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The Paradoxes and Inconsistencies Created by Leading Women During the French Revolution:

The “Feminist” Problems with Olympe de Gouges, Madame Roland, and Madame de Staël

Jill Harmston

May 3, 2020

The following paper studies the feminist paradoxes presented by the examination of the major publications written by three of the most influential and memorable women of the French Revolution: Olympe de Gouges, Madame de Staël, and Madame Roland. The era of the French Revolution is often romanticized and dramatized, as a result of its turbulent political changes, incredibly colorful cast of characters, and harrowing violence. In the modern day of high feminist consciousness, the late 18th century is accredited as a significant steppingstone for women, with numerous female voices raising their songs and events like the Women's March on Versailles seeming to create a clear message of increasing feminine power. But how did the women of power view the chaotic time in which they lived? Did they support the growing cause for women that would be identified as a feminist movement today? Examining the views of women who participated in the French Revolution and all the change that accompanied it provides scholars with a new light to view feminine awareness at a major point of its history. My research suggests that the answers are much more nuanced than would be expected. Though they may be viewed as influential and mavericks for women of the day, Olympe de Gouges, Germaine de Staël, and Madame Roland were just as likely to elicit sensibilities that contrasted the call for women's rights as they were to appear to support it. I argue that these three women cannot simply be labeled as either for or against the movement towards broader women's rights, but as some complex mixture of the two.

The preexisting scholarship regarding women of the French Revolution is robust and sound. When speaking about the study of women during the French Revolution, the name of Joan Landes is one that commands respect and noting. In her book, Landes makes the argument that the exclusion and degradation of women during the French Revolution was not simply a result of custom or the changing world around them, but actually a critical and essential part of

the formation of the modern public. Landes continues this in her essay “Representing the Body Politic: The Paradox of Gender in the Graphic Politics of the French Revolution.” She expresses that women’s fights against their legal and social constraints were in fact a crucial development in the life of the Revolution. However, scholars such as Olwen Hufton caution against these kinds of claims. Hufton, in his *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*, emphasizes that large, sweeping claims like that of Landes and other historians are misleading. He argues that women of the Revolution cannot be generalized based upon the extraordinary actions of the few vocal and successful women of the time. To create an accurate picture of women during the French Revolution, Hufton claims that historians must narrow their view. Levy and Applewhite endorse this in their analyses of working-class women, “Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris.” While none of these scholars pointedly discuss the situation of de Gouges, de Staël, or Roland, their ideas have helped shape how other historians treat the general subject.¹

When looking at the historiographies of specific individuals, the results are much more condensed. Joan Wallach Scott, a leading scholar on the life of Olympe de Gouges, advocates that de Gouges is a spectacular example of history that can be applied to modern times in “A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer.” However, Scott also resents the great romanticizing of the works of Olympe de Gouges. John Cole seconds this sentiment, yet he digresses on other topics. In contrast to Scott, Cole contends that de Gouges must be understood through a properly

¹ Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Joan Landes, “Representing the Body Politic: The Paradox of Gender in the Graphic Politics of the French Revolution,” in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15-37. Olwen J. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992). Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris” in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79-101.

contexed historical lens.² Moving to the other two great women of interest, the historiographical arguments surrounding Madame Roland and Germaine de Staël generally echo each other. Scholars debate whether both women's influences and interests were a result of their own personal beliefs or an effect of their association with great men of the time. Kathryn Kadane in "The Real Difference between Manon Phlipon and Madame Roland" claims that Madame Roland was a political creature from a very young age, not only after her immersion into the inner circle of Paris politics. Biancamaria Fontana makes a similar argument in favor of Germaine de Staël in *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait*, but instead insists that de Staël's political life was not solely the result of being the daughter of famed financier Jacques Necker. Conversely, Linda Orr posits in her essay "Outspoken Women and the Rightful Daughter of the Revolution: Madame de Staël's *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*" that de Staël's life was more meaningfully influenced by her experiences in contact with politics, not her own thoughts. Likewise, Sien Reynolds argues that Madame Roland's academic abilities were only enacted through her association with her husband and relationships later in life.³

Luckily, when reaching to explore and explain the inner workings of high-ranking actors of the French Revolution, historians are often happily greeted with tome after tome examining topics as small as daily chores or as weighty as the meaning of freedom or happiness. The

