

1 Introduction

1.1 Becoming Olympe de Gouges

Olympe de Gouges was born Marie Gouze in 1748 in Montauban, in the Tarn-et-Garonne, a region of France also known as Occitany.¹ Before the Revolution, when Paris asserted its cultural supremacy over the rest of the country, French was not the principal language spoken in Montauban. Instead, Marie would have been brought up speaking Occitan, or Languedoc, as well as a heavily accented French which would have set her apart when she moved to Paris in her twenties. Her mother was Anne-Olympe Mouisset, daughter of a well-respected solicitor and textile merchant. The Mouisset family had close ties with the local gentry, the Le Franc de Pompignan family, and Anne-Olympe had been brought up in friendship with the older son, Jean-Jacques. The following account of her family history, and in particular of her paternity, is only recorded in a novel Gouges advertised as autobiographical: *Memoires de Madame de Valmont* (1788). This epistolary novel is said by its author to give a true account of her mother's youth and of her own relations with her father's family. Because there are no official records of these events, we must confine ourselves to Gouges's accounts of herself in her writings. Fortunately, these are omnipresent in all her writings: *The Rights of Woman* gives a description of her proofreading habits, in the Preface to a 1788 play entitled *Le Philosophe Corrigé ou le Cocu Supposé* she describes her beauty routine.² What follows is a reconstruction based on Gouges's autobiographical writings.

Anne-Olympe and Jean-Jacques grew up together, and when they eventually fell in love, Jean-Jacques was sent away by his family who wished to avoid a marriage with a respectable but non-aristocratic family. After Jean-Jacques's departure, Anne-Olympe was married off to a butcher, Pierre Gouze, and over the next ten years, she gave birth to two daughters. In 1747 Jean-Jacques returned to Montauban and Gouze was sent to travel on business for a whole year. Anne-Olympe's third daughter, Marie (Olympe de Gouges), was born shortly after Gouze came back. There is no proof that Le Franc de Pompignan was Marie's father, but there is evidence that it was common knowledge in Montauban (Blanc, 2014: 21, note 14). When she came to Paris, Gouges tells us that she relied on rumours about her paternity to make her way into Parisian high society (Gouges, 1788a: 28).

¹ I used Olivier Blanc's 2014 biography Olympe de Gouges as well as Gouges's autobiographical works to write this biographical section. For more biography, see also Mousset (2007) and Scott (1997).

² https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Le_Philosophe_corrigé

Gouges was educated in a day school. The Ursulines school at Montauban had been started in 1682 by six Ursuline sisters from Toulouse. The school offered free classes to local girls in basic reading and writing, religious education, and sewing. The point of such an education was to prepare girls to become good Catholic wives. Thus Gouges's education was very limited, closer to what one might expect for the daughter of a butcher than for the grand-daughter of a lawyer or the daughter of an aristocrat. In the autobiographical novel *Memoires de Madame de Valmont*, Gouges (1788a) relates that her birth father had offered to take over her education but that her mother had, for some reason, refused. If we believe her autobiographical fiction to be an accurate reflection of her feelings, Gouges seemed not to bear a grudge. On the contrary, she enjoyed describing herself, as she did in her 'Preface pour les Dames', as a natural genius, who owed all her wisdom to Nature herself:

Perhaps one day I will receive, without any effort on my part, the respect that is granted to works arisen from the hands of Nature. I can call myself one of its rare creations – everything I have comes from her; I have had no other tutor: and all my philosophical reflections cannot undo the strongly rooted imperfections that came with such an education (Gouges, 1788a: 7).

Nonetheless, as a result of an education that she regarded as neglected ('I had an education such as would have offered in the times of the great Bayard, and chance deprived me of light, in this most enlightened century' (Gouges, 1786: Preface)), she did have trouble working with pen and ink and was forced to hire secretaries to take down dictation for all her works. This was undoubtedly instrumental in her acquiring a reputation for illiteracy and the accusation of not being the author of her works. She attempted to respond to this slander through public dictation, but perverse rumour-mongers argued that she had been made to learn by heart the texts she dictated (Gouges, 1792a).

In 1765, when she was still a teenager, Marie Gouze was married to Louis-Yves Aubry, intendant in charge of food for the Count Alexis de Gourgues. In *Madame de Valmont* (Gouges, 1788a), she writes that her autobiographical heroine was married against her will and found her husband to be rude, unpleasant, and below her. She also noted that her mother inexplicably rejected another party she much preferred.

This marriage was in any case short-lived. Louis-Yves died in November 1766, three months after the birth of their son, Pierre Aubry (1766–1803). Although there is no record of his death, it is likely that he either drowned in the river Tarn, which inundated Montauban that year, or died after contracting one of the many diseases caused by the inundation.

