

Olympe de Gouges

By Jill Evans

Personal Reflection

As long as I can remember, I have been interested in studying liberal revolutions, especially the French Revolution. Discovering Olympe De Gouges has been a rewarding experience in my studies and I found De Gouges fascinating not only for her courage but for her dedication and integrity. De Gouges was an intense and passionate individual who never backed down when challenged by opposition and she continually found value in her ideals; a reason to live and to die. De Gouges' ideas are still relevant and interesting today and I would like to see more visibility and awareness of historical women who helped recast and reshape gender roles.

Biography

Olympe de Gouges was one of the most radical, militant and confrontative female activists of the French Revolution. Unfortunately, De Gouges is also one of the most ignored and forgotten historical figures of her time. In the eighteenth-century, men believed that women did not have the intellectual capacity to fully participate in the public sphere. Women did however participate by becoming writers; De Gouges is one example of a woman who challenged eighteenth-century gender limitations through writing. De Gouges dedicated her life to her political and philosophical convictions by working to achieve representation and full political participation in the public sphere for women.

De Gouges started out in humble beginnings; she was born Marie Gouze in the south of France. She married at a young age and produced one son, however, the marriage abruptly ended after her husband's death. De Gouges dreamt of becoming a playwright and moved to Paris to follow her dream. However, a playwright was not an acceptable profession for a woman of her time and she was constantly working for recognition. Being a woman of the eighteenth-century, De Gouges was "poorly educated, [. . .] wrote in a barely legible hand and spelled phonetically."¹ However, De Gouges' ambition was not inhibited by a lack of education nor gender discrimination within the theatre profession; she was determined to carve out a place for herself in the public sphere.

De Gouges continually created a new identity and image for herself. She was constantly "in a process of self-construction."² Once in Paris, Marie Gouze "took her mother's middle name, Olympe, added a 'de' and changed her father's surname to Gouges."³ De Gouges also claimed "that she was the illegitimate offspring of a romance between her mother and a local notable"⁴ Her desire to be associated with a gift for writing is one reason De Gouges asserted that she was the daughter of Le Franc de Pompignan. "This lineage added intrigue and status to her life and (since the marquis had won a reputation as a man of letters) provided a genealogy of her own literary ambitions."⁵ Historian Sara E. Melzer speculates that these "assertions, like her self-renaming, constituted her identity: tentative, ambiguous and never fully secured."⁶

In 1789, a new governmental body called the National Assembly was created, however, the politicians in control were only interested in reforming and preserving the rights of male citizens. In 1789, the National Assembly passed a document called the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. This document "called into being an 'imagined community' of equal citizens endowed with extensive rights and a

¹ Darline Gay Levy et al. *Women in Revolutionary Paris: 1789-1795* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 65.

² Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine, eds. *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

participatory political system meant to protect them.”⁷ De Gouges was not pleased to find that equality and full political participation were exclusive rights granted to only male citizens under the Republic.

In 1789, the storming of the Bastille, cemented the beginning of revolutionary changes in France. De Gouges supported the uprising in Paris during the storming of the Bastille because her underlying motivation “resulted from her belief that society was corrupt and that women particularly were the victims of oppression and injustice. Her hope for mankind lay with revolutionary reform.”⁸ De Gouges joined the Revolutionary fever that swept Paris with the hope that a new Republic would create a just and equal society and grant new opportunities for women. “Revolutionary power struggles between 1789 and 1793 created and multiplied opportunities for eluding or challenging and reworking [. . .] gendered formulations of revolutionary citizenship and civic virtue.”⁹ The Revolution was escalating on all levels of public and private life and De Gouges placed herself in the eye of the storm.

