

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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8. Marie Olympe Gouze

[Olympe de Gouges]

7 May 1748–3 November 1793



Fig. 8. Marie Olympe Gouze [Olympe de Gouges]. Photo by PawełMM (2018). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/Olympe_de_Gouges.png, CC BY 4.0.

Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne

Article premier

La femme naît libre et demeure égale à l'homme en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l'utilité commune.

II

Le but de toute association politique est la conservation des droits naturels et imprescriptibles de la femme et de l'homme : ces droits sont la liberté, la propriété, la sûreté, et surtout la résistance à l'oppression.

III

Le principe de toute souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la nation, qui n'est que la réunion de la femme et de l'homme : nul corps, nul individu, ne peut exercer d'autorité qui n'en émane expressément.

IV

La liberté et la justice consistent à rendre tout ce qui appartient à autrui ; ainsi l'exercice des droits naturels de la femme n'a de bornes que la tyrannie perpétuelle que l'homme lui oppose ; ces bornes doivent être réformées par les lois de la nature et de la raison.

V

Les lois de la nature et de la raison défendent toutes actions nuisibles à la société : tout ce qui n'est pas défendu par ces lois, sages et divines, ne peut être empêché, et nul ne peut être contraint à faire ce qu'elles n'ordonnent pas.

VI

La loi doit être l'expression de la volonté générale ; toutes les citoyennes et citoyens doivent concourir personnellement, ou par leurs représentants, à sa formation ; elle doit être la même pour tous ; toutes les citoyennes et tous les citoyens, étant égaux à ses yeux, doivent être également admissibles à toutes dignités, places et emplois publics, selon leurs capacités, et sans autres distinctions que celles de leurs vertus et de leurs talents.¹

1 Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), pp. 14–15.

Translation: Article One.

Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions can only be founded on common utility.

II

The goal of every political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man: these rights are liberty, property, safety, and especially resistance to oppression.

III

The principle of every sovereignty resides essentially in the nation, which is nothing but the union of woman and man: no body, no individual, can exert authority which does not derive expressly from it.

Marie Olympe Gouze [Olympe de Gouges] was born a butcher's daughter or bourgeoisie in Montauban. Her mother's family was so closely tied to the Lefranc de Pompignan family that rumor considered Marie illegitimate. In 1765, at seventeen, she was married to a man thirty years her elder, Louis Yves Aubry; she later recalled her repugnance for this man "qui n'était ni riche ni bien né,"² who died after their first child was born around 1766. Marie reached Paris with her son in the early 1770s and took the name Olympe de Gouges, apparently depending on the kindness of men such as Jacques Biétrix de Rozières, who gave her 70,000 francs, and acquiring a certain reputation; but she gave no cause for scandal and lived freely on her own terms, featuring in the *Almanach de Paris* from 1774. Gouges began a course of study in the salons and the theaters of Paris to supplement the education she lacked, even founding a small troupe, purchased in 1787 by the Marquis de La Maisonfort. She wrote her play *Zamore et Mirza* in 1784, and it was produced at the Comédie-Française in December 1789 under the title *L'Esclavage des Noirs*. The play faced attacks from the right on its style and its content, and it folded after three performances. Gouges invoked the play at her trial to indicate her patriotism and her hatred of tyranny. A second abolitionist play and an abolitionist treatise followed. It seems possible that she met La Fayette and the abbé Grégoire at the *Amis des Noirs*; certainly, her abolitionist work was extensive and pioneering.

 IV

Liberty and justice consist in returning all which belongs to others; thus, the exercise of the natural rights of woman is limited only by the perpetual tyranny that man opposes her; these limits must be reformed by the laws of nature and of reason.

V

The laws of nature and of reason forbid all actions harmful to society: everything which is not prohibited by these wise and divine laws cannot be restricted by them, and none can be constrained to do what they do not order.