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The young widow, refusing to use her husband's name, became Olympe (later Marie-Olympe) de Gouges. Olympe was her mother's name, given her by her godmother, Anne-Olympe Colomb de la Pomarède. Gouges was a possible spelling of Gouze (Occitan was a spoken language more than a written one, so many words had alternative spellings), and 'de' a common way of saying 'daughter of'. Several political tracts of 1792 are signed 'Marie-Olympe de Gouges'. For legal papers, she signed 'Marie Gouze, Veuve Aubry'. In other texts, she refers to herself as 'Olympe de Gouges'. On one handwritten piece, she signs the postscript to a dictated letter in her own hand 'olimpe de gouges'.

A year after her husband's death, Gouges met Jacques Biétrix de Rozières, a military man who became her lover and helped finance her career. Although they remained close till her death, it would appear that she refused to marry him, preferring to stay single. It is possible that she already believed then what she later wrote in her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, that marriage was 'the tomb of trust and love' (Gouges, 1791). Rozières settled money and property on her, to an amount similar to what a marriage contract would have brought her (Blanc, 2014: 41).

Around 1769, Olympe gave birth to a daughter, Julie (at least that is how she is named in the autobiographical play *Bienfaisante ou la Bonne Mère* of 1788) (see Blanc, 2014: 40), who died in early childhood or infancy. The only (non-fictional) record of the baby girl's existence is in a statement Gouges made at her trial, when she claimed that she knew she was pregnant as she could recognize the symptoms that she was expecting from her first two pregnancies.

Gouges moved to Paris shortly after meeting Biétrix. There, according to her autobiographical novel, she met her half-brother, Pompignan's legitimate son, and their strong resemblance struck Parisian society so that she was welcomed into the homes of aristocrats. Gouges divided her time between her son, whose education she took very seriously, and mingling with Parisian artists and aristocrats. She became close friends with famous writer Louis-Sebastien Mercier (1740–1814) and future revolutionary politician Michel de Cubière (1752–1820). They introduced her to Madame de Montesson (1738–1806), who ran a private theatre in her Paris home. Montesson's stage manager was Joseph Bologne, Chevalier Saint Georges (1745–99), a 'man of colour', the son of a white planter and an enslaved woman from his plantation. Saint Georges was a composer who had been offered the management of the Paris Opera but had seen the offer withdrawn after some actresses had claimed they would not work with a Black manager. Saint Georges was also a military man, and had led the Revolutionary all-Black regiment. He was invested in the abolitionist movement and travelled to London, where he met the British Abolitionists, and later moved to Haiti to observe the Revolution's aftermath. It is possible that he

served as a source of inspiration and information for Gouges's writings on slavery.

Acting with Madame de Montesson gave Gouges the opportunity to educate herself and refine her French accent and vocabulary. She did not start writing plays until 1784, and by then she had started her own amateur troupe in which she acted with her son, Pierre. Touring with her company proved invaluable for disseminating her work in France as she could not get her plays performed officially in the Paris theatres. Gouges had run afoul of theatrical politics, alienating all-powerful actors such as Fleury (1750–1822), who had the final say as to whether a play would be bought and performed. Only one of her plays, *Zamore and Mirza*, was ever performed in Paris, five years after it was submitted, and only for three nights. As well as performing them with her own company, Gouges ensured that her plays were known by publishing them at her own expense.

On the eve of the Revolution, Gouges went from being a political and philosophical playwright to defending her ideals more directly through pamphlet writing. Having witnessed the abject misery of the starving Parisians in the winter of 1788, she wrote her first political tract, asking the people of France to start a voluntary tax fund to ease the national debt and to feed the people. Her proposal, 'Lettre au peuple ou projet d'une caisse patriotique' (Gouges, 1788b), was printed on the front page of a national newspaper and, a few months later, eleven French women from an artistic milieu, led by the artist Adélaïde-Marie-Castellas Moitte, donated jewels to the National Assembly. Two collection points were set up shortly afterwards. The first was set up by Madame Pajou, a daughter of a sculptor, who joined efforts with Madame Moitte to collect more jewels in the aftermath of the first donation. The second was the initiative of Madame Rigal, a goldsmith, who pronounced a discourse to a gathering of women artists and goldsmiths asking all women of France to follow the example of the eleven women from Versailles and help relieve the national debt.³

Gouges's political writing activity increased, and during the Revolution there were many placards by her, sometimes anonymous, sometimes signed, pasted around Paris. Her writings were often critical of the decisions of particular individuals in the government, including Robespierre. Her last tract, *The Three Urns* (1793c), advocating that the Paris Commune relinquish some of their power and put their motions to the vote through the whole of France, caused her to be arrested in July 1793 and guillotined in November of that year. Her final

³ It may have been the case that several groups simultaneously decided to help relieve the national debt, but Gouges seemed persuaded that these particular groups acted because of her proposal, as witness another pamphlet written a few weeks later entitled 'My Wishes Are Fulfilled, or The Patriotic Gift. Dedicated to the Estates-General'.

months, described in the concluding section of this Element, displayed the same commitment to improving the social political situation of France as her earlier writings did. She died convinced that her memory would be avenged.