² Joan Wallach Scott, "A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes Offer: Olympe de Gouges Claims Rights for Women," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 102-120. John Cole, *In Between the Queen and the Cabby* (Montreal, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

³ Kathryn Ann Kadane, "The Real Difference between Manon Phlipon and Madame Roland," *French Historical Studies* 3, no. 4 (1964): 542-49, doi:10.2307/286157. Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016). Linda Orr, "Outspoken Women and the Rightful Daughter of the Revolution: Madame de Staël's *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*." in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 121-136. Sien Reynolds, *Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

influential Madame Roland, Olympe de Gouges, and Germaine de Staël most decidedly fit within this category. Olympe de Gouges was a prolific author and pamphleteer during the last two decades of the 18th century, with her most recognizable work being the iconic “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen,” as well as countless other works regarding any given political stage of the time. Likewise, Germaine de Staël was an avid writer and published several works ranging from her thoughts on Rousseau, to human nature, and even a heavy and detailed history of the French Revolution, being as she was the only one of the three to survive it. In contrast, Madame Roland, despite being known for her writing prowess and her many contributions to her husband’s official works, only left a single cohesive creation. Madame Roland wrote her lengthy memoirs while incarcerated and awaiting her execution, which were published posthumously.

The Women within the Writing

Marie-Jeanne Phlipon, who would later become known as Madame Roland, was born on March 17, 1754 to a craftsman and his wife, Pierre Gatien Phlipon and Marguerite Bimont.⁴ Throughout her youth with her family and a year in a convent at age eleven, Marie-Jeanne received an education sufficient enough to “ensure [her] an advantageous marriage.”⁵ During this time, Marie-Jeanne was often vexed at the fact that she was not a man and could not rightly receive a better education.⁶ In 1780, at twenty-six, Marie-Jeanne married Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, a middle-level public administrator. The couple welcomed a daughter, Eudora, a year later. In 1792, Roland was selected as France’s Minister of the Interior, only to be deposed mere

⁴ Reynolds, *Marriage and Revolution*, 14.

⁵ Madame Roland, *The Private Memoirs of Madame Roland*, ed. Edward Gilpin Johnson (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1976), 125.

⁶ Reynolds, 232.

months later, and reinstated again in August. Into 1793, the couple was increasingly harassed through written word and statements from the Convention by members of the radical left, including Danton, Marat, and Robespierre. Roland resigned in January 1793. Late May saw the overthrow of the Girondin party in the Convention, the party with which the Rolands were most closely aligned. The Girondins were considered moderates and often were against the execution of the royal family. Madame Roland was arrested by enemies of the Girondin party on June 1st, but Jean-Marie managed to evade arrest. Madame Roland was curiously released and rearrested on June 24th. She was executed on November 8th, 1793 and her husband committed suicide when given the news on November 10th.⁷

Tragically bound to meet a similar fate, Marie de Gouze was born on May 7th, 1748. Marie's mother, Anne Olympe, was married to Pierre Gouze. Her paternity was publicly known to be Jean-Jacques Lefranc, Marquis de Pompignan. Pierre Gouze died soon after Marie's birth. At the early age of seventeen, Marie was forced to marry Louis Yves Aubry, a man she was disgusted by for his lack of intellect. Marie and Louis had a son, Pierre Aubry, though Louis soon died as the result of a flood. Marie moved to Paris changed her name to Olympe de Gouges. Colloquially translated, "gouges" would have equated to "soldier's slut." This irony was certainly not lost on the ever-dramatic Olympe. De Gouges spent much of her time writing plays, and saw a significant amount of accomplishment as such, despite being a woman. Throughout her life, Olympe remained a moderate and sympathized for the king.⁸ As with Madame Roland, de Gouges was arrested following the fall of the Girondins. Ironically, in an attempt to stay her

⁷ Roland, *The Private Memoirs of Madame Roland*, 261-263.

