

Olympe de Gouges: More than a Proto-Feminist

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Olympe de Gouges is best known today as a spokeswoman for the rights of women in revolutionary France, a cause she championed in her famous 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. She was executed in 1793 by the order of the Tribunal of the National Convention, and feminists in nineteenth and twentieth century France saw her as a martyr for their cause. They took up the phrase from her *Declaration* “woman has the right to mount the scaffold, so she should have the right equally to mount the rostrum” as a slogan for their movement.¹ But to remember de Gouges exclusively for her *Declaration of the Rights of Women* or exclusively as a defender of the women’s rights is insufficient. She was in fact not merely an early feminist, but also an active participant in the social and political discourse of the French Revolution who expressed her views in public speeches, pamphlets and plays. She was a productive playwright, drafting over forty plays, most of which were political in nature and addressed controversial topics.² She called for the abolition of slavery, was a proponent of rights for illegitimate children, advocated legalizing divorce, and crafted plays against severe punishment for people in debt and monastic vows.³

De Gouges’ ideas are not always clearly expressed in her writings, and her vaguely conveyed beliefs often contradict each other. For instance, her earlier plays and pamphlets demonstrate her loyalty to the throne and her later works display respect for

¹ Joan Scott, "The Uses of Imagination: Olympe de Gouges in the French Revolution," in *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 55.

² Gabrielle Verdier, "From Reform to Revolution: The Social Theatre of Olympe de Gouges," in *Literate women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine Montfort-Howard (Birmingham: Summa Publications Inc., 1994), 191.

³ Verdier, "From Reform to Revolution," 191

revolutionary proceedings and participants.⁴ A predominant theme of all of de Gouges' writings is her belief that nature provides mankind with all the wisdom and morality it needs to establish just laws. She calls for the establishment of laws that coincide with the principles of nature and warns against actions that she deems to be abuses against the natural order, such as the subjugation of women and slaves.

Olympe de Gouges was given the name Marie Gouzes at the time of her birth around 1748, but changed her name to Olympe de Gouges after she was widowed.⁵ According to Joan Scott, who has written extensively on de Gouges, many of the basic facts of de Gouges' life are ambiguous; details such as the number of children she had, the identities and professions of her husband and father, and even the year of her birth remain elusive to scholars. Scott argues that these facts are unknown in part because of the vibrant imagination that de Gouges possessed and used to form her own identity.⁶ She contends that de Gouges made contradictory claims about herself at different times in her life and suggests that the facts of de Gouges' life are not as significant as the way she represented herself in her writings and what this representation said about the way de Gouges wanted to be perceived.⁷

According to Scott, de Gouges created an identity for herself that was at once neither feminine nor masculine and both feminine and masculine, one that combined elements of historical, philosophical, and mythical figures such as Joan of Arc, Cassandra,

⁴ Verdier, "From Reform to Revolution," 191

⁵ Scott, "The Uses of Imagination," 21.

⁶ Scott, "The Uses of Imagination," 21.

⁷ Scott, "The Uses of Imagination," 22-23.

and Rousseau.⁸ While the question of her identity and the role her imagination played in forming that identity is an interesting one, de Gouges' character is perhaps less important than her plays and pamphlets themselves. An evaluation of her works and the way they were received is perhaps a more relevant, though less creative endeavor than trying to untangle her identity from a jumbled mass of contradictory ideas she put forward about herself. Even Scott notes that de Gouges chose writing as a medium (in fact, she dictated her works to a secretary) because of its permanence.⁹ Though the men who arrested de Gouges found and likely destroyed some forty of de Gouges' unpublished manuscripts, several of her pamphlets and twelve of her plays survive today.¹⁰ Unfortunately, few of her works are readily available in English translation, but luckily her controversial abolitionist play has been translated.

De Gouges is more frequently remembered for her defense of women than for her outspokenness for the abolition of slavery, but she wrote and produced a highly controversial play on the subject. Though she had never been to the Americas, de Gouges asserted that the play was "a faithful tableau of the current situation in America,"¹¹ a situation which she judged to be dire and wrought with brutality. De Gouges' play, *The Slavery of the Blacks, or the Happy Shipwreck*, was written in 1783, published in 1786, and performed in December 1789 and January 1790.¹² According to Edward Seeber, the play was altered between its original drafting and its performance in

⁸ Scott, "The Uses of Imagination," 22-23.

