TITLE OF THESIS**: Liberté, Égalité, Sorority : A Study of the Theatrical Works of Olympe de Gouges 1748-1793.**

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Abstract

Liberté, Égalité, Sororité: A Study of the Theatrical Works of Olympe de Gouges 1748-1793.

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Marie Olympe de Gouges was born Marie Gouze in Montauban, France on the seventh of May 1748. Widowed at the age of eighteen, she left her native Montauban accompanied by her young son to pursue a career as a writer in Paris in 1766. Changing her name to Olympe de Gouges, she forged a new identity for herself as a political pamphleteer, social activist, revolutionary sympathiser and playwright. Throughout her time as a writer she courted controversy for her proto-feminist principles and uncompromising advocacy of the cause of the abolitionists. De Gouges is principally remembered for her political and feminist writings, however she wished above all to be considered as a *femme de lettres*. This thesis involves a detailed study of the complete dramatic works of Olympe de Gouges, and aims to increase awareness of an important area of the playwright's literary repertoire which is deserving of greater critical attention. Olympe de Gouges was found guilty of 'pro-royalist' sentiment by the revolutionaries and was thus executed on the third of November 1793. Altogether it is believed that she wrote around nineteen plays, twelve of which remain for posterity, and it is these plays which are examined in this thesis under the thematic headings of *liberté, égalité* and *sororité.*

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Darach Sanfey for his invaluable insight, advice and wisdom in the supervision of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Loïc Guyon, the head of the French Department of Mary Immaculate College, for his kind encouragement. To all my family and friends, as well as my colleagues in the French Department, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your support and guidance. Above all, this project is dedicated to my four children, Dolores, Hema, Ciara and Fionn; may the guiding lights of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity shine on your life's path.

Dedication

À mes enfants

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and has not, in full or part, been submitted to any other institutions.

Signed: ……..

Vivien Hennessy

September 2012

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Introduction

To any scholar of French eighteenth-century studies, Olympe de Gouges needs little or no introduction. She is principally celebrated for her proto-feminist philosophies, as well as her political pamphleteering, and her most enduring work, the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791), a feminist revision of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (1789), is still considered to be one of the cornerstones of early feminist thought.

However, of all the titles bestowed upon de Gouges, from proto-feminist to political thinker and abolitionist advocate, her designation of preference was undoubtedly, *femme de lettres*. Olympe de Gouges' true passion was for the theatre, a fact stated personally by the author on numerous occasions. In the preface to the 1791 publication of *Le Couvent ou les vœux forcés,* de Gouges describes her devotion to writing:

> La littérature est une passion qui porte jusqu'au délire. Cette passion m'a constamment occupée pendant dix années de ma vie. Elle a ses inquiétudes, ses alarmes, ses tourments, comme celle de l'amour…Il m'a pris fantaisie de faire fortune, je veux la faire, et je la ferai. Je la ferai, dis-je, en dépit des envieux, de la critique et du sort même […][1]

Nevertheless, to date, de Gouges' complete dramaturgy remains a relatively neglected area of her literary repertoire. It was not until 1981, with the publication of her biography by the historian Olivier Blanc, almost two hundred years after her trial and death by execution,

[1] Olympe De Gouges, preface to *Le Couvent ou les vœux forcés, Olympe de Gouges, Théâtre, Tome I* (Paris: Indigo et Côté-femmes éditions, 1991), p. 34.

that a revival of interest in this fascinating and pivotal figure of Revolutionary history was to initiate. Yet heretofore critical attention has been focused mainly on de Gouges' politics, and her significance as a proponent of proto-feminist ideology. Though recent studies from acclaimed academics, notably those of Gisela Thiele-Knobloch, Janie Vanpée and Joan Wallach-Scott, have concentrated on some of her theatrical works, there is as yet no comprehensive analysis of her dramatic corpus as a whole. Critics have tended to regard de Gouges' dramaturgy as a footnote to her political writings, however this thesis endeavours to highlight her theatrical works as a noteworthy contribution to eighteenth-century literature.

This thesis aims to provide a detailed analysis of the complete dramaturgy of Olympe de Gouges, and proposes that the playwright be considered as an eighteenth-century *femme de lettres* of note. As such, this analysis supports the claim by Blanc that: 'C'est un auteur de comédies ou de drames qui valaient bien la plupart des productions […] de l'époque.'[2] Blanc's hypothesis will be validated by a close reading of de Gouges' dramatic works, while an examination of the tropes of *liberté*, *égalité* and *sororité* will underscore the important social, philosophical and political import contained therein.

From comedy to tragedy, melodrama to political polemic, de Gouges' dramaturgy is markedly of a social nature. As befitted the didactic function of such 'social theatre', the playwright strove to highlight contemporaneous concerns and to dramatise popular themes

[2] Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges*, with a preface by Claude Manceron (Paris: Éditions Syros, 1981) p.5.

which were increasingly pertinent in an era of great social change.[3] De Gouges particularly engaged herself with the depiction of those she considered marginalised and subjugated, such as slaves, domestics and women. Camille Aubaud asserts that: 'Les pièces d'Olympe de Gouges clament les souffrances et les résignations de tous les opprimés.'[4]

De Gouges' theatre has at times been criticised for employing somewhat flimsy plotlines, or for indulging in overt bathos. However the dramatist's social commentary is always lucid and forthright. She also displayed a keen ear for language and characterisation. Memorable dialogue, as exemplified in such plays as *Molière chez Ninon* (1787), and lively rhetoric, as illustrated in her political dramas, among them *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1792), are the hallmarks of de Gouges' unique style, always assuring a fresh perspective and a novel approach to familiar themes.

Yet actual stage performance, or the lack thereof, is the tragedy behind the history of de Gouges' dramatic works. Between 1783 and 1792, de Gouges wrote some twenty plays, of which only twelve remain. The last of her dramas, *Le Tyran détrôné ou La France sauvée* (1792) is incomplete, but was cited as evidence of her subverse intentions at the time of her trial, for its supposed espousal of pro-royalist sympathies. Of these plays, only four were publicly performed, and only one, *Le Couvent ou les vœux forcés* (1790) had a successful run, staged on no fewer than eighty occasions from the time of its first production on the fourth of October 1790 at the Théâtre National Comique et Lyrique.

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[3] For more see R. Emmet Kennedy, Marie Netter and Mark Olsen, *Theatre, Opera and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris: Analysis and Repetory*, (Greenwood: Praeger, 1996), where such 'social theatre' is defined as performances designed to reflect and portray social concerns above philosophical concepts or political dogma.

[4] Camille Aubaud, *Lire les femmes de lettres* (Paris: Dunod, 1993), p. 92.

The reasons for this low number of public performances are twofold. Firstly, as observed by Gisela Thiele-Knobloch: '[…] la réserve extrême du monde théâtral et du public envers les productions des femmes' was undoubtedly a factor.[5] Secondly, the playwright's fraught relationship with leading theatrical institutions, notably the Comédie Française, earned her a reputation as a difficult and demanding author. In his article, *The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789,* Gregory S. Brown recounts her difficulties in obtaining a definitive date from the national theatre for the initial production of her first play, *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783). The Comédie Française, exceptionally, admitted the play into their active repertory shortly after it had been submitted for consideration in April 1784, however it was not performed until December 1789. In the interim, de Gouges continued to petition the troupe leaders with letters requesting that her play be performed. However, the National Theatre did not take kindly to a mere playwright, moreover a woman, interfering in their affairs, which led to their decision to remove *L'Esclavage des noirs* from their repertory in 1785, only for it to be reinstated in 1789. When it was eventually staged, the explicit anti-slavery message of the drama gained further notoriety for the playwright, as its performance was marred by riots instigated by a cabal of pro-slavery lobbyists. All of which ensured that de Gouges 'remained an established outsider to literary life.'[6]

De Gouges' relatively short career as a writer, spanning only nine years, was thus

[5] GiselaThiele-Knobloch, preface to *Olympe de Gouges, Théâtre, Tome I* (Paris: Indigo et Côté-femmes editions, 1991) p. 14.
[6] Gregory S. Brown, 'The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges' *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies,* Vol. 34, No. 3, French Revolutionary Culture (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 2001) pp. 383-401.

tarnished by disappointment and rejection. It is therefore a testament to the author that she maintained a strong creative output in the face of adversity. Such was her determination to be recognised as a *femme de lettres* that she became politically active, publishing tracts and attaching herself to the cause of the Girondins. Olympe de Gouges was dedicated to the philosophy of the revolutionaries, but as an ambitious writer, aware of the many obstacles she had to face, and particularly as a woman of controvertible origins, she was also conscious of the immediacy of political rhetoric. De Gouges knew that having strong political attachments were important factors in the establishment of a strong public image. Brown asserts that to remember de Gouges merely for her feminism, her abolitionist principles and her politics, we thus: '[…] fail to place her in her proper context, as a woman aspiring to a public identity as a writer in the late ancien régime.'[7]

The fact that Olympe de Gouges was inspired by revolutionary ideologies and events is plainly evidenced in her dramaturgy. She was sympathetic to the cause of the Girondins, and favoured a reform of the monarchic institution, while promoting the strengthening of power of the Legislative Assembly. Notwithstanding this, her theatrical works are not biased by blind patriotism and they also caution against total adherence to any cause that purported to advocate social change, when such change was inconsiderate and dismissive of the needs of all. As a playwright, de Gouges strives to portray those for whom the ideals behind a popular revolution held little or no promise. For de Gouges, the main tenets of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were inherently flawed as they excluded the rights of slaves and women, were slow to address those marginalised by extreme poverty and by a restrictive, slowly evolving *Ancien Régime*, characterised by the archaic values of aristocracy and a corrupt clergy.

[7] Gregory S. Brown, *op. cit.*, p.384.

Furthermore, de Gouges believed that the notion of fraternity was doubly flawed, as by its very definition it exclusively addressed male citizens. Therefore this thesis will examine the tropes of *liberté, égalité* and *sororité* in the theatrical works of Olympe de Gouges. This analysis will be divided into three sections, and this tripartite format will further be divided into individual chapters.

The opening chapter explores the concept of personal liberty as delineated in her dramaturgy, and outlines how the playwright endeavours to highlight the adverse consequences of the unjust sanctioning of same. To this end, de Gouges offers her audience a heterogeneous array of original characters who struggle for their right to personal liberty, including amongst others: enlightened slaves, an ageing man confronting senility, and a young novice facing a life sentence of imposed vows behind the cloistered walls of a convent.

The second chapter is concerned with the theme of libertinage in de Gouges'theatre. This concept, which denoted intellectual, sensual and sexual liberty, is deftly treated by the playwright as she examines its significance in the daily lives of her characters. The libertine lifestyle of Ninon de Lenclos as depicted in *Le Siècle des grands hommes ou Molière chez Ninon* (1787), for example, is that of a woman in full control of her own fate. However, when in some of her other plays the pursuit of libertine behaviour is shown to be prejudicial to the rights of others, de Gouges demonstrates how it leads to tragedy driven by human pride.

The third and final chapter in the liberté section examines de Gouges' interpretation of family. This chapter will demonstrate how de Gouges engages a dramatic deconstruction of the traditional framework of family as an analogy for a society in the throes of momentous transformation. Further analysis highlights how the playwright explores the contentious issue of legitimacy and inheritance, while she also invites her audience to consider the injustice involved in archaic notions of birthright and strict familial obligation.

De Gouges advocated universal equality for humankind. She stressed that women and men should not be divided on the grounds of gender, race or social class. Through the medium of literature she continued to urge the public to observe the natural kingdom, where equality reigned in the absence of arbitrary modes of division. In the preface to her *Déclaration,* she raises the question:

> Homme, es-tu capable d'être juste? C'est une femme qui t'en fait la question; tu ne lui ôteras pas du moins ce droit. Dis-moi? Qui t'a donné le souverain empire d'opprimer mon sexe ? Ta force ? Tes talents ? Observe le créateur dans sa sagesse ; parcours la nature dans toute sa grandeur, dont tu sembles vouloir te rapprocher, et donne-moi, si tu l'oses, l'exemple de cet empire tyrannique. [8]

The second section of this thesis involves a study of the theme of equality in de Gouges' theatre. Chapter four examines examples of social inequality prevalent in eighteenth-century society, which de Gouges felt compelled to address. The playwright highlights the plight of the impoverished and thus gives voice to a normally silent demographic, that of the domestic servant, in an effort to raise public awareness and sympathy for their condition.

The next chapter dealing with equality outlines de Gouges' treatment of the

[8] Olympe De Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2003), p.11.

monarchy, the clergy and the military in her plays. De Gouges firmly believed that the future of the monarchy lay in the hands of the sovereign king, Louis XVI, whose active participation in the lives of the citizens of France, she maintained, was essential to the progress of society.[9] As for the clergy, de Gouges' dramaturgy offers a scathing portrayal of an institution which tended to corrupt rather than enhance the social order. On the other hand, Olympe de Gouges portrays the military as a meritocratic model of social advancement as it is shown in her productions to promote gender equality and certain secular values.

The playwright's determined quest for gender and racial equality is the subject of chapter six. Olympe de Gouges was the only eighteenth-century female playwright to declare publicly her objection to the *Code noir* upholding colonial slavery. Following in the footsteps of known abolitionists such as Condorcet and Brissot, de Gouges sought to highlight the plight of enslaved peoples through the medium of literature, most notably with the production of her play *Zamore et Mirza, ou l'heureux naufrage* (1783), later revised and renamed *L'Esclavage des noirs.* This chapter further examines the proto-feminist principles enshrined in her *Déclaration,* and then reveals how these are embodied in her dramaturgy.

The final section of this thesis focuses on the thematic role of sorority in de Gouges' theatre. More than a century and a half before the emergence of studies on *l'écriture féminine,* the playwright responded to the practice of female subjugation through the use of

[9] While de Gouges was principally known for her egalitarian principles, she nevertheless remained a monarchist. Her biographer Olivier Blanc outlines one of the reasons why she advocated conservation of the monarchy: 'Mme de Gouges s'opposait pourtant à la réduction du train de vie du roi car, jugeait-elle, « l'éclat de la Cour est nécessaire pour donner à l'étranger une haute idée des ressources financières de la France »', cited by Olivier Blanc, *Marie-Olympe de Gouges, une humaniste à la fin du XVIIIème siècle* (Paris: Éditions René Vienet, 2003), p.105.

gendered language. This is demonstrated in the contrapositive logic she employs in constructing a feminist version of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen,* where replacing *l'homme* with *femme* and *citoyen* with *citoyenne*, she bravely asserts female equality as a constitutional right. Therefore, this section, in keeping with de Gouges's proto-feminist values, falls under the heading '*Sororité*', as it challenges the tacit androcentrism of *'Fraternité'*. Thus, the penultimate chapter in this thesis examines the manner in which the playwright seeks to create a *côterie* of female characters in her plays who epitomise feminine solidarity and strength. This analysis will reveal her visionary desire for the elevation of the status of women, along with her personal plea for the just recognition of their invaluable contribution to society.

The final chapter focuses on the theme of male redemption through female intervention in de Gouges' dramaturgy. De Gouges intentionally dramatises 'man-made' calamity onstage in an effort to emphasise the importance of the role of women in redressing such situations. Her overall intention is again to exalt the state of womanhood while illustrating the potential harmony to be achieved in the mutual cooperation of the sexes.

This thesis maintains that any study of Olympe de Gouges must involve acknowledgment of her role as an eighteenth-century playwright of significance. As a social dramatist, her incisive portrayal of characters subjugated by oppressive societal norms, offers an invaluable insight into contemporaneous concerns in an era of revolution. The unique humanist ideals incorporated in her dramaturgy preceded the proto-modernist

model of 'social theatre', leading Gabrielle Verdier to observe that: 'Le théâtre d'Olympe de Gouges est en grande partie…radicalement moderne.'[10]

In her preface to the 1784 edition of *Le Mariage inattendu*, de Gouges declared:

> Je suis femme et auteur; j'en ai toute l'activité. Mon premier mouvement est semblable à une tempête; mais dès que l'explosion est faite, je reste dans un calme profond; tel est l'effet qu'éprouvent toutes les personnes vives et sensibles. [11]

Olympe de Gouges was primarily an author, her dramatic compositions eloquently attest to the fact that literature was a vocation to which she was ready to commit herself wholeheartedly, and for which she hoped to be remembered.

The twelve plays discussed in this thesis are those versions published in the 1993 edition of *Olympe de Gouges, Œuvres complètes, tome I, théâtre,* edited and with an introduction by Félix-Marcel Castan.

[10] Gabrielle Verdier, 'Du privé au public, les femmes en action dans le théâtre d'Olympe de Gouges', from a paper presented at the first annual conference of Olympe de Gouges, Montauban, 4-6 July, 1991, as cited by Gisela Thiele-Knobloch, *op. cit.*, p.22.

[11] Roland Bonnel, 'Olympe de Gouges et la carrière dramatique: une passion qui porte jusqu'au délire,' in *Femmes et pouvoir: Réflexions autour d'Olympe de Gouges,* eds. Shannon Hartigan, Réa McKay, Marie-Thérèse Seguin (Moncton : Éditions d'acadie, 1995), p.84.

Liberté

1 Personal Liberty

Plus je regarde les compagnes de mon sort, plus je les observe,

et plus je vois que le bonheur ne peut être où la liberté n'est pas.[12]

As a playwright, one of Olympe de Gouges' principal occupations was the exposition of the multi-faceted aspects of personal liberty, as she strove to examine, in her plays, the injustice brought about by the infringement of same. The impelling force behind her literary endeavours was the compulsion to demonstrate the consequences incurred by the infringement of personal freedom, in a revolutionary age where the pursuit of liberty led directly to bloodshed, the deposition of monarchy and the abolition of the *ancien régime*.

For de Gouges, like her literary predecessors, liberty represented one of the fundamental rights of man, specifically those '[...] écrits dans les lois de la nature.'[13] De Gouges, inspired by enlightenment thinking, was influenced by the ideologies proposed by the *philosophes*. One of her models, Rousseau, believed that a liberated conscience was a happy one, virtuous and true to nature:

> […] il en est de la liberté comme de l'innocence et de la virtue, dont on ne sent le prix qu'autant qu'on jouit soi-même, dont le goût se perd sitôt qu'on les a perdues.[14]

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[12] Olympe De Gouges, *Œuvres complètes, Tome 1, Théâtre,* ed. by Félix-Marcel Castan (Montauban: Cocagne, 1993), p. 275 and hereafter referred to as *O.C.*, T.I.
[13] *Ibid.*, p.29.
[14] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes,* as cited in Paul Hoffman, *Théories et modèles de la liberté au XVIIIème siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), p. 181.

Voltaire classed liberty as autonomy of judgement, the ultimate in intellectual freedom, where the possibility would exist for one opposing thought to replace another, he famously claimed that: 'Le choix entre deux actions contraires est l'effet de ma liberté.' [15]

Thus, the enlightenment provided authors such as Olympe de Gouges with a range of philosophical definitions of liberty, just as the Revolution exposed its practical and political applications. Whether they dealt with the subjects of slavery, arranged marriage or forced vows, the theatrical works of Olympe de Gouges afford us a valuable insight into late eighteenth-century French society and values and thus form part of a continuum of questioning spirit initiated by the *philosophes* some forty years previously.[16]

Written in 1783 and finally performed in 1789, *L'Esclavage des Noirs* was de Gouges' first foray into theatre. Taken literally, it is an indictment of the treatment of enslaved black people in the French colonies in the supposed age of enlightenment and reason. The thematic thrust of the play came to represent the focus of the playwright's dramaturgy to follow, in that she would continue to address social issues that highlighted the inherent contradictions of a society that upheld, like a brandishing torch for the rest of the world to witness, the ideals of humane and rational thinking.[17] De Gouges became a

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[15] Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, as cited in Paul Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p.263.

