

## Paradoxical Feminism: Attempts at Gender Equality in the French Revolution

Maggie Stanton

PSU Challenge History of Modern Europe

Matthew Vannelli

December 17, 2019

Proponents of feminism during the French Revolution faced a peculiar dilemma. Not only did the concept of political feminism barely exist, but, in addition, activists of the movement faced paradoxical barriers. For, as French society found itself swept into a frenzied pursuit of liberty, equality, and fraternity, adherents of the French Revolution ironically neglected to include all citizens in their so-called “inalienable rights of man.” Most notably, the newly formed National Assembly forgot its women. While modern feminism would not officially emerge until the early nineteenth century, debates concerning the role of women in society emerged as a notable topic throughout the French Revolution. Particularly, as questions surrounding a woman’s role in domestic services, family, and politics fell into the political spotlight, more assertive feminist demands emerged in the form of pamphlets, plays, and other writings. While revolutionaries fought with muskets for the inalienable rights of man, early French feminists began to fight with pens for the inalienable rights of women. One such declaration of female emancipation emerged in 1791 from the pen of Olympe de Gouges, who’s *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* mirrored that of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, published a few years earlier in 1789, in order to emphasize the revolution’s failure to recognize gender inequity within the new emerging French society. Yet, while de Gouges’s statements certainly captured political headlines and eventually directly challenged Maximilian de Robespierre’s terror regime, its message failed to resonate with the French public and ultimately made little lasting impact on the women’s movement. The combination of de Gouges’s weak political argument, her lack of constituency, and the inherent ambiguity of the feminist movement ultimately led to her execution. Additionally, the outspoken political activism found in the writing of Manon Roland and the growing popularity of women’s

clubs such as the *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires* resulted in the creation of the *Code Napoléon* in 1804, a document that solidified gender inequality in limiting a woman's right to citizenship and property. As a result, female activism came to be viewed as an unsuccessful threat to social order. While the French Revolution seemed to finally offer inclusion to any group that so desired it, in actuality, when women stepped up to accept such inclusion, this gift was snatched away. This, effectively, produced a dilemma: in seeking inclusion into their community, French women had to rebel against that community, an action both justified by the ideology of the revolution and simultaneously criminalized by proponents of this ideology.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, feminism within the French Revolution became a paradoxical phenomenon: evidence of women's political activism found in the writings of Olympe de Gouges and Manon Roland, as well as in the unsuccessful sustention of the *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires* in 1793, threatened the Jacobin ideal of a new moral republic. Thus, feminist efforts to gain equal rights ironically prompted the creation of the *Napoleonic Code* and other anti-feminist decrees, thereby paradoxically solidifying concepts of female insubordination and inequality in post revolutionary French society.

As the revolution spurred the creation of new individualistic ideologies, conceptions of domestication, spearheaded by Jean Jacques Rousseau, emphasized "nature" as the origin of sexual difference and idealized women as the virtuously superior and intellectually inferior sex. Such reasoning legitimized the exclusion of women from political power and limited them to the domestic sphere out of a social fear that female sexuality would pollute society. Montesquieu's *Les Lettres persanes*, written in 1721, suggests that women's sexuality, inherent to their

---

<sup>1</sup>Sara Melzer and Leslie Rabine, introduction to *Rebel Daughters: Women in the French Revolution* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