⁹ Scott, "The Uses of Imagination," 36.

¹⁰ Verdier, "From Reform to Revolution," 191.

¹¹ Olympe de Gouges, 1792 Preface to *Black Slavery or The Happy Shipwreck*, trans. Maryann DeJulio, accessed 6 April, 2011, http://www.uga.edu/slavery/texts/literary_works/black_slavery.pdf.

¹² Verdier, "From Reform to Revolution," 190.

late 1789. He writes that the play became more blatantly anti-slavery in its later form, with the introduction of distinctly ‘black,’ rather than ‘Indian’ characters and the transformation of the title from *Zamore et Mirza, ou l’heureux Naufrage* to *L’esclavage des noirs, ou l’heureux Naufrage*.¹³ The play was somewhat contentious: performance of *Black Slavery* was halted after angry planters complained about its content.¹⁴

De Gouges was forced to defend her provocative play against those who thought it might cause uprisings or undermine the institution of slavery in the Caribbean. She wrote a response to a critic two weeks after the Comédie Française ceased performing it in January 1790, and again defended her work in a preface she added to the play in 1792. While both documents profess to seek to justify her play, the two have distinctly different flavors. In the first, de Gouges declares her love for France and the king, and explains that her play is not radical or incendiary. The loyalty she declared toward the king in her 1790 response is notably absent from the 1792 preface. In the preface of 1792, she is forced to address the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue and attempts to distance herself from the violent uprising.

In de Gouges’ 1790 “Response to the American Champion or a Well-Known Colonist,” de Gouges explains that her play is not radical; indeed, she claims that those who oppose her work (this play and her other writings) are extremists. She says that the play is not meant to instigate rebellion, but that it is meant merely to highlight the difficult circumstances under which the slaves live. De Gouges calls for the *eventual* abolition of the slave trade, but she claims that her play simply asks for better treatment

¹³ Edward Seeber, *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Lenox Hill, 1971), 178.

¹⁴ Scott, “The Uses of Imagination,” 30.

of the slaves. She also refutes the assertion that slaves will be inspired to revolt because of her play, in fact, she professes that it will encourage the opposite mentality among the slaves: “By even performing it in America, it will always bring the black man back to his duty.”¹⁵

De Gouges vehemently professes her loyalty to France and the king: “[b]eing truly French, I idolize my homeland; I have sacrificed everything for it.; I hold it as dear as I hold my king, and I would spill my blood to give back to it all that its virtue and its paternal tenderness deserve.”¹⁶ She felt compelled to defend her stance as a true French loyalist and staunch monarchist. Her use of such intensely patriotic language in defense of her play serves to tie the message of her play to her loyalty to France and the king. To de Gouges, her desire for better treatment of slaves and the ultimate abolition of the slave trade was not incompatible with her devotion to France and the king.

In her 1792 preface, she does not proclaim a love of country and king, but criticizes the colonists and then directs her language toward the slaves, whom she chastises for using violence. She calls the colonists “wretches,” and writes that their behavior is “inhuman.”¹⁷ After rebuking the colonists, de Gouges addresses the slaves directly, deploring their use of violence as a despicable imitation of their tyrannical masters. She writes that this violence justifies their enslavement, or at least, their enchainment: “[y]ou justify tyrants when you imitate them. Most of your Masters were humane and charitable, and in your blind rage you do not distinguish between innocent

¹⁵ Olympe de Gouges, “Response to the American Champion or a Well-Known Colonist,” on *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, accessed April 6, 2011, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/344/>.

¹⁶ de Gouges, “Response”

¹⁷ de Gouges, *Preface of 1792*

victims and your persecutors. Men were not born in irons, and now you prove them necessary.”¹⁸

The preface is rich with De Gouges’ unique thoughts about what laws ought to be in place and the events taking place within France, but her voice is self-contradictory. She simultaneously says that all men must follow the laws that spring forth from ‘Nature,’ that these laws declare the fraternity and equality of all men, and that the slaves are closer to ‘Nature’ than the Europeans.¹⁹ How can men all be equal brothers if some of them are closer to nature than others? She goes on to say that *truly* enlightened men, who “have regards for all men,”²⁰ have given the blacks rights by removing them from a land in which they did not possess any. This is, without a doubt, an unfitting statement to make in a preface to a play that displays the extreme lack of rights of the slaves in the Americas, but it could be justified by the fact that the governor of the slave colony in her play is a benevolent one who has generously educated the slave Zamor.

