis of the reviews published in the periodical press, Catriona Seth² has shown that the French editorial marked always privileged the sex of the author compared to the literary genre of the text, in the case of a work written by a woman.



Political literature certainly played an important role—above all in the period around the taking of the Bastille—in the discussion of the limits of the Revolution and the claiming of rights for French female citizens: indeed, there was no lack of female *cahiers de doléances*³ and petitions addressed to the French Assemblies asking for political freedom and equality of rights to be common to both sexes. This is demonstrated by the case of Etta Palm⁴, who led a delegation of women to the legislative Assembly on April 1st 1792 to ask

1st that the National Assembly grant girls a moral and national education; 2nd, that they be declared of age when they are 21 years old; 3rd that political freedom and equality of rights be common to both sexes; 4th that divorce be decreed. [1^o que l’Assemblée nationale accorde une éducation morale et nationale aux filles; 2^o qu’elles soient déclarées

¹ Cossy, *Jane Austen (1775-1817), Isabelle de Montlieu (1751-1832)*, 199.

² Catriona Seth, *366 jours de la vie de femmes auteurs: les romancières de 1800*, in *La tradition des romans de femmes*, ed. by Catherine Mariette-Clot and Damien Zanone, 205-220.

³ Paule-Marie Duhet, 1789. *Cahiers de doléances des femmes et autres textes* (Paris: Des femmes, 1981). For further information see Philippe Grateau, *Les cahiers de doléances, une relecture culturelle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires des Rennes, 2004); Pierre Serna, *Que demande le peuple? Les cahiers de doléances de 1789. Manuscrits inédits* (Paris: Les Éditions Textuel, 2019).

⁴ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860. Recueil complet des débats législatives et politiques des chambres françaises* (Paris: Imprimerie et librairie administratives Paul Dupont, 1893), vol. 41: 63.

majeures à 21 ans; 3° que la liberté politique et l'égalité des droits soient communes aux deux sexes; 4° que le divorce soit décrété.]]¹

However, novelistic literature, and sentimental novels in particular, represented a particularly apt way of reflecting on the female condition: besides responding to the characteristics of a genre which was considered to be eminently female, like the theatre, it enjoyed a greater spread and circulation.



1. A theatre of rights: Olympe de Gouges against prejudices and social injustices

The most recent historiography has clearly shown the role played by the theatre in the acclimatization and circulation of the language of rights. While Hunt has shown how the invention of human rights was determined in the 18th century by the spread of empathy thanks to plays and novels on love and marriage, so “each in their way reinforced the notion of a community based on autonomous, empathetic individuals who could relate beyond their immediate families, religious affiliations, or even nations to greater universal values”;² Ferrone, considering the Enlightenment the authentic inventor and promoter of the political language of the moderns, thoroughly illustrated the theme of the staging of rights during the *Ancien Régime* in France.³

Olympe de Gouges as a writer was particularly conscious of the politicization of literature and its role in the struggle for the universalization of rights. The playwright, a member of the *Société des amis des noirs* created by Jacques Pierre

¹ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, vol. 41, 63.

² Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights. A History*, 32.

³ Ferrone, *Storia dei diritti dell'uomo*, 359-415.

Brissot in Paris in 1788, and the author of the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, used her plays and her short stories to support the battle for the recognition of rights in those men and women who had been excluded from the French Constitution of 1791. The contested play *Zamore et Mirza ou l'esclavage des noirs*¹ is an example of the 18th-century politicization of literature and clearly shows the commitment of de Gouges in the battle against social injustices in supporting the rights of minorities. Among Brissot's personal papers, deposited in the national Archives in Paris, it is by no chance that we find an unprinted praise of the work and the playwright, who is recognized first of all for having consecrated her first literary endeavours "to those wretched people whom with all our efforts we were unable to wrest from slavery [aux malheureux que tous nous efforts no. pouvaient arracher à l'esclavage]"² and, in the second place, for having known how to attract the attention of the French public to the theme by creating a touching portrayal of the condition of those who lived in the colonies.