1.2 Playwright, Novelist, and Pamphleteer: Genre and Philosophy

Gouges's biographer, Olivier Blanc, lists 144 pieces of writing by her, including forty-three plays, sixty-eight tracts, placards, or articles, and thirty-one novels, prefaces, or isolated pieces.⁴ All were written between 1784 and 1793. At least one of those pieces, *Primitive Happiness* (1789), can be described as a traditional piece of philosophical writing. It responds to J.-J. Rousseau's first two discourses, *On Science and the Arts* and *On Inequality*, and it develops the author's own account of the origins of human society and of their ethical and political implications. But much of what Gouges wrote – be it plays, novels, or articles and open letters published in papers and as placards – was philosophical. The author used formats she was comfortable with – often formats that used a spoken style of rhetoric, such as theatre or speech-making – and at the same time, formats she knew would reach a wider audience than would an academic article – a text written by a member of an academy, destined for the local intelligentsia.

Unlike the tracts of her contemporaries, who often sought to denounce or publicize a particular political stance, decision, or personality, Gouges's writings stand out for their use of argumentation and her clear desire to make her readers think and come to their own conclusions rather than simply accept hers. The pamphlet she was arrested and convicted for, *The Three Urns* (Gouges, 1793c), is a case in point: Gouges asked that the people of France be allowed to consider what form of government would best protect their rights, rather than have that decision imposed on them by Robespierre and Danton. In a similar vein, her writings on slavery (a play, a preface, a pamphlet, and an open letter), although they clearly denounce the practice of enslaving human beings, also offer reflections on why that practice is wrong and what courses of action might be morally justified for those who find themselves enslaved and those who want to help free them.

As I hope to demonstrate in what follows, Gouges's reflections on women's situation in society, the rights they are entitled to, the role they might play in obtaining rights for themselves and others, and how the might help society flourish are present in her novels, her plays, and her pamphlets and longer texts,

⁴ For a full list, see Blanc, 2014: 238–47. There are very few recent editions or translations of Gouges's works, but most of them can be found in French on Gallica, the website of the BNF (<https://bit.ly/37JXGtE>), and many have been translated by Clarissa Palmer and posted on her webpage (www.olympedegouges.eu).

such as *Primitive Happiness* (1789). The most famous of these texts is evidently her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (1791). Gouges contemplates through these texts the place of women in humanity and the nature of humanity itself. Her argument for equality comes from an understanding of what it means to be human. But unlike her contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft, she does not focus on the capacity to reason. Human beings, for Gouges, are first and foremost creatures who are capable of living and working together, who can learn while they emulate, and who depend on each other for growth and support throughout their lives. Given the importance of community for human flourishing, it makes sense that women should be seen as equally important to men: communities can only grow through families. Her stance on marriage is closely related to her political philosophy. Gouges is a republican (despite her early attempts at defending the king) who believes that a sound political system which enables the flourishing of citizens should be free of domination, whether that domination comes from hereditary tyrannical power or newly imposed dictatorships. Marriage also, she argues, needs to be free of domination, as a union without freedom will not enable the growth of virtue, and hence happiness.

Even though Gouges's literary and theatrical pieces have a political and ethical message which they develop through philosophical argument, we should also consider her views on what role aesthetics can play in society. Although she partially agrees with Rousseau that too much art is a sign of social decadence, she also believes that he was wrong to see theatre as doing nothing more than pandering to a perverse audience, and acting as a way of infiltrating society with women who ought to be tucked away in their homes.

1.3 A Note on Gender

Olympe de Gouges argued for women to be granted the same civil rights as men. But there are many parts of her work that seem to suggest that she would have been in favour of a difference feminism, one which took into consideration the specificity of female virtues, and argued that they had a role to play in the shaping of the republic. Women could be female and active citizens; they had something specific to bring to politics. This is a view developed by Martina Reuter (2019: 407), following Smart (2011), who argued that Gouges appealed to women's expertise as mothers to argue that home life was also a form of civic life. This was a belief held also by Gouges's friend, the playwright Sébastien Mercier, who, in his futuristic novel *L'An 2440* (1771), appeals to motherhood in order to rethink the body politic (Smart, 2011: 75).