biological nature, grants them the power to seduce, and thereby abuse, their male counterparts. Arguing that women's "natural beauty" granted them a "tyrannical power..which no man can resist," Montesquieu reinforced the notion that women acted as danger to moral politics and self-government, and should thusly be excluded from it.<sup>2</sup> In arguing for female subordination on the grounds of natural biology, revolutionary philosophers subsequently suggested that female submission was God-given. By this argument, God made women biologically unfit for self-government, and thus, naturally, they must remain dependent on men. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise on the nature of education, *Emile*, solidified this concept in emphasizing that "[b]y the law of nature even, women are at mercy of the judgements of men...To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them....Behold the duties of women."<sup>3</sup> Thus, a virtuously ideal woman became one who succumbed to the needs of men and did not attempt to interfere with duties outside of her domestic sphere. Similarly, the ultimate expression of feminine virtue during eighteenth century France, known as *pudeur*, implied a woman's possession of timid bashfulness associated with chastity.<sup>4</sup> As *pudeur* became the feminine ideal, a lack of *pudeur* represented a lack of morality. According to Montesquieu, "[t]he violation of *pudeur* supposes in women a renunciation of all virtues."<sup>5</sup> For revolutionaries dedicated to building a morally superior republic, female violators of *pudeur* represented everything they worked against. If the republic were to successfully reach the standard of public virtue which the

---

<sup>2</sup> Montesquieu, *Les lettres persanes*, (Paris, 1721).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (1762), in *Oeuvres complètes*, (Dijon: Imprimerie Darantiere, 1969), Vol. 4, pp. 702-703

<sup>4</sup> Candice E. Proctor, *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Charles de Socandat, Baron de la Brede et de Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des Lois*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu* 3 vols. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1874), Vol. 2, Book 26, Chapter 8 p. 134

revolutionaries desired, women had to comply to this moral standard. Such compliances silenced an entire minority group and paved way for unobstructed philosophy concerning the biological inferiority of women, a concept strongly paradoxical to the revolution's demand for inalienable rights. Yet, as these sexist ideologies grew, so did political movements that counteracted this notion of feminine domesticity.

Female-led gatherings and political protests encouraged the creation of women's political clubs and scholarly works, pushing women out of the private sphere and into political spotlight. One of the first demonstrations of impactful female activism during the French Revolution came to be known as the "October Days." Parisian market women, angered by the 1789 bread shortage and rumors that the King's soldiers at Versailles had decimated the tricolor cockade, stormed the Palace of Versailles. While originally demanding more bread, the protest eventually turned political, as women fought alongside revolutionaries to request the King's adherence to the recent political reforms proposed by the National Assembly and the royal family's relocation from Versailles to Paris.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the activism of these market women resulted in a large blow to monarchical power and strengthened the influence of France's common people; paradoxically, although women initiated the October Days' political fight for human rights and representation, the women themselves remained excluded from the rights they fought for. Women could only embody the theoretical political ideal of *citoyennes* (female citizens) when useful to the causes of the greater revolution.<sup>7</sup> When it came to demanding rights for the sake of woman's equality

---

<sup>6</sup> Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. Sarah Melzer and Leslie Rabine (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Revolutionary feminists added an "e" to the grammatically masculine term, "citoyen" in order to make the noun feminine, "citoyenne." Such grammatical wordplay reflected their desire to explicitly include women in the new Republic, starting with the common vernacular.

alone, revolutionaries denied women the rights they desired. Yet, women's participation in political movements continued to grow. Feminist activists such as Etta Palm d'Aelders, Théroigne de Méricourt, and Pauline Léon stewarded the creation of political clubs, including the infamous *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires* of 1793, in which women gathered to discuss political issues and draw support for the revolution.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the clubs provided women with the rare opportunity to step out of the domestic life and into the public sphere, expressing their ideas for reform without oppressive male influence. These clubs birthed politically charged feminist writings, allowing women to subtly engage in political rhetoric while still remaining safely within the private sphere. Floods of feminist writings appeared between 1789 and 1791, particularly in the form of politically charged magazines and newspapers, such as the *Etrennes nationales des dames*, the *Courrier de l'yemen*, and the *Annales de l'Education du Sexe*, demanding improved civil and educational rights for women.<sup>9</sup> Yet, such explicit writings allowed misogynists to attack the immorality of these writers for transgressing feminine norms and thus jeopardizing the morality of the Republic. The eventual implementation of Napoleon's *Code Napoléon* in 1804 dismantled the progress of these feminist writers in solidifying female insubordination, ultimately stating that "a wife owes obedience to her husband" and cannot "give, pledge, or acquire by free or chargeable title, without the concurrence of her husband."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the effects of the female transition into political spotlight throughout the French

---

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Desan, "Women's Experience of the French Revolution: An Historical Overview" in *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine R. Montfort (Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Code Napoléon* (21 March, 1804), trans. Lyn Reese, <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/TWR-07.html>.