⁸Sophie Mousset, *Women's Rights and the French Revolution: A Biography of Olympe de Gouges* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 15-50.

execution, she claimed special privilege as a woman, declaring she was pregnant at forty-four. Despite her somewhat misguided attempts otherwise, Olympe de Gouges was executed on November 3rd, 1793. She was the first woman to be executed following the beheading of Queen Marie Antionette, the woman to whom she addressed her “Declaration.”⁹

The only one of this list to survive the guillotines of the Terror, Anne Louis Germaine Necker was born April 22nd, 1766, to Suzanne Curchod Necker and Jacques Necker.¹⁰ Madame Necker personally approached the task of Germaine’s education. A devout disciple of Rousseau, she embarked to raise her daughter strictly following the famous literary education of Emile, the subject of Rousseau’s *Emile*. Madame Necker kept multiple copies of the book in her library, but not a single Bible. Until she was twelve years old, Germaine was under the strict tutelage of her mother, without a single playmate, though she was repeatedly exposed to the greatest minds of the era. Madame Roland hosted a salon of great esteem, where young Germaine was a constant fixture, attended by the likes of Marmontel, Raynal and Grimm.¹¹ Germaine almost obsessively admired her father, who was appointed Director General of Finance by Louis XVI in 1776.¹² In early 1786, Germaine married the Swedish ambassador to France Baron Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein. As ambassadress, Madame de Staël began to make her mark on France.¹³ Madame de Staël also hosted a famous salon and had the ears of some of the most powerful men in France, the likes of Tallyrand, Narbonne, Barnave, and even Thomas Jefferson. Following the onset of

⁹ Mousset, *Women’s rights and the French Revolution*, 96-97.

¹⁰J. Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age: A Life of Madame de Staël* (Indianapolis, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1958), 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23-25.

¹² Herold, *Mistress to an Age*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

the Revolution, Madame de Staël spent her time travelling between Paris, her family's estate in Switzerland, and running around Europe plotting escapes for her friends and her string of lovers.¹⁴ Beyond the purview of this study, Madame de Staël became a conversational sparring partner for Napoleon and died on her family's estate at Coppet on July 14th, 1814.¹⁵

During the leadup to the Terror and the subsequent fall of its leader Robespierre, the French Revolution was largely hostile to women. Joan Landes uses the representations of women and the use of women as representations to explain the general views held of women during the early 1790's. Chaste, modest, and subdued women were cherished, or at least the idea of them was. However, the slightest deviation from this perfect mold was reprehensible. There was a complete separation between the moral and sexual tendencies of all women. As a whole, women were viewed as sexual beings, therefore worthy of disdain and suppression. The contrast of this ideology becomes clear when Landes looks to the representations of liberty and aristocracy, two major points of interest during the Revolution. Aristocracy was often represented as a diseased body, and almost always a female one. This female body was made to appear sinful and corrupt through sexuality, correlating to the sins attributed to the Old Regime. Conversely, liberty, the great goal of the Revolution, was also referred to as a feminine object. However, this female was completely desexualized and exalted.¹⁶ These two examples speak to the two extreme positions women could be relegated to: the perfectly moral virgin or the unethical, shameful coquette. As the former was widely unrealistic, women were more apt to be viewed as the latter in general, creating a society that was largely unwelcoming to outspoken women.

¹⁴ Herold, 90-95.

¹⁵ Ibid., 471.

¹⁶ Landes, "Representing the Body Politic," 26-30.

The Problem of a Rousseauian Feminist

The three supposed heroines of this paper each fancied themselves to be privy to the great knowledge of the proper ordering of society, yet each of them defied it in their own distinct ways. During the late 18th century, the bibles of educated society were the works of the great *philosphe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In modern terms, Rousseau was decidedly anti-feminist, spending more than a few pages detailing the proper place of women within the laws of nature. Simply put, this position was the subordinate of men. Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Olympe de Gouges each claimed to be devoted followers of this famed Genevan, despite Madame de Staël's extreme distaste for Rousseau's idolized fatherland.¹⁷ This presents a philosophical dilemma. The idea of a Rousseauian feminist or female leader itself is paradoxical. If his writings are to be any judge, Rousseau himself would have disapproved of each of these woman; de Gouges for her outspokenness, Roland for her influence over her husband, and de Staël for her lack of restraint and moderation, just to name a few. Their admiration of a school of thought that rebuked their ways of life creates an inconsistency that calls into question the reliability of retrospective declarations of the feminism of de Gouges, Roland, and de Staël.