VI

The law must be the expression of the general will; all citizens female and male must contribute personally or by their representatives in its formation; it must be the same for all; all citizens female and male being equal in its eyes, must be equally admissible to all dignities, places and public employments, according to their capacities, and with no distinctions other than their virtues and their talents.

- 2 Léopold Lacour, *Les origines du féminisme contemporain: trois femmes de la Révolution* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1900), p. 13.

An admirer of Mirabeau, La Fayette, and Necker in 1788–1789, Gouges declared herself a monarchist, seeking parity between legislature and executive. She wanted universal suffrage, and became a republican after November 1792, charting a complex course between the Montagnards, party of Marat and Robespierre, and the Girondins whom they later sent to the guillotine. Almost all her writings call for women to participate in public debate. Her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* remarks, “La femme a le droit de monter sur l’échafaud; elle doit avoir également celui de monter à la Tribune.” Gouges called also for the right to divorce and for freedom from religious vows in her revolutionary theater. In the spring of 1793, Gouges denounced Marat, Robespierre, and the September Massacres, and she denounced the charges leveled at the Girondins on 2 June 1793 in an appeal to Danton. Her suggestion that France might return to monarchy led to her arrest on 20 July 1793. Brought to the Tribunal on 2 November, forty-eight hours after her Girondin friends were guillotined, Gouges defended herself well. Condemned to death, she announced that she was pregnant. The doctors were unable to say, but the public prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville declared the statement false. Standing at the guillotine, she allegedly called out: “Enfants de la Patrie, vous vengerez ma mort.”³

To date, the *Société des études robespierristes* has published not one study on Gouges; their first number on women appeared in 2006. Certainly, she has been the victim of a *légende noire*, calling into question her mental health, suggesting that she was unable to read or write. Writing after all is a fraught, if not dangerous activity. Gouges in her *Déclaration* argues that the forced inferiority of women has led them to use ruse and dissimulation, and certainly frank and honest dealing is easiest when one has the full weight of authority behind one. Transferring Gouges to the Panthéon remains a subject of controversy today.

This text is an extract from Gouges’s *Déclaration* of 14 September 1791, which has seventeen articles (not six), and is prefaced with a dedication to Marie-Antoinette and a preamble and followed by a *postambule*. The whole is well worth reading, though less easily available in France than one might imagine—less available, for instance, than Wollstonecraft’s echo of it the following year in England. That is not a problem faced

3 Nicole Pellegrin, “Les disparues de l’histoire,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, 1 November 2008.

by the *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme* (1789). Two possible rationales present themselves: Gouges's text might be dull enough not to merit reading, or it might be outlandish enough that it fails to speak to any modern reader. Let us see if either of these is the case. To do so, let us focus for a moment on Article One: "La femme naît libre et demeure égale à l'homme en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l'utilité commune." It seems fair to say that sentence one here is not outlandish to a modern eye. Is it, then, unusually dull? That does not seem to be the case. It is, in fact, a mild tweak to Article One of the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme*: "Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits." Gouges has substituted *la femme* for *les hommes*, and moved *libre* to between *naît* and *demeure*: an interesting decision. Woman, says Gouges, is born free; thereafter, she remains equal in rights. This is an arresting observation, with its crisp inference that women do not remain free. It is also anchored elegantly in Rousseau, who was omnipresent in 1791: "L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers," he wrote in *Du contrat social*. One is tempted to conclude that more thought has gone into Gouges's 1791 declaration than into the 1789 version. And Gouges's second sentence, far from being outlandish, is identical to the original 1789 text; it simply applies to women now. In short, Gouges's first article, all two sentences of it, is neither dull nor outlandish; quite the contrary, it is crisp and pertinent. One is tempted to view Gouges's detractors as victims of a couple of cheap sexist tropes—Gouges was unstable, Gouges was illiterate—and to wonder, with some disappointment, at the French capacity to maintain a broad conspiracy of silence on this feminist manifesto for two centuries after its author climbed to the guillotine. To proceed here seems supererogatory. "Femme, réveille-toi," writes Gouges in the *postambule*, and the advice remains well taken.

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