Zamore et Mirza, written in the first half of the 1780s, was performed by the *Comédie française* between December 1789 and January 1790. The three performances were so unsuccessful, however, that according to the regulations of the Parisian theatre, de Gouges lost all her rights over the play. In a memoir in her defence which she printed at her own expense,³ however, de Gouges complained and denounced the attempts that had been made to sabotage her work by the actors, financed, she claimed, by those who had become rich thanks precisely to their exploitation of the coloured populations of the colonies, who saw the anti-slavery *pièce* as a dangerous precedent. In the introduction to the play, entitled *Réflexions sur les hommes nègres*, de Gouges explained the reasons that had convinced her to tackle the subject. When she had discovered the condition of the black women and men in the French colonies she understood that "it was force and prejudice that had condemned them to that horrific slavery, that Nature had no part in it, and that the unjust and powerful interest of the Whites had done it all [c'était la force et le préjugé qui les avaient condamnés

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Zamore et Mirza, ou l'heureux naufrage, drame indien en trois actes et en prose*, in *Œuvres*, vol. 3, 23-99 (Paris: Cailleau, 1788). It was republished in 1792 with some changes, under the title *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'Heureux naufrage*.

² ANF 446 AP-15, folio 15.

³ *Mémoire pour madame de Gouges contre la Comédie-Française* (s.l.: s.n., 1790).

à cet horrible esclavage, que la Nature n'y avait aucune part, et que l'injuste et puissant intérêt des Blancs avait tout fait]".¹ For this reason, she had taken sides against slavery, and she had approached the *Société des Amis des Noirs*.

A trade in men!... Great God! And Nature does not tremble! If they are animals, are we not like them? And how do the Whites differ from this species? It is in the colour (...) The colour of man is varied, just as in all the animals that Nature has produced, just like the plants and the minerals. Why does the day not contest the night, the sun the moon, and the stars the firmament? Everything is varied, and that is the beauty of Nature. Why, then, must we destroy her Work? [Un commerce d'hommes! Grand Dieu! et la Nature no. frémit pas! S'ils sont des animaux, no. le sommes-nous pas comme eux? Et en quoi les Blancs diffèrent-ils de cette espèce? C'est dans la couleur (...) La couleur de l'homme est nuancée, comme dans tous les animaux que la Nature a produit, ainsi que les plantes et les minéraux. Pourquoi le jour no. le dispute-t-il pas à la nuit, le soleil à la lune, et les étoiles au firmament? Tout est varié, et c'est là la beauté de la Nature. Pourquoi donc détruire son Ouvrage?]²

The work portrayed a couple of slaves in flight for having killed, in an extreme attempt at self-defence, the overseer of the owner who had tried to rape the young Mirza. The play ends with the acquittal of the couple from all accusations and the emancipation of all the slaves of the island. To justify her work, which was loudly booed at the *Comédie française*, de Gouges published a writing to clarify her position and the terms of her political battle. The text, entitled *Réponse au Champion américain ou Colon très aisé à connaître*³ attempted to respond to the accusations published in the *Moniteur* against the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, suspected of having used a woman to provoke the colonists. From the accounts of the time, we know that the public of the gallery of the *Comédie française* had violently contested the play, in which a black slave, guilty of having killed a Frenchman, was granted a pardon by the governor (the *Code noir*, which regulated life in the French colonies, stipulated the death penalty for any slave that had so much as wounded their owner⁴). De Gouges declared

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Réflexions sur les hommes nègres*, in *Œuvres*, vol. 3 (Paris: Cailleau, 1788), 92.

² de Gouges, *Réflexions sur les hommes nègres*, 93-94.

³ Olympe de Gouges, *Réponse au Champion américain ou Colon très aisé à connaître* (Paris, 1790).