To condense the work of several hundred pages and many hours of reading, Jean-Jacques Rousseau posits that the law of nature, among many other things, dictates the subservience of women below men. Women, Rousseau continues, do wrong to complain about this or other gender driven inequalities, as they are not the result of any ill-meant prejudice, but should take comfort that they were actually the result of reason—a quality necessary for enlightened society. Additionally, Rousseau cautions women against writing or otherwise publicizing their thoughts,

¹⁷ Herold, 104.

as women writers are invariably led astray and away from virtue. Even more importantly, though, is the need for men to not take the assistance of women who claim to be academics, so called blue stockings, as they would be ill-advised. In Rousseau's eye, women cannot properly enter academia, as their entire existence is constantly revolving around their sex and gender, compared to men's ability to act beyond their masculinity. Put otherwise, women are never able to view the world other than through their greatly distorted lens of feminine sexuality, whereas men could be unbiased.¹⁸ Such were the views of a man elevated by the majority of educated France, including Madame Roland, Madame de Staël, and Olympe de Gouges.

Olympe de Gouges most certainly could not be disconnected from the Rousseauian camp willingly. In her works condemning slavery, de Gouges repeatedly compared herself to her Rousseau—her dear Jean-Jacques, as she familiarly referred to him as—and was an avid student of his natural law.¹⁹ She even went as far as to claim to be a representation of many of Rousseau's greatest qualities, including his gallantry and his acknowledgement of even incompetent adversaries as his equals.²⁰ De Gouges was quick to call upon quotes of Rousseau to justify her positions and ideas.²¹ To claim that de Gouges' laws of nature, at least in theory, were a different set than that of Rousseau's would be a difficult position to argue, to be sure.

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Duties of Women," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1995), 569-571.

¹⁹ Olympe de Gouges, "Black Slavery, or The Happy Shipwreck," in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in the French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish and Francoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent and London: Kent State University Press, 1994), 89.

²⁰ Olympe de Gouges, "Response to the American Champion," in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in the French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish and Francoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent and London: Kent State University Press, 1994), 123.

²¹ Cole, *In Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 119.

Despite her subscription to Rousseau's line of thinking, de Gouges often contradicted his declarations in substantial ways. First and foremost, the very fact that de Gouges published countless pamphlets and posters with the intent of influencing the trajectory of the whole of France was a direct contradiction to Rousseau's rejection of female writers attempting glory as a result of vanity. Going even further, the second of de Gouges' cardinal sins against Rousseau was her aggressive public advocacy for women's rights in the form of her "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen." This would have been a direct and deliberate strike upon the face of Rousseau's law of nature. Yet, in apparent conflict with her own words, de Gouges calls for the application of laws of nature to rectify the sorry state of women.²² There can be no doubt that it is Rousseau's laws to which she referred, most likely as a ploy to convince her readership that her radical claims were in fact logical and rally them to her cause. In doing so, she created a discrepancy. If the laws of nature were all that were necessary to rectify society and government, why would the degradation of women be the single exception? De Gouges' attempt to reconcile Rousseauian nature with women's rights was not without fault.

The St. Peter of Rousseau's disciples, Madame Roland receives the distinction of being the strongest devotee of Rousseau. She described his writings as "the proper food for [her] mind."²³ Looking back on her life while awaiting her execution, Madame Roland expressed relief that she had only discovered Rousseau later in life, as she would never have read another author after him.²⁴ Though she would never speak or write a syllable against him, Madame Roland made a habit of acting in ways contrary to Rousseau's guidelines. Rousseau deeply

²²Olympe de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen," in *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, ed. John Cole (Montreal, London, and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 30-32.

²³ Roland, 273.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

resented the idea of women in politics, even in an assisting role. Despite the largest part of her influence being behind the scenes as her husband's secretary and speech writer, Madame Roland's reach was expansive. In fact, Madame Roland claimed that hardly a single statement or policy enacted by her husband was created somewhere other than her own desk.²⁵ To continue in Rousseau's train of thought, this would have been utterly ruinous for both Madame Roland and her husband, destroying her innocent feminine virtue and leading her husband falsely into destruction. In her personal action, Madame Roland publicly accused Robespierre of corruption, the leader of the Convention at the time, as well as stormed the Convention to demand rectification following her husband's arrest.²⁶ Actions such as this by a woman would be nearly indefensible in a Rousseauian context. Despite her convictions of women's proper place in society being below men, Madame Roland found herself creating a spectacle, as well as an example for later women to act, no matter her intention in the exact opposite direction.

While she may not have been the most devoted, Madame de Staël was certainly the most acquainted with Rousseau. Madame Necker, de Staël's mother, was intent on raising her only daughter exactly in the image of Rousseau's *Emile*.²⁷ Though raised to be the perfect Rousseauist, Madame de Staël scorned Rousseau's perfect feminine virtues of moderation and restraint to no end, claiming herself that she had none and preferred it that way.²⁸

Though she never advocated for women's suffrage, Madame de Staël set another example of a woman who acted beyond Rousseau's, society's, and even her own proclamations

²⁵ Roland, 278.