Revolution remains ambiguous. Providing both opportunity and restriction, the era prompted a critical and paradoxical perception of the role of women in French society.

In particular, Olympe de Gouge's *Declaration of the Rights of Women* exemplifies the inherent paradox of political feminism during the revolution: in attempting to claim equality between the sexes, de Gouges asserted their particular differences. Such a dilemma finds its roots not in the limitations of de Gouges's writing, but in the larger ambiguity of the feminist movement. As such, blame for these paradoxical arguments should not fall solely on de Gouges's political writing. However, de Gouges's writing remains undeniably contradictory, simultaneously chastising and applauding the nature of femininity. De Gouges attacked women, calling them "indulgent, frivolous, seductive, intriguing, and duplicitous;" yet, on the other hand, she defended the special privileges of women, labeling them "the sex superior in beauty as in courage during childbirth."<sup>11</sup> In emphasizing society's duty to protect mothers, the more "beautiful" and "courageous" sex, de Gouges appealed to women in order to unite them, yet simultaneously criticized their nature, asserting their worst characteristics. Depicting de Gouges's paradoxical argument, Joan Wallace Scott asserts that in order to claim "the general status of 'human' for women, [de Gouges] insisted on their particular qualifications; in the process of insisting on equality, she constantly pointed out and acknowledged difference."<sup>12</sup> Particularly, in attributing female authority to the concept of pregnancy and motherhood, de Gouges asserted the difference between male and female in order to argue for equality. Yet, the

---

<sup>11</sup> Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791), in *Between the Queen and the Cabby: Olympe de Gouges's Rights of Woman*, ed. John Cole (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer: Olympe de Gouges Claims Rights for Women," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. Sarah Melzer and Leslie Rabine (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

concept of pregnancy, a phenomenon men possess the least amount of knowledge and experience in, remains entirely subject to the interpretation and experiences of women; as such, emphasizing the feminine experience of pregnancy cast doubt on the authority of de Gouges's argument in pitting the unreliable female against the legitimate and truthful man.<sup>13</sup> Further emphasizing the difference between the well-mannered male and suspicious female in a paradoxical attempt to prove equality, de Gouges highlighted female tendency towards seduction in an attempt to prove its ability to promote active citizenship and a new social order. She argued that women who flaunted their sexuality would "incit[e] young men to fly to the defense of the Fatherland," for "the art we possess to move the sounds of men would produce the salutary effect of enflaming all spirits...[n]othing can resist the our seductive organ."<sup>14</sup> Emphasizing the undeniable presence of female sexuality, de Gouges suggested that such deviance could incite active citizenship in order to better society. Yet, for revolutionaries attempting to build a morally superior republic, the feminine ideal consisted of a woman grounded by the chastity of *pudeur*; inversely, any suggestion of female sexuality spurred social fear of the decline of moral society. Thus, de Gouges's decision worked against her, as her accentuation of female sexuality instilled a sense of fear in those who sought feminine norms for the new society. Following the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Women*, the journalist Prudhomme counteracted de Gouges's claim, emphasizing the importance of developing "silent and modest" female supporters of the revolution, and stating that "*citoyennes* be pure and hardworking girls, tender and chaste wives, wise mothers, and you will be good patriots...true patriotism consists of fulfilling one's duties,

---

<sup>13</sup> Scott, 110.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.



and only wanting those rights allotted to each according to his sex.”<sup>15</sup> Criticizing women who stepped out of the domestic sphere, Prudhomme’s negative interpretation of female sexuality and adherence to established gender roles counteracted de Gouges’s patriotic stance on female sexuality. Prudhomme’s radical weekly newspaper, *les Révolutions de Paris*, lasted from 1789 to 1794 and had over 250,000 subscribers, reaching a wide audience of both male and female revolutionaries.<sup>16</sup> Thus, his expansive influence greatly weakened de Gouges’s argument for an equality that paradoxically centers on gender difference.