⁴ For further information see Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: the Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002); Patrizia Delpiano, *La schiavitù in*

her paternity, or rather maternity, of the work and explained that she had been animated by the desire to do away with “le despotisme”¹ that had not been toppled along with the walls of the Bastille. Faced with the accusations of those who saw her work as an invitation “to have the American colonists’ throats slit [à faire égorger en Amérique les colons]”,² de Gouges proclaimed herself an “apostle of a sweet freedom [apôtre d’une douce liberté]”:³ “without knowing the history of America, this hateful slave trade of the blacks has always aroused my spirits, whipped up my indignation [sans connaitre l’histoire de l’Amérique, cette odieuse traite des negres a toujours soulevé mon âme, excité mon indignation]”.⁴ She claimed, therefore, that her work was not a beacon of discord, but rather a soothing balm for “black men, expecting from the Colonists and the French Nation the abolition of the slave trade, and a better fate [les hommes noirs, en attendant des Colons et de la Nation française l’abolition de la traite, et un sort plus heureux]”.⁵ For de Gouges, indeed, in accordance with the programme of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, the slaves should have been able to expect to be granted progressive emancipation by the national Assembly; it is not surprising, therefore, that she harshly condemned the violence against the colonists in the aftermath of the Santo Domingo uprising, which is why she is particularly opposed today by a section of postcolonial studies.

The aim of Olympe de Gouges’s play was to arouse French public opinion regarding the unhappy fate of humanity in chains. As Sophie Mousset has pointed out: “it was important and urgent to take a stand against the black slave trade and to portray slaves whose pure feelings, generosity, and righteousness would strike people [il était importante et urgent de prendre position contre la traite des Noirs et de mettre en scène des esclaves dont la pureté des sentiments, la générosité et la droiture devaient frapper les esprits]”.⁶ And it was precisely in order to increase its mimetic and empathic effect that she asked the actors of

età moderna (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009).

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Réponse au Champion américain*, 3.

² de Gouges, *Réponse au Champion américain*, 4.

³ de Gouges, *Réponse au Champion américain*, 4.

⁴ de Gouges, *Réponse au Champion américain*, 5.

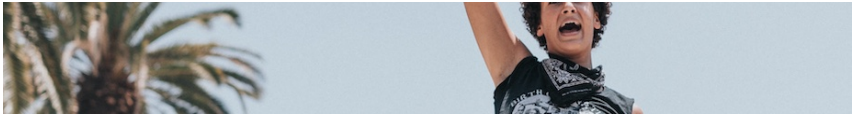
⁵ de Gouges, *Réponse au Champion américain*, 8.

⁶ Sophie Mousset, “Contre toute forme d’oppression”, in Olympe de Gouges, *Zamore et Mirza ou L’esclavage des Noirs* (Paris: Librio, 2007), 10.

the *Comédie française* to paint their faces black. She had, in fact, written in the introduction:

I hope that the performance of this play will produce the effect that one should expect in favour of these victims of ambition. The costume adds half to the interest of this play. It will move the pen and the hearts of our best writers. [j'espère que la représentation de ce drame produira l'effet qu'on en doit attendre en faveur de ces victimes de l'ambition. Le costume ajoute de moitié à l'intérêt de cette pièce. Elle émouvra la plume et le cœur de nos meilleurs écrivains.]¹

Fully aware of the role that the theatre could play in the political and cultural battle of the 18th century,² Olympe de Gouges used this channel to promote the rights of woman and the female citizen. While *Zamore et Mizra* shows that she was close to the party of Brissot and part of the late French Enlightenment, most of the other plays, except for those of political news—such as *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées*; *Les Aristocrates, ou les curieux du Champ de Mars*; *La France sauvée ou le Tyran détrôné*—focus on representing and reflecting on the condition of women in France.



2. Women on stage: 'Molière chez Ninon' and 'La nécessité du divorce'

In agreement with Diderot on theatre as a way to stir the minds and educate to virtue, Olympe de Gouges strenuously defended its “regenerative” function for society. In *Le bonheur primitif de l'homme*, a work of Rousseauian inspiration

¹ de Gouges, *Réflexions sur les hommes nègres*, 97.

² For further information, see Gerardo Tocchini, *Arte e politica nella cultura dei Lumi. Diderot, Rousseau e la critica dell'antico regime artistico* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2016).

from which the opening quote was taken, the playwright presented her project for the regeneration of France through the formation of a “second French theatre or National Theatre [second théâtre français ou Théâtre National]”¹.