²⁶ Reynolds, 266.

²⁷ Herold, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

that women belonged in the private sphere and household. She presented herself in a paradoxical manner, both disdaining women's "slavery, always domestic," and defending Rousseau's views of women with passion:

Rousseau tried to prevent women from taking part in public affairs and playing a brilliant role, but how much pleasure he gave them when he talked about them! Ah! He may have tried to deprive them of some rights foreign to their destiny, but how he gave back the ones that belong to them forever! If he tried to decrease women's influence on the way men make decisions, how much he consecrated the power they have over men's happiness!...Last of all, he believes in love; he is forgiven; what does it matter to women that his mind quarrels about power with them, when his heart submits to them?²⁹

Despite being a woman of great intelligence and herself meddling in the political public and domestic private spheres, she emphasized the division between the public and private facets of life in revolutionary France, all but declaring Rousseau the hero for women's rights within the private sphere while demolishing the ground under their feet in the public sphere. If one abides with the concept of women being exclusively relegated to the private sphere, her logic is valuable. However, de Staël herself did not. De Staël was actively involved in the politics of the day and sought to live within public eye. "To talk politics," she was recorded remarking, "is to be alive."³⁰ Beyond her own personal interference with the lives of France's leaders, Madame de Staël was known to order her husband, the ambassador from Sweden, about Paris.³¹ In Madame de Staël's case, to be a woman of Rousseauian belief, one had to accept their banishment to the private sphere. However, she failed to do so herself. Once again, we see a contradiction between the words and actions of a devout Rousseauian woman.

²⁹Germaine de Staël, "Letters on Rousseau: On the *Letter on Spectacles*," in *An Extraordinary Woman: Selected Writings of Germaine de Staël*, ed. Vivian Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 42-43.

³⁰Goodden, *Madame de Staël*, 2.

³¹ Herold, 76.

Their best efforts aside, women who were simultaneously enamored by Rousseau and governed by intelligence and reason were unable to reconcile the two, even those as great as Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Olympe de Gouges. The application of Rousseau to the power of women within society only creates paradoxes, and these famous ladies unknowingly fell victim to it. The insistence upon Rousseauian principles created cleavages between the words and actions of women working for their proper place in society, if even for their own benefit. This conflict between dedication to Rousseau, as a societal authority and proponent of women's subservience, and the forward movement of women is difficult to overlook, creating an air of mild hypocrisy in some ways.

Discrepancies of Definition

Prior to the French Revolution, examples of women rising beyond the home and into power were rather scarce and easy to declare as mere exceptions to the rule. Women rising as a more unified group was largely unheard of in the annals of history. Women had few models to look to in their past. It is unsurprising then, that the uniformity and clarity of their cause was lacking. As understandable as it may be, upon inspection, this creates a number of inconsistencies that ail the credibility or conviction of the movement as a whole, not to mention simple confusion. Similar to the case of the Rousseauian feminist, Olympe de Gouges was the greatest and most vocal offender of this lack of clarity, both advocating for women's rights and for their authority within the home. Madame Roland and Madame de Staël, likewise, were apt to preach for women's conventional relegation to the home yet act in a way that was anything but conventional. These variations draw a strange and conflicting image of the true intentions of these three esteemed women.

As with anything in her life, Olympe de Gouges declared her feelings and beliefs regarding where women should sit in society and government with extreme conviction and irrefutable confidence, even when contradicting herself. The end goal of de Gouges' *pièce de résistance*, her "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen," was to put forward the rights that women should bear throughout the whole of France.

The mothers, the daughters, the sisters, representatives [fem.] of the nation, demand to be constituted in a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, forgetfulness, or scorn for the rights of woman are the sole causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman...so that the acts of the power of women and those of the power of men may be compared at any moment with the purpose of every political institution and be the more respected...³²

Despite her belief and proclamation that women were, "born free and [remained] equal to man in rights," and deserved the fullest incorporation into the French nation and politics, de Gouges herself often placed women's rightful power within the home and family, as well as their sexual power, even for the most powerful of women.³³ In addressing her "Declaration," de Gouges pleads with Queen Marie Antionette to lead the way for women and do her best to rectify the chaotic nation. However, de Gouges claims that "the true duty of a Queen" is her influence as a mother and wife, not the political realm in which she was immersed. This assertion that the leading woman of the French government's role was within the private sphere contrasts de Gouges' other contentions of women's right to and necessity in full participation within the public sphere.