De Gouges’ play does not criticize slave masters directly as much as it deplors the stewards who work beneath them and the colonists on the island. The kindly governor doesn’t want to order Zamor’s execution, but feels obligated to only because the other colonists and demand it. Similarly, one of de Gouge’s characters criticizes ministers and courtiers, but does not disapprove of the king. In this passage, she draws a parallel between the slavery under which the blacks toil and the conditions under which the French people live:

¹⁸ de Gouges, *Preface of 1792*

¹⁹ de Gouges, *Preface of 1792*

²⁰ de Gouges, *Preface of 1792*

We are free in semblance, but our irons are only the heavier. For several centuries the French have been groaning under the despotism of Ministers and Courtiers. The power of a single Master is in the hands of a thousand Tyrants who trample the People underfoot. This People will one day break its irons and, resuming all its rights under Natural Law, it will teach these Tyrants what the union of a people too long oppressed and enlightened by a sound philosophy can do.²¹

This passage suggests that de Gouges believes that the enlightenment of the French people will lead them to liberty. By 1792, when she wrote her Preface to the play, de Gouges had lost some of her faith in the power of enlightenment. In it, she makes a somewhat sketchy distinction between those who are genuinely interested in granting equality to all and those who aggressively use egalitarian language for their own purposes and without actually believing in its ideals:

The true man has regards for all men. These are my principles, which differ greatly from those of these so-called defenders of Liberty, these fire-brands, these incendiary spirits who preach equality and liberty with all the authority and ferocity of Despots. America, France, and perhaps the Universe, will owe their fall to a few energumen that France has produced, the decadence of Empires and the loss of the arts and sciences.²²

²¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Black Slavery or the Happy Shipwreck*, trans. Maryann DeJulio, accessed 6 April, 2011, http://www.uga.edu/slavery/texts/literary_works/black_slavery.pdf, 10.

²² de Gouges, *Preface of 1792*.

In this passage, de Gouges emphasizes the importance of education—something that she addresses in her play. The educated Zamor is a hybrid of sorts, a man who is at once close to nature by birth (under de Gouges’ definition of proximity to nature), and a man who has been elevated by European ideas. Another slave, named Coraline, has also been educated; she and Zamor serve as mouthpieces for de Gouges’ ideas throughout the play, but it is unclear whether or not she thought slaves ought to be educated. At one point, the Governor regrets that he educated Zamor, thinking that if he had not educated him, Zamor may not have killed the steward.²³

Education for the slaves was not de Gouges’ top priority: instead, she believes that they ought to be granted their liberty, a liberty she defines as freedom from the unnaturally cruel treatment to which they were subjected. De Gouges naively believes that granting this vague form of liberty to the slaves is the only step necessary to achieve peace and harmony on the islands. Through the character of Coraline, de Gouges argues that once the slaves are given their freedom, they will continue to work happily: “Let the masters give liberty; no Slave will leave the workshop. Imperceptibly, the rudest among us will instruct themselves, recognize the laws of humanity and justice, and our superiors will find in our attachment, in our zeal, the reward for this kindness.”²⁴ Throughout the play, she emphasizes the fact that the colonists’ harsh treatment of the slaves is out of step with the laws of nature.²⁵ De Gouges calls for a return to this natural state, which goes hand-in-hand with the liberation of the slaves. Toward the beginning of the play, Zamor pleads for his natural rights: “Most of these barbaric masters treat us with a

²³ de Gouges, *Black Slavery*, 19.

²⁴ de Gouges, *Black Slavery*, 16.