The purpose of this new theatre was to “preserve the arts, and repress the excess of luxury; ruthlessly abolish half of the spectacles raising one which can purify morals, make prejudice disappear, and become the source of noble emulation and the utility of society [conserver les arts, et réprimer l’excès du luxe; abolir impitoyablement la moitié des spectacles en élever un qui puisse épurer les mœurs, faire disparaître le préjugé, et devenir la source d’une noble émulation et l’utilité de la Société]”.² In particular, de Gouges theorized the predominance of women in the composition of the works of this second type of theatre, which would coexist and then replace the official one of the *Comédie française*:

Women, for example, although I am interested in the proposal, should they not receive some marks of encouragement, when merit and honor elevate their sex? Do not women make up half of the society? And unfortunately their lack of emulation contributes to the loss of the other half. [Les femmes, par exemple, quoique je sois intéressée dans la proposition, no. devroient elles pas recevoir quelques marques d’encouragement, quand le mérite et l’honneur élèvent leur sexe? Les femmes ne forment-elles pas la moitié de la Société? Et malheureusement leur peu d’émulation contribue à la perte de l’autre moitié.]³

De Gouges concluded her project hoping that no. one would fight a plan that would not only elevate the customs of all French but also contain the hope of “being able one day to elevate the soul, the heart, the spirit of all women, and put them in a position to obtain again what they have lost since this noble chivalry [pouvoir un jour élever l’âme, le cœur, l’esprit de toutes les femmes, et les mettre à même d’obtenir de nouveau ce qu’elles ont perdu depuis cette noble chevalerie]”.⁴ In a note she addressed to the editors of the *Journal de Paris*, she asked them why they refrained from reporting in the newspaper the publication of her volume containing the play which has caused another clash with the

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Le bonheur primitif de l’homme* (Paris: Chez Bailly, 1789), 72.

² de Gouges, *Le bonheur primitif de l’homme*, 69.

³ de Gouges, *Le bonheur primitif de l’homme*, 68.

⁴ de Gouges, *Le bonheur primitif de l’homme*, 80.

Comédie française's actors, *Molière chez Ninon*, a particularly evocative play in promoting the representation of women as subjects bearing rights.

*Molière chez Ninon ou le siècle des grands hommes*¹ represents the famous 17th-century female poet and courtesan Ninon de Lenclos. In this work too, just as in *Zamore et Mirza*, de Gouges combats "the power and the prejudice of society [la force et le prejudice de la société]", but in this case against intellectual women. Unlike what the title might suggest, the protagonist of the play is in fact Ninon, and Molière is just her simple confidant, as the actors of the *Comédie française* quickly and provocatively pointed out, refusing to act in the work.² The play was never staged in a theatre, but it was published as a printed work in 1788. The intelligence, kindness, and courage, but also the weakness of the woman are the common thread running through the play, which celebrates Ninon de Lenclos as a female model. It was Molière himself who invited the women of France to imitate her:

what greatness of soul! What spirit! What delicacy! Ah! women who guard against her: learn to imitate her, and you will raise yourselves. What a model to follow! Her weaknesses, her mistakes, bring out even more her great and sublime qualities. [quelle grandeur d'âme! quel esprit! quelle délicatesse! ah! femmes qui vous gendarmez contre elle; apprenez à l'imiter, et vous vous élèverez. Quel modèle à suivre! Ses faiblesses, ses erreurs, font ressortir davantage ses grandes et sublimes qualités.]³

In fact, the play in 5 acts relies entirely on the contrast between the prejudices regarding Ninon de Lenclos, behind which it is not difficult to recognize the profile of a free woman dedicated to writing like Olympe de Gouges and the true identity of the poet. The character of Ninon de Lenclos represented by Olympe de Gouges is a woman faithful to her promises, careful in managing her assets and witty in responding to the constant provocations that men of dubious esteem address her. The praise of the woman is in fact constructed by characters from different classes who, knowing the true qualities of the courtesan, blame the negative judgment of French society; first of all the maid Mademoiselle Le

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon ou le siècle des grands hommes* (Paris: Chez Cailleau, 1788).

² Un auteur de la Comédie Française avait dit "je suis indigné de voir que l'Auteur ait pu s'oublier jusqu'à faire du grand Molière le Confidant de Ninon; et si j'ai quelque conseil à lui donner, c'est de renoncer à cette pièce, et de no. la montrer à personne", in de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 198.

³ de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 131.