³² De Gouges, "Declaration," 30-31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

Becoming lost in the ambiguities of femininity was a common occurrence for de Gouges. In a number of pamphlets, as well as her defense of King Louis XVI, de Gouges made a habit of explicitly claiming that her works and thoughts should not be judged with any reference to the fact that she was a woman. She abhorred the idea that women should receive any deference, either positive or negative, as a result of their sex. Despite this, she was wont to revel in feminine stereotypes when they suited her purposes.³⁴ In establishing her authority to speak in her “Declaration,” de Gouges calls on feminine courage in childbirth to affirm women’s superiority. This reference to a distinctly feminine characteristic, not an attribute that could be equally attained by either sex, suggests that she did not view women and men as truly equal in all facets. In terms of stereotypes, de Gouges engendered many of her works for the sake of their increased reception and efficacy. Presenting herself in more feminine terms would have made her appear more honest, as women were viewed as the restorers of morals within society. Likewise, this allowed her works the opportunity to be viewed as attempts to civilize or correct the morals of society, not a call to arms for revolution.³⁵ De Gouges’ refusal to conform to either side of the proverbial line, her invocation of feminine typecasts paired with her claims of the inaccuracy of these same stereotypes, presents a sizeable chink in the armor of de Gouge’s arguments and a set of standards almost as indecipherable as de Gouge herself.

Throughout her *Memoirs*, Madame Roland meditated on a number of philosophical subjects, including the path to true happiness:

In the midst of doubts, uncertainty, and investigation, relative to these grand objects, I concluded without hesitation that the unity of the individual, if I may so express myself,

³⁴ Scott, “A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer,” 108-109.

³⁵ Gregory S. Brown, “The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 389, www.jstor.org/stable/30053985.

the most entire harmony, that is to say, between his opinions and actions was necessary to his personal happiness.³⁶

In spite of her belief that happiness is found in the coherence of thoughts and behaviors, Madame Roland acted in way very different from the literature she professed. She was a staunch subscriber to the belief that women should remain within the home and that her duty was to ensure that the children and the house were properly ordered—duties that should be carried out silently and without the slightest fanfare.³⁷ However, it was with Madame Roland, not her husband, that many notable legislators corresponded. This communication, conducted in her husband's stead, was commonplace and well-known.³⁸ Such was Madame Roland's reach that, when the Convention was discussing requesting that Roland remain the Minister of the Interior, Georges Danton remarked, "If you invite him, invite Madame Roland too; everybody knows that he has not been alone in his department."³⁹ Madame Roland was most certainly not a reticent and submissive housewife, as she claimed was proper. While she may not have appeared on the floor of the Convention or given public speeches regarding her politics, she pressed her influence through her guidance of her husband and her actions, though always on his behalf—at least in name.

While Madame Roland may have acted against her own teachings, Madame de Staël would have steadfastly approved of her conduct. De Staël posited that if "the role [women] play in public affairs comes from their attachment for the man in control—if sentiment alone dictates their opinions and prompts their actions—they are not leaving the path nature has laid out for

³⁶ Roland, 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

³⁸ Reynolds, 192.

³⁹ Roland, 208.

them.”⁴⁰ However, in any other scenario, de Staël claimed that reason compelled women to remain obscure and that it was to their benefit to remain ensconced in domestic affairs. Yet, Madame de Staël did not heed her own admonitions. Much like the Roland household, the de Staël’s political situation was greatly influenced by the woman of the house. In contrast, Madame de Staël was a driving force in her own right, not simply working behind or as an agent of her husband, often going as far as to give him orders regarding how to proceed.⁴¹ By her own admission, acting as such placed her on a path opposite to what nature decreed for a woman. The open and flagrant abuse of societal norms like that committed by Madame de Staël were rare and most certainly are not reconciled with her demure and subdued writings. This conflict between real life and literature begs the question of whether Madame de Staël found it impossible or unseemly to abide by her own evaluations, or if she plainly saw herself as above them and an exception of the rule.