Gouges frequently appeals to women's experience, as mothers and wives, and the way in which this experience affects their virtue. The institution of

marriage, she says, makes women dishonest and conniving (Gouges, 1791), and their status as daughters means they are uneducated and unable to fend for themselves if they are widowed (Gouges, 2014). But these characteristics are tied to women's circumstances, not their essence. Appeals to virtues that are related to motherhood could be either. One could argue that women, through the experience of mothering, develop certain character traits and virtues or that women have certain natural virtues that they are called on to exercise when they become mothers. It is not clear that Gouges believes the latter, rather than the former. Some of her reflections on gender – her own and that of others – suggest, on the contrary, that she found it to be fluid.

In *Départ de Necker, ou les adieux de Madame de Gouges aux Français et A M. Necker*, Gouges describes herself as 'A woman who long ago made herself a man in order to be able to say what she wanted to say' (Gouges, 1790a). This has been read as evidence that she thought women had to acquire men's characteristics in order to participate in politics, or at least that she herself 'emulated and appropriated' the role of the active citizen in order to claim citizenship for women (Scott, 1997: 56). Later in the same text, Gouges says that she had to overcome her 'feminine timidity' in order to address the king and queen and advise them to call back Necker (Gouges, 1790a). But neither of these suggest that she had to overcome her nature. In fact, the ease with which she apparently switches between masculine and feminine personas suggests, on the contrary, that these are superficial traits, masks she can put on and off. This is not to say that all gendered traits are superficial and easy to discard or adopt: some are the product of lifelong habit, and prejudice, and have become second nature. But second nature is not essential nature, and this, I think, is what distinguishes Gouges's views on gender from difference feminism.

Other writings also support the idea that Gouges's views of gender characteristics were fluid and that gender was acquired rather than essential. This is true, in particular, of her references to Madame d'Eon. Madame d'Eon, previously Chevalier d'Eon, was a well-known diplomat who identified as a woman from her midlife until her death, and moved to London to make a living as a celebrity swordsman. Although some Londoners seemed to be unsure about d'Eon's gender of origin at her death, it is unlikely that Gouges did not know that d'Eon had lived half her life as a man. Madame d'Eon only became known as a woman in 1777, by which time Gouges was a part of Parisian society and would have noted the transitioning of a famous chevalier, yet she refers to herself as belonging to the same 'sex':

Mademoiselle Déon [sic] proves only too well that my sex is not lacking in courage. I will admit there are few with this martial character, but there have

been some. And you who are more fearful than women, do you not fear this sex that has distinguished itself in other circumstances, and may I, myself, convince you that Mademoiselle Déon has transmitted to me her intrepidity?
 (Gouges, 1789: 112)⁵

Given that she uses a trans woman as a model for herself, it is unlikely that she would have had a view of feminine virtues as tied to a biological woman's essence. Also, as many other writings suggest that she thinks typical feminine traits are acquired through circumstances (the fact that girls do not receive sufficient education, that women are dominated in marriage), it would seem that Gouges is not, on the whole, inclined to argue for a form of difference feminism.

1.4 Overview of Recent Scholarship and Note on the Texts

Works on Olympe de Gouges as a philosopher are few and far between. Nevertheless, others have written about her, and it is fitting to give an overview of recent scholarship here. Three recent monographs are dedicated to Gouges's work: John Cole's 2011 *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, Carol Sherman's 2013 *Reading Olympe de Gouges*, and Olivier Blanc's 2014 *Olympe de Gouges*. Cole's book offers a translation and a commentary on Gouges's *Rights of Woman*. Unfortunately, Cole announces in the introduction that Gouges was 'no philosopher' (5), which makes it difficult to look for help understanding Gouges's philosophy in his book. Sherman presents Gouges as a dramaturge who used theatrical rhetoric in all her works. She also emphasizes the extent to which calumnious gossip about Gouges has prevented her from becoming the influential philosopher she ought to be. I take up this important theme in my final section, when I discuss her reputation. Blanc's book-length biography (in French) is an exemplary resource for details of Gouges's life and for the context necessary to understand her various publications. Gouges wrote a large number of political pamphlets, the significance of which was in part determined by the events they responded to. Blanc's carefully referenced work makes this reconstruction easier.

Others have, in the past thirty years or so, discussed Gouges's contribution to philosophy and feminism in chapter-length works. Erica Harth in *Cartesian Women* (1992) discusses Gouges's relationship with Condorcet's and Rousseau's writings, showing that while she is close to both, she also disagrees with them. Joan Scott, in her *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (1997), discusses Gouges as a feminist writer and concentrates on her various arguments for giving women rights of citizenship. Scott reads Gouges's efforts to combat revolutionary sexism as an attempt to infuse the masculine concept of citizenship with a feminine

⁵ Interestingly, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, Wollstonecraft also listed Madame d'Eon as an exemplary woman.