[16] Theoretical definitions and models of individual liberty formed a major part of enlightenment thinking. Freedom of thought, expression and a person's right to exercise agency unrestricted by arbitrary social mores and despotic government were subjects of wide debate and inspired eighteenth-century authors such as de Gouges. For more on the manydefinitions of personal liberty expounded by the *philosophes* see Johnathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[17] Although the Age of Enlightenment or *Le Siècle des Lumières* in France was a European intellectual movement which also spread to the American colonies, some of its most prominent exponents emanated from France. Challenging the status quo, and courting danger in the form of censorship or imprisonment, intellectuals from Montesquieu to Diderot were inspirational figureheads of great importance whose contribution to emerging democratic values culminated in the drafting of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* in 1789.

dramatist concerned with the rights of the marginalised, such as women, the severely impoverished and, most controversially, people of colour. Not surprisingly, the play took years to be staged, after much campaigning by the author, as she risked her reputation and aroused great hostility through her petitions to the Comédie Française. According to Joan Wallach Scott, when the play was eventually performed, the cast chose to ignore her very specific instructions regarding its production, and she thus regarded the production as having failed to convey its overtly political message. Wallach Scott also notes that:

> The cast too, refused de Gouge's instruction that the actors wear blackface, a gesture she denounced as intolerable because it undermined the dramatic and political effects she sought.[18]

De Gouges was deeply opposed to limitations of liberty based on biological differences such as race and gender. She claimed that: '[…] man's colour is nuanced, like all the animals that nature has produced, as well as the plants and minerals. All is varied and that is the beauty of nature.'[19] The opening scene of *L'Esclavage des noirs* introduces us to the characters of Zamor and Mirza, two fugitive West Indian slaves. Zamor is revealed to be an educated slave, as informed and idealistic as any European of the time. From the opening scene, he declares that a new found 'morale douce' has entered European philosophy, one that will, hopefully, have a positive effect on the plight of all enslaved peoples; 'Les hommes éclairés jettent sur nous des regards attendris : nous leur devrons le retour de cette précieuse liberté, le premier trésor de l'homme […].' [20] This is a subversive sentiment, if we consider that it is a play written three years before the publication of J.P. Brissot de Warville's famous treatise on the cause of unrest in Saint Domingue, and five

[18] Joan Wallach Scott, 'French Feminists and the rights of 'Man': Olympe de Gouges's Declarations', *History Workshop*, No.28 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Autumn 1989), p.14.
[19] *Ibid.*, p.14. Translation by Scott,
[20] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 27.

years before the foundation of the society known as *Les Amis des Noirs* in the capital.[21] Fearing that its controversial content would incite insurrection in the colonies, the mayor of Paris called for the play to be cancelled. Indeed the play was to run for only three days after agents engaged by the pro-colonial lobby booed the performance throughout its duration. [22]

The fear surrounding this notion of tolerance, or worse, the possible liberation of colonial slaves, is addressed directly by de Gouges. Zamor and Mirza have been captured and await public execution without trial, despite the pleas of the other slaves and the Governor's wife. The major of the colony's army and the judge confront each other and their dialogue reflects a society divided in opinion:

> LE MAJOR, *au juge* – Voilà, monsieur, le fruit d'une trop grande sévérité.
>
> LE JUGE – Votre modération perd aujourd'hui la colonie.
>
> LE MAJOR – Dites mieux; elle la sauve peut-être. Vous ne connaissez que vos lois cruelles, et moi, je connais l'art de la guerre et l'humanité. Ce ne sont point nos ennemis que nous combattons; ce sont nos esclaves, ou plutôt nos cultivateurs. [23]

This allusion to cultivation, a reference to the famous ending of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), is also discussed by Coraline, one of the house servants of Mme de Saint-Frémont, the Governor's wife. The power and liberating influence of literature is evoked when she informs the other servants: 'J'ai lu dans un certain livre, que pour être heureux il ne fallait qu'être libre et bon cultivateur.'[24] The playwright clearly wished to demonstrate to her audience that Voltaire's vision was meant to extend to all mankind, while also stressing the importance of the written word, including her own.

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[21] Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *Discours de J. P. Brissot, deputé, sur les causes des troubles de St. Domingue : prononcé à la séance du premier décembre 1791* (Cornell University Library Digital Collections)

[22] See O.Blanc, *op. cit.*, p.97.

[23] *O.C.*, T. 1, p. 38.

[24] *Ibid.*, p.32.

One of the proposed titles for this drama was *L'Heureux naufrage* and the eponymous shipwreck proves fortunate in its introduction of two characters from France, Valère and Sophie, to the tropical island. The shipwreck itself also symbolises the destruction of old rules and conventions. The author portrays the French couple as representative of a new order of enlightened thinking in Europe, and the juxtaposition of the old world and the new, serves to highlight injustice in both spheres. Valère, a free white man, soon reveals to Mirza, a black slave woman, the inequity inherent in the corrupt government of his homeland. He informs her that the French are liberated only in appearance: 'Nous sommes libres en apparence, mais nos fers n'en sont que plus pesants. Depuis plusieurs siècles, les Français gémissent sous le despotisme des ministres et des courtisans.' [25]

The trope of the island is cleverly deployed, as it represents a land adrift, on the brink of rebirth, just like France itself. However, the play illustrates that in order for this rebirth to take place, a thorough examination of the ideals of liberty would need to be undertaken. The play closes with a speech from the island's benevolent Governor, as he issues a universal caution that liberty is dependent on submission to wise and humane laws. The best society can hope for, he opines, is a well-intentioned and informed government:

> Sachez que l'homme, dans sa liberté, a besoin encore d'être soumis à des lois sages et humaines, et sans vous porter à des excès répréhensibles, espérez tout d'un gouvernement éclairé et bienfaisant. [26]

The playwright's dramatic message was designed to echo far beyond the shores of her literary island.

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[25] *O.C.*, T. 1, p.29.
[26] *Ibid.*, p.41.

The freedom to control one's own destiny is a recurrent theme in de Gouges' plays. In *Le Mariage inattendu* (1784), we witness the plight of the character Fanchette, whose humble birth condemns her to a loveless arranged marriage. Fanchette's friends and aristocratic acquaintances watch powerlessly as her father takes charge of the young woman's future. In reply to the misgivings of La Comtesse, he outlines the simplicity of the transaction as far as he is concerned: 'M. Nicolas est un brave garçon, qui a du bien, qui ne veut plus que je sois jardinier, et qui prend ma fille telle qu'elle est'.[27]

The playwright is determined to show us how Fanchette is handed over to her husband regardless of her personal desires. Nicolas is portrayed as her new master when he says in Act III, Scene VII: 'Mais mon parrain, je suis le maître de Fanchette. Il n'y a que moi qui avons [*sic*] tout pouvoir sur elle.'[28] He is not powerful enough, however, to protect her from the villainous Almaviva, whose efforts in exercising his 'droit de seigneur' culminate in the annulment of the marriage.

The fact that the drama ends on a happy note (it is eventually revealed that Fanchette is actually of noble heritage, therefore free to marry her sweetheart) is irrelevant to the play's overall message. De Gouges shows her audience that freedom can be restricted, and is subject to arbitrary and capricious feudal traditions.

Family obligations, financial contract and strict religious vows all serve to deprive Julie of *Le Couvent* (1791) and Sophie of *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1794), of their natural right

[27] *O.C.*, T. 1, p. 51.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

to liberty. Convent literature was extremely popular in the eighteenth century, and de Gouges' plays can certainly be said to have been inspired by such works as Diderot's *La Religieuse* (1796), where the plotline of the latter along with its prison imagery and treatment of the victim theme is similar to that of *Le Couvent* (1791).[29] In eighteenth century France, young girls from all social backgrounds had access to convent schooling. A girl who had attended a convent school often stayed on with the teachers (and surrogate family) she knew and trusted. If some needed persuasion to stay on in religious life then an ecclesiastical 'persuader', known as an 'accapareur de conscience' could be engaged.[30] Young women were forcefully reminded of their obligation to God, the church and their family. Their own considerations were never taken into account. McManners notes that '[…] theological treatises still put the celibate state above the married, and the contemplative life above the active.'[31] Thus, a young novice such as Julie, reluctant to take lifelong vows would find herself a victim of covert and insistent persuasion by the Abbesse, her family, and indeed the institution itself. The young novices of these plays are forcibly contained within the walls of the convent, their destiny, to take vows which would ensure their lifelong imprisonment therein. However, the playwright delves deeper, and in an effort to explore the fundamental questions of personal liberty, she demonstrates to her audience that Julie is not only powerless in the face of religious obligation, but is also victimised by her family. It is her uncle who committed her to the convent in an attempt to cover up the heinous crime of having murdered her father. She is also, albeit inadvertently,

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[29] Though completed in 1780 by Diderot, *La Religieuse* was not to be published until 1796 after the author's death. For a comprehensive study on convent literature see *La religieuse dans la littérature française* by Jeanne Ponton (Quèbec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1969).

[30] John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France, Vol.1 The Clerical Establishment and its Social Ramifications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.502.

[31] *Idem.*

deceived by her supposed deliverer, the young knight whose masculine presence not only compromises her virgin state but also attempts to impose upon her his desire for marriage regardless of her unshaped and inexperienced desires. It is therefore not surprising that the convent itself is referred to in the play as a 'prison'. [32]

For the playwright, the convent with all its restriction of physical and psychological freedom represents the ultimate burial place of personal liberty. In a comic interlude, we witness a dialogue between two nuns, Sœur Agathe and Félicité who have known nothing but convent life. In the midst of dramatic events within their cloistered sanctuary they discuss a possible future in the outside world. They are initially fearful of this hypothetical liberty whereby: '[…] chacune deviendra ce qu'elle voudra, ou ce qu'elle pourra.'[33]

The nuns eventually embrace the notion of emancipation.[34] In fact, Julie, torn between the intentions of all those around her, is only afforded one opportunity to express her own need, that of having the choice to be indecisive, the freedom to make up her own mind and to change it as she so wishes: 'Je ne demande point à sortir de ce cloître, mais au moins qu'on retarde une cérémonie dont la religion s'irriterait. Laissez à mon coeur le temps de se disposer.'[35]

De Gouges' plays confront their audience with various interpretations of liberty, and their significance with regards to the individual characters and lives portrayed therein. In

[32] *O.C.*, T. 1, p.209.
[33] *Ibid.*, p.219.
[34] The personal emancipation envisaged by the nuns of the play reflects a wider dissolution of ties between Church and State, whereby in 1789 monastic vows were eventually abolished and by 1790 all religious orders were dissolved. Nuns and monks were thus encouraged to return to civilian life, for more see Mc Manners, *op. cit.*
[35] *O.C.*, T. 1, p.215.

an ironic twist to the theme of personal choice and intellectual freedom, we are introduced to Ninon, the eponymous heroine of *Molière chez Ninon* (1788), and her decision to retire from society to the contemplative sanctuary of the convent, despite the remonstrations of her friends and family. For Ninon, freedom of choice is takes precedence over the requisites of society and the exhortations of her peers. Ninon is depicted as the epitome of the libertine, a woman who, by the standards of any age, is noteworthy for her independence of spirit and sexual freedom. Her lifestyle, however, begins to oppress her, and her decision to retreat from the frivolous world of Parisian high-society demonstrates another facet of her personal expression of autonomy. This resolve of character is manifested in the penultimate scene of the final act:

> MOLIÈRE - *surpris* - Ce que vous dites-là est-il bien possible, Mlle de Lenclos? Quoi! Vous abandonneriez votre société, vos amis; c'est ordonner leur supplice, les enterrer tout-vivants.
>
> NINON – Mon ami, j'en suis bien fâchée, mais ce parti est nécessaire. Je me le dois. Je le dois à mon fils.
>
> MOLIÈRE, *à part* – Je tremble; elle est si forte dans ses résolutions.[36]

Similarly, with de Gouges' final and possibly most contentious play, *La France sauvée* (1792), we are asked to identify who is truly in need of liberation, the unseen French populace or the royal family themselves. Set in the closing days of the monarchy, the drama unfolds within the walls of the Palais des Tuileries, never before depicted on stage. Originally intended as a five-act drama, all that remains of the play is one and a half acts. The royal family are depicted therein as ineffectual, ignorant of the consequences of unfolding events, and effectively alienated from the outside world. This sense of alienation is accentuated by the arrival of the character Olympe de Gouges as she is written into the play itself. Olympe (the character) demands an audience with the Queen, however, Marie

[36] *O.C.*,T.1, p.191.

Antoinette is surrounded by an entourage of ladies in waiting determined to isolate the monarch from outside influences, particularly notorious republicans. The dramatisation of such an event, although fictional, was the subject of much debate at the trial of de Gouges, as the prosecution perceived it as evidence of pro-royalist sentiment, an accusation firmly denied by the playwright. Janie Vanpée, in her essay entitled *Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges,* records that:

> Records of the interrogation leading up to de Gouges's trial show that both she and the Revolutionary Tribunal interpreted the play as compelling evidence to prove their opposing cases. For the Tribunal, it would prove her guilty of treason. For de Gouges, on the contrary, it would ratify her patriotism. [37]

What de Gouges seems to suggest in this play, however, is that the royal family, despite their trappings of wealth, power and prestige were indeed 'trapped' in a cocoon of ignorance fashioned by generational tradition and maintained by unscrupulous courtiers.

This fictional characterisation of Olympe de Gouges appears in Act I, Scene VII and she is previously described by a humble valet as 'une bonne patriote'.[38] The Queen is reminded by her lady in waiting, La Princess de Tarente, that royal etiquette prohibits her from coming in direct contact with 'simples particuliers' [39]and that shielding her from the outside world would serve to safeguard her against 'le projet des assassins […]'.[40] The audience becomes increasingly aware, however, that it is the scheming machinations of the court which serve to compromise the Queen's position and security. The Queen agrees to hide in a closet as Olympe is ushered in, affording her an opportunity to hear at first hand the message of true liberty, undiluted by her entourage. Vanpée comments:

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[37] Janie Vanpée, 'Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges', *Theatre Journal 51* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p.49.
[38] *O.C.*, T. 1, p. 336.
[39] *Ibid.*, p.336.
[40] *Idem.*

> The spatial configuration on stage thus mirrors the actual political situation between the monarchy and the republicans, with the monarchy operating through mediation, its intentions and plotting veiled from direct public apprehension, and with the republicans insisting on direct and open representation.[41]

The closet is indeed symbolic of the impenetrable wall between monarchy and subject, but most importantly it demonstrates the restriction of freedom imposed upon, of all people, the Queen herself. Olympe is portrayed as the liberated conscience of the republic as she derides the hollow delusions of nobility: 'Vaine chimère! Le rang, la naissance ne vous donnèrent dans aucun temps le droit d'offenser impunément personne. A quelle époque, grand Dieu, vous permettez-vous ces excès, cette superstition, cette folie, cette extravagance![42]

As for the courtiers themselves, she holds them in particular contempt: 'Que ne feriez-vous pas, vous autres courtisans, pour assouvir votre aveugle ambition?' [43]

The playwright thus proposes that liberty and equality should not only be considered as fundamental rights within wider society, but should also be judiciously employed, for the purposes of universal enlightenment, within the walls of the palace itself.

The late eighteenth century saw an increased psychological awareness of the human condition. In France, in particular, the innovative approach to psychiatric disorders espoused by Philippe Pinel captured the public imagination. In 1792, Pinel was appointed chief physician at the Bicêtre, the infamous Parisian asylum for the insane. Strongly influenced by the doctrines of both John Locke (1632-1704) and Étienne Bonnet de

[41] Janie Vanpée, *op. cit*, p.63.
[42] *O.C.*, T. 1, p. 336.
[43] *Idem.*

Condillac (1715-1780), he proceeded to treat patients in long term confinement, many of them subject to appalling conditions and imprisonment. His innovative approach involved releasing the patients from their chains and he eventually developed an early form of therapeutic counselling.[44] Like Olympe de Gouges, Pinel was a frequent visitor of the famous salon of Mme Helvétius, the gathering place for the school of *idéologues*, and the playwright would no doubt have been well acquainted with his revolutionary approach to mental illness. While Pinel espoused the literal liberation of his patients, so too did de Gouges favour a sympathetic regard towards those in the throes of psychological deterioration. This is evident in her characterisation of Desyveteaux in *Molière chez Ninon* (1788). In Act II of the play the audience is introduced to this elderly nobleman who has succumbed to a form of senile dementia. He is found by his friends in the parkland surrounding his home, and this outdoor setting is set in direct contrast to the previous backdrop of the confined interior space of Ninon's Parisian salon. The stage directions bear noting here:

> Le théâtre représente un lieu champêtre; dans le lointain un côteau, et une ferme au bas. On voit dans le fond une prairie, avec un parc de moutons. On voit la brouette du berger sur un des côtés du théâtre; de l'autre côté, en face, est la cabane de la bergère. Une fontaine coule à côté de la cabane; plusieurs arbres forment un couvert; et une butte de gazon au-dessous, forme un siège.[45]

This elaborate description suggests tranquillity and freedom, and reflects the psychological state of Desyveteaux himself. The character, in his delusion, has reinvented himself as Coridon, a lowly young shepherd, desperately in love with a young shepherdess with whom marriage is impossible as he is deemed unworthy by her father. Rather than

[44] For a detailed account of Pinel's medical theories and their application see: Philippe Pinel, *Traité medico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale, Classics in Psychiatry Series* (Stratford: Ayer Publishing, 1976).
[45] *O.C.*, T. 1, p. 159.

deride the old man for his folly and attempt to coerce him into returning to 'reality', his loyal friends decide that it is best to indulge his fantasy as they acknowledge the liberation of mind that it affords. Ninon sums up their sympathetic reactions when she admits that: 'J'ai d'abord versé des larmes sur son sort; mais voyant qu'il est heureux dans ses idées chimériques, je suis moins affligée.'[46]

De Gouges' alternative rendering of the subject of mental illness not only preaches a sympathetic treatment of the condition, but also proffers the notion that the human psyche in all its natural states is the last bastion of personal liberty.

Olympe de Gouges effectively used the medium of theatre to convey the importance of personal liberty. The playwright was most concerned with unjust sanctions imposed on individuals on the basis of their class, colour and gender. De Gouges engaged with the language of the enlightenment and adapted it to correspond with the message contained in her dramatic works. She advocated that personal liberty should be available to all, and should be considered as the primary goal of a people's revolution.

[46] *O.C.*, T. 1, p.165.