Additionally, de Gouges’ lack of formal education resulted in an informal writing style, in which she applied oral argument to the written word; ultimately, such rhetorical style failed to unite a constituency under her movement, and, in fact, repelled many potential readers. Many of her previous works emulated the rhetorical strategy of the political orators she heard speak at various national assemblies. Thus the *Declaration of the Rights of Women*’s adherence to common literary rules and rhetorical practice derived from de Gouges’s use of imitation, rather than her own literary prowess, as her lack of education prevented her from successfully applying her own literary techniques.<sup>17</sup> Instead, de Gouges’s writing reflects the oral foundation of her knowledge-information gathered from the various speeches, assemblies, and street arguments she experienced. Aware that her lack of education affected the credibility of her argument, de Gouges asserted that her informal writing style allowed her to author a more unbiased and natural truth

---

<sup>15</sup> Prudhomme, *Révolutions de Paris*, (Paris 1789) Vol. 17, No. 213, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Geri Walton, *Louis-Marie Prudhomme: French Journalist and Historian*, (France, 2016), para. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Janie Vanpée, “La Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la citoyenne: Olympe De Gouges’s Re-writing of La Déclaration des Droits de l’homme” in *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine R. Montfort (Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994), 63.

in her writing.<sup>18</sup> Prefacing her play, *le Philosophe Corrigé*, she claims: “I am a student of nature; I’ve said, and I repeat, that I owe nothing to the learning of men: I am my own creation, and when I write, there is nothing on the table but ink, paper, and pens.”<sup>19</sup> This “oral” and informal writing style directly addressed the audience, often in the form of a letter. However, such direction required the formation of a specific constituency which, as a female author who professed the controversial concept of female citizenship and equality, de Gouges lacked. As one of the first female feminist authors of her time, de Gouges possessed no models to imitate nor previously established constituents to listen to her call.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, because most women rejected this new feminist notion of political equality, preferring to adhere to the domestic spheres of the social norm, those who did support de Gouges’s movement lacked the social unition needed to form an active movement. Particularly, addressing the *Declaration of the Rights of Women* to the famously unpopular Marie Antoinette further ostracized her from her desired audience.<sup>21</sup> De Gouges’s vigorously emphasized her loyal duty to the Queen: “When the entire Empire accused you and made you responsible for its calamities, I alone... had the strength to take up your defense...when I saw the sword raised against you, I threw my observations between that sword and the victim.”<sup>22</sup> In heroically defending the Queen, de Gouges metonymically defended the monarchy, and thus the hated aristocracy. Such loyalty to the Queen paradoxically opposed her support of the revolution, and as such, preceding her

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>19</sup> Olympe de Gouges, *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1788), in *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine R. Montfort (Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994), 64.

<sup>20</sup> Vanpée, 66.

<sup>21</sup> John Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby: Olympe de Gouges's Rights of Woman*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 43.

<sup>22</sup> de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Women*, 54.

*Declaration of the Rights of Women* with a declaration to the Queen would have repelled many potential feminist revolutionaries.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in repelling the audience she wrote to, de Gouges failed to create a movement united under a conscious commonality of needs.

It is understandable that de Gouges's progressive push for radical gender equality led to social backlash and her eventual execution. However, what seems unexpected is that Manon Roland, an outwardly strong proponent of Rousseau's cult of domesticity and ideals of female modesty, ironically still faced execution for her political influence. Paradoxically, Rousseau's domestic ideals encouraged Manon's political activism, which nevertheless resulted in her execution alongside more radical feminists like Olympe de Gouges in November, 1793.