Roi who warns a woman's lover that "Mademoiselle Ninon de Lenclos not only knows how to make herself respected by all those who know her, but also by her people, an art very difficult to grasp, but even more so to practice [Mademoiselle Ninon de Lenclos sait non seulement se faire respecter de tous ceux qui la connoissent, mais encore de ses gens, art très difficile à saisir, mais plus encore à exercer]".¹ The woman is then praised by Molière, who turns to her "enlightened genius [génie éclairé]" and "delicate taste [gout délicat]"² to paint the character of the *Misanthrope in love* that he intends to stage; finally, she is greeted by Queen Christina of Sweden who amazed by Ninon's intelligence and in admiration of "the qualities that put you above your sex [le qualités qui vous mettent au-dessus de votre sexe]"³ asks the woman to accompany her on her journey to Rome.

The lead story is accompanied by a second one, always destined to mark the fate of Ninon de Lenclos. In fact, a young girl named Olimpe arrives at her home and asks Molière to be admitted to his theatre company because she intends to ruin her own reputation in order to escape the marriage arranged by her father. Ninon agrees to hide the girl but at the same time asks Molière to arrange a meeting with the girl's father to convince him not to hinder the wishes of her daughter, condemning her to an unhappy life. The play ends with an unexpected acknowledgment that not only allows the young Olimpe to marry her beloved man, who turns out to be the unexpected son of Ninon de Lenclos, but also to bring to the scene themes which were both particularly dear to de Gouges and significant for 18th-century society, such as the harsh criticism of arranged marriages and the abolition of the differences between the rights of legitimate and illegitimate children (we must not forget that de Gouges herself claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of the marquis Lefranc de Pompignan). Ninon de Lenclos arguing with Olimpe's father, who refuses to accept that his daughter marries a natural child, weaves a heartfelt praise of education against the privileges of birth: "what are birth and titles to the man who does not uphold their honor? The first man in society is the estimable man who has no other principles than those of well-born souls, and whose sentiment and education

¹ de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 9.

² de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 19.

³ de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 143.

have raised above the vulgar [que sont la naissance et les titres à l'homme qui n'en soutient pas l'honneur? Le premier homme dans la société est l'homme estimable qui n'a d'autres principes que ceux des âmes bien nées, et que le sentiment et l'éducation ont élevé au-dessus du vulgaire]".¹ At the end the character of Ninon de Lenclos defends the rights of natural children in the same way Olympe de Gouges was doing in her political writings: "a natural son! hey! What does it matter, sir, if this young man has honor, distinguished feelings. Is he not a man; does he not have rights to public esteem if he deserves it? [un fils naturel! eh! qu'importe, Monsieur, si ce jeune homme a de l'honneur, des sentimens distingués. N'est-il pas un homme; n'a-t-il pas des droits à l'estime public s'il la merite?]"²



A theme very connected to the rights of natural children and very present in the reflection of de Gouges and revolutionary pamphletism is divorce, to which the playwright dedicates a play in three acts, never performed or published, *La nécessité du divorce*. The goal of the play composed in 1790, as the title suggests, is to demonstrate the need to institute divorce. The first act, which opens with the representation of the evident marital crisis of Azinval's family, contains a very harsh invective against the indissolubility of marriage. Indeed, it is up to the character of Rosambert, an old bachelor who prevents his nephew from marrying his beloved woman, to demonstrate how the indissolubility clause is contrary to the most elementary laws of nature and common sense and always ends up transforming a happy bond into a heavy burden to bear:

You are both in good faith, but if you happen to marry by misfortune, you will end up hating each other cordially, I tell you that. In love, the woman is an angel, in the household, she is a devil. The lover obeys and the husband commands. Monsieur takes

¹ de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 172-173.

² de Gouges, *Molière chez Ninon*, 184-185.

to the right, Madame gives to the left, hence the disunity of spouses, the poor education of children, the ruin of families and the corruption of society.[Vous êtes de bonne foi tous deux, mais si vous veniez par malheur à vous marier, vous finirez par vous détester cordialement, c'est moi qui vous le dis. En amour, la femme est un ange, en ménage, c'est un diable. L'amoureux obéit et le mari commande. Monsieur prend à droite, Madame donne à gauche, de là la désunion des époux, la mauvaise éducation des enfants, la ruine des familles et la corruption de la société.]¹

The Revolution, however, marks a turning point for Rosambert himself, who clearly expresses Olympe de Gouges' point of view; the old bachelor, in fact, hopes that the legislators will introduce divorce since only by breaking the chains of an indissoluble bond they will contribute to both the restoration of morals and the multiplication of solid and fertile unions.