2 Libertinage

In the previous chapter we explored the importance of personal liberty as defined and portrayed in a selection of plays by Olympe de Gouges. For the playwright, personal liberty was a natural right, and any attempt to deny this was shown in her dramaturgy to lead to unfortunate consequences. This chapter explores the theme of *libertinage* in de Gouges' drama. As a broad literary term, *libertinage* is usually considered as an expression of moral deviance of the kind explored in the writings of the Marquis de Sade or *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the epistolary novel written by Choderlos de Laclos in 1782. Critical definitions of the term are varied and numerous; however for the purposes of our argument let us take the definition given by Didier Foucault:

> Le mot libertinage apparaît au début du XVIIème siècle. Dès cette époque, il n'a pas une signification unique, mais se difracte dans deux directions principales. Il caractérise un positionnement intellectuel délibérément critique à l'égard de la religion, ses principes fondamentaux, ses dogmes, ses croyances, ses cultes ou son clergé. Il désigne des comportements et des mœurs basés sur la recherche du plaisir, sous toutes ses formes et sans limites, depuis les divertissements courants – ceux du jeu, de la boisson, de la table ou de la danse…jusqu'aux raffinements érotiques.[47]

The term '*libertine*' then, in the eighteenth century, held contradictory connotations. For some it denoted an almost heroic manner of living, embracing freedom of expression and intellectual as well as sensual liberty, while for others it constituted vulgarity and as an insult was widely and effectively employed.[48] Michel Delon, author of *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, sums up the ambiguous nature of the term:

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[47] Didier Foucault, *Histoire du libertinage - des Goliards au Marquis de Sade* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), p.7.
[48] For an engaging survey of visual satire during the Revolutionary period, see *Taking Liberties, Satirical Prints of the French Revolution,* ed. Jean-Paul Pittion (Dublin: Chester Beatty Library, 1989).

> […] le libertinage du XVIIIème siècle nécessite la tension entre l'aimable licence et la prostitution crapuleuse, entre l'allusion voilé et l'explicite pornographique, entre la liberté de parler et d'aimer et les contraintes de la société.[49]

According to Delon, the publication of pornographic pamphlets depicting the monarchy as sexually permissive libertines: 'accelerated the decomposition of the system.'[50] Publications such as *Les Crimes des rois de France* and *Les Crimes des reines*, were popular favourites and contributed to the swell of social unrest. Alongside the aristocracy, the clergy were revealed in populist literature as being a hypocritical lot, leading double lives of religious sanctimony and moral debauchery. Women, in the spirit of libertine writings, were depicted either as hapless victims or as aberrant monsters, with particular vilification reserved for the Queen herself, Marie Antoinette. [51]

This paradoxical nature of libertinage is reflected in the dramaturgy of Olympe de Gouges. Ninon, the heroine of *Le Siècle des grands hommes ou Molière chez Ninon* (1787) is depicted as the perfect model of the libertine lifestyle, while the playwright also extols the virtues of sexually liberated women in *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1792) and *Les Curieux du Champs de Mars* (1790) whose choices are offered as a progressive example to society. However, when we examine the distorted and disingenuous philosophy espoused by the Marquis de Clainville in *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787), or the effects of adultery in *La Nécessité du divorce* (1790), we observe the dramatist's personal interpretation of libertinage as a socially advanced way of living only when practised fairly and altruistically.

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[49] Michel Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette, 2000), p.18.
[50] *Ibid.*, p.44.
[51] For more see Stéphanie Genaud, *Le Libertinage et l'histoire: politique de la séduction à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation Publications, 2005), p. 222.

Ninon de Lenclos (1620-1705), was an historical figure of note, a celebrated courtesan, beauty, and patron of the arts who came to be a muse to many authors of the eighteenth century, including Voltaire, and a source of inspiration to de Gouges, featuring in many of her writings. [52] As a woman, and as an aspiring *femme de lettres* who sought the light of liberty in all aspects of life, Olympe de Gouges used the example of Ninon as a version of herself, a paradigm of easy virtue, intellectually uninhibited by prevailing religious doctrine or social mores.[53] The fact that the author chooses to set the play in the previous century serves to remove de Gouges' libertine utopia from the contemporary scene, thereby positing it as an exemplary model for social behaviour. It also seems to cynically suggest a certain contemporaneous intellectual erosion, as illustrated by the alternative title of *Le Siècle des grands hommes.*

When we first encounter the character of Ninon in Act I, Scene V, she is surprised by the early morning arrival to her private chambers of the clergyman known as 'Le Grand Prieur'.[54]

Resisting his amorous advances, she engages her wit and demonstrates patient diplomacy when she warns the cleric:

> Pour moi, qui n'ai su jamais induire personne en erreur, je vois avec peine que vous vous obstinez à vouloir devenir mon amant; et si vous insistez davantage, vous perdrez mon estime, sans obtenir mon

[52] For fuller biographical details on Ninon de Lenclos, see Roger Duchêne, *Ninon de Lenclos ou la manière jolie de faire l'amour* (Paris: Fayard, 2000)

[53] The idea that Ninon de Lenclos (both the historical figure and the dramatic character) was a source of considerable inspiration to the playwright is supported by amongst others, Roland Bonnel (see chapter 7, *Performing Sisterhood*), her biographer Olivier Blanc and Marcel-Castan.

[54] This episode in the play alludes to a purported encounter with Cardinal Richelieu who offering Ninon fifty thousand crowns for a night in her bed was tricked out of his money with the latter sending a friend to him instead. Molière's presence in the play points towards the incident as a possible inspiration for his infamous Tartuffe.

amitié.[55]

The character thus establishes herself as a woman of principle, who despite her reputation as a famous mistress is not to be trifled with nor regarded as easy prey. Saddened by the imminent departure of her current lover, Le Châtre, as he departs on a military campaign, her dialogue with him in Act I, Scene XIX, presents an ethical dilemma. We learn in the course of the drama that Ninon's transparency in love precedes her. She has taken many lovers in her life but, as one adventure ends, so another begins. Le Châtre however, is not content to leave Ninon to her own devices and insists that she sign a declaration vowing fidelity to him in his absence. As a theatrical device, the signing of this declaration is all the more effective for being the closest to a marriage contract that Ninon has so far encountered, and we must imagine, has always avoided. Nonetheless, her sensitive nature leads her to acquiesce to Le Châtre's demands and she reluctantly signs. As the drama evolves, this decision proves to be an inauspicious one, as it imposes an unwelcome psychological restraint on a hitherto liberated woman. We can partly attribute her decision towards the end of the play to retire from society to the guilt incurred by her decision to break that promise as she becomes romantically involved with Le Comte de Fiesque. One of the usual characteristics of a libertine was the avoidance of guilt and regret regardless of the emotional impact of their behaviour on others, therefore the character of Ninon represents a new form of libertinage, in which a sense of conscience is allied with emotional freedom. This is evident from Ninon's avowal to Le Fiesque, on ending their relationship:

> J'ai su aimer, M. Le Comte; mais ne jamais feindre. Je n'ai point su non plus employer les grimaces, les ressources des coquettes qui garantissent leur cœur par le travers de leur esprit et qui jouent la

[55] *O.C.*, T.1, p.151.

> passion avec un cœur glacé.[56]

Ninon, however, is not the only famous libertine depicted in this play. It also features La Reine Christine de Suède (1626-1689), another authentic historical figure who is received by Ninon at her home, where a celebration is conducted in her honour. Christine, having succeeded her father, King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden in 1632, was famous in the seventeenth century for her independence of spirit.[57] Another notable patron of the arts, she gained international recognition for brokering the 'Peace of Westphalia' which culminated in the ending of the Thirty Years War in Europe. Didier Foucault describes the Queen as one of 'les femmes les plus fascinantes du siècle'.[58] The rapport between the two women, as depicted in the play, is one of instantaneous and mutual admiration, and the audience is led to understand that of all the relationships and intimate friendships that Ninon has hitherto experienced, this 'liaison' as it is described by Christine, proves to be the most successful in its achievement of equal and mutual regard.[59] Félix-Marcel Castan observes that:

> Ninon est au nœud d'une vaste conscientisation féminine, qui enveloppe et anime la société entière… Olympe de Gouges, à travers le personnage de Ninon, s'explique sur la plus haute morale, la morale authentique, la morale en perpétuel renouvellement, la liberté des sentiments, la sincérité jusqu'à l'excès d'une femme débarrassée des préjugés : preuve évidente de modernité et grandeur.[60]

While *Molière chez Ninon* pays homage to a certain type of libertinage present in the seventeenth century, *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787) exposes the hypocrisy involved in the blind adherence to a rigid philosophical code. In this play, le Marquis de Clainville is

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[56] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 187.
[57] For more biographical information on Queen Christine see Susanna Kerman, *Queen Christina of Sweden and her Circle; the transformation of a seventeenth-century philosophical libertine* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991).
[58] Didier Foucault, *op. cit.*, p.384.
[59] The relationship between Ninon and Christine will be explored further in the '*Sororité*' chapter.
[60] *O.C.*, T.1, p.147, Castan's editorial comment.

depicted as being cold and stoical to the point of indifference, a man who favours reason over emotion even within his own marriage. A brief plot summary is necessary here: the Marquis returns home after spending some time away with his regiment. During his absence, and unknown to him, his wife has given birth to a baby girl.[61] This well-guarded secret has been kept from the Marquis by the three principal female characters of the play – la Marquise de Clainville, his wife, la Comtesse de Saint-Alban and Mme Pinçon, the governess. Believing that his wife has cuckolded him, the Marquis, as the drama unfolds, is reanimated through the experience of the extreme emotions of jealousy and anger. It transpires that de Clainville is in love with a mystery woman, of unknown identity, met at a masked ball in Paris. This woman, we learn, was his wife in disguise, and it was during this brief encounter that their child was conceived. The truth is finally revealed in the final act of the play and the philosopher duly 'corrected', is revived in sense and revitalised through a new found love for his spouse and child.

De Gouges demonstrates in this play that there is no room for double standards in love and human relationships and that a life devoid of passion is an insubstantial one. In Act I, Scene V, the Marquis is confronted by his friend Le Baron de Montfort who demands of him: 'Mais toi qui fais le philosophe, réponds à ton tour : si ta philosophie te permet de ne te gêner sur rien, comment peux-tu condamner les principes des autres?'[62] Exasperated with his emotional inertia, la Comtesse appeals to him: 'Quel homme vous êtes ! Vous ne tenez compte de rien : la vertu chez vous est une chimère. Vous n'êtes donc pas susceptible

[61] Critics have compared this play to two very influential satirical plays of the period both by Sedaine*: Le Philosophe sans le savoir* (1765) and *La gageure imprévue* (1768) which both intentionally poke fun at '*bienpensant*' ethics and sensibilities.
[62] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 111.

de passions ?'[63] It is significant to note, however, that it is a reckless act of sexual abandon and apparent adultery that unites the married couple. This illustrates the frequently explored theme of restraint represented by the imposition of marital obligation and forced religious vows to be found in de Gouges' theatre. In this instance she suggests that the married couple only begin their true conjugal relationship under guise and secrecy, free from societal contract and familial expectation.

With *La Nécessité du divorce* (1790), de Gouges makes use of the medium of theatre to convey a logical argument for divorce. In a society where divorce exists, she claims, marriage is strengthened rather than undermined. Once again, the trope of liberation is developed in the proposal of social and political reform. From an historical viewpoint, divorce remained illegal until its authorisation by the Assembly in September 1792. [64] Again, as with *Le Philosophe corrigé*, we are presented with a plot involving an adulterous husband reunited with his wife. De Gouges succeeds in underscoring the deep chasm of misunderstanding and poor communication between the sexes, particularly within the domestic sphere, and shows that it eventually leads to disappointment, despair and infidelity. The restraints imposed by an indissoluble marriage union and the consequences of these are highlighted by the character Rosambert in Act I, Scene IV:

> En amour, la femme est un ange ; en ménage, c'est un diable ; l'amoureux obéit et le mari commande. Monsieur prend à droite, Madame donne à gauche ; de là, la désunion des époux ; la mauvaise éducation des enfants, la ruine des familles et la corruption de la société.[65]

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[63] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 115.
[64] Divorce was once again abolished in 1816 and despite efforts by legislators in the 1830s and in 1848, it was not to be reinstated again until 1884, under the Third Republic. Throughout this period, France's political climate dictated its divorce laws; divorce was regarded as a republican, even revolutionary institution throughout the nineteenth century. For more see Christine Roulston, *Narrating Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Farnham: Ashgate: 2010)
[65] *O.C.*, T.1, p.230.

De Gouges' views on marriage were made patently clear in her political writings as Wallach Scott writes, she viewed it as a 'tomb of trust and love'.[66] Superficially, *La Nécessité du divorce* narrates the tale of domestic harmony restored through another elaborate ruse, one concocted this time by Rosambert. On closer scrutiny, however, and unlike the happy ending of *Le Philosophe corrigé*, a casualty of profligate living is revealed, this time the hapless mistress, Herminie. Forsaking all other possible suitors and offers of marriage, she attaches herself to a man who, unbeknownst to her, is already married. When confronted by the wife of her lover, she is met with tender sympathy, but while his wife's stoical approach rekindles his love, the profligate d'Aznival casually abandons his mistress and she is forced to leave Paris under a cloud of shame and disrepute.

The term libertinage in the eighteenth century became increasingly associated with a deeply critical view of a Catholic Church commonly perceived as corrupt, and predators of the clerical kind are frequently found in de Gouges' dramaturgy; indeed the playwright seems to take relish in her vivid depiction of their sinister and calculated pursuit of vulnerable women.[67] *Le Prélat d'autrefois* written some time between 1791-92 and first performed in Paris at the Théâtre de la Cité-Variétes in 1794, months after the author's death, once again explores the issue of forced vows as raised in *Le Couvent*, but now the emphasis is concentrated more on the role of good and evil and the foundation of public and personal morality. Religious values are questioned as part of a growing anti-

[66] Joan Wallach Scott *op. cit.*, p. 11.
[67] By no means an original trope, de Gouges' anticlerical sentiments reflected a widespread cultural and intellectual reaction to the tyrannical and corrupt nature of the Church and religious intolerance, a reaction initiated by the *philisophes.* For a detailed study on this subject see S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion. The myths of modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

clericalism prevalent in French society.[68] The setting, in dark chambers, the theme of religious perversion, and the presence of ghosts in this play indicate a gothic influence prevalent in English literature and becoming known in France as *la littérature sombre*. The unnamed '*Évêque*' of this piece is without doubt one of the most sinister characters to be found in de Gouges' theatre. Most disturbing is the power and influence he yields over the Abbess of the convent as she aids him in his baleful design to sexually corrupt the young novice Sophie. We learn that the Abbess, herself in her youth, was one of his innocent victims, and that she holds illusory notions of rekindling their thwarted 'love', to the extent that she is willing to offer him a young woman as a form of human sacrifice. The playwright may have been influenced by an actual event which held French society in thrall, as recounted here by Mita Choudhury:

> In 1764, the Parlement of Paris heard a sensational case in which several nuns from the Abbey of Saint-Pierre-de-Beaumont near Clermont-Ferrand accused their abbess of libertine behavior and abusive conduct. Significantly, this trial coincided with the intensification of attacks on ecclesiastical institutions. This article argues that the lawyers defending the nuns drew from contemporary notions of feminine vice and virtue as means of exposing the larger dangers of clerical despotism. On the one hand, the mémoires judiciaires attacking the abbess configured feminine power as self-serving, arbitrary, and corrosive, threatening social order and the masculine world of law. On the other hand, the mémoires portrayed the nuns both as passive victims and as active citizens seeking to preserve their community. The nun's appeals to the lawyers reinforced the latter's masculine identity. Thus, while revealing the fusion of eighteenth-century anxieties about gender and clerical power, the Beaumont affair also suggests a complex negotiation between female agency and male subjectivity in the public sphere. [69]

What sets this play apart from other literature of the time, which was also preoccupied with clerical malevolence, is the playwright's attempt to analyse the origins of such behaviour, as she delineates the detrimental effect of forced religious obligation on the

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[68] For a thorough account of the influence and power exerted by the Catholic Church in eighteenth- century France see John Mc Manners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth Century France, Vol. 1, The Clerical Establishment and its Social Ramifications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[69] Mita Choudhury, 'Despotic Habits: The Critique of Power and its Abuses in an Eighteenth-Century Convent'. *French Historical Studies 23,1* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press 2000), pp. 33-65.

Bishop himself. He describes his personal fate in Act I, Scene VI:

> Je suis homme, mon ami. Forcé par une famille puissante à choisir l'état ecclésiastique, je suis parvenu aux premières dignités de l'église ; l'ambition est satisfaite, mais le cœur ne l'est pas; la nature est plus forte que la raison. [70]

The message signalled by Le Prieur in Act I, Scene I, not only highlights the dogma which upheld the prohibition of independent conviction as enforced by institutionalised religion, but also by analogy, serves to underscore the plight of a nation undermined by a despotic monarchy: '[…] n'oubliez jamais ce que je vous ai recommandé : obéissance aveugle, soumission sans bornes, entier abandon de vous-même, pour n'écouter que la voix de vos supérieurs.'[71]

Deviance is not only to be found wearing a clerical collar however, as the dramatist portrays many situations where women are sexually vulnerable. The character of Mirza in *L'Esclavage des noirs,* is the victim of attempted rape and it is as a result of her lover Zamor's murder of her would-be violator that they are both given the death sentence. From the subaltern state of a West Indian slave woman, to the predicaments faced by French women in contemporary society, the playwright repeatedly and expertly exposes female vulnerability. Fanchette, the young heroine of *Le Mariage inattendu,* is targeted by the villainous Comte Almaviva who wishes to seize the occasion of her upcoming nuptials as an opportunity to exercise his *droit du seigneur*.[72] Adherence to a strict moral code was encouraged in an endeavour to keep female sexuality in check, so as the unscrupulous Count attempts to emotionally blackmail the young Fanchette by deliberately

[70] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 266.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 263.
[72] It has already been noted in the first chapter that *Le Mariage inattendu* was written as a suite to Beaumarchais' classic *Le Mariage de Figaro;* where the Count was unsuccessful in his seduction of Suzanne, in Olympe's play he turns his intentions to the virginal Fanchette.

misrepresenting an innocent midnight tryst, he threatens to besmirch her reputation, the most valuable asset of a young unmarried woman of modest means.

In *L'Homme généreux* (1785) we meet Marianne, a woman weighed down by the burden of her family's poverty. As her elderly father faces debtor's prison, help arrives in the person of La Fontaine, who in paying off his debts effectively abducts his daughter by way of human collateral and in turn attempts to seduce her. Men of a certain nature are to be avoided, as we are reminded by her father, Le Vieux Montalais, in Act II, Scene I : 'un berger est plus dangereux pour une jeune fille qu'un loup : on a peur de l'un et l'on se fie à l'autre.'[73] What de Gouges addresses here is the problematic nature of female sexuality in the late eighteenth century, and the notion that sex could be used as a social, personal and political weapon to undermine women.

Not all of de Gouges' female characters are unfortunate victims. Ninon is depicted as the epitome of female emancipation and we also note the introduction of sexually confident women in the later plays, fully conscious of their individual power. Suzon of *Les Curieux de Champs du Mars* (1790) is one such character. Although she plays a minor role in this short one-act comedy, her character serves as a model of the independent young woman. When she first appears in Scene VIII with her young lover Bertrand, we note his possessive jealousy as he accuses her of flirting with other men in a crowd gathered to celebrate the Fête de la Fédération of the 14th of July, 1790. Suzon protests her innocence while he goes on to accuse her of 'making eyes' at a sentinel ushering the heaving mob. Foreseeing a possible advantage to his lover's appeal, Bertrand now urges her to ask the

[73] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 78.

sentinel for his permission to mount some scaffolding, affording him a better view of the festivities. It is Suzon, however, that is granted this privilege, and Bertrand's envy is dissipated in the anger of the onlookers. This cleverly constructed vignette is symbolic of an emerging ideal of independent femininity, set against the highly charged backdrop of the Fête de la Fédération. De Gouges indicates that she is not averse to employing feminine guile, and is representative of a woman comfortable with, and in full possession of, her own sexual power.