Although Roland often collaborated with her husband in writing scholarly works, she refused to publish anything directly under her name, instead adhering to Rousseau's ideals of modest femininity and the natural superiority of the male sex. In a letter to a male family friend she emphasized her belief in the domination of the male sex: "I believe in the superiority of your sex in every respect...it is up to you to make the laws in politics and discoveries in the sciences... however gifted they may be, women should never show their learning or talents in public."<sup>24</sup> Yet, even while professing her adherence to the domestic sphere, she hypocritically participated covertly in public politics, transforming her home to an informal gathering place for Brissot, Robespierre, and other deputies who constituted the Girondin radical left.<sup>25</sup> Manon never allowed herself to directly participate in the meetings, yet, sitting outside the circle of men and

---

<sup>23</sup> John Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby: Olympe de Gouges's Rights of Woman*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 43.

<sup>24</sup> Manon Roland to Bosc, 29 July 1783, in *Lettres*, 3:257.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Trouille, "The Circe of the Republic: Mme Roland, Rousseau, and Revolutionary Politics" in *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine R. Montfort (Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994) 91.

quietly doing needlework, she does not deny that she listened attentively to the conversation, sometimes even offering her own opinion when called upon. Moreover, Roland was often asked to transfer messages to her absent husband, and the society quickly became accustomed to presenting their political cases to Manon for consultation.<sup>26</sup> As a result, Roland, while publicly adhering to the domestic ideal, subtly engrossed herself in politics. As the Girondins' popularity declined, the Jacobin order vigorously attacked the Rolands, eventually charging Manon Roland with imprisonment, trial, and execution. Yet, instead of condemning her for any specific political act, the Jacobins executed her in November of 1793 for alleged moral transgressions and for overstepping gender barriers, just as Olympe de Gouges had been.<sup>27</sup> In a letter to a friend from her prison cell, Roland revealed that, ironically, it was Rousseau's example in his *Confessions* that provoked Roland to emerge from anonymity as a political participant: "These memoirs will be my *Confessions*, for I will not conceal anything...I've thought about it carefully and made up my mind. I will tell all, absolutely everything."<sup>28</sup> Thus, paradoxically, Rousseau's writing both restrained and liberated those who followed his cult of domesticity. Ironically, Manon Roland, in adhering to his ideals, faced execution for defying these same standards of domesticity.

Shortly after the eradication of Manon Roland's secret society, a group of *citoyennes* formed a political club exclusively for women in 1793, known as the *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires*, which ironically prompted laws explicitly denying women's rights to equality. Led by Claire Lacombe and Pauline Léon, the club was exclusively dedicated to supporting the revolution; yet, like Roland, the club eventually received backlash from the

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>28</sup> Manon Roland to Jany, October 1793, in *Lettres*, 4:527-28.

Jacobins who, while choosing to eliminate these women for their political ideas, publicly attacked them on the basis of sex. Originally, the Jacobins, Paris Commune, and National Convention respected the Revolutionary Republicans for their virtue and patriotism. Zealously criticizing aristocrats, merchants, and counterrevolutionaries, the *Société* gained favor in the eyes of Jacobins in successfully overthrowing the Girondins in June of 1793.<sup>29</sup> However, as the *Société*'s insistence on female participation in politics began to contradict the ideals of severe moralists like Robespierre, the morals of the Revolutionary Republicans transitioned to align less with the Jacobins and more closely with the *enragés*, a revolutionary group dedicated to defending the lower class. In an attempt to eliminate the growth of opposing factions, the Jacobins attacked the immorality and social deviance of women involved in the *Société* as a political strategy for eliminating their political ideas. On November 1, 1793, Jean-Pierre-André Amar, deputy to the National Convention, presented a report prepared by the Committee of General Security emphasizing the female incapacity to participate in government affairs: "This social order is the result of the difference that exist between man and woman... Do you want to see them... coming to the bench, to the tribunes, to the political assemblies, like men, bonding both the reticence that is the source of all virtues of their sex, and the care of their families?"<sup>30</sup> For Amar, preserving the Republic meant preserving morality, as he maintained that "without morals there is no Republic."<sup>31</sup> Asserting the mental and physical incapacities of the female sex, Amar proposed that female involvement in politics would detract from motherly and

