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Reading Olympe de Gouges by Carol Sherman (review)

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BOOK REVIEW



Carol Sherman. *Reading Olympe de Gouges*.
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116 pages. \$70.00.

Reviewed by Meili Steele

From Rights to Normative Imaginaries: The Other Olympe de Gouges

The status of the eighteenth-century French dramatist and political writer Olympe de Gouges has been a controversial topic in the press recently because of proposals that she be admitted to the Panthéon, the monument that honors important figures in the history of France. Prior to the 1990s, her work was not widely known beyond *La Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791), which is her response to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, adopted in 1789 by the National Assembly.¹ In fact, as Carol Sherman points out in *Reading Olympe de Gouges*, what attention her work has gotten, from Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's dismissal to attacks by contemporary thinkers, demonstrates a failure to understand her project. Sherman's book refutes these claims not by polemic but by comprehensive, careful analysis of her texts. This book puts de Gouges's work in the social, political and literary contexts necessary to understand the revision of the institutions of her time that she proposed. Sherman takes the focus off the principles laid out in *La Déclaration* and turns her attention to the textual articulation of norms in her other writings—writings that have been largely ignored or misread. Sherman's book is required reading for anyone wanting to participate, not just in the debate about de Gouges and the Panthéon, but also in broader discussions about the history of feminism and the French Revolution.

De Gouges's biography is indispensable to understanding her work, both because of the circumstances of her birth in 1748 and because of her active

participation in the political events of her time. She was an illegitimate child who believed her father to be the dramatist and poet Le Franc de Pompignan. He and his heirs refused to recognize her. She was married at seventeen, gave birth at eighteen and was quickly widowed. She came to Paris in 1784, where she added French to her native Occitan, composed plays, some of which were presented in Paris and in the provinces, and began to produce political commentary that she printed and pasted on walls around Paris. Her efforts to stop the violent events leading to the Terror brought about her execution in November 1793. After a review of the varied reception of her work (chapter 1), Sherman divides her discussion of de Gouges's writings into two parts: her nontheatrical political essays and letters (chapter 2 "The Drama of Rhetoric") and her theater (chapter 3 "The Rhetoric of Drama").

Chapter 1 opens with an analysis of one of de Gouges's frequently misunderstood texts, *Mémoire de Mme de Valmont*, and unpacks its complexity and intertextuality. In the protagonist's plea, she asks for help from the family of her biological father, who has refused to recognize her. The *Mémoire* is composed of letters by different family members, which serve evidentiary and dramatic purposes. Sherman carefully displays the techniques (both literary and rhetorical) and the thematic complexity of the text. De Gouges plays with the conventions of the epistolary novel and its elaborate relationships between "author" and characters, its claim to truth, its deployment of parody and its use of embedded letters. By bringing together letters from the protagonist's mother, sister, and her half-brother, de Gouges shows the social intricacies of the patriarchy's collective disregard for children's suffering.²

In the second half of this chapter, Sherman examines de Gouges's political letters, in which she speaks as if she were on the public rostrum, to which women had no access.³ The letters were addressed to "the People," the Estates General, national representatives and the Queen, to whom she also sent *The Declaration*. In these writings, de Gouges takes up the economic and political crises facing the state and imagines the nation assembled before her—"Oh, people, unhappy citizens" etc.—in a manner similar to Rousseau's presentation of *The Discourse on Inequality*. She urges the people to respect the *Parlements*, the *Etats-Généreaux*, and the king at the same time that she asks the authorities to respect the people. She makes predictions of what will happen as a way of guiding the participants in these struggles. De Gouges seeks a balance between the extremes of political debate in order to avoid the impending violence.⁴ Sherman elucidates the rhetorical techniques in each of these letters and brings

out not just the technical achievement, but the ethos that de Gouges tries to establish. The letters are not accounts of the events or her feelings about them; instead, they are public addresses, written as orations, as op-eds for the eighteenth century. She thus assumes the position she was denied and speaks directly to her imagined attentive audience in a highly dialogic fashion.

In chapter 3, Sherman examines de Gouges's plays through three comprehensive thematic lenses rather than attempting a formal taxonomy as other critics have done. The first two rubrics, "Schools for Husbands" and "School for Wives," show how de Gouges concentrates on the transformation of existing marriages, rather than taking up the typical focus of dramatic plots of the period: young love thwarted by external forces. Although young characters of this sort appear, they are secondary to the existing marriages in the plays, which is where she points to the structural changes necessary to make marriage a successful institution.