Similarly, Mme Charlot and her daughter, two significant female characters in *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1792), embody female sexual power and beauty as inspirational forces for French military might in the period of the Revolutionary wars. While successful in escaping the predatory advances of the wily cleric Grisbourdon (to whom Mme Charlot overtly refers as 'Le Tartuffe'), they both encourage their men, and actively engage in armed revolutionary battle, therefore gaining heroic admiration for their gender, more typically perceived as sexual quarry. The fact that Mme Charlot is German and married to a patriotic Frenchman and that Charlotte their daughter woos the son of an Austrian general to fight on the side of the French, is not merely an expression of jingoistic pride, but metaphorically points to the rapid advancement of revolutionary ideals throughout Europe.

Libertinage as a theme in the drama of Olympe de Gouges investigates the intellectual and moral freedom enjoyed by famous female libertines such as Ninon de Lenclos and Queen Christine of Sweden. De Gouges also exposes the inherent dangers of

female exploitation under the influence of amoral individuals upheld by misogynistic religious or social values. In her later plays, the dramatist employs the trope of sexual liberation to develop a positive perception of female sexuality newly emerging in eighteenth century art and literature and tellingly allies the fortunes of such a potentiality with the success of popular revolution.

3 Freedom from traditional frameworks: redefining family

So far we have noted that the theatrical writings of Olympe de Gouges are marked by a preoccupation with changing social values, and in this manner act as a mirror for public and private concerns prevalent in late eighteenth-century French society. While her political writings articulate clearly her quest for gender equality amongst other issues, her dramaturgy also goes on to probe traditional customs and mores, systems and beliefs such as the conventional notion of family, where, through the familiar theatrical tools of plot, characterisation, dialogue and rhetoric, she attempts to deconstruct and redefine kinship. To this end, de Gouges takes the symbol of family, the very cornerstone of society, and drags it from the darkness of the ideologies of the Ancien Régime into the enquiring light of revolutionary thought. In an historical context we may note that:

> Family life became the central feature of bourgeois culture. Prior to the eighteenth century family life was typified by a lack of affectional bonds between family members—between husband and wife, between parents and children. Families were patriarchal, and parental authority over children was based on beating. Under the Enlightenment encouragement for the pursuit of personal happiness, family life was transformed in the second half of the eighteenth century. Personal affection became a more common element of relationships between spouses.[74]

In the theatre of de Gouges, families are invariably shown to be in crisis; they are fractured, divided and then reunited. They are shown to be composed not only of blood

[74] Kishlansky, Geary and O'Brien, *Civilization in the West* (Cambridge: Pearson, 2010), p.250.

relatives but are also bound by other ties, opening up a debate as to the relevance of heredity, in an age where a growing appreciation of the value of comradeship over kinship began to evolve. Familial decay is symbolic of great societal change and the decline of feudal institutions such as the church and monarchy.

In *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783), family division metaphorically represents the psychological and geographical distance between France and her colonies, while in the case of *L'Homme généreux* (1785) it serves to underscore the grim divide between rich and poor. In *Le Couvent* (1790) a mother is deliberately alienated from her daughter, rendering them both vulnerable to patriarchal and religious influence, and the problematic issue of paternity is explored in *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787). The playwright registers a positive note with her expression of independent vision in *Molière chez Ninon* (1787), whereby maternity is re-examined and true family is shown to be unfettered by the ties of blood lineage. With *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791), the playwright conjures up a fantastical family, a gathering of great intellect joined together in the interests of the nation. Finally we shall examine how *La France sauvée* (1792) demonstrates how even the most powerful of dynasties are subject to division within their ranks.

Language plays a pivotal role in de Gouges' dramaturgy and familial metaphors are effectively employed in *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783). Mme de Saint-Frémont refers to her domestic entourage and her slaves as 'mes enfants', and a good master is treated with the same reverence reserved for *un bon père de famille.* In this way, the playwright emphasises to her audience the importance of benevolent governorship and also attempts to promote a

sense of fraternity between people of all races in accordance with her abolitionist principles. In the first chapter, we noted how the shipwreck was indicative of significant change and upheaval, and the playwright further heightens the dramatic effect of the play by placing the governor's long-estranged daughter on board. This serves not only to demonstrate the delicate and contentious link between the island and the mainland but also allows the author to introduce into the play's narrative the personal history of the colonial governor. Here, the savage cruelty of the tropical colony, where martial law was employed to prevent native insurrection, is compared to the cruelty of familial custom as experienced by the governor in his former life. M. de Saint-Frémont informs us in Act II, Scene V that:

> Je suis d'une province où les lois injustes et inhumaines privent les enfants cadets du partage égal que la nature donne aux enfants nés du même père et de la même mère. J'étais le plus jeune de sept; mes parents m'envoyèrent à la Cour pour y demander de l'emploi; mais comment aurais-je pu réussir dans un pays où la vertu est une chimère, et où l'on n'obtient rien sans intrigue ni bassesse ?[75]

His outraged words are indicative of a society tarnished by corruption, but what is made clear is that his story and that of those close to him in the past seems to have been dictated by unfair parental decisions. The audience learns that as a young man in France, the governor's fate was allied to that of the daughter of a widowed Scotsman who is eventually killed at war, leaving her destitute and orphaned. As she has no family and is of humble stock, the young man's parents disapprove of their relationship and they are forced to marry in secret and, shortly afterwards conceive a child. They are soon discovered and he is dispatched as regiment captain to a post in the Indies. Some time later he is falsely informed by his family that his young wife has died, and given no indication as to the fate of their child. In time he becomes M. de Saint-Frémont, assuming the family name of the retired governor upon marrying his daughter, thereby erasing his painful past and assuming

[75] *O.C.*, T.1, p.33.

a new identity. Carried along on the tide of circumstance, Saint-Frémont is described in almost Shakespearian terms,[76] reminiscent of that playwright's most ill-fated parental figure, King Lear, as when his wife declares in Act II, Scene V: 'Mon ami, tu es plus malheureux que coupable.'[77]

When he receives the news from his family in France that his wife and daughter are still alive (in a final act of ruthlessness on their behalf), he is incapable of rejoicing as so much time has passed and he has since remarried. Underlining the consequences of his family's unjust behaviour, Saint Frémont informs us that: '[…] mais par un raffinement de barbarie, le cruel parent qui m'avait trompé m'apprit que Clarisse vivait encore.'[78] De Gouges' use of the word 'barbarie', an expression usually reserved for the customs of natives, is significant as it further emphasises the callousness that can exist in so called civilized society, challenging long-held ideologies regarding the philosophical divide between coloniser and colonised.

The unadulterated love of Mme de Saint-Frémont rescues her husband from despair and she herself is typical of many of the heroines of de Gouges' plays in that she represents pragmatic reasoning allied with sympathetic instinct. Her vow to embrace her husband's daughter as her own, directly echoes her own father's 'adoption' of his son-in-law, whereby the latter, contrary to custom (and from a feminist perspective, it is daringly subversive),

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[76] In his essay 'Revolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Culture; Shakespeare in France, 1789-1815' Matthew Ramsey observes that: '[…] Shakespeare was already the standard of literary revolution for the generation that made the French Revolution (just as he later was for the generation that read Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare*), but also because, for the generation of the 1790s, Shakespeare was so obviously a revolutionary and republican poet, and the Revolution was so clearly a Revolutionary event.' *The French Revolution in Culture and Society,* eds. Troyansky, Cismaru and Andrews (New York: Greenwood, 1991) p.58.

[77] *O.C.*, T.1, p.33.

[78] *Idem*.

assumes his wife's family name. Indeed it is she who intuitively first recognises Sophie as the long-lost daughter: 'Je trouve dans les traits de cette étrangère une ressemblance…Quelle chimère!'[79] Thus de Gouges exposes the complex and problematic nature of familial influence and the all too human endeavour to forge new alliances while acknowledging the unforgettable nature of the past.

In *L'Homme généreux* (1785), the playwright addresses the misery brought about by poverty and the social stigma experienced by a family in debt. In this play, the audience witnesses how the 'sins of the father' are brought to bear on the other family members. Le Vieux Montalais, the character of the father, faces debtor's prison, and de Gouges deftly paints a portrait of a family in crisis, creating an atmosphere of tension and desperation which pervades the drama. The concept of re-invention is once again explored, with Marianne and her brother going out in the world in disguise, the only way that they can reasonably be employed without incurring ignominy and shame.[80] Marianne is under the protective tutelage of a noblewoman, Mme de Valmont, while Le Jeune Montalais (as he is always referred to in the play) works for Le Comte de Saint-Clair under a false identity. At one stage, in an effort to clear his father's debts he enlists in the army for the sake of the small bursary involved, a decision which would have led to certain death. The debt is finally paid by Le Comte, the generous man of the title, but not before Marianne's impoverished situation exposes her to an attempt on her maiden virtue. The message

[79] *O.C.*,T.1, p. 35.

[80] The necessity to change one's name and in some cases cut all familial ties, when one member of the family was declared a felon, was a frequent and sad reality for many in eighteenth century France. De Gouges here exposes the inherent ignominy and sometimes danger involved in being a member of a family of a known 'criminal'. She and her audience would have been fully aware of the Calas affair and Voltaire's public condemnation of same, which eventually led to the strengthening of the movement of criminal law reform in France.

contained in this drama is clear: a family in solidarity is a noble thing, but the weakness of one can bring about the destruction of all.

While *L'Homme généreux* exposes a family in crisis, in *Le Couvent* (1789), de Gouges dedicates herself to the theme of forced separation of mother and child. In this play, the dramatist underscores the unique bond that exists between mother and daughter, and the strength of the bond dramatised is analogous of female solidarity and empowerment.

Le Couvent essentially relates the story of how one man, Le Marquis de Leuville, upon assuming authority as head of a family, sets about despotically controlling the fate of those closest to him. Having rashly murdered his sister's husband he banishes her and her infant daughter to a convent in an effort to conceal his crime. Julie and her mother are segregated within the cloister, the young novice growing up unaware of the true identity of her mother. Led by the Abbesse, the 'familial' congregation of the order become complicit in this deception, and by highlighting this collusion Olympe de Gouges adds another chapter to her personal campaign against the enforcement of vows, in particular those of a religious nature.[81] However, the playwright also manages to reveal a deeper dimension of the mother and daughter dynamic; while Julie is ignorant of the fact that Sœur Angélique is indeed her mother, and the latter is bound to secrecy, they are both free to develop a relationship that transcends the conventional affiliation of parent and child. 'Sisters' in the religious sense, they are essentially equals and, while Julie looks to Sœur Angélique for support, the latter in turn takes great solace in the company of her daughter: 'Oui, ma fille, appelle-moi ta mère, j'ai plus que tu ne penses des droits à ce titre.'[82]

[81] This will be discussed in more detail in the '*Égalité*' section.
[82] *O.C.*, T.1, p.214

'The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman'- so writes de Gouges in Article XI of her *Déclaration*. She goes on to elaborate that:

> ...cette liberté assure la légimité des pères envers les enfants. Toute citoyenne peut donc dire librement, *je suis mere d'un enfant qui vous appartient,* sans qu'un préjugé barbare la force à dissimuler la vérité ; sauf à répondre de l'abus de cette liberté dans les cas déterminés par la loi. [83]

In a patriarchal society, the last bastion of female power often lies in the true knowledge of paternity and this is the issue addressed by the playwright in *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787). While all the female characters of this play are aware of the true paternity of the baby daughter of La Marquise, it is the patriarchal head of the family, Le Marquis de Clainville himself who is revealed to be floundering, confused and lost in a female dominated universe of collusion and wile. Comfortable in his inherited position, and having taken his family for granted, the Marquis is dealt a lesson in the dangers of complacency. He is forced to face the possibility of losing his family, a fact which ultimately humbles him. *Le Philosophe* highlights the dichotomy between the private and public sphere, a subject of great philosophical debate in a period of revolution. For better or for worse, the erosion of the Ancien Régime paved the way for public ownership of private property: personal, intellectual and familial. De Gouges reveals how a private family matter could quickly become public scandal, as illustrated in Act III, Scene VI, by this satirical song which circulated around Paris containing a slanderous account of the de Clainville affair:

> Terrible dans la guerre
> Au ménage époux débonnaire
> Chez lui tout y prospère
> Et surtout un enfant
> Tandis qu'il est absent, arrive à contretemps. [84]

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[83] Olympe de Gouges, *op. cit.*, p.17.
[84] *O.C.*,T.1, p.122. (This verse will again be examined in the penultimate chapter of the thesis, for its biographical relevance to de Gouges)

We have previously shown how the character of Ninon de Lenclos can be considered an ideological facsimile of the playwright; her itinerary also mirrors certain biographical aspects of de Gouges' own personal history, as dramatised in *Molière chez Ninon* (1787). Olympe de Gouges was raised by her mother and stepfather (a man whom for many years she believed to be her true father) in Montauban, while her real father, the marquis Le Franc de Pompignan, remained a distant, semi-mythical figure. As Wallach Scott observes:

> This lineage added intrigue and status to her life and (since the Marquis had won a reputation as a man of letters) provided a genealogy for her own literary aspirations. It also, of course, made a mockery of the rules of patrilineal origin and naming. (The theme of naming and renaming the father reappears, albeit with inconsistent and varied usage, throughout de Gouges's life and work.)[85]

In the fictional world of Ninon, the heroine is separated from her son soon after his birth, a fact which she keeps secret even from her closest friends. When she is finally reunited with him at the age of forty-five, she is overjoyed to assume her new role as a mother. Thus the dramatist subverts the accepted convention of woman as mother by demonstrating how her character has been free to lead a libertine lifestyle in youth, embracing motherhood in middle-age. According to popular opinion, as espoused by Rétif de la Bretonne, this is the age at which a woman: '[…] peut se regarder comme n'ayant plus de sexe; l'hiver et l'inutilité physique ont commencé pour elle.'[86]

The notion of kinship is further deconstructed in this drama with the implication that a family may also be comprised of a faithful circle of friends, lovers and acquaintances

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[85] Joan Wallach Scott, *op. cit*, p.8.
[86] Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne, *Les Six âges de la fille dans les contemporaines ou aventures des plus jolies femmes de l'âge présent* (Lyon: Joly,1781), p.14.

whose mutual regard is shown to surpass the obligation inherent in 'natural heredity'.

This, then, leads eloquently to the mythical union of enlightened figures of history as presented by de Gouges in her most philosophically adventurous work, *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791). First staged in Paris on the 15th of April 1791 at the Théâtre des Italiens to commemorate the death of Mirabeau, this one act drama reads more like a Platonic dialogue or a discourse in the style of Diderot. Castan reminds us of how Mirabeau, the great revolutionary orator, was considered by the playwright:

> Olympe admirait Mirabeau, qui lui rendait son admiration, mais elle doutait de son intégrité morale… Après sa mort, elle n'hésite pas à exalter la mémoire de l'homme politique, dont elle partageait alors les points de vue.[87]

This, of course is the hallmark of Olympe de Gouges as both a writer and a revolutionary thinker - her ability to admire the great philosophers and leaders of the age while simultaneously acknowledging their fallibility. To this end, in this play she forms a hypothetical 'family' of ideologues from differing schools of thought, joined not by biological ties but by the more significant and influential bond of mutual interest in the social and political advancement of their nation. Gathered together on stage are Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu, along with Henri IV and Louis XIV joined also by Antoinette Deshoulières, Ninon de Lenclos and Mme La Marquise de Sévigné, all of them under the watchful eyes of the dramatic incarnations of Destiny and Fortune. The characters voice their opinions on the current state of France while contemplating their own contributions, literary and otherwise, to its cultural development. While Voltaire and Rousseau show their approval of contemporary events, Montesquieu counters their optimism by questioning the new constitution and the true status of France's citizenry:

[87] *O.C.*, T.1, p.247, Castan's editorial comment.

> Je crains, au contraire, que la nouvelle Constitution n'ait point cette énergie que tu lui supposes. Les trois ordres sont indubitablement nécessaires à l'esprit d'un gouvernement monarchique. Le caractère français est changeant : c'est par son inconstance qu'il aime tout ce qui flatte sa vanité. J'ai travaillé pour le bien de mon pays, et suivant vous, je n'ai fait qu'un ouvrage ! Mais croyez-vous, l'un et l'autre, cette Constitution bien affermie ?[88]

The play concludes with the celestial coronation of Mirabeau and through his voice de Gouges expresses her personal opinion on the best possible political solution for her country: 'Puisse la France n'oublier jamais que la seule forme de gouvernement qui lui convienne est une monarchie sagement limitée.'[89]

From the ideological family of *Mirabeau* to the polemical portrayal of the real royal family in *La France sauvée* (1792), de Gouges manages to convey the corruption inherent in absolute power, while displaying the persuasive influence of Republican idealism and its power to infiltrate even the highest echelons. De Gouges audaciously represents the royal family as she would any other, allowing the audience to view them in a naturalistic domestic setting. We are first introduced to Marie Antoinette in Act I, Scene II, where, according to the stage directions, she is 'seule, les cheveux épars et en robe du matin'.[90] Plagued by anxiety, aware that her reign and possibly her life is nearing its end, her recognition of the threat to her family is cogently manifested: 'Que l'incertitude est affreuse! La mort ou la victoire, voila mon dernier mot… Éloignons de mon sein toute pitié. Mon époux, mes enfants, éloignez-vous de mes yeux, pour vous sauver.'[91]

However the playwright is determined to demonstrate that this is not merely a

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[88] *O.C.*, T.1, p.250.
[89] *Ibid.*, p.257.
[90] *Ibid.*, p.333.
[91] *Idem*.

family facing possible disaster, but one already in crisis, the seeds of their self-destruction having been sown from within. Louis XVI is shown to be ineffectual and weak, incapable of ruling and unwilling to take any significant decision regarding himself or his family. The following eye-witness account of a conversation between Town-Councillor Charles Goret and Malesherbes who both had access to the King during his last days of imprisonment in Le Temple, attests to the paralysis which seemed to grip him:

> […] we spoke of Louis XVI's position, for it was but a few days before the end. Of this conversation the following words have always remained in my memory. 'I cannot,' said M. de Malesherbes, 'make the King pay any attention to his affairs, or give his mind to them. Grave as his position is, he shows the greatest indifference to it'. Here we see the impassibility of which I have already spoken. This was the last time I was in the Temple before the King's death.[92]

The Queen is portrayed as cunning and manipulative and insists on adhering to royal protocol right to the end. She refuses to entertain an audience with an outsider of the court, Olympe de Gouges, and is unwilling to relinquish authority. It is the young dauphin who captures our attention with his impressive entrance in Act I, Scene X: 'Vive la Nation! Vive la Nation! … Maman, n'est-il donc pas vrai qu'il faut crier, « Vive la Nation » ?[93] The prince goes on to sing 'L'hymne de la Marseillaise' to the appalled reaction of his mother, having learnt the song from a grenadier of the royal court. Thus, the playwright demonstrates that the foundations of tyranny are being eroded from within, and that youth is representative of change, evolution and a dismissal of the old values of the 'ci-devants'.