The actions, words, and thoughts of Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Olympe de Gouges create a number of paradoxes between each other, as well as themselves in some cases. Should intentions be weighed heavier than words or actions, or vice versa? When looking into the past, it is paramount that one does not do so with blinders on. Words should not be considered completely removed from actions, and likewise actions should not be wholly separated from the thoughts or beliefs of an individual. To examine the lives of de Gouges, de Staël, and Roland, the totality of their histories—the culmination of their words, thoughts, actions, and other life recordings—have to be considered. When doing so, the nuance of belief

⁴⁰ Germaine de Staël, “Letters on Rousseau: On the *Letter on Spectacles*,” in *An Extraordinary Woman: Selected Writings of Germaine de Staël*, ed. Vivian Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 160.

⁴¹ Herold, 76.

comes forward. Historians cannot rightly say that one is accurate and the other is not. The inconsistencies presented by these women in their biographies are intriguing and ambiguous, creating a grey area of uncertainty in regard to their true intentions. If one were to judge any single woman by an individual work or action, one would most likely conclude the opposite of what another would have decided with only a slightly different piece of evidence.

Lacking the Makings of a Movement

It is not hard to assume that another requirement to be declared a feminist is to act in the interests of women as a whole, not simply be a woman fighting for their own place or for a certain group or class of women. As admirable as a fight for a *woman's* rights may be, it is wholly different from a fight or dedication to *women's* rights. It is this lack of larger vision that Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Olympe de Gouges all were guilty of promoting. These three women, though they differed in many of their aims and actions, all believed themselves to be superior women—exceptions to the rule, so to speak—and therefore worthy of greater opportunities than the remainder of the population. Going beyond only being concerned for their individual cases, all three great women held personal disdain for the lower classes of women, though Madame de Staël and Madame Roland were much more outspoken on this subject.

As previously noted, the examples of women of science and of letters were somewhat rare prior to the French Revolution. It, therefore, is understandable that women of Madame de Staël's, Madame Roland's, and Olympe de Gouges' calibers would view themselves as extraordinary. They certainly did not view all women as equally endowed with talent or intellect, or much less superior to that of men. Olympe de Gouges clarified this point through the use of her character Madame Pinçon in *The Amended Philosopher or The Alleged Cuckold*. "If all women were like me, a regiment of Knights of Eon would be raised in less than a day; it would

not retreat when faced with the enemy!” Later in the story, Madame Pinçon, a surrogate mouthpiece for de Gouges herself, resents the fact that she seems to be the only strong woman of substance surrounded by weak-minded women.⁴² Despite her great call to arms for women in her “Declaration,” de Gouges regretted that other women did not share her vision or her drive. Madame Roland, likewise, believed that she was unique and one of the few worthy to be compared to some of the great reformers of history.⁴³ She also was apt to acknowledge her superiority over her peers from a young age.⁴⁴ In viewing herself, there was no comparison among her female acquaintances. For both of these women, there was little connection between themselves and the women of France as a whole. There would be no air of camaraderie or common experience for them, leaving little room to claim an intention towards the greater good of women.

Going a step further than simply elevating themselves, Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Olympe de Gouges were all guilty of a pointed disdain for women of the lower classes. De Staël wrote repeatedly of being exasperated by the pettiness of women beneath her and that she would not sully herself to speak of intellectual matters with them.⁴⁵ Madame Roland, quite vocally, found illiterate or uneducated women deplorable. Specifically, she was highly judgmental of female writers as unable to provide the truth and unworthy of fame. She declared to her dear friend Sainte-Lette that she would, “eat my fingers sooner than become an

⁴² Mousset, 39.

⁴³ Roland, 193

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁵ Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principle Events of the French Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 75.

author!”⁴⁶ The irony of this statement simply cannot be overlooked, as her *Memoirs* were what memorialized her in history, though posthumously. De Gouges, on the other hand, was more subdued—a rare term to describe the fiery author—on this subject. While she never explicitly evoked a disdain for lower classes, de Gouges was in support of social distinctions for the whole of society, as she delineated their execution in her “Declaration.”⁴⁷ Much of what can be read about each of these women has been greatly romanticized and overlook their indifference towards the well-being of women as a whole, only assuming that they must have been a part of the larger movement of the time. However, when this aspect is acknowledged, whatever feminist appearances they may have manifested seem to have been largely on a self-serving and self-interested level, not a feminism for all.