²⁵ de Gouges, *Black Slavery*, 6, 12, 28.

cruelty that makes Nature shudder...God! Divert the presage that still menaces these climes, soften the hearts of our Tyrants, and give man back the rights that he has lost in the very bosom of Nature.”²⁶

This call for a return to the principles of nature can be found throughout de Gouges’ works; it features prominently in her justification of her demand for women’s equality and the abolition of slavery. Before the Preamble to her *Declaration*, de Gouges asserts that if men observe nature carefully, they will find no justification for their dominance over women:

What gives you sovereign empire to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents? Observe the Creator in his wisdom; survey in all its grandeur the nature you seem to want to be close to, and give me, if you dare, an example of this tyrannical empire. Go back to animals, consult the elements, study plants...search, probe, and distinguish, if you can, the sexes in the administration of nature.²⁷

Instead, she proclaims, they will find that throughout the natural world, the sexes are “cooperating in harmonious togetherness in this immortal masterpiece.”²⁸ Her defense of the humanity of slaves is similarly rooted in natural principles: she declares that the biological differences between blacks and whites are minimal, and that the two races are indeed closely related: “Colonists claim to reign as despots over the men whose fathers

²⁶ de Gouges, *Black Slavery*, 7.

²⁷ de Gouges, “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen,” in *Women’s Rights and the French Revolution: A Biography of Olympe de Gouges*, by Sophie Mousset, translated by Joy Poirel, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

²⁸ de Gouges, note before “Declaration.”

and brothers they are; and, disowning the rights of nature, they trace the source of their rule to the scantiest tint of their blood.”²⁹ Relatedly, Sophie, a character in *Black Slavery*, notes that the blacks are not slaves by nature: “Nature did not make them slaves, they are men like you.”³⁰

A restoration of what de Gouges terms ‘natural rights’ is evident in de Gouges’ best-known piece of writing: her 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. Her declaration is patterned after, and indeed steals significant passages from, the National Assembly’s 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. Her work differs blatantly from the latter in that she forcibly asserts that women deserve rights equal to those of their male counterparts. De Gouges’ *Declaration* was likely meant to be an addition to, rather than a replacement of the one drafted by the Assembly.³¹ This is significant because her work drastically alters the meaning of several key articles of the Assembly’s declaration, and in the process she omits some critical rights granted in the Assembly’s declaration. For instance, the passages that grant freedom from unlawful detention and the presumption of innocence until guilt is proven are missing from her text.³² If de Gouges’ work is viewed as a supplement to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* the rights established in that document are not retracted by her manuscript.

²⁹ de Gouges, Postscript to “Declaration.”

³⁰ de Gouges, *Black Slavery*, 12.

³¹ Scott, “The Uses of Imagination,” 36.

³² “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen 26 August 1789,” on *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*. 2001, accessed on April 6, 2011, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/295/>, Articles 7 and 9.

The drafters of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* were influenced by ideas of the philosophes, who had expressed the notion that men are born with “natural rights.”³³ They were also influenced by recent publications from the American colonies: the American Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of Rights for the state of Virginia (written by George Mason in 1776 and later used as a template for the Assembly’s declaration) were published and distributed by French newspapers.³⁴ De Gouges claimed Rousseau as her “spiritual father,” and among his multitude of works, his *Social Contract* was likely an influence on her writing.³⁵ Both the Assembly’s and de Gouges’ declarations are based on the idea that people are born with natural, inalienable rights on which the laws ought to be based, but while the Assembly’s declaration uses these rights as a springboard from which new laws can be drafted by “the will of the people,” de Gouges’ declaration has a tone of *returning* ancient and natural rights to the people, specifically to women and their dependents. She associates liberty and justice with “restoring all that belongs to another,” defines the nation as a “reuniting of woman and man,” and calls for a destruction of men’s tyranny over women and a reestablishment of the rights they are entitled to by nature.³⁶

De Gouges’ *Declaration* explains the rights she believes women ought to possess. These rights include property ownership, the right to partake in professions normally assigned only to men, the right to voice their opinions publicly, and the right to have a say in the allocation of government funds and oversee administration of the laws. She

³³ Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2008), 18.

³⁴ Censer and Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, 19.

³⁵ Scott, “The Uses of Imagination,” 29.

³⁶ de Gouges, “Declaration” Articles 3 and 4

also stipulates that there ought not be any societal prejudice against mothers declaring the illegitimacy of her children. In her *Declaration*, de Gouges calls for women's rights but also demands that women earn these rights and be held to the same standards as their male counterparts. She expresses the belief that men and women ought to contribute equally to society and ought to possess equal rights, but her other writings and even the strange postscript to her *Declaration*, do not espouse the idea that the sexes are identical. Instead, her message is that they ought to have intertwined and equal roles in the family and society. For instance, at the end of her postscript, she compares the roles she believes the executive and the legislative branch of the government ought to have to the family and the roles that of a husband and wife: "I think that these two powers, like man and woman, should be united but equal in force and virtue to make a good household."³⁷

The postscript to de Gouges' *Declaration* is a bizarre and somewhat incoherent document that touches on a variety of issues. It discusses the sexual power women once held over men, calls for women to work toward obtaining their rights, addresses the problem of prostitution and the issue of illegitimate children, deplors marriage, suggests that women must become engaged in all the undertakings of men in order to achieve equal status, and finally condemns the institution of slavery. Her postscript is broad in scope, but the arguments she makes within the text are vague, undeveloped, and contradictory to each other.