De Gouges' efforts to redefine family corresponded to a collective interrogation of the nature of generational difference prevalent in Revolutionary France. Troyansky in his essay *Generational Discourse in the French Revolution* outlines the importance of a break

[92] G. Lenotre, *The Last Days of Marie Antoinette*, translated by Mrs. Rodolph Starwell (London: William Heinemann, 1913), p.95.
[93] *O.C.*, T.1, p.338.

with the past and a revision of the notion of heritage and family:

> The Revolution not only represents a break with the past, but it also creates that past. It contrasts the new world of liberty and or/equality with the old world of restriction and privilege. No matter how much of the Ancien Régime one sees as surviving the Revolution, there is no denying the great divide that the Revolutionaries saw. One way in which they imagined or represented that divide was in terms of generational difference. Old ranks, old practices, old customs would be associated with age, with *les anciens*, while youth would naturally be associated with Revolution.[94]

De Gouges' plays invite their eighteenth-century audience to re-examine the significance of family in a changing society and in doing so allow them to consider a redefinition of long held values and customs. De Gouges suggests a revision of the past in order to pave the way towards a more progressive society, ultimately leading to a more equitable and liberated future. Her dramas attest to the emerging questioning of the strict conditions of birthright, and in portraying realistic situations where individuals are capable of forging their own destinies, she demonstrates the advantages of embracing equal values for all members of society.

[94] David G. Troyansky, 'Generational Discourse in the French Revolution', *The French Revolution in Culture and Society* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), p.24.

Égalité

4 Social Division and Feudal Tradition

In the previous section we examined representations of liberty in the theatrical works of Olympe de Gouges and saw the ways in which the playwright's concept of liberty engaged with an eighteenth century audience concerned with redefining the parameters of personal, political and intellectual freedom. The chapters in this second section will analyse the many representations of equality in the plays, showing that, just as the ideological notion of liberty was often conveyed through the dramatic manifestation of 'non-liberty', or unjust social constraint, in de Gouges' dramas, so too were examples of inequality.[95] Through an examination of the themes of inequality illustrated in her theatre, this chapter will examine how the playwright formulates her quest for a more egalitarian society, at a time when French society was poised for revolution and inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Engaging with the language of enlightenment, Olympe de Gouges sought to unravel and re-forge long held social norms which promoted inequality. In her dramaturgy, social divisions are critiqued along with the futile nature of feudal tradition. The aim of *L'Homme généreux* (1785) is not only to elicit a sympathetic response to a family in poverty but also to confront the audience with the age-old theme of the malicious treatment of those *en misére* by those *en privilège.* De Gouges illustrates how the poor are mere pawns to be

[95] These 'dramatic manifestations of non-liberty' were discussed in the previous section. De Gouges' drama quite often dealt with the adverse consequences of the curtailment of liberty and equality, examples of the latter will be reviewed in this section.

manipulated by the rich, whose generosity also ironically serves as a questionable salve to their own privileged consciences, all this some eighty years before the appearance of Hugo's *Les Misérables.*

While the Revolution of 1789 was to herald institutional change and the erosion of the values of the Ancien Régime, certain feudal practices continued to persist, further compounding social inequality. Chief among these were the expectations surrounding the appropriateness of marital unions. *Le Mariage inattendu* (1784) portrays the unjust treatment of Fanchette, daughter of a gardener whose supposed lowly status prohibits her alliance with Chérubin. Likewise, Le chevalier de Belfort is considered to be an unsuitable match for the young Olympe, as depicted in *Molière chez Ninon* (1787), simply because his mother's identity remains an enigmatic mystery. [96]

Domestics, servants, the general underclass of French society had for some time started to creep centre-stage, and as literary characters they emerged from their former status as shadowy background figures. In response to this de Gouges also draws these characters into the spotlight.[97] By thus substantiating them and affording them a significant voice, as we will observe in *L'Entrée de Dumouriez aux Bruxelles* (1793) and *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787), the playwright champions a hitherto silent class poised for emancipation. In closing, we will analyse the playwright's most incisive satire on social

[96] Olympe de Châteauroux, a young female character in the play and not the playwright, for a synopsis of each play as well as a full list of original characters see the appendix.

[97] Recognition of the potentiality of the moral and intellectual contribution of the serving classes came to the fore with the publication of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela* in 1740. This novel spawned many pan-European offshoots including Piccini's comic-opera *La Buona Figliuola* in 1761 and was also translated into French by Abbé Prévost as *Paméla ou la Vertu mieux éprouvée* in 1743. This led to a moral debate as to the treatment of domestics, whereby society was forced to re-examine their outlook towards this class and reconsider their moral abilities and intellectual significance.

division, *Les Curieux du Champs de Mars*, a play which both comically and eloquently manages to expose the absurdity of hierarchical prestige.

In 1790, the *Comité pour l'extinction de la mendicité* was formed by formal request of the Constituent Assembly. Its formation was preceded by a growing social concern with, and an awareness of, poverty. In his essay *Change, continuity, and the French revolution, elite discourse on mendacity, 1750-1815*, Olejnicizak points out that:

> […] there is much evidence to suggest that elite fascination and fear of beggary and vagrancy produced a quickening of interest during the eighteenth-century which resulted in an outpouring of tracts, essays, memoirs and dictionary and encyclopaedia articles. Increasingly after 1750, observers groped for a more nuanced vocabulary to describe the poor, particularly the labouring poor […] No single French writer ever formulated a universally accepted hierarchy of the poor, and no theorist ever created a school of thought which dealt solely with the poor.[98]

In *L'Homme généreux* (1785), la famille Montalais are not vagrants but they are certainly perilously close to becoming destitute.[99] Le Jeune Montalais holds the position of secretary to Le Comte de Saint-Clair, however his allowance doesn't provide enough to sustain the family and keep the bailiffs from the door. Imprisonment for debt was a genuine threat which found many families constantly borrowing from creditors to pay off the amount due to another. In addition to this, poverty was considered a matter of great social shame and many families went to great lengths to avoid discovery. This particular predicament and the one faced by les Montalais is summed up by Mc Stay Adams: '[…] those who enjoyed a station of life above that of the common tradesman or labourers were too proud to receive charity openly – these were the *pauvres honteux* who must be helped

[98] William Olejniczak, 'Change, continuity, and the French revolution, elite discourse on mendacity, 1750-1815' *The French Revolution in Culture and Society*, eds. David G.Troyansky, Alfred Cisamaru and Norwood Andrews Jr. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp.136-137.

[99] For a detailed discussion of the plight of the poor in France at the latter end of the eighteenth-century, see Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

in secret.'[100]

We have already examined the consequences of the Montalais' vulnerability and the subsequent exploitation of Marianne in the chapter devoted to libertinage. But what of the motives of their saviour Saint-Clair? Caught between the benevolent intentions of Saint-Clair and the more sinister motives of La Fontaine, an employee of the Marquis de Flaucourt, the impoverished status of les Montalais becomes the cause of a power struggle between two wealthy men, each representing the polarities of good and evil. In rescuing the family, Le Comte also achieves personal satisfaction and inevitably profits by marrying Marianne.[101] Thus, Olympe de Gouges addresses the problematic nature of charity, posing the question of who has most to gain from such an arrangement, the donor or recipient. In this instance, it is revealed that the count's motives are entirely altruistic, as he constructively aids the family by improving their immediate financial situation (he pays off their debts) and ensuring future security for their elderly father, by bestowing upon him a pension for the rest of his days. As a social commentary, this play attempts to achieve an awareness of poverty which no committee, law or encyclopaedia entry could hope to do. Its characterisation of a family in dire circumstances, its depiction of their courteous mannerisms, intellectual capacity and pleasant appearance all serve to elevate them above the normally faceless status of the unfortunate poor. Marianne is described frequently as 'belle' et 'verteuse'. Mme de Valmont, her protectress, informs Le Comte that:

> Cette aimable fille est sans cesse occupée à des travaux mercenaires ; sa conversation est bien la pure

[100] Thomas Mc Stay Adams, *Bureaucrats and Beggars, French Social Policy in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.14.

[101] De Gouges' Marianne bears some resemblance to the eponymous heroine of Marivaux's unfinished classic *La Vie de Marianne*, wherein a young woman's *sensibilité* and moral intuition are also explored. From a cultural and historical viewpoint, Marianne is also the allegorical symbol of the French Republic, representing the values of Liberty and Reason.

> image de la candeur, de la sagesse et de la piété filiale, et je vous avoue que sa rare vertu m'édifie autant qu'elle m'enchante. Cette fille respectable semble vouloir se dérober aux avantages qu'elle trouverait dans le monde ; voilà tout ce que je sais de cette aimable enfant…[102]

By highlighting poverty as a social problem, de Gouges demonstrates to her audience that a better understanding of those in need could indeed lead to a more sympathetic perception of them, if not a more equitable society.

Olympe de Gouges first arrived in Paris in 1767, not long after the death of her husband and was resolutely determined to establish herself as a *femme de lettres*. However, a butcher's daughter from Montauban was not likely to be well received in the upper circles of Parisian *haute société*. The budding playwright sought out her half brother through their father, Le Franc de Pompignan, and Jean-Georges Le Franc introduced her to his 'milieux libertins'.[103] Thus the playwright draws from personal experience when depicting the hypocrisy of archaic notions of privilege and traditional protocol with her portrayal of the fate of Fanchette in *Le Mariage inattendu* (1784). Again like Marianne, she is depicted as beautiful, well mannered and softly spoken. Her would-be lover, Chérubin, outlines to Figaro her virtues which he believes, transcend her origins: 'Je crois voir en elle une fille de

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[102] *O.C.*, T.1, p.76.

[103] De Gouges' biographer Olivier Blanc details her successful entry into Parisian society: 'Par sa mère qui avait reçu une éducation raffinée, elle connaissait les usages de la société aristocratique et, bien que fille de boucher à l'état civil, elle n'était riens moins qu'une femme ordinaire. On ne doit pas s'étonner que dans le Paris de Louis XVI, elle fût reçue dans les cercles élégants de la capitale. Comment, petite bourgeoise de Montauban sans fortune, avait-elle pu se retrouver dix ans plus tard à fréquenter des gens « bien nés riches et honnêtes » selon l'expression de l'abbé de Bouyon qui ajoutait que, « jeune et jolie », elle fréquenté les « grands ». Elle rencontra certainement des princes du sang, notamment le duc d'Orléans et le fils de celui-ci, le future Philippe-Égalité, puisqu'on sait qu'elle fut introduite dans le salon de la marquise de Montesson avec laquelle elle partageait la même passion du théâtre. Elle sut aussi attirer chez elle des écrivains, des philosophes, des savants, des artistes de renom, et se construisit une réputation de femme d'esprit dans les salons artistiques et intellectuels de la capitale.' Olivier Blanc, *Marie-Olympe de Gouges, une humaniste à la fin du XVIIIème siècle* (Paris: René Viénet, 2003), p.37-38.

qualité sous l'habit grossier d'une villageoise.'[104] Prohibited from marrying into nobility and forced to accept the fate ordained for her, she is shown to be a foil to her father's demands and a victim of societal pressures. Her predicament is best summarised by her own soliloquy in Act II, Scene I:

> Hélas, je ne suis point née pour lui. Le sort me destine à être la compagne d'un paysan et non pas d'un homme de qualité. Ce n'est plus ce page, cet étourdi ; c'est un homme raisonnable, décent ; il n'en est que plus dangereux pur une âme sensible. Aurai-je la force de l'oublier? Je le dois, il faut me résigner à ma triste destinée, et remplir le devoir qu'elle me prescrit.[105]

The later revelation that she is the daughter of Le Duc and Duchesse de Médoc further emphasises the absurdity of clinging to notions of birthright, for after all she is still the same young woman, the only difference being the revision of her social status.

While these characters seem to be defined by their need to marry well, and are shown to be redeemed by a favourable and much desired match, this in no way diminishes the importance of marriage protocol. To marry well meant the difference between ignominy and a secure position in society. With the identity of his mother remaining an enigmatic mystery, Le Chevalier de Belfort of *Molière chez Ninon* (1787) also faces social exclusion, prevented from marrying his lover, the young Olympe. Before we are introduced to de Belfort, we encounter Olympe in Act I, Scene XII, in audience with Ninon and Molière. She is depicted as a runaway who has fled her father's house and who intends not only to elope with her lover but also to pursue a life on the stage. This affords the playwright an opportunity to paint a sardonic portrait of life in the theatre, as Molière reproaches the young hopeful:

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[104] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 47.
[105] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

> Apprenez, mademoiselle, que sagesse et constance sont deux qualités proscrites de théâtre. Je veux croire même que vous les possédiez; et quand vous auriez une vertu des plus austère, on n'y croira pas; et si vous avez le malheur qu'on y ajoute foi, point d'amis, point d'applaudissements: vous entendrez crier au fond de la sale: « Ah, voilà cette bégueule ! Où a-t-elle été niché sa vertu, et pourquoi n'entrait-elle pas plutôt au couvent qu'à la comédie ? »[106]

Despite the fact that this is essentially an historical drama, set in the seventeenth century, its portrayal of social inequality and public attitudes towards the acting profession (among others) were also pertinent to eighteenth-century cultural norms. The divide existing between playwright and player is emphasised by the fact that it is the great dramatist himself who delivers these lines. Actors held an ambiguous position in French society, as Mc Manners informs us:

> […] there was an obscure distrust of actors in the public mind, even when they were adulated. Willing to serve in plays good or bad, they were mercenary; their real persona was always masked, so that they never were what they appeared to be. They filled a necessary role in society, it was said, just as the public executioner did, but it was hard to imagine why they felt called to it.'[107]

The acting profession was considered particularly disreputable for a young woman, and the character of Olympe is duly warned that she risks losing her lover along with her reputation. De Gouges is anxious to highlight the public's mistrust and fear of the acting profession, without condoning such an attitude. Deliberate irony is employed here, as this of course is a play itself, intended to be performed by real actors (one of them playing a famous playwright) and commenting on their own profession. To this end the dramatist deliberately disengages herself from certain aspects of enlightenment thinking as espoused by Rousseau (whom she greatly admired whilst disagreeing with his attitude towards female advancement). His *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758)[108] according to

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[106] *O.C.*, T.1, p.155.
[107] John Mc Manners, *Abbés and Actresses: The Church and the theatrical profession in eighteenth-century France*, The Zaharoff Lecture 1985-86 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.10.
[108] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758), ed. M. Fuchs (Genève: Librairie Giard, 1948).

Mc Manners was responsible for: 'depriving the theatrical profession of the benefit of the new wave of *sensibilité* which was softening the asperities of social relationships at the end of the Ancien Régime.'[109]

While Olympe is thus discouraged from following her dream, her lover, Le Chevalier de Belfort is also restrained by his own 'illegitimacy'. Despite the high esteem in which he is held by Olympe's father, Le Marquis de Châteauroux, in the absence of a known mother and with his father now dead he is socially marooned and therefore prohibited from marrying a member of the noblesse. In order to stress the importance of the circumstances of one's birth in determining social destiny, let us examine Gail Bossenga's exposition of same:

> In the old regime, distinguished birth (naissance) was a synonym for nobility and conferred honour automatically. According to the entry *naissance* in the *Encyclopédie,* it was with good reason that birth conferred 'a great ascendancy over the members of the state who are of less elevated extraction…' Birth was also considered a source of quasi-moral attributes and inherent aptitude for certain functions. According to Funetière's *Dictionnaire universel* of 1725, birth was 'the good or bad qualities with which one is born.' Because it was commonly believed that birth predisposed some individuals to positions of authority over others, social opportunities were strongly conditioned by the quality.[110]

De Gouges cleverly manages to deconstruct the notion of illegitimacy for the most part associated with the absence of a father, and when it is revealed that Ninon is in fact his mother the play then radically addresses the sensitive if not taboo issue of maternal abandonment. But did Ninon in fact abandon her child? It transpires that a more sinister plot was behind the unhappy separation of mother and son; Ninon's former husband took the infant against her consent, thus allowing her to continue to pursue her libertine way of life. The message is all too clear: in an age where to be a mother involved the loss of

[109] John Mc Manners *op. cit.,* p.10.
[110] Gail Bossenga, *Old Regime France 1648-1788,* ed. William Doyle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.46-47.

freedom, sacrifice or withdrawal from society are the only options available to women[111].

From issues of legitimacy to the subaltern status of the domestic servant, de Gouges bravely gives voice in her drama to an otherwise forgotten class. Eighteenth-century French society was of course noted for its institutionalised class division, whereby one belonged to either the first estate (the clergy, seen as mediators between God and man), the second (comprised of the nobility) and thirdly commoners, whose lot it was to sustain the other two orders. Bossenga also describes the functioning of such social stratifications:

> […] society was commonly regarded as a series of hierarchically ordered groups, all of whom were expected to fulfil particular roles in order to maintain social harmony. It was these groups that gave an individual his or her identity and set the general scope for life opportunities. Individuals were bound by their place in the family, by the negative or positive obligations imposed by rank, by the rights ascribed to particular localities and professions, and by the dictates of religion. Such institutional restraints did not obliterate individuality, but they did markedly shape the possibilities for individual expression by perpetuating norms for proper conduct, by shaping the distribution of resources, and by imposing sanctions on deviant behaviour.[112]

It is Mme Pinçon, described as a 'vieille gouvernante', who utters the first lines of *Le Philosophe corrigé,* and we are immediately made aware of her strong and determined personality and her clear ascendancy over her husband:

> MME PINÇON – Convenez, M. Pinçon, que vous n'avez pas la raison que votre âge donne. Votre scrupule n'est pas sage.
> M. PINÇON – C'est bien à vous, Mme Pinçon, à me faire des reproches…Mais je les mérite. Je suis un sot, un benêt, qui se laisse mener par les caprices de sa femme.[113]

Thus the playwright establishes a woman of serving class as an important character in her play which is concerned with the exposition of familial and social mores. The plot of this play has been examined earlier in this thesis, but here we will examine the importance of the role played by Mme Pinçon in this sometimes amusing, and more importantly, socially

[111] We will examine gender inequality in a later chapter.
[112] Gail Bossenga, *op. cit.,* p. 43.
[113] *O.C.,* T.1, p.109.

critical stratagem, one by which not only a single-minded and self appointed philosopher is brought to his senses, but a society consumed with arbitrary distinctions of human existence is sharply disparaged. Not only is Pinçon responsible for the care of the La Marquise's infant daughter, she also takes an active part in hiding the child from her father and the outside world.

Thus Mme Pinçon's role is symbolic of the importance of the domestic servant in the maintenance of an aristocratic façade; however, de Gouges manages to distinguish this particular *gouvernante* by making her an active agent in the drama. In this sense she questions the accepted societal norm of the passive servant. Mme Pinçon's most important moment in the play undoubtedly arrives in Act V, Scene XI when, disguised as a man, she impersonates the supposed lover of La Marquise and is thus challenged by the latter's husband to a duel. A woman of advancing years, a servant moreover, is drawn into the glaring spotlight of drama and her bravery is eloquently rendered: 'Je me sens d'une valeur intrepide: sous cet habit, j'ai cent fois plus de courage...'[114] De Gouges also insinuates that the donning of male attire is a liberating experience for the character.