A good example of such change can be seen in *Le philosophe corrigé ou le cocu supposé* (1787). A young marquis is bored with his sexually timid wife, as he reveals in a soliloquy, and goes back to his garrison. His wife, aware of the problem, speaks to her friends and discovers that she is not alone in experiencing an incompatibility between sexual desire and respectability. She and her friends then plot to help her overcome her timidity and to awaken and revise her husband's desire. The marquise disguises herself at a masked ball and seduces her husband. She spends several nights with her husband without revealing her identity, and he falls in love with the mysterious stranger. She returns home pregnant and gives birth to a child. The date of the birth leads the marquis to believe that he has been cuckolded while he was away. The marquis, who takes himself to be a man of reason, tries unsuccessfully to contain his anger as he suffers through several scenes of emotional conflict that have been orchestrated by his wife and friends. In one scene, while ruminating about his dishonor, the marquis looks at the baby and is tempted to kill it; however, he is seduced by the child and her resemblance to her mother. Through the marquis, de Gouges argues for the worth of all children, regardless of their lineage. Nonetheless, the play does not demonize the marquis, but instead concentrates on displaying his ambivalent feelings toward his wife and the child and his desire for the mysterious woman. When the truth is finally revealed, the marquis is made to understand the desperation that drove his wife to run such risks to save the marriage. He is forced to face the destructive practices of his time in his own person, practices that split off sexual desire from marriage: he has committed

adultery with his wife—cuckolded himself—and fathered a child he hated. Through the collective agency of her friends, the marquise has become the expressive and respectable wife. The marquis reconciles with the marquise as both wife and lover, denounces conventional aristocratic sexual practices, and embraces the stable family unit.

De Gouges develops similar themes in *La nécessité du divorce* (circa 1784). Here a young aristocratic wife suspects her husband of courting another woman. She confronts the latter. Upon learning that the husband told the mistress he was unmarried, the two women become partners rather than competitors. This entire scene is played out while the husband, who overhears their conversation, is properly schooled by what he hears. Sherman sums up the thematic point:

To defeat the politics of adultery, the consequent damage to family stability and thus to the children and to the state, de Gouges replaces authoritarian enforcement of rules regarding marriage with examples of women joining forces and bringing the husband and father back to responsibility for the core family. . . . She invents male characters who show their increasing consciousness of the beings less powerful than they. (*Reading* 66)

De Gouges takes the classical types from the literary tradition and transforms them so that heroines have an agency in the utopian world of the play. The heroines return “good-but-mistaken men to the family, they push the irredeemable by shame and banishment, and they rescue young women from their persecutors. In these ways, seduction plots are altered, reversed, and reinvented. The plots’ victims, their heroines, gain substance and personhood” (69).⁵ De Gouges unites the transformations imagined in her plays with the political revolution taking place in society. As general Dumouriez says in the play named after his character, “In politics, in battle, everywhere, women follow in our footsteps, and your sex rivals ours; such is the fruit of our sovereign revolution” (*L’Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles*, cited in *Reading* 76).

De Gouges’s concern is not just with adults, however, but also with children. She puts children on stage and gives them rights and stories, such as the right to know their fathers. Hence, we find fathers who long for the lost children, who welcome the adoption of orphans. We see this in *Le Philosophe corrigé*, for example. And Sherman gives a detailed reading of de Gouges’s rewrite of Beaumarchais’s *Figaro* in her *Mariage inattendu de Chérubin*, showing how

her work uses intertextuality—which includes allusions to Diderot and bourgeois drama as well—to take up the plight of women and children in ways that Beaumarchais ignores. Sherman points out that de Gouges seeks to replace the existing formal relationship between classes with “new bases for caring” (81)—bases that emerge from biology, family history, and emotional attachments. To be sure, the principle of natural rights informs her understanding of these new social arrangements, but here we find natural rights re-imagined in her own terms.

In this section, as she does throughout the book, Sherman gives an appreciative analysis of the language and textures of de Gouges’s argument. Sherman shows how de Gouges took the plots and figures that inhabited the imagination of her time and reworked them into a distinctive normative vision, a vision unlike that of any other thinker of the period. This study of Olympe de Gouges offers a new portrait of a subtle and complex thinker who draws on literary and nonliterary genres to speak to the social, political and literary issues of her time in ways that have not yet been adequately recognized.

NOTES

1. For the recent debate, see Blanc “Olympe De Gouges: Une Féministe,” and Perfetti.
2. Sherman continues her analysis of the changes in the institution of the family in eighteenth-century France that she began in *The Family Crucible in Eighteenth-Century Literature*.
3. One of the most famous quotations from de Gouges’s *La Déclaration* is: “La femme a le droit de monter à l’échafaud; elle doit avoir également le droit de monter à la tribune” (“Woman has the right to mount to the scaffold; she ought also to have the right to mount to the rostrum”; cited in Sherman 33). She made it to the scaffold, where she was beheaded in 1793, but was denied the rostrum with the exception of an address to the Assemblée Legislative in 1792. In it she petitioned successfully for women to be permitted to participate in the Fête de la Loi, a ceremony ordered by the Legislative Assembly that took place on June 3, 1792, celebrating the memory of the assassinated mayor of Estampe, Jacques Simonneau.
4. This is, of course, where those taking a Jacobin position on the French Revolution attack her. Sherman’s latest book, *Olympes de Gouges, Witness to Revolution* (2016), examines de Gouges’s interventions in the rapidly shifting political contexts during this period and corrects those who want to fit her into a single category: “Historians and literary critics who fight over whether she *was* monarchist or republican ignore the very nature of her evolution, the fact that with events she modified her ideas of what was necessary, holding always to the middle way, espousing neither of the evolving extremes” (Preface, n.p.).
5. In *Le Couvent ou les Voeux forcés* (1792) and *L’Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1793), de Gouges takes on the complicity of the church and the monarchy in supporting arranged marriages.

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