---

<sup>29</sup> Proctor, 157.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Pierre-André Amar, *Décret de la Convention Nationale, du 9e jour du 2e mois de l'an 2e d la République Française, un et indivisible* (Archives nationales, 1794) AD I 91.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

domestic duties. Thus, he determined that “clubs and popular societies of women, under whatever denomination they might be, are forbidden.”<sup>32</sup> He then advised the Convention to destroy all female associations, which he claimed the “aristocrats” were using to “set the female sex against their men.”<sup>33</sup> As a result, October 30, 1793 marked the end of not only the *Société*, but all women’s clubs, and movement towards sexual equality was silenced. Paradoxically, the *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires*, in fighting for the revolution, unintentionally undermined the ideals of morality the revolution promoted, and eventually silenced the movement towards sexual equality in the French Revolution.

It is noteworthy to mention, however, the influences and methods in which political writings and clubs positively affected female influence during the revolution. Publicly proclaiming their opinions in an effort to promote new political and social agendas, women, through the writings and societies created between 1790 and 1793, obtained political voice, which led to the beginnings of political representation. Additionally, the creation and perseverance of various documents, pamphlets, magazines, and newsletters cemented the documentation of the female voice in history, which historians continue to analyze. As such, written documents allowed revolutionary feminists to engrave themselves in history.

Yet, while these feminist writings revealed the female perspective to modern historians two hundred years into the future, they more immediately produced a less positive outcome. Negative reactions from revolutionary press, particularly in the form of informal satires, ridiculed and delegitimized feminist works, effectively invalidating the philosophies of equal

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 163.

rights advocates. These satires primarily existed in three forms: erotic satire, pro-revolutionary pamphlets that associated the revolution's opponents with the female sex, and satire that ridiculed feminist demands in making them appear ridiculous and outlandish.<sup>34</sup> Written by mock prostitutes, pornographic satire erotically mimicked the demands of real feminist writers. Associating feminist values with the desires of prostitutes, this erotic satire dirtied the feminist movement. The *Déclaration des droits des citoyennes du Palais Royal*, while predating Olympe de Gouges's *Rights of Women*, mirrors the demands of equality it expresses. However, unlike de Gouges's work it specifically emphasizes a woman's sexual rights: "If men are free to go to women" then women "must be free to receive them" and have the right to freely sexually engage with men.<sup>35</sup> Such claims solidified public opinion classifying feminist women as immoral and deviant, and highlighted the corruption these woman would bring to the new moral Republic. Similarly, other satires negatively depicted revolutionary feminists as power hungry opponents to the revolution. The satirical writers of the *Trés Humbles Romontrances des femmes francaises*, for example, illustrated the evil immorality of these women in claiming that even their children could not distract them from their scheming: "This respect for domestic duties is the veil with which one envelops her incapacity... We have no children, or if we do have some, we will arrange things so that we are not inconvenienced by them."<sup>36</sup> Relying on similar tactics, other satirical pamphlets intended to ridicule the demands and desires of sexual equality advocates. In exaggerating and demeaning the philosophies of sexual equality, these pamphlets depicted the

---

<sup>34</sup> Proctor, 136.

<sup>35</sup> *Déclaration des droits des citoyennes du Palais Royal* (1781) in *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution*, ed. Candice E. Proctor (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 157.