Written just after the French Revolutionary army's victory at Jemmapes and Bruxelles, in November 1792, *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1793) was performed on only two occasions just two months later, at the Théâtre de la République on the rue Richelieu. Public disorder sparked by Dumouriez's suspected (and later confirmed) treason meant the cancellation of any subsequent performances. This play is meant to celebrate the heroism of General Dumouriez, but it is to the alternative title, *Les Vivandiers* that our

[114] *O.C.*, T.1, p.139.

attention is drawn, as it denotes the true heroes of the drama.[115]. Thus de Gouges suggests that military success can be attributed to all, even the serving ranks of the army. Les Vivandiers in question are the family Charlot, the father, French-born along with his wife and daughter, all cooks in the Austrian army. The lowliest of the serving classes, and therefore easily ignored, they quickly become spies for the French and are responsible for sabotaging the Austrian campaign, causing insurrection from within the enemy camp. Upon noticing Charlot's patriotism the French spy, 'Tape-à-l'œil', explains his usefulness in military espionage:

> Tu peux mieux encore servir ton pays ; crois-tu que la France manque de bras? Il lui faut des amis chez un people encore aux fers ; ton état te met à même d'avoir affaire au soldat comme à l'officier ; il faut briser les chaînes de ces victimes des tyrans ; ils ne demandent qu'a s'instruire ; il faut les éclairer.[116]

The playwright's use of the verb *éclairer* here implies that englightenment philosophies ought to be extended to all, even enemies of the Revolution. The Charlot's role in abetting a French victory is deeply symbolic of the role of the ordinary citizen in society. Their singular achievement attests to plebeian power and serves as a defiance of institutionalised inequality. In this manner de Gouges the playwright also acts a political mentor for her audience, as she highlights their significant role as *citoyens* in this fledgling republic.

It is a national holiday of special consequence, la Fête de la Féderation of the 14th of July 1790, and along the length of the Champ de Mars crowds have gathered to partake in the festivities. Rich and poor, aristocrat and 'gagne-petit' alike are all congregated together in the secular pilgrimage that is *Les Curieux du Champ de Mars* (1790). The play itself is a

[115] *Vivandier* is an historical term for a sulter, the lowly camp cook whose charge was to keep an army fed and watered.
[116] *O.C.*, T, 1, p.304.

celebration of equality. We are invited to follow the promenade of M. de Bélisle, described by the playwright as an 'impartial' officer of the National Guard, as he quietly observes the varied characters passing in the crowd. The aristocratic figures are shown to be wandering aimlessly, furtively suspicious of the festivities and infuriated by their demotion in society. Mme de la Branche bemoans the loss of her title, and to further emphasise her sense of entitlement the playwright, in the play's script, has her refer to herself each time *en majuscules*:

> J'en parlerai tant que JE vivrai ; quel nom croyez-vous que l'on ait fait succéder à celui de marquise de La Branche du Blason? Celui de Mme Cornu; JE serais actuellement Mme Cornu! Et JE perdrais un nom illustre et les droits d'une race antique.[117]

This play works along comedic lines and the absurdity of aristocratic privilege and birthright are emphasised in its vignette of a dying class. De la Branche's new title, the distinctly non-aristocratic 'Cornu', is further debased by its implication of a wild horned animal and the fact that it is also a pejorative term used for a *mari trompé*. Père Ambroise is denoted in the list of characters as an *aveugle* accompanied by his dog Jacquot – *tous deux aristocrates*. M. de l'Écusson, a genealogist has also fallen on hard times, losing his lucrative customer base to the revolution. In an egalitarian society, the skills he employed to research or invent a family's lineage, which brought into existence as he describes: 'deux cent marquis, six cent comtes, deux mille barons', are no longer of use. He recounts the demise of his profession to Bélisle, 'Je venais d'achever un arbre généalogique, qui remonte à plus de huit cent ans. Celui pour qui j'ai entrepris ce travail ne veut me payer, disant que mon arbre ne peut lui servir de rien.'[118] To which the guard amusingly replies: 'Ma foi, vous pouvez porter votre arbre ailleurs! Il ne prendra pas racine ici. Je vous

[117] *O.C.,* T, 1, p.199.
[118] *Ibid.,* p.202.

conseille d'en faire du bois pour vous chauffer.'[119]

The younger generation are portrayed as dynamic, carefree, and clearly on the rise, sometimes quite literally, as young Suzon is hoisted above the crowd, the better to witness the festivities, to the disdainful reaction of some jealous onlookers: 'comme cette petite mijaurée a la préférence sur nous!' Celebrations aside, however, the aftermath of revolution, with its looming signs of the 'terror' to come, are enigmatically evoked by L'Écusson:

> Funeste Révolution! Fatale Constitution! Allons, puisqu'on me chasse de partout, je vais de désespoir entrer dans une compagnie de chasseurs. A mon tour je chasserai les autres.[120]

Fully aware of the potency of social theatre, de Gouges resolutely underscores the tragedy brought about by unnecessary adherence to pre-ordained social division. She does so by exposing the human face of poverty in her dramatision of the plight of a family in dire need with *L'Homme généreux,* thereby compelling her audience to engage with the society in which they lived. The archaic notion of birthright and automatic privilege is especially condemned as demonstrated in *Le Mariage inattendu* and *Molière chez Ninon.* De Gouges gives voice to a newly acknowledged demographic, the serving classes,

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[119] *O.C.*, T.1, p.203.
[120] *Idem*.

reminding her eighteenth century counterparts of their strength, determination and potential to impel great change. De Gouges undoubtedly champions the strengthening of the serving classes and her dramatic characterisations of same, notably the Fernig sisters, the Charlot family and Suzon, illustrate their struggle for and achievement of equality. Finally, while affording us an invaluable portrait of a society in profound transformation with *Les Curieux*, the dramatist also urges her audience to reflect upon the futile nature of a caste society (as she advocates a more egalitarian model), an audience urged to make the transistion from spectators to active agents now thrown into the emerging modern realm of ideological equality brought about by the physical reality of revolution.

5 The Monarchy, the Clergy and the Military

In order for social equality to be achieved, Olympe de Gouges believed that the two main pillars of eighteenth-century French society, the monarchy and the clergy should undergo radical reform. Contrasted with these, the playwright exalted the military as an example of meritocracy in action, an institution untainted by greed or selfish ambition as characterised by the worst elements of the church and the aristocracy. Olympe de Gouges considered herself a 'moderate' royalist. In this respect her personal politics reflected those of the Girondins who favoured institutional revision of the monarchy and remained particularly opposed to the execution of Louis XVI. They instead suggested his long-term imprisonment or exile in order to avert a decisive and definitive break of the revolutionary regime not only with France itself but all of Europe as well. This belief naturally brought the playwright into direct conflict with the Jacobins led by Robespierre, whose condemnation of the king and of the restoration of monarchy was without doubt.

De Gouges' particular perspective on the purpose and destiny of the monarchy is outlined in *La France sauvée* (1792). She believed that the ruler of France should be worthy of his role and that sovereignty should serve as an example of good government, actively engaging with the constitutional assembly, with the king acting as an inspirational figurehead and an effective leader in times of national crisis.

With regard to the role of the Church in French society, de Gouge's theatre is resoundingly anti-clerical, a sentiment echoed by much of her contemporaries. Most notably Monvel with *Les Victimes cloîtrées* (1791) and Léger's subversive drama *La Papesse Jeanne* (1792), forming the genre popularly known as *théâtre monacal*.[121] In eighteenth-century France, the clergy provided the main intellectual support for the 'society of orders'.[122] The whole system of patriarchal hierarchy was divinely inspired and as monarchs ruled by divine right, they were ideologically sustained by the established church who never tired of reminding their parishioners of this fact. The maintenance of the status quo was therefore a mutually beneficial process. This of course worked also in the reverse, as vital flaws became apparent in one institution these would in consequence lead to the unravelling of the other. Enlightenment philosophy and revolutionary ideals radically challenged absolute monarchy along with the feudal privileges enjoyed by the Catholic clergy and aristocracy. As resentment grew against flagrant corruption, literature played no small part in the wave of anti-clericalism initiated by the *philosophes*. Thus de Gouges aptly addresses these concerns in her dramaturgy, in particular with *Le Couvent* (1790) and *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1791).

Conversely, Olympe de Gouges treats her military characters with considerable esteem. In the mid-eighteenth century the French army remained as it had for centuries, an archaic institution characterised by an unyielding code of conduct, rigid if not static

[121] Monvel, *Les Victimes cloîtrées*, ed. Sophie Marchand (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2011) and Léger, François-Pierre-Auguste, *La Papesse Jeanne* (Paris: Cailleau, 1793).
[122] The expression 'society of orders' was first coined by Roland Mousnier in *La Plume, la famille et le marteau : institutions et société en France du moyen âge à la Révolution* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970). Herein he claimed that between the 15th and 18th centuries French society regarded honour, status and social privilege as far more important than wealth.

operational tactics, apathetic soldiers and an officer class derived mainly from the aristocracy. However, consistent with revolutionary upheaval and the emergence of a national assembly, the army also yielded to a radical remodelling.[123] The common soldier was granted greater recognition in an effort to promote equality and boost morale, thus discouraging acts of desertion. That said, the playwright's preferential treatment of the military is problematic in itself. The French military were chiefly instrumental in the expansion of French overseas colonisation and given de Gouges' strong anti-slavery views it seems ironic that she would choose the army as a model to be contrasted favourably with the monarchy and the clergy. This point is perhaps countered by her portrayal of the military as a force for the general good in her abolitionist œuvre, *L'Esclavage des Noirs* (1783). Also, in de Gouges' theatre, the military are more symbolic of a growing meritocracy within wider society.

On the sixth of November, 1788, *Le Journal général de France* published on its front page cover the first ever political pamphlet penned by Olympe de Gouges, titled '*Lettre au people, un projet d'une caisse patriotique par une citoyenne,'* wherein her empathy with her fellow citizens is made apparent along with her royalist sympathies. Olympe addresses the economic difficulties facing the French public, crippled by increased taxes and the miserable harvests of '87 and '88 and outlines the king's lack of culpability:

> Ce déficit qui discrédite la France, a pris naissance sous le règne le plus fastueux et le plus florissant, il s'est augmenté sous Louis XV, Louis XVI n'a pu parer la catastrophe qui s'est manifestée avec l'éclat le plus terrible. Ses prédécesseurs avaient fait le mal, les uns sans le savoir, les autres volontairement; et lui, plus malheureux roi que les ancêtres, devient-il responsable de leurs erreurs ?[124]

[123] For more details on the reform and role of the military in late eighteenth-century France see Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The French Revolutionary Wars* (Oxford: Routledge, 2001).
[124] Olympe de Gouges, *Écrits politiques*, T.I. (Paris: Côté femmes, 1993), p. 38.

Thus de Gouges clearly outlines her position regarding the state of the monarchy. Rather than see it abolished, she instead hoped for reform that would see the sovereign work for, and with the citizens of France. In this tract, she goes on to inform Louis XVI of the terrible plight of his people while underscoring his ability to save them with the suggestion amongst other ideas of the introduction of a voluntary tax which would allow each citizen to contribute on an equal basis with their king:

> Chaque citoyen qui apporterait à cette caisse, suivant ses moyens, le tribut qu'il aurait bien voulu s'imposer, mettrait son nom sur le registre, en bas de la somme qu'il aurait remise à la Caisse publique. […] L'homme de la halle, ainsi que la femme de charge éprouveraient une satisfaction sans égale de voir leur nom à côté de celui d'un prince de sang. [125]

The dramatist's portrayal of Louis XVI in *La France sauvée* (1792) is consistent with her royalist sympathies. The king is shown to be adverse to any conflict yet weak and vacillating when confronted by his wife and courtiers. This is a continuation of a theme which ran through de Gouges' literature and political writings where she maintained that the king was a dupe to those around him and in need of outside intervention and influence. Louis XVI first appears in Act I, Scene XI where he is first confronted with his young son whose innocence and enthusiasm reduces him to tears:

> LE PRINCE ROYAL - Tu n'es pas un tyran, toi, mais prends garde à ma sœur et à toutes ces femmes. Elles sont toutes aristocrates. Elles nous feront couper la tête. Tu es un bon roi cependant, et moi, je ne suis pas méchant, tu le sais bien…Tu pleures…Mais je n'ai rien fait! Est-ce que l'on me tuera aussi? J'aime bien la nation. Oh! Je suis content avec mon habit de garde national. [126]

Thus, with this speech, de Gouges establishes the humanity of the monarch and reveals that the future king, the young prince, is sympathetic to the people's revolution. The playwright wishes to demonstrate to her audience that the republic and the monarchy are not mutually

[125] Olympe de Gouges *op. cit.,* p.42
[126] *O.C.,* T.1, p. 338.

exclusive. His son (echoing the playwright's own political sentiments) reminds him that: 'il est si joli cependant d'être roi, quand on est bon citoyen'.[127] Louis carefully contemplates these words and appears to be about to give into the people's demands. He is however thwarted by his wife, as she accuses him of cowardice and *poltronnerie*. She goes on to admonish him for being a perfidious husband and cruel father, and thus he eventually acquiesces to her demands and in doing so immediately assumes the role of tyrant, a title which he had so long feared. The consequence of which is that he effectively condemns his family and himself to death.[128] By placing herself as a character in the actual drama, de Gouges dons the mantle of both author and character. As only one act of this drama remains for posterity, and considering the fact that the play itself was used against her in her own trial, one can only surmise whether this play was in fact the playwright's attempt to portray herself as an intermediary between the king and his people.[129] De Gouges did after all offer to take up the defence of the king at his own trial. As it stands, Olympe appears only once, in Act I, Scene VII to inform the court that:

> […] la masse des bons citoyens veut la liberté et l'égalité. Vous périrez tous avant qu'aucune force, aucune autorité ait pu changer sa résolution. La raison, la justice, la nature sont pour la souveraineté nationale; […] Cependant il dépend de vous encore, vils courtisans, de sauver ce trône de sang, cette monarchie fantôme imposant des siècles d'ignorance, censure du people et tyran des plus beaux droits de l'homme! [130]

This play, or what remains of it, is tinged with De Gouges' disappointment and frustration. It is a final plea for the monarchy to amend its ways and turn their vision outwards towards the nation and its citizens, whose march towards freedom is now inexorable.

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[127] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 339.
[128] The alternative title of this play is *Le Tyran Détrôné.*
[129] The prosecutor at Olympe's trial, Fouquier-Tinville claimed that the play's titles and its treatment of the monarchy were a guise for monarchist bias. See Janie Vanpée, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
[130] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 337.

If the playwright's pro-royalist sentiments were compromised by her liberal and revolutionary persuasions, her attitude towards the clergy as delineated in her theatre is clearly critical if not condemnatory. Her treatment of certain members of the French church, attempts to underline the inequalities inherent in an institution thwarted by the pursuit of wealth and prestige, and characterised by predatory and parasitical behaviour. Le *Grand Vicaire* of *Le Couvent* (1790) is one such example. When we are first introduced to him in Act I, Scene II, he is pitted against the local *Curé*. The playwright's depiction of these two clergymen is a clever study in the disparity in values prevalent within the Church itself at that time. The *Curé* is portrayed as pure of spirit, a devoutly religious soul, sympathetic to the needs of his parishioners who wishes only for the fulfilment of their spiritual and yet worldly happiness. In opposition to this, *Le Grand Vicaire* is a greedy man, whose supposed supplications to a higher power are merely a disguise intended to mask his all-consuming desire for wealth and status. These opposing representations of religious life best demonstrate de Gouges' philosophy regarding religion and the social obligations of the individual. Rather than being strictly anti-religious, she wishes to make her audience aware of her belief that any dogma and creed or indeed political viewpoint should be tolerated provided it respects the rights and liberties of all members of society and is practised altruistically.

Convinced that the young novice, Julie, is being coerced into taking religious vows, the *Curé* attempts to intervene and is duly warned against any action that may impede her 'vocation' by both Le Marquis de Leuville and Le Grand Vicaire, giving rise to a theological debate. The subordinate *Curé* is reminded by the *Vicaire* of his authority to

silence the latter or even worse, have him excommunicated. The *Curé*, however, remains steadfast and bravely condemns the selfish ambitions of the majority of his counterparts:

> Plût au ciel qu'aucun motif humain n'y eût jamais appelé cette foule d'ambitieux, qui ne considèrent dans la vie sacerdotale qu'un chemin top facile pour arrive à la fortune, et se procurer toutes les jouissances de la mollesse et du luxe! L'Église n'aurait point à rougir de la corruption des mœurs de ses ministres: moins opulent, ils en seraient plus respectables.[131]

At the conclusion of the play, it is the righteous *Curé* who is largely instrumental in securing Julie's freedom and manages to retain the respect and devotion of his followers while the *Vicaire* is disgraced. He leaves his 'superior' with a parting remark on the perils of corrupting his 'auguste religion' and when asked from what authority he draws inspiration for his defiance, he replies tellingly:

> Du droit que me donne mon caractère; celui d'un culte libre que vous devriez défendre, si vous connaissiez votre devoir: ce devoir que vous pouvez réprouver en moi, mais que le Ciel approuve.[132]

It would seem that levels of corruption rose exponentially according to rank in the Church as described here by George Rudé:

> With wealth, privilege and defined political commitment went a considerable amount of laxity and abuse in the exercise of ecclesiastical duties. Some high prelates were frank disbelievers: it is said that Louis XVI, when Loménie de Brienne was recommended to him for the see of Paris, objected that 'at least the Archbishop of Paris should believe in God.' [133]

As outlined in an earlier chapter, the character of the Bishop portrayed in *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1791) is undoubtedly one of the more sinister villains depicted in de Gouges' theatre.[134] His salacious desire for the novice Sophie is undisguised. His corruptive influence extends to the Abbesse, a woman so cold and calculating that it is with some

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[131] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 212.
[132] *Idem*.
[133] George F.E. Rudé, *Europe in the eighteenth-century: aristocracy and the bourgeois challenge* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.126.
[134] For more see the chapter on *libertinage*.

relief that the audience learns that she herself was once a victim of his wiles thus explaining her behaviour. She recalls her fall from grace at the hands of the bishop: 'Un moment d'oubli a causé le malheur de ma vie: avec quelle facilité il a trompé mon innocence; par combien de fausseté il m'a précipitée dans l'abîme du désespoir.' [135]

The characterisation of the sexually predatory clergyman is such a familiar one in eighteenth-century French literature (from the comical depiction of Tartuffe by Molière to the more sinister *prêtres lécheurs* found in de Sade's writings), that it is of no surprise to find that it forms a common motif in de Gouges' dramaturgy as well. However such depictions for the playwright serve not only as comic interludes or as moralistic lessons on hypocritical conduct, they also further emphasise the disparity between a self-serving clergy and a society striving to realise the egalitarian and libertarian ideals of the Enlightenment and revolution. When 'Le Prieur' appears in *Molière chez Ninon* (1787), his deviant behaviour and lustful desire provide dramatic tension, but his exaggerated character traits also perform several functions at once. Firstly the heroine's reactions to his unsolicited advances allow the audience to observe the resolute disposition of Ninon herself. That Ninon recounts his behaviour to Molière may be a possible allusion to the latter's source of inspiration in the creation of his most famous character. However, most importantly the playwright wishes to expose the real danger in crossing an influential member of the clergy. It is certainly no coincidence that having spurned the Le Prieur in Act I, Scene VI, Ninon is issued with a *lettre de cachet*, for allegedly committing crimes of an 'immoral nature'. She stands accused by a *cabale* mysteriously known as 'les filles

[135] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 273.

repenties' to which the heroine archly replies: '[…] je ne suis ni fille, ni repentie!'[136] With this play de Gouges also addresses the universally acknowledged fact of clerical greed and dishonesty. When her former lover, Gourville, recounts the story of how he had been grieviously robbed of his savings by a respected clergyman, he apologises for having ever doubted Ninon, who returns the money he had given her for safekeeping. She then asserts, echoing the aforementioned sentiment: '[…] et vous M. de Gourville, je dois vous en vouloir d'avoir pu oublier que j'étais Ninon, et non pas un religieux.'[137]

The semi-comical figure of the sexually voracious clergyman appears several times in the playwright's theatrical works. He appears as the scheming Abbé Basilic in *La Nécessité du divorce* (1790), acting as spiritual advisor to Mme d'Azinval, a woman facing marital crisis. His sole intention is to discredit her husband in order to seduce her. He is also the conniving Père Grisbourdon of *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1793), described by the critic William Howarth as '[…] Tartuffe from a strip-cartoon.'[138] Grisbourdon is shown to be treacherous, bearing no loyalty to king and nation and consumed by his pursuit of Mme Charlot and her daughter.