By means of divorce, Monsieur l'Abbé, you place an innumerable crowd of celibates in a position to marry. They are reluctant only out of fear of an eternal marriage. A large number of marriages, by making girls rarer, will make it more difficult for libertines to seek them illicitly. By means of divorce you fertilize marriages by making them more numerous, because they will be less troubled by celibates whose number will be diminished, and, because of the status of married persons depending on their conduct, they will necessarily become more circumspect. By means of divorce, finally, you take advantage of vice itself and you avenge oppressed virtue without using the means of force. The households which currently live in a *de facto* divorce and they are stricken with sterility become fertile again by the reversal of the parties that this change will bring about.

Par le moyen du divorce, Monsieur l'Abbé, vous mettez une foule innombrable de célibataires dans le cas de se marier. Ils ne sont réticents que par la crainte d'un mariage éternel. Un grand nombre de mariages, en rendant les filles plus rares, rendra plus difficile la recherche illicite qu'en font les libertins. Par le moyen du divorce vous fécondez les mariages en les rendant plus nombreux, parce qu'ils seront moins troublés par les célibataires dont le nombre sera diminué, et parce que l'état des personnes mariées dépendant de leur conduite, elles en deviendront nécessairement plus circonspectes. Par le moyen du

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *La nécessité du divorce* in *Théâtre politique*, preface by Gisela Thiele-Knobloch (Paris: Côté Femmes Éditions, 1991), vol. 2, 151.

divorce, enfin, vous tirez parti du vice même et vous vengez la vertu opprimée sans employer les moyens de force. Les ménages qui actuellement vivent dans un divorce de fait et sont frappés de stérilité redeviennent féconds par le revirement des parties que ce changement opérera.¹

The arguments presented in the play by Rosambert contain with great effectiveness not only the political reflections of Olympe de Gouges but also a large part of the revolutionary treatises on the subject that demonstrated how the introduction of divorce would have led to a multiplication of unions, rather than a reduction. It is no coincidence that the play ends in a double marriage, the Azinval couple faced with the feared possibility of separation returns to celebrate its love while the surly Rosambert, who in the first act had vigorously denied his nephew to get married, agrees to the marriage.

As *Molière chez Ninon* staging the character of Ninon de Lenclos clearly showed the qualities and merit of an intellectual woman to whom even the master Molière would have turned for advice, *La nécessité du divorce* proposes a marriage based on equality and mutual forgiveness. The final lines marked by Rosambert states that:

Good luck, but never forget, my children, that sensitivity, gentleness, are the only means of maintaining peace and union in a state (...) that unfortunately we cannot change, that everyone has his moods and faults, and that mutual indulgence alone can produce perfect accord.[A la bonne heure, mais n'oubliez jamais, mes enfants, que la sensibilité, la douceur, sont les seuls moyens d'entretenir la paix et l'union dans un état...qu'on ne peut malheureusement pas changer, que chacun a ses humeurs et ses défauts, et qu'une indulgence mutuelle peut seul produire un accord parfait.]²

At the same time, it is not a work without contradictions: Philippe Corno³ underlined how de Gouges unknowingly reveals the prejudices of her time by portraying a patriarchal marriage that ends not by chance with the wife's for-

¹ de Gouges, *La nécessité du divorce*, 155.

² de Gouges, *La nécessité du divorce*, 181.