In 1791, a new Constitution was ratified by the National Assembly and De Gouges wrote and published a response to the preamble, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. De Gouges’ pamphlet the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* was published in the paper, *Les Droits de la femme* and called for women to gain equal rights to men and protection of their rights as mothers. De Gouges “argued that such a document was made necessary because the Constitution of 1791 and its preamble, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, were silent on the issue of women’s rights.”¹⁰ One of most controversial statements in this document is that a “woman has the right to mount the scaffold.”¹¹ De Gouges believed that if women were to become full and equal citizens, they would also be held accountable for their words and actions.

Attached to the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* was a personal letter to the queen, Marie Antoinette. In De Gouges’ letter to the Queen she tried to appeal to the shared experience of womanhood: “It will never be a crime for you to work for the restoration of customs, to give your sex all the firmness of which it is capable.”¹² Thinking that the Queen would be in a position to raise the consciousness of women about their subordinate status, they would then fight for equal representation and participation in the Republic. De Gouges wrote: “This revolution will happen only when all women are aware of their deplorable fate, and of the rights they have lost in society [. . .] defend this unfortunate sex, and soon you will have half the realm on your side.”¹³ De Gouges wanted a militant response coupled with the passion and tenacity that matched her own will. She fought for this dream even in the face of dangerous obstacles that would threaten her life.

In the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen*, De Gouges “based her arguments on natural rights theory. Equality was not something to be granted, like a gift; equality was ‘natural’ and had only to be recognized”¹⁴ De Gouges was influenced by fellow feminist writer, the Marquis de Condorcet who published *Essai sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité* (1790). Condorcet’s document “called for ‘equality of rights’ for both sexes [. . .] [and argued] that women have the same natural rights as men.”¹⁵ “To those who would deny that women have the same capacity to reason as men, Condorcet countered that educational disabilities and legal discrimination alone explain the seemingly different reasoning of men and women.”¹⁶ Like Condorcet, De Gouges believed that it was lack of access to education that had caused the intellectual divide between men and women. De Gouges believed that it

⁷ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2002), 42.

⁸ Shirley Elson Roessler, *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789-95* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998), 64.

⁹ Melzer and Rabine, 80.

¹⁰ Levy et al., 64.

¹¹ Olympe de Gouges, the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman in the French Revolution and Human Rights: a Brief Documentary History*. Trans. and ed. by Lynn Hunt (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 125.

¹² Levy et al., 88.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Melzer and Rabine, 236-37.

¹⁵ Ibid., 235-36.

¹⁶ Ibid., 236.

was up to women to reclaim their natural rights. This natural rights theory was also the underlying argument in De Gouges' letter to the Marie Antoinette: equal rights will not be handed to you, you have to claim it.

By 1792, the Revolution grew much more radical and the National Assembly dissolved and was replaced by the radical National Convention. Two factions of rival political groups: the Girondins and the Jacobins were vying for power within the National Convention. The King had been sent to the guillotine in 1791, signifying that the Monarchy was no longer trusted nor tolerated in the new Republic. Women activists such as De Gouges, Théroigne de Méricourt and Etta Palm d'Aelders stepped up their demands for equality in the public sphere by organizing women's clubs. In May 1793, the women's club *Société des Citoyennes Républicaine Révolutionnaires* "were active at the height of the power struggle in Paris between the Girondins and the Jacobins."¹⁷ However, the Revolution had radicalized to a point where political groups such as the Sans-Culottes and the Girondins were guillotined because they disagreed with the Jacobin political structure for the Republic. De Gouges placed herself in a confrontation with Jacobin party leader Robespierre by critiquing his ideas and actions through her writings. In 1793, De Gouges wrote *Testament Politique* which defended the rights of the Girondins and criticized "the actions of the [National] Convention during the preceding days when the Girondins had been expelled."¹⁸ De Gouges' criticism of the National Convention was directed at the Jacobin leader Robespierre and she knew at "the time of her critique [. . .] that her days were numbered."¹⁹ De Gouges was holding fast to her ideals in the face of an unstable and tumultuous political upheaval.