As a dynamic body, charged with physically enforcing the ideals of equality and of liberating those oppressed by despotic regimes, de Gouges portrayed the French military as the ideal embodiment of revolutionary zeal.[139] Though not entirely representative of the actual French national army, but to an extent an offshoot of same, *l'armée revolutionnaire*,

[136] *O.C.*, T.1, p. p. 171.
[137] *Ibid.*, p. 157.
[138] William D. Howarth, *Beaumarchais and the theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.98.
[139] From a biographical viewpoint, it is worth noting at this juncture that Olympe's only child, Pierre Aubry went on to become the famous General Aubry (1766-1802).

epitomised populist triumph. Their steady recruitment from all social strata came to signify the single most egalitarian organisation acting in French society from 1793 onwards. Their early beginnings were a source of inspiration for de Gouges. Eventually, of course they would become the henchmen of *la terreur* or as Richard Cobb refers to them: '[…] instruments of vigilance and vengeance, punishing the guilty, terrorising the lukewarm and the indifferent, regenerating public spirit and supplying the urban markets by force.'[140] Therefore, though not truly peace-keepers, their egalitarian status was nonetheless undeniable, as Cobb again illustrates: 'The Parisian *armée* was an egalitarian force. Little distinguished officer from fusilier or cannoneer and they were often neighbours with the same social background!' [141] Thus in an effort to depict an emerging sense of egalitarian awareness the playwright portrays sympathetic often heroic military figures. In fact, many of the military characters present in these plays play minor but deceptively pivotal roles as demonstrated by La Fleur, the recruiting sergeant of *L'Homme généreux* (1785). A comic, almost Falstaffian figure, he aids the Montalais family in their time of distress and provides humour at their darkest hour. By offering to lend young Montalais the sum of *cent écus,* normally awarded for his recruitment, and then excusing his obligation to the army, he contributes to their financial rescue and in doing so earns himself the right to be considered, along with Le Comte de Saint-Clair, as the 'generous man' of the title.

De Gouges' pro-military sentiment is evidenced in her earliest play, *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783). Here, the character of Le Major strongly opposes any military conflict with the slaves, preferring to see himself as peacekeeper, as he declares in Act III, Scene V:

[140] Richard Cobb, *The People's Armies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p.2.
[141] *Ibid.,* p.102.

'Je ne suis point envoyé ici pour ordonner le carnage et pour répandre du sang, mais pour ramener l'ordre'. [142] And later in Scene VII of the same act he decries the use of force against the natives, as he addresses the Judge of the colony: 'Vous ne connaissez que vos lois cruelles, et moi, je connais l'art de la guerre et l'humanité. Ce ne sont point nos ennemis que nous combattons; ce sont nos esclaves, ou plutôt nos cultivateurs.' [143]

In *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1791), first staged in Paris at the Théâtre de la Cité-Variétés in 1794 (the third year of the first republic), the military contingent represent secular opposition to clerical oppression. When Captain Saint-Elme and his regiment alight in the small provincial town at the centre of which lies the impenetrable convent known locally as the *Monastère des filles de Saint-Benoît*, they are met with a warm welcome by its habitants and with suspicion bordering on fear by the local churchmen. The playwright juxtaposes the underlying philosophies espoused by both establishments with a vignette in Act I, Scene II. Here we witness Le Prieur ordering Père Hilaire to adhere to his vows of: '[…] obéissance aveugle, soumission sans bornes, entier abandon de vous-même, pour n'écouter que la voix de vos supérieurs.'[144] Conversely, on the opposite side of the town square, Saint-Elme addresses his men as equal comrades, reminding them of their civic duty with regards to the town and its people: 'Mes amis, mes camarades, allez vous reposer; je vous recommande surtout le bon ordre; nous ne sommes pas ici en pays ennemi: respectons les propriétés.'[145]

[142] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 38.
[143] *Ibid.*, p.38.
[144] *Ibid.*, p.263.
[145] *Idem*.

While Père Hilaire scurries off in blatant dread of his superior, the soldiers under the captain's guard drink to his good health. The pursuit of his lost lover, Sophie, brings Saint-Elme to the convent and the playwright demonstrates how each time he and his men penetrate deeper into its prison like fortress, the walls, bricks and masonry appear to crumble, inviting light where darkness once prevailed. In one memorable comic scene, the soldier Germain disguises himself as a holy statue within the convent, a highly sacriligeous act which reinforces the absurdity of a cult whose idolatry of stone sculptures takes precedence over the humane treatment of living beings. These metaphorical representations of darkness and light, blindness and sight, allow the dramatist to draw parallels with the liberating power of the army. In the end, not only is Julie freed, but the literal destruction of the convent walls releases the long sequestered nuns, permitting them to join the townspeople, thus becoming part of the outside world. The cloister is symbolically razed to provide a platform of equality. The play closes with this emphatic monologue from Saint-Elme, which refers as much to the popular triumph of the French people:

> Et vous, victimes de l'ignorance et de la tyrannie, séchez vos pleurs, bannissez vos alarmes, vous touchez au terme de vos malheurs: que dis-je! Il luit, ce jour heureux qui va briser vos fers, et vous rendre la liberté. [146]

Relying less on the symbolic, *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1792), dramatises an actual historical event, the liberation of Brussels by the French Army in the same year. In an effort to emphasise the dynamic force for good that the army represented, the playwright includes the controversial real-life figure of General Égalité (so named for his radical views) in the list of characters. It was of course, unfortunate for de Gouges that

[146] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 291.

Dumouriez turned coat not long after the only production of this play on the 23rd of January 1793 at the Théâtre de la République, yet this fact in no way detracts from the overall political message contained therein. The literal rise in ranks, as well as the switching of sides of the Charlot family, from '*vivandiers*' in the Austrian army to martial spies for the French, underscores the meritocratic (albeit idealistic) potential of military life. While the inclusion of the legendary, historically accurate, Fernig sisters reveals the theoretical potentiality of the army as a possible means of equal opportunity for both sexes. This play is noteworthy for its rhetoric rather than action however, and it is to the same that the audience is forced to turn, in order to gauge de Gouges' personal vision with regards to the function of revolutionary military might:

> DUMOURIEZ, *à Balza* – Je jure à mon tour d'être fidèle à la cause de la liberté, et de l'égalité; de défendre de tout mon pouvoir les droits du people souverain belge, et de mourir, s'il le faut, à mon poste en les défendant. Et toi, citoyen Balza, reçois le baiser de paix au nom de la République française qui te promet, par mon entremise, de défendre de toutes ses forces et de tous ses trésors les représentants librement élus de la société des amis de la liberté. [147]

As always, de Gouges' theatre functions as a mirror for society. The audience are invited to reflect on the dying days of a royal dynasty and a king enfeebled just as his subjects grow in strength. An eighteenth-century audience, troubled by an unequal society, need look no further than the corrosive elements of the clergy eroding its very core. While intentionally contrasted with these, a vigorous, forward moving military are shown, not to be motivated by greed, but rather emboldened by the pursuit of liberty and equality. Through close examination, realistic portrayal and sometimes deliberate censure, Olympe de Gouges attempts to dismantle and rearrange the constructs of eighteenth-century norms embodied by a failing monarchy and corrupt clergy, allowing her and her audience to

[147] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 327.

envisage an egalitarian alternative. The playwright uses the model of the French military as an example of equality in action, an inspirational ideal to be replicated as a utopian societal framework.

6 Race and Gender

The concepts of liberté, égalité, and fraternité were, according to Olympe de Gouges, intrinsically flawed as they excluded the rights of women and slaves. Mirroring the politics of the abolitionists, notably Condorcet and Brissot, de Gouges sought to address such inequalities, just as they had done, through the medium of literature. First founded in Paris in 1788, *La Société des Amis des Noirs* followed the ideas of its creator Jacques Pierre Brissot, who advocated the dissemination of abolitionist politics through the printed word. The initial objective of the society was the abolition of slavery in the French colonies and the eventual attainment of equal rights for men and women of colour. Abolitionist literature concerned itself with making an indifferent, if not ignorant, French public aware of the cruelties inflicted on colonial slaves, far from the shores of *La France* and the boulevards of its capital.[148] In his most famous text, *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des négres* (1781), Nicolas de Condorcet claimed that:

> Réduire un homme à l'esclavage, l'acheter, le vendre, le retenir dans la servitude, ce sont des véritable crimes, et des crimes pire que le vol. En effet on dépouille l'esclave, non seulement de toute propriété mobilière et foncière, mais de la faculté d'en acquérir, mais de la propriété de son temps, de ses forces, de tout ce que la nature lui a donné pour conserver sa vie ou satisfaire à ses besoins. À ce tort on joint celui d'enlever à l'esclave le droit de disposer de sa personne. [149]

Similarly, in her preface to the 1792 edition of her abolitionist play, *L'Esclavage des noirs* (originally written in 1783) Olympe states:

> Dans les siècles de l'ignorance les hommes se sont fait la guerre ; dans le siècle le plus éclairé, ils veulent se détruire. Quelle est enfin la science, le regime, l'époque, l'âge où les hommes vivront en paix ? Les savants peuvent s'appesantir et se perdre sur ces observations métaphysiques. Pour moi, qui n'ai étudié que les bons principes de la nature, je ne définis plus l'homme, et mes connaissances

[148] For more on the history of French colonial slave trade see Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[149] Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des négres* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1781), p.7.

> sauvages ne m'ont appris à juger des choses que d'après mon âme. Aussi mes productions n'ont-elles que la couleur de l'humanité ?[150]

Olympe de Gouges saw no rationale in excluding the rights of women and people of colour, regarding both as a similar cause. In this respect she again echoes the politics of Condorcet, who himself advocated equal education for both sexes. Her literature stresses the inequalities caused by the marginalisation of both enslaved peoples and women. To this end, de Gouges invoked the fundamentals of life itself incorporated in '*les lois de la nature'* to which she believed all were subject, as defined in the second paragraph of her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791):

> Remonte aux animaux, consulte les elements, étudie les végétaux, jette enfin un coup d'œil sur toutes les modifications de la matière organise; et rends-toi à l'évidence quand je t'en offre les moyens; cherche, fouille et distinguee, si tu le peux, les sexes dans l'administration de la nature. Partout tu les trouveras confondus, partout ils coopèrent avec un ensemble harmonieux à ce chef-d'œuvre immortel. [151]

Under this law, she believed, women were equal to men as was all of humanity, regardless of race and colour. Indeed, Joan Wallach Scott asserts that for the playwright:

> Like distinctions of sex, distinctions of colour defied clear categorization. Only the cupidity and greed of white men could explain for De Gouges the enslavement of blacks; only blind prejudice could lead to commerce in human beings and to the denial of a common humanity between black and white. [152]

In her quest for race and gender equality, de Gouges not only strove to portray

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139 *O.C.*,T.1, p.25
140 Olympe de Gouges, *op. cit.*, p.11.
141 Joan Wallach Scott, *op. cit.*, p.14.

strong female characters, intellectually equal to their male counterparts, but also highlight the inadequacies inherent in a patriarchal society. As befitted the nature of her social theatre, she sought to promote notions of equality by humanising political ideologies. Thus, slaves and domestics are depicted as informed, intelligent beings, politically aware, and inspired by enlightenment philosophy. This is wholly evident in her first play, *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783). We have already examined the plot of this drama in earlier chapters but for the purposes of this discussion, let us direct our attention to the characterisation of the two young couples, the French Valère and Sophie, and the slaves Zamor and Mirza.

In the opening scene, the dramatist conveys her moral and political stance with regard to the arbitrary enslavement and suppression of man based on race, as Zamor explains the difference between whites and blacks to Mirza:

> Cette différence est bien peu de chose ; elle n'existe que dans la couleur ; mais les avantages qu'ils ont sur nous sont immenses. L'art les a mis au-dessus de la nature : l'instruction en a fait des dieux, et nous nous sommes que des hommes. Ils se servent de nous dans ces climats comme ils se servent des animaux dans les leurs. [153]

At the outset of the play the playwright places her four principal characters (Zamor, Mirza, Valère and Sophie), on a secluded islet separate from the mainland of the colony. Zamor and Mirza, as we have previously shown, are fugitives, Valère and Sophie have been shipwrecked, washed ashore and saved by the slave couple. Far from France, and disconnected from the colony, these four are thereby positioned in a neutral space, a place of equality, unhindered by man-made laws and custom, a virtual garden of Eden. This allows the audience to observe them as equal entities. Reversing the traditional dynamic of white mastery over black, it is Zamor and Mirza who are responsible for the wellbeing of

[153] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 27.

the white couple, with the latter beholden to their saviours. Valère is astounded to find in Zamor an articulate and educated man, on a par with his own measure of civilised reasoning and behaviour.

In a touching vignette, Sophie and Mirza are depicted sitting closely together, locked in an embrace of mutual regard. Touching each other's skin and admiring the difference, they each declare the other beautiful, with Sophie exclaiming: 'Son ingénuité m'enchante ; sa physionomie est douce et previent en sa faveur.' [154]

This touching of skin is a powerful if not taboo-breaking symbol of equality, enough to shock any eighteenth-century audience. Olympe wished to portray these women as wholly equal, as they conduct a conversation that could easily be imagined in any fashionable Parisian salon.

De Gouges goes on to expose the inequalities intrinsic to the judicial system employed in the colonies. The governor and his wife are subject to the law of the colony and not the laws of France. They themselves are shown to be powerless, mere figureheads, underscoring the truly ineffectual nature of government in these outposts to an eighteenth-century audience who harboured other illusions. M. de Saint-Frémont, the governor, finds his hands tied; his good intentions in seeking a pardon for the condemned slaves are futile. Notwithstanding this, de Saint Frémont believes that civilised society is tainted by its treatment of slaves and that these subjugated people exhibit: '[…] tant de grandeur d'âme, et nous osons les regarder comme les derniers des humains! Hommes civilisés, vous vous

[154] *O.C.,* T.1, p. 29.

croyez supérieurs à des esclaves!'[155]

He is also painfully aware of the law of the colony, one which must be observed at all costs. He advises Valère that his petitions are useless: 'Je sais tout ce que vous devez à ces malheureux ; mais vous n'avez pas le droit de les défendre ni de changer les lois et les mœurs d'un pays.'[156] The drama concludes on a positive note, with the condemned slaves pardoned; however, the quotidian proceedings of the outpost continue as normal, and though the pardon granted to Zamor and Mirza indicates a triumph of sorts, slavery is not abolished. From an historical perspective, France was not to abolish slavery in its colonies until 1794, and had to wait until 1848 for this to be definitively executed. [157]

In 1784, Olympe de Gouges published a semi-autobiographical novel under the title *Roman de Madame de Valmont*, whose thinly-disguised heroine is a facsimile of the author herself. Mme de Valmont reappears in *L'Homme génereux* (1785) as the widowed friend of Le Comte de Saint Clair and *protrectrice* of Marianne. Amongst other themes, this drama concerns itself with Mme de Valmont's condemnation of the lack of formal education available to women.[158] This subject had also been debated by the abolitionist writer Condorcet, who believed that the education of women was necessary for the betterment of society. As Paul Hoffman puts it:

> Selon lui(Condorcet) la pensée crée la fonction de la pensée. Le savoir n'est pas seulement une somme de connaissances, mais un processus d'acquisition, une éducation des organs eux-mêmes qui

[155] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 39.
[156] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[157] For more see Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008)
[158] This opinion expressed by Mme de Valmont directly contradicts Rousseau's assertion in *Émile* that women should be educated merely in the art of pleasing their husbands and in the maintenance of a family and household.

> a pour effet de compenser les inégalités de l'esprit et de la sensibilité, que des façons de vivre différentes ont pu créer entre l'homme et la femme. Condorcet préconcise une éducation commune aux garçons et aux filles, dans des écoles mixtes […] Les bienfaits de la mixité ne sont d'ailleurs pas d'ordre intellectual, mais d'ordre moral et politique. L'instruction est d'abord un aprentissage de l'esprit d'égalité. [159]

In Act I, Scene X, Mme de Valmont, decries the status of women, summing up their predicament as she explains to the Comte:

> Voilà comme notre pauvre sexe est exposé. Les hommes ont tous les avantages ; on en a vu qui, sortis de la plus basse origine, sont parvenus à la plus grande fortune, et quelquefois aux dignités. Et les femmes, sans industrie, c'est à dire si elles sont verteuses, restent dans la misère. On nous a exclues de tout pouvoir, de tout savoir.[160]

This exclusion of women from the fundamental right of education for Olympe, signalled a failure in eighteenth-century society. Félix-Marcel Castan, considers this statement of Mme de Valmont as the: 'première formulation catégorique d'une revendication féministe.' [161]

From the rights of women and their quest to gain equal education, to the rights of women as they choose to be mistresses of their hearts and lives, *Le Mariage inattendu* (1784), is a play that functions on two levels. Firstly, it is a proto-feminist polemic on the forced impotency of women and their lack of influence in society as it extends to their own fortunes. Secondly, the play acts as a personal retort to the playwright's own detractors, as she moves to dispel some of the myths surrounding her legitimacy as a 'femme de lettres'. The critic William D. Howarth claims of this play that it is: '[…] a sequel which remains fairly faithful to the spirit of Beaumarchais, and in fact makes more effective use of the *droit de seigneur* as a plot device than the latter's.'[162] This alone demonstrates the playwright's ingenuity in appropriating one of the most celebrated dramatic works of the

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[159] Paul Hoffman, *La Femme dans la pensée des lumières* (Paris: Ophrys, 1975) p.556.
[160] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 76.
[161] *Idem*. Castan's editorial comment.
[162] William D. Howarth, *op. cit.*, p.190.

period, *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1778), and adapting it to chime with her feminist principles. We have already examined the plot of this drama and its pertinence to de Gouges' views on liberty, but further examination reveals its pre-occupation with the issue of gender equality through the exposition of the unjust status of women, and indeed men, in a society which encourages discrimination.