³ Philippe Corno, "Hommes et femmes face au divorce dans le théâtre révolutionnaire: une redéfinition de la différenciation sexuelle? L'exemple de *La Nécessité du divorce* D'Olympe de Gouges", in *Le genre face aux mutations: masculin et féminin, du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, ed. by Luc Capdevila, Martine Cocaud, Dominique Godineau, Sophie Cassagnes, François Rouquet and Jacqueline Sainclivier (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, Histoire, 2003), 223-232.

givenness for her husband. Certainly, as Corno himself highlighted, since *La nécessité du divorce* it is a play and not a political treatise, each character contains a part of the social universe from which it was created. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that a typical trait of female writing during the 18th century is the adoption of the male point of view to promote the reception of proposals improving the female condition, as studies have demonstrated in the case of divorce following the effective approval of the law in 1792.¹ Finally, it cannot be overlooked that this is a play that has never been performed and it has never been published. If the lack of a theatrical performance should not come as a surprise since de Gouges was in those years fighting a long battle with the main French theatres, the lack of publication by a prolific author precisely in the years in which the divorce request was moving many pens, could also mean that the author was not completely satisfied with her work.



3. Beyond the theatre: the strange case of the ‘Prince philosophe’

The most significant of Olympe de Gouges’s works for analysing the politicization of literature and the battle for rights through literature is the Oriental story *Le prince philosophe*.² While *Molière chez Ninon*, elaborated before the Revolution, reflects on the female condition through the individual case of the poet and the young Olimpe—the writer’s alter ego—who finds shelter with Ninon

¹ Roderick Phillips, *Family Breakdown in Late Eighteenth-Century France: divorces in Rouen, 1792-1803* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982); Grégoire Bigot, “Impératifs politiques du droit privé: le divorce ‘sur simple allégation d’incompatibilité d’humeur ou de caractère’ (1792-1804)”, *Clio@Themis, Revue électronique d’histoire du droit* 3 (2010).

² Olympe de Gouges, *Le prince philosophe, conte oriental*, 2 vols (Paris: Indigo, 1995 [1792]).

de Lenclos, *Le prince philosophe*, published in Paris in 1792, deals with the debate sparked by the Revolution on the political rights of women. Modelling it on Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, de Gouge describes the Oriental kingdom of Siam in order to speak the truth about the kingdom of France. To quote the most striking example, at the precise moment in which de Gouges took sides with Louis XVI against the trial in the Convention, putting herself forward to defend him and stating that there should be no other consequences than his deposition, in the story *Almodin*, after leaving his crown to his son, the philosopher prince goes back to living as a private citizen in the countryside, just as de Gouges requested Louis Capet should be allowed to do. But the work is significant above all for its reflection on the rights of women: queen Idamée, wife of the philosopher prince, wants to lift women from the state of idleness in which they find themselves, crushed under the weight of the law of the strongest. The queen expresses the wish that "in future centuries, their names be placed at the level of those of the greatest men; not only do I want them to cultivate letters and the arts, but for them to be suitable to take their places in the courts, in litigation, in the administration of matters of taste [dans les siècles futurs, on place leur nom au rang de ceux des plus grands hommes; non seulement je veux qu'elles cultivent les lettres, les arts, mais qu'elles soient propres encore à exercer des places dans les tribunaux, dans les affaires contentieuses, dans l'administration des affaires de goût]".¹ Persuaded by his wife of the usefulness of publicly employing women's capacities in all fields, and diminishing at the same time the power which they despotically exercised in secret (according to rhetoric typical of the 18th century, also criticised by Mary Wollstonecraft), the philosopher prince agrees to organize a public debate around three questions:

The first question was to know if we must give young ladies an education stronger than their constitution; the second was to decide whether women would have enough courage and strength of spirit to be inflexible and constant in their opinion; finally, the third, whether, at a certain turning point that women experience, such as when they become of marriageable age, or when they become mothers, they do not ask to be spared and if this sparing them is not incompatible with the duties that men are obliged to fulfil. [la première question était de savoir si l'on devait donner aux jeunes demoiselles une édu-

¹ de Gouges, *Le prince philosophe*, vol. 2, 10-11.

cation plus forte que leur constitution; la seconde état de décider si les femmes auraient assez de courage et de force d'esprit pour être inflexibles et constantes dans leur opinion; enfin la troisième, si, à certain révolution que les femmes éprouvent, comme quand elles deviennent nubiles, ou quand elles deviennent mères, elles ne demandent pas d'être ménagées et si ce ménagement n'est pas incompatible avec les devoirs que les hommes sont obligés de remplir.¹