Her postscript is similar to her 1792 Preface to *Black Slavery* in that in both of these supporting documents, she chastises those whose rights she appears to support in her main documents. In the Preface to *Black Slavery* she says that the slaves prove

³⁷ de Gouges, Postscript to "Declaration"

themselves worthy of chains when they use violence, and in the postscript to her *Declaration*, she says that women are at least in part to blame for the way that men treat them: “women have done more harm than good.”³⁸ She draws another connection to the slavery issue in the postscript, in which she compares prostitution to slavery and draws attention to the sad plight of “liberated” prostitutes who are left without money, housing, or the ability to provide for their children. De Gouges presents yet another parallel between the two issues: she explains that men, who have been liberated by the revolution, have used their newfound liberty to be crueler to both women and to slaves. But while she proclaims in the postscript that women, who have not gained anything from the revolution thus far, must take matters into their own hands and elevate themselves to become equals with men, it is not evident that she believes slaves ought to be similarly enlightened.

Her discussion of the value of ‘enlightenment’ and becoming liberated is contradictory. She proposes in her note before her *Declaration* that man’s enlightenment has taken him away from nature and caused him to treat women with increasing cruelty: “Bizarre, bloated with science and degenerated in this century of enlightenment and wisdom, in the grimiest ignorance, he wants to command as a despot over a sex which has been gifted with all intellectual faculties; he claims to rejoice in the Revolution,”³⁹ and in her postscript she writes of men: “having become free, he has become unjust to his companion.”⁴⁰ But in the same document she cites national education as an important stepping-stone on the path to improving the status of women and in her Preface to *Black*

³⁸ de Gouges, Postscript to “Declaration.”

³⁹ de Gouges, note before “Declaration.”

⁴⁰ de Gouges, Postscript to “Declaration.”

Slavery she warns against a loss of the arts and sciences.⁴¹ She simultaneously promotes and rejects the ‘century of enlightenment,’ and in *Black Slavery*, the slave Zamor explains that education separates humans from nature by elevating them to a god-like status: “Art has placed them above Nature: instruction has made Gods of them, and we are only men. They use us in these climes as they use animals in theirs.”⁴²

The contradictions that linger in de Gouges’ statements on enlightenment are representative of the countless paradoxes that permeate her writings and, as Scott eloquently points out, her representations of herself. It is almost fitting, then, that her execution involved another paradox. Though a pro-revolutionary play she had written was staged shortly before she was arrested and tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal, de Gouges was arrested and executed on the basis that she was a royalist. It is undeniable that de Gouges expressed royalist sentiments: *Black Slavery*, her response to critics of the play, the dedication and postscript to her Declaration, and countless other of her documents declare her love for her monarch, but according to Verdier, she had lost faith in the king by the time of her execution.⁴³ In reality, it is likely that she was condemned to death for her Girondist and federalist political leanings and because she was living under the rule of a National Convention that was increasingly hostile toward politically active women.⁴⁴ Regardless of the causes of her execution, de Gouges must be remembered for her broad and prolific works which espoused contradictory views but brought to light issues that were pertinent to her time and place. She was daring enough to present her views to the public in a time when it was incredibly dangerous to do so. It

⁴¹ de Gouges, *Preface of 1792*

⁴² de Gouges, *Black Slavery*, 7.

⁴³ Verdier, “From Reform to Revolution,” 211.

⁴⁴ Scott “The Uses of Imagination,” 51; Verdier “From Reform to Revolution,” 191.

is through her works, which consistently call for a return to her vaguely defined principles of nature and call for the end of brutality against various peoples that she can best be remembered. While Olympe de Gouges is significant as a proto-feminist figure whose words became a motto for the feminist cause in the centuries following her death, her works reveal that her contributions to her time were much greater than those for which she is remembered today.

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