<sup>36</sup> *Trés Humbles Romontrances des femmes françaises* (Imprimerie Galante, 1788), 8-9.

feminist movement as a joke. Because the satirical pamphlets were so hard to distinguish from serious demands for equality, French society came to view feminist claims as trivial and foolish. In doing so, political satire muddled the perceived agenda of the equal rights movement and prevented the formation of a community united under one goal. As a result, the creation of feminist publications ironically resulted in increased satire and hostility against the movement itself, leading to a social rejection of feminist philosophies. Rejection of feminist philosophies paralleled the execution of the strongest proponents of these ideologies.

In executing Olympe de Gouges and Manon Roland, as well as other principal advocates of the women's rights movement such as male proponent Marquis de Condorcet, revolutionary authorities demonstrated their intolerance for sexual equality and warned women against defying gender expectations; the creation of Napoleon's *Code Napoléon* in 1804 eventually politically solidified such intolerance. By the end of November 1793, in an effort to stifle women's demands for equality, both de Gouges and Roland faced execution for their outspoken political action. Warning other women against similar fates, city official Pierre Chamette advised:

“Never forget the haughty woman Roland, who thought herself fit to govern the Republic and who ran her death...Never forget that virago, the woman-man, the impudent Olympe de Gouges, who abandoned the cares of her household to get mixed up in politics and commit crimes..Forgetting the virtues of her sex drove her to the guillotine.”<sup>37</sup>

In emphasizing that any virtueless women, specifically those who promoted sexual equality, would be met with punishment, revolutionary officials effectively silenced the women's rights movement. Dr. Guillois, publishing a book in 1904 on “Les femmes de la Révolution,” analyzed

---

<sup>37</sup> Speech of November 17, 1793, quoted in Lisa Beckstrand, *Deviant Women of the French Revolution and the Rise of Feminism* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 2009), 133.



the psychology of these women, determining them to have suffered from “l’hystérisme révolutionnaire.” Claiming the de Gouges fell victim to “an excessive desire to be original, bizarre feminist ideas, and demented vanity,” Dr. Guillois expressed the common public sentiment that a desire to pursue gender equality resulted from mental illness.<sup>38</sup> Such diagnoses invalidated the feminist movement, paralleling it to a curable disease. The enactment of the *Code Napoléon* under the new French Consulate in the 1804 formally revoked the movement’s cry for equality. Establishing that a “wife [owes] obedience to her husband” and “cannot plead her own name” or acquire property, the *Code* solidified gender inequality in the new “moral” republic of France.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, the political activism of de Gouges and Roland resulted in their subsequent execution, which successfully advised women against pursuing gender equality under the new French government for the following century.

Thus, feminist attempts at inclusion in the revolution’s new society paradoxically resulted in their explicit exclusion. While the French Revolution did serve to bring women out of the domestic sphere, providing them with opportunities to voice their demands and participate in political protests, such opportunities were short lived. In an effort to quench female demands for equality, revolutionary leaders turned their words and actions against them, claiming that the female desire to escape domesticity and enter the public sphere as citizens threatened the creation of a new republic centered on moral virtue. By 1793, the strongest proponents of women’s equality - Olympe de Gouges, Manon Roland, Théroigne de Méricourt, Claire Lacombe, Pauline Léon, among others - had been eliminated for defying the limitations of the private sector. Their

---

<sup>38</sup> Alfred Guillois, *Etude médico-psychologique sur Olympe de Gouges: considérations générales sur la mentalité des femmes pendant la Révolution française* (Lyon: A. Rey, 1904), 59.