The first question concerning the theme of education is won by a girl, who, educated with physical exercises from a very early age, beats her adversary. King Almondin is forced to admit that "l'éducation fait tout", but at the same time he states that it would be too dangerous to educate all girls like the little horsewoman. The second question concerning the courage and strength of spirit necessary in order to be inflexible and constant in one's opinion is discussed by two young people of 25: the contest is won this time by the young man. Chance dictates that a pair of lovers are chosen for the debate, and the girl is unable to resist the homage of the young man who loves her; it is recognized therefore that women are weaker than men in love. The third question, debated by a pair of elderly subjects, concerns women's independence of judgment: while the old man believes that "women, in their own words, are only well placed in their own homes [les femmes, en propres termes, ne sont bien placées que dans leur ménage]", as they do not have "either enough constancy, ability, or composure to conduct important affairs [ni assez de constance, ni de capacité, ni de sang-froid pour conduire des affaires majeures]",² his adversary denies women's incapacity stating on the contrary that female charm could serve as a precious advantage in diplomatic affairs.

At the end of the three trials, the king allows queen Idamée to establish an *académie des dames out les séances publiques de la reine* in order to judge the cases that involve women. He leaves Idamée the task of choosing the president, councillors, lawyers, and procurators. This is the only concession that the king allows, however, because the queen's plan fails with the queen herself, when she is discovered betraying her husband with a functionary of the kingdom. Many people have wondered why de Gouges made the plan fail because, in the

¹ de Gouges, *Le prince philosophe*, 16.

² de Gouges, *Le prince philosophe*, 21.

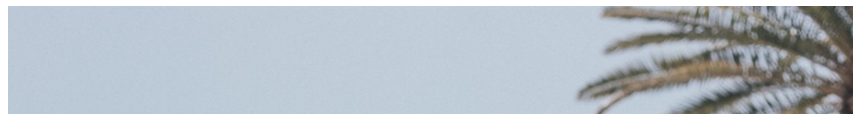
fiction of the story, it would have guaranteed the women of Siam the same opportunities as men: according to Huguette Krief¹ the triumph of passion over rationality, and hence the queen's betrayal, can be explained by the Oriental setting; but, more generally, we can maintain that it is the umpteenth confirmation of the negative effects of the exclusion of women from political power on the public, but also private, sphere. Queen Idamée ends up by betraying her husband because she has to exercise her power secretly and surreptitiously. In spite of the conclusion, it cannot be denied that de Gouges' goal in this work is to demonstrate that women can play a public role along with men and that they have the same rights of their husbands, fathers and brothers. In this regard we must not forget that the questions debated in the "battle between the sexes" portrayed by de Gouges (education, independence of judgement, sensibility) were central not only in the debate on the female condition of the 18th century but also particularly so in the revolutionary decade.

The fate of Queen Idamée, whose political contribution is nullified and forgotten by the prevalence of the private dimension over the public one, ends up actually predicting the destiny of Olympe de Gouges. She was condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal in November 1793 and she was portrayed by the periodical press as a dissolute woman, a virago, who, forgetting "the virtues that befitted her sex [les vertus qui conviennent à son sexe]" had tried "to be a statesman [être homme d'état]"² and had met her just punishment. While the *Feuille du salut public*, the organ of the Committee for Public Health, called the Republican women of France to their duty to love and teach "the laws that remind your husbands and your children of the exercise of their rights [les lois qui rappellent vos époux et vos enfans à l'exercice de leurs droits]", Olympe de Gouges fell into historiographical oblivion from which she was not saved until the second half of the 20th century by the development of Western feminist movements, which appreciated above all her political and intellectual coherence, epitomized by her death on the scaffold. But Olympe de Gouges, as we have seen, was above all a daughter of the Enlightenment, aware of the eminent role that literature and theatrical production could play in the spread and

¹ Huguette Krief, *Vivre libre et écrire. Anthologie des romancières de la période révolutionnaire (1789-1800)* (Oxford-Paris: Voltaire Foundation-PUPS, 2005).

² *Feuille du salut public*, no. 139, 17 November 1793, 3.

acclimatization of the language of rights, to which she contributed personally by adding to her pamphlets and brochures plays and stories which addressed a wide and heterogeneous public.



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