De Gouges' published *Les Trois urnes, ou la salut de la partie, par un voyageur aérien* (1793) and was arrested. This document proposed governmental reform by the vote of the people. De Gouges thought that if the people chose their leaders by secret ballot then France would have a true Republic. De Gouges was arrested for distributing posters of the pamphlet, imprisoned and brought to trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal. "Olympe de Gouges composed and had printed works which can only be considered as an attack on the sovereignty of the people."²⁰ De Gouges was considered a threat to the Republic because she tried to instill limitations on the powers of the National Convention. Also, De Gouges fearlessly stood up for the rights of women during a time when one of the key issues of debate was how far the government should go when arresting, imprisoning or executing people. De Gouges held such strong philosophical and political convictions that she, like many others of her time, valued their ideals over their lives. De Gouges kept up the pressure on the government in order for her voice heard, even when she knew it could mean her death.

By the end of 1793, "women suffered a definite setback in their efforts to become full citizens of the Republic."²¹ De Gouges, Marie Antoinette, as well as other women activists were sent to the guillotine. "Women's clubs and societies were banned; and [. . .] women were barred from fully participating in the revolutionary public sphere."²² During the terror, female political activists were painted "as examples of 'the sex' out of control, needing the ultimate correction in order to what [critics] called the 'male énergie' of the Republic."²³

During De Gouges' trial she said that she had written *Les Trois urnes* because she was looking out for the "happiness of her country [and] that she had ruined herself in order to propagate the principals of the Revolution."²⁴ De Gouges had invested much time and energy into her political activities and it was out of the question to go back to the traditional role of dutiful housewife. The Revolution had radicalized and intensified the political struggles to the point where the idea was to live free or die for your cause. De Gouges responded in the best way that she could within the radical revolutionary period. De Gouges'

¹⁷ Levy et al., 143.

¹⁸ Roessler, 70.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Levy et al., 255.

²¹ Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 112.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 130.

²⁴ Levy et al., 257-8.

belief in Republican ideals coupled with her militant confrontative style brought down the judgment of Robespierre and she was sent to the guillotine in November 1793. With her theatrical personality, De Gouges demonstrated throughout her career a skill at making highly charismatic public speeches. In her last public appearance she mounted the scaffold and shouted “Children of the Fatherland, you will avenge my death [and] cries of ‘Vive la République’ were heard among the spectators waving hats in the air.”²⁵

De Gouges legacy is that she helped create a public conversation on the subject of women’s rights. Prior to the French Revolution, there had not been discourse on the subject of women’s rights; De Gouges’ efforts paved the way for such debate. De Gouges’ legacy is that she was a trail blazer; she took part in creating a public conversation on the subject of women’s rights and fought to broaden the definition of a woman’s role in society.

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Time Line

1748	Marie Gouze (Olympe de Gouges) is born in the south of France
1778	Olympe de Gouges begins to produce plays in Paris
June 1789	National Assembly established
1789	The <i>Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen</i> is passed
July 1789	Storming of the Bastille
1790	Condorcet publishes <i>Essai sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité</i>
September 1791	Olympe de Gouges publishes the <i>Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen</i>
April 1792	France declares war on Austria and Prussia
September 1792	First meeting of the National Convention; France declared a republic

²⁵ Ibid., 259.

January 1793	King Louis XVI executed
January 1793	Dr Gouges' play <i>L'Entrée du Dumouriez à Bruxelles</i> opens
May 1793	The women's club <i>Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires</i> is established
June 1793	De Gouges writes <i>Testament Politique</i>
July 1793	De Gouges publishes <i>Les Trois urnes, ou la salut de la partie, par un voyageur aérien</i>
July 1793	Olympe de Gouges is arrested and imprisoned
September 1793	National Convention announces that "terror is the order of the day"
October 1793	Marie Antoinette executed
October 1793	National Convention outlaws women's clubs
November 1793	Olympe de Gouges executed