<sup>39</sup> *Code Napoléon* (21 March, 1804), trans. Lyn Reese, <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/TWR-07.html>.

attempts at publishing feminist works and establishing women's political clubs only solidified the notion that women were unqualified and biologically unfit to participate in government and politics. Ironically, the years following the revolution appeared more oppressive towards women than those preceding it. New public opinion denied women education, employment opportunities, and the right to serve in the army, effectively pushing women further into domesticity and removing any tools through which to escape.<sup>40</sup> However, it is noteworthy to consider that because revolutionary leaders strove to mitigate the feminist movement, many of the documents, pamphlets, and secret societies associated with the demand for equal rights may have remained undiscovered, and thus, safe from destruction. Escaping attack from Jacobin leaders, these feminist works possibly proved more successful than their more popular and, as such, more heavily criticized counterparts, yet appear non-existent to historians. In addition, most of the primary sources noted refer to an English translation of the original source from French. These translations, while necessary, create room for inaccuracies and miscommunications that diverge from the original meaning of the source. Yet, even amid historical ambiguity, the work of women's rights activists, though unsuccessful in instituting equal rights in the new Republic, established the foundation for future feminist movements throughout the world. In taking preliminary steps to write down their agenda and unite a community, gender equality advocates during the French revolution demonstrated the possibility of fighting for women's rights. The revolution, while ultimately stifling the feminist movement, encouraged the creation of feminist works historians still study today. The paradoxes of

---

<sup>40</sup> Proctor, 169-172.

revolutionary feminism shed light on the characteristics of feminism today and illustrate the cyclical pattern that encapsulates the female demand for equality.

## Bibliography

- Amar, Jean-Pierre-André. *Décret de la Convention Nationale, du 9e jour du 2e mois de l'an 2e de la République Française, un et indivisible*. Archives nationales, 1794.
- Code Napoléon*. (21 March, 1804). Translated by Lyn Reese, <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/TWR-07.html>.
- Déclaration des droits des citoyennes du Palais Royal* (1781). In *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution*, edited by Candice E. Proctor, 161-163. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Desan, Susanne. "Women's Experience of the French Revolution: An Historical Overview." In *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, edited by Catherine R. Montfort, 19-30. Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994.
- de Gouges, Olympe. *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791). In *Between the Queen and the Cabby: Olympe de Gouges's Rights of Woman*, edited by John Cole, 27- 41. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.
- . *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1788). In *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, edited by Catherine R. Montfort, 64. Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994.
- Guillois, Alfred. *Etude médico-psychologique sur Olympe de Gouges: considérations générales sur la mentalité des femmes pendant la Révolution française*. Lyon: A. Rey, 1904.
- Levy, Darline Gay, and Harriet B. Applewhite. "Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris." In *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, edited by Sarah Melzer and Leslie Rabine, 79-101. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Melzer, Sara, and Leslie Rabine. *Rebel Daughters: Women in the French Revolution*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Montesquieu. *Les lettres persanes*. Paris, 1721.
- . *L'Esprit des Lois*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu* 3 vols. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1874.
- Proctor, Candice E. *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Prudhomme, *Révolutions de Paris*. Paris, 1789.

Roland, Manon to Bosc, 29 July 1783. In *Lettres*.

Roland, Manon to Jany, October 1793. In *Lettres*

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile* (1762), in *Oeuvres complètes*. Dijon: Imprimerie Darantiere, 1969.

Scott, Joan Wallach. "A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer: Olympe de Gouges Claims Rights for Women." In *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, edited by Sarah Melzer and Leslie Rabine, 102-120. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Speech of November 17, 1793. Quoted in Lisa Beckstrand. *Deviant Women of the French Revolution and the Rise of Feminism*. New Jersey: Associated University Press, 2009.

*Trés Humbles Romontrances des femmes françaises*. Imprimerie Galante, 1788.

Trouille, Mary. "The Circe of the Republic: Mme Roland, Rousseau, and Revolutionary Politics." In *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, edited by Catherine R. Montfort, 81-109. Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994.

Vanpée, Janie. "La Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la citoyenne: Olympe De Gouges's Re-writing of La Déclaration des Droits de l'homme." In *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, edited by Catherine R. Montfort, 55-79. Alabama: Summa Publications, INC, 1994.

Walton, Geri. *Louis-Marie Prudhomme: French Journalist and Historian*. France, 2016. <https://www.geriwalton.com/louis-marie-prudhomme/>