Not the Solution, But the Cause Itself

Beyond withholding sympathy from a large portion of women, oftentimes women themselves were believed to be at fault for their situation. The French Revolution was generally hostile to women, and this subject was no exception. According to Olympe de Gouges, the corruption and inadequacy of the government was a result of the “nocturnal administration of women.”⁴⁸ Even in her passionate call for women’s rights, de Gouges claims that “women have done more harm than good.”⁴⁹ Additionally, there are only a handful of unprecedented additions to de Gouges’ “Declarations” compared to the original *Declaration of the Rights of Man and*

⁴⁶ Roland, 322.

⁴⁷ De Gouges, “Declaration,” 31.

⁴⁸ Joan Wallach Scott, “French Feminists and the Rights of ‘Man’: Olympe De Gouges’s Declarations,” *History Workshop*, no. 28 (1989): 12, www.jstor.org/stable/4288921.

⁴⁹ De Gouges, “Declaration,” 35.

Citizen; that is, generally de Gouges only slightly altered the articles to apply to the female population, often just adding the words “and women.” However, in one of the few striations from this path, de Gouges showed her mistrust in women when she added a law that would punish women for seeking out the money of men.⁵⁰ Even de Gouges, who could be seen as the best friend to women among the group considered in this paper, blamed women for their deplorable lot in life and saw them as greatly to blame for their situation, not just pawns to the power of men.

Madame de Staël seconded this notion, adding that one of the reasons for women’s lowly status was the cruelty of women towards other women, creating a self-harming cycle of degradation.⁵¹ This repression of talent was caused, in de Staël’s reasoning, by the anxiety that the talents of women created amongst other women.⁵² Thus, even when de Gouges or Madame de Staël were championing the cause of women—either directly, as de Gouges “Declaration,” or indirectly, as Madame de Staël’s disregard for society roles of women—there was no sympathy for the plight women found themselves in. This apparent contradiction, blaming women for the very bondage they were trying to break free from themselves, presents a paradigm of vacillation and condescension. In the minds of Olympe de Gouges and Madame de Staël, women’s fight for a higher place in France was not a fight against men or even law; it was an internal fight against women.

⁵⁰ De Gouges, “Declaration,” 38.

⁵¹ Germaine de Staël, “Women who Cultivate Literature,” in *Madame de Staël on Politics, Literature, and National Character*, ed. Morroe Berger (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1964), 186.

⁵² De Staël, “On Vanity,” 161.

Conclusion

The difficulty any historian knows well is the frustration of lack of evidence or sources. After all, history is the study of the past. One cannot simply rewrite history by running another experiment, recalculating data, analyzing some other reaction, or conducting a different survey. Historians are only privy to what history has blessed them with. Barring the discovery of additional long-lost documents, scholars will continue to reevaluate historical documents, art, or other human creations. Different arrangements of historical evidence can lead to varying interpretations, but it is important to stay true to the evidence given and not to produce interpretations beyond its means. Creating broad-sweeping narratives and generalizations, while useful in some respects, hinder this.

When historians and scholars look to the Women's March on Versailles, women's participation in local sections, or even the existence of a work the likes of de Gouges' "Declaration" and assert that the French Revolution was a step forward for women's rights, they lose the nuance and individuality of the era. The French Revolution saw immense social change and the growing prominence of non-titled citizens. In a time of such drastic societal upheaval, it becomes even more difficult to group the whole of women together. Further categorizations are necessary. Even when only analyzing women's thoughts on women's rights and their proper role in society within the upper echelons of Paris society, a decisive answer is rather elusive and resides in sea of grey. As in the examples of Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Olympe de Gouges, the paradoxes and inconsistencies that arise from attempting to fit them within the parameters of modern feminism, or even the rising feminist consciousness of the French Revolution, are more than strong enough to raise doubts about their true intentions and relationships with women's movements. While these contradictions are in disagreement with the

larger view of women's movement toward modern feminism, they do not detract from it. In fact, acknowledging the imperfection of a standard enlivens and enriches scholarship.

Above all else, the subjects of history are human. No matter how exhaustively scholars research, there will continue to be exceptions to any rule they create. One must acknowledge these exceptions and use them to deepen the study of women's history. Just as people today, people of the past were not perfect, nor completely constant. The complexities of Madame Roland's, Madame de Staël's, and Olympe de Gouges' beliefs and actions did not occur within a vacuum, but in a world full of change and upheaval. Superimposing one-dimensional boxes upon their lives does not do them justice.

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