Despite her love for Chérubin, and her abhorrence of her fiancé Nicolas, Fanchette is obliged by filial obligation to marry. Her father's haste in marrying off his daughter is based on the belief that her virtue is threatened by the attentions of Chérubin. While the latter's affections are honourable and stem from genuine love, those of the count go unchecked and are clearly reprehensible. Antonio, her father, speaks of the false-hearted nature of certain men: 'Je savons ben [*sic*] que parmi les grands seigneurs, on sait donner de biaux [*sic*] noms à ce qui n'est guère biau de soi-même.'[163] He is erroneously referring to Chérubin, whereas all the while it is Le Comte Almaviva who is plotting the seduction of Fanchette, profiting from the spirit of confusion and misunderstanding. For de Gouges, confusion and misunderstanding (along with man's belief in his own superiority) were among the causes responsible for the unfair division of the sexes. Thus, the playwright symbolically renders the iniquitous nature of a social order which fosters ignorance of the plight of its female citizens.

The character of Figaro, in this instance acting as the porte-parole of the dramatist in the play, alludes to the popular myth surrounding the illiteracy of Olympe de Gouges, which deemed her unworthy of serious acclaim and even less deserving of following in the

[163] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 51.

footsteps of Beaumarchais. In Act II, Scene XXV he replies to Antonio's avowal of illiteracy with the ironic statement: 'Ce n'est pas un grand tort pour un faiseur de salades, mais pour un faiseur de comedies, c'est un grand malheur.'[164] The play concludes with a direct address to the audience delivered by Figaro:

> Messieurs, il faut convenir que mon mariage a excité la verve de tout le monde ; plusieurs m'ont traité d'extravagant et n'ont pas moins multiplié ma folie. Si cette nouvelle production vous paraît plus remplie de défauts que celles qui l'ont précédée, daignez lui accorder votre suffrage en faveur du sexe de son auteur. Une femme qui marche dans la carrière dramatique, sans autre appui que ses propres forces, a des droits à votre indulgence. Vos yeux, accoutumés aux prestiges de l'art, ne pourront-ils se détourner un moment pour examiner les jeux d'une imagination qui n'a d'autre guide que la nature? [165]

In this fashion she counters the widely recognised angry reaction of Beaumarchais to her sequel, and also defiantly challenges her many critics, establishing herself as a serious contender in the venomously chauvinistic world of letters.

Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées (1791), the most overtly political of de Gouges' dramas, contains an unequivocal feminist message. Esteemed figures of French history, among them Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, gather together to pay homage to the departed Mirabeau and, as they debate the current state of their illustrious nation, three noteworthy women add their personal plea for gender equality to the lofty meditations of their male interlocutors. Distrustful of the intentions extolled by these great men, Mme Deshoulières, Mme de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, fear that they will never experience full equality for their gender in this world, with Deshoulières cynically declaring: 'On ne veut pas que nous soyons sur la terre les égales des hommes ; ce n'est qu'aux Champs-

[164] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 60.
[165] *Ibid.*, p.66.

Elysées que nous avons ce droit.' [166]

De Lenclos goes on to warn further of the dangers of exclusion, as she presages the inevitable failure of a people's revolution which discounts the rights of women:

> Et de qui dépend cette revolution? En vain l'on fera de nouvelles lois, en vain l'on bouleversa les royaumes ; tant qu'on fera rien pour élever l'âme des femmes, tant qu'elles ne contribueront pas à se rendre plus utiles, plus conséquentes, tant que les hommes ne seront pas assez grands pour s'occuper sérieusement de leur véritable gloire, l'État ne peut prospérer : c'est moi qui vous le dis. [167]

While Olympe de Gouges was motivated by the humanist ideals of the great philosophes of the Enlightenment, she clearly felt compelled to redress the inequities and omissions inherent in their vision of womanhood. The message expounded in her political writings and her most universally acclaimed work, the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791), explicitly demanded that women be accorded equal status to men. This conviction extends to her theatre, wherein she sought to expose and extinguish the systemic misogyny at the heart of society, paradoxically perpetuated during the Enlightenment. De Gouge's literature defies the opinions of such revered thinkers as Rousseau and to take an example that predates the enlightenment, Molière. Her writing is a reproach to the opinions voiced by the character of Arnolphe in Molière's play *L'École des femmes* (1662):

> Votre sexe n'est là que pour la dépendance :
> Du côté de la barbe est toute la toute-puissance.
> Bien qu'on soit deux moitiés de la société,
> Ces deux moitiés pourtant n'ont point d'égalité :
> L'une est moitié suprême, et l'autre subalterne ;
> L'une en tout est soumise à l'autre qui gouverne.[168]

It is also a testament to the courageous fortitude of the playwright that she continued to

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[166] *O.C.*, T.1, p.255.
[167] *Ibid.*, p. 256.
[168] Molière, *L'École des femmes* (Paris: Larousse, 2003), p.24.

pursue her beliefs through the medium of writing despite serious opposition from all quarters and the attempt by her venerated 'natural' father, Le Franc de Pompignan, to dissuade her from writing on the grounds of her gender. In a letter addressed to his daughter, he expressed his fear, shared by many of his male counterparts:

> Si les personnes de votre sexe deviennent conséquentes et profondes dans leurs ouvrages, que deviendrons-nous, nous autres hommes, aujourd'hui si superficiels et si légers? Adieu la supériorité dont nous étions si orgueilleux. Les dames nous feront la loi…Cette révolution serait dangereuse. Ainsi je dois désirer que les Dames ne prennent point le bonnet de Docteur mais qu'elles conservent leur frivolité même dans leurs écrits. Tant qu'elles n'auront pas le sens commun, elles seront adorable…Les femmes peuvent écrire mais il leur est défendu, pour le bonheur du monde, de s'y livrer sans prétention.[169]

The playwright's determination in addressing the contentious issue of slavery, upon which much of the economic and military might of France was indisputably reliant, also contributed to her infamy and public disdain, to the extent that she was issued with a lettre de cachet shortly after the first production of *L'Esclavage des noirs*. Undeterred, however, de Gouges proceeded to champion the rights of slaves and women in her writings both political and literary, as she strove to see them accorded an equal place of glory in an era of great social change. Gisela Thiele-Knoblock, in her preface to *Olympe de Gouges, Théâtre, Tome I*, reflects on this duality of purpose contained in de Gouges'dramaturgy:

> Son sujet principal est donc l'esclavage…Sur le plan politique et concret, il s'agit avec Zamor et Mirza et sa fabuleuse postface *Réflexions sur les Hommes Nègres* de l'esclavage des noirs, c'est-à-dire du combat des esclaves noirs pour leur droit naturel d'être reconnus comme êtres humains. Deuxièment, elle vise l'esclavage du sexe feminine, c'est-à-dire le combat des femmes pour le même droit. [170]

[169] Camille Aubaud, *op. cit.*, p.91.
[170] Gisela Thiele-Knoblock, *op. cit.*, p.12.

Sororité

7 Performing Sisterhood

Politically forthright, resolutely feminist, and unapologetically socially motivated, Olympe de Gouges courted controversy throughout her life as a writer. Much of this opposition arose from contemporary fear of female empowerment. Branded a '*bacchante affolée'* and '*monstre impudique'*, de Gouges incurred the rancour of the majority of her male peers.[171] Benoîte Groult, in her introduction to *Œuvres d'Olympe de Gouges,* states that the playwright: 'a cristallisé sur sa personne tous les fantasmes traditionnels de la misogynie.'[172]

Excluded from the closed and predominantly masculine literary *côteries* of Paris, de Gouges sought out the company of women whose virtues and strengths she extolled and embodied in her writings. A telling example of this ostracism is cited by Olivier Blanc as he recounts Olympe's failed attempt to procure a meeting with her fellow playwright, Beaumarchais, in July of 1777:

> S'étant faite annoncer à la porte du somptueux hôtel de la Vieille-rue-du-temple où, en juillet 1777, Beaumarchais avait réuni les auteurs dramatiques pour les engager à se solidariser et faire cause commune pour défendre leurs droits contre les abus de pouvoir multipliés de comédiens, un valet répondit à la visiteuse que le maître de maison était occupé et qu'il ne pourrait pas la recevoir. Olympe ayant demandé un nouveau rendez-vous, le valet s'était éloigné puis était revenu, déclarant en soupirant que son maître se trouvait dans l'incapacité de fixer une date. Elle s'en était retournée tristement chez elle, se promettant bien de ne jamais plus solliciter « l'appui et les conseils de ceux qui ont oublié les malheurs et l'adversité. »[173]

De Gouges did however find herself welcomed in the prominent salons of such illustrious women as Anne-Catherine Helvétius, Marie-Jeanne Roland and Sophie de Condorcet (widow of the famous abolitionist). Among them, she found inspiration for the

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[171] Camille Aubaud *op. cit.,* p.89.
[172] Benoîte Groult, *Œuvres d'Olympe de Gouges* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), p.13.
[173] Blanc, *op. cit.,* p.64.

charismatic female characters of her plays. Despite this, she remained on the margins of aristocratic society, and was never to achieve full social acceptance.[174] In her theatre, de Gouges strove to portray a powerful community of women, an idealised sisterhood, with the capacity to reverse entrenched patriarchal norms. From her dramatic representations of Ninon to the Fernig sisters, the playwright's own manifestation in *La France sauvée* (1792), Mme d'Aznival and Queen Christine of Sweden, the dramatist created a unique côterie of female characters, each reflecting a facet of her personal vision, while collectively displaying the solidarity she found regrettably lacking in reality.

One of the few forums for expression and exchange of ideas among women was the literary salon, hosted by society's '*grandes dames'*. Though de Gouges was a frequent and usually welcome visitor to these, her humble social origins and poor financial situation prevented her from presiding over a salon of her own, as Roland Bonnel explains: 'Le salon? Ni la situation sociale ni les relations d'Olympe de Gouges ne lui permettaient d'en tenir un.'[175] Thus, with her play *Molière chez Ninon* (1787), de Gouges manages to create onstage a social milieu of great prestige, something she was unable to realise in life.

As an embodiment of feminine virtue, coupled with an emancipated will, Ninon is at once'[…] une grande âme, généreuse, passionnée, honnête.'[176] Her character, as depicted by the playwright, is liberated in life and love, signifies more than a simple *porte-parole* for de Gouges, she represents the dramatist herself, and as such she manages to challenge the many scurrilous accusations levelled against the playwright in contemporary society. These

[174] For more see Roland Bonnel *op. cit.,* pp.65-92.
[175] *Ibid.,* p.68.
[176] *Ibid.,* p.69.

accusations actually culminated in Restif de la Bretonne's public condemnation of her as a common prostitute.[177] Janie Vanpée reminds us of the precarious position the playwright held in the public consciousness:

> Attacked on personal grounds, the authenticity of her writings and the sincerity of her intentions challenged, her morals and her virtue impugned, what little authority she had as a woman undermined, de Gouges was forced to defend herself repeatedly. She countered personal attacks by writing about herself. [178]

Onstage, Ninon is issued with a *lettre de cachet* as admonishment for her libertine lifestyle:

> Il s'est élevé des clamours contre Mlle de Lenclos. Les dévotes, surtout, ont répandu toute leur animosité pour noircir la femme la plus aimable de son siècle : on a suppose même des choses d'une nature à n'être pas répétées ici. Enfin, tout ce que la calomnie a de plus affreux, on l'a prêté à Mlle Ninon. [179]

Whereas in the play Ninon is granted an immediate pardon by no less a personage than the Queen of France, de Gouges, in reality, was never to receive such a reprieve:

> Je viens, Mlle de Lenclos, m'acquitter des ordres de la Reine, et vous assurer de sa part qu'elle est fâchée qu'on lui a fait de faux rapports sur votre compte ; qu'elle en punira les délateurs, et que sa faveur ne s'étendra jamais sur les femmes qui ont osé vous calomnier auprès d'elle.[180]

De Gouges endeavoured to promote female solidarity. She believed that women needed to look to each other for inspiration and moral support in their struggle for equality and recognition, as Ninon reappearing in *Mirabeau aux Champs Elysées* (1791) stresses:

> En général les femmes veulent être femmes, et n'ont pas de plus grands ennemis qu'elles-mêmes. Que quelqu'une sorte de sa sphère, pour défendre les droits du corps, aussitôt elle soulève tout le sexe contre elle ; rarement on voit applauder les femmes à une belle action, à l'ouvrage d'une femme. [181]

As a counter to such self-defeating attitudes, the dramatist offers her audience a model of feminine unanimity in the relationship between Queen Christine of Sweden and Ninon de

[177] Camille Aubaud, *op. cit.,* p.53.
[178] Janie Vanpée, *op. cit.,* p.58.
[179] *O.C.,*T.1, p.171.
[180] *Ibid.,* p.173.
[181] *Ibid.,* p.255.

Lenclos. Devoid of false pride, Christine explains to her friend her reasons for abdication:

> J'ai détaché de ma tête le diadème pour le placer moi-même sur le front de mon successeur. Cette abdication a calmé les esprits et, maîtresse de mon sort, sans rang et sans éclat, j'ai commencé à régner pour moi-même.[182]

In reply to Christine's words Ninon offers a subtle warning to those who court power for personal glory: 'le vulgaire regarde une couronne comme un don du Ciel.'[183] Christine admires the society of friends which Ninon has gathered around her, whilst underscoring the dangers confronted by a women of independent means and morals, authentically experienced by the writer herself: 'Cela fait bien votre éloge ; et je ne m'étonne pas si vous excitez la jalousie des femmes, et surtout des prudes.'[184] De Gouges' message, conveyed in the dialogue of these characters, extends to all women regardless of their social circumstance. As Ninon represents the playwright, we are shown that even the most humble of *citoyennes* can pretend to claim equality with the highest members of society, and even the monarchy:

> […] mais soyons égales, Ninon ; et puisque tout nous vient de la nature et qu'elle a mis tant de rapport entre nous deux, remplissons son but, en mettant dans notre liaison toute l'amitié d'une tendre fraternité. [185]

Audaciously perhaps, Olympe saw herself as equal to the task of mediation in the male world of politics, and in the future administration of her nation. To this end, she appealed to another woman, Marie Antoinette, Queen of France. Her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la cityoyenne* (1791) is dedicated *'À La Reine'*, and her last play, *La France sauvée* (1792), documents de Gouges' failed attempt to influence the Queen as she finds herself deterred by prevaricating courtiers. It is significant that she reaches out to the

[182] *O.C.*, T.1, p.179.
[183] *Idem*.
[184] *Idem*.
[185] *O.C.*, T.1, p.180.

Queen rather than the King, entreating the former's sympathy on the grounds of their common gender:

> On ne vous fera jamais un crime de travailler à la restauration des mœurs, à donner à votre sexe toute la consistance dont il est susceptible. Cet ouvrage n'est pas le travail d'un jour, malheureusement pour le nouveau régime. Cette révolution ne s'opérera que quand toutes les femmes seront pénétrées de leur déplorable sort, et des droits qu'elles ont perdus dans la société. Soutenez, Madame, une si belle cause ; défendez ce sexe malheureux, et vous aurez bientôt pour vous une moitié du royaume, et le tiers au moins de l'autre. [186]

On the eve of her family's downfall, Olympe attempts to save the Queen, wishing that: 'Pour la première fois elle entendra la vérité.'[187] Dismissed injudiciously by the court as an 'étourdie' and 'une tête exaltée', de Gouge's solicitations are lost on the sovereign, whose untimely reflection in Act I, Scene IX: 'Cette étourdie, cette fanatique, cette audacieuse a peut-être raison', is of little comfort and no advantage.[188] Preferring false flattery over the unsparing counsel of a concerned citoyenne, Marie Antoinette contributes to her own downfall and that of the equally blinkered institution she represents. Her refusal to acknowledge the necessity of change illustrates the failure of women in general to participate in their own struggle for independence. The Queen's chief crime, however, is her misuse of her own influence. She is a woman of consequence, with authority over her husband, yet arrogantly chooses to dissuade him from reasoning with his people, thus driving him directly to his perdition. Accordingly, the playwright advises women of their potential ability to exert power and influence, and urges them to look beyond societal limitations, while cautioning against inertia and the squandering of talent.

If female complicity held the potential to save a nation, it most certainly had the

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[186] Olympe de Gouges, *op. cit.*, p.9.
[187] *O.C.*, T.1, p.337.
[188] *Idem*.

capacity to save a marriage. De Gouges demonstrates this in her play *La Nécessité du divorce* (1790). Mme d'Aznival remains stoical and refuses to descend into a mire of self-pity when her husband's adultery becomes apparent. She resolves to reclaim her husband and to:

> […] ramener l'infidèle, de le fixer dans sa famille, de lui faire sentir le vide et la frivolité de ses amusements coupables, de le convaincre qu'il est odieux dans tous les cas de violer sa parole, c'est un sacrilege d'enfeindre un serment fait en face des autels. [189]

To this end, she turns to the one person capable of fully understanding the complexities of love both lost and found, her husband's mistress, Herminie. Her intentions in doing so are made clear to Rosambert in Act II, Scene I: 'Je veux absolument la voir, l'interroger, connaître les moyens qu'elle emploie pour fixer mon époux.'[190] However, on meeting Herminie, Mme d'Aznival is touched by her innocence and moved by her vulnerability, realising that they are both the wronged parties. Mme d'Aznival thus absolves the other woman saying: 'Je ne vous ferai aucun reproche. Vous n'en méritez pas.'[191] These two women form an instant bond as they come to terms with their victimhood, borne out of male pride and perfidy. Their acceptance of each other and absence of any animosity demonstrates their moral superiority. If divorce were to be legalised, argues de Gouges, then its primary aim would be to protect women such as these.

In the theatre of de Gouges, women are rarely portrayed as each other's enemies, and whenever they are shown to deviate from their obligation to solidarity, they soon regret and renounce their transgressions. Such is the case of L'Abbesse in *Le Prélat d'autrefois*

[189] *O.C.*,T.1, p.236.
[190] *Ibid.*
[191] *O.C.*, T.1, p.240.

(1791), who, in admitting the error of her ways, finally grants the novice Sophie her freedom, despite the fact that in doing so she puts her own life in danger: 'En vous rendant la liberté, je remplis le plus doux de mes devoirs.'[192] In *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787), when the marriage of Le Marquis and La Marquise de Clainville seems to be beyond redemption, the intervention and collusion of three women is its last hope of salvation. In the first scene, M. Pinçon, husband of the governess, sheds some light on his wife's involvement in the 'complot':

> On a bien vu des choses extraordinaires de la part de ce sexe frivole ; mais a-t-on jamais poussé l'extravagance au point où on la pousse ici ? Trois femmes imaginent un projet : elles l'exécutent avec discretion et gardent constamment leur secret près d'une année entière, sans se démentir un instant. On me met dans leur complot ; on me fait quitter le marquis, pour me faire passer auprès de Mme la marquise, dans la crainte que je ne découvre tout le mystère à mon maître… [193]

M. Pinçon's use of the expression, '*sexe frivole'* is immediately belied by his account of the clever efficiency and determination with which the women's plan is executed. He may well disagree in theory with their strategy, yet he is nonetheless easily persuaded to comply. His wife's bravery in disguising herself as a man and attempting to duel with the marquis in Act V, Scene XII further highlights his weakness, while La Marquise's dignified efforts to regain her husband's love, and the quick-witted intelligence of La Comtesse, all serve to reinforce the trivial nature and indeed frivolity of both Le Marquis and Le Baron. The resolve of determined women, the dramatist moralises, is not to be dismissed lightly.

Mirabeau famously declared that: 'Sans les femmes, il n'y aurait pas eu de

[192] *O.C.*, T.1, p.287.
[193] *Ibid.*, p.109.

Révolution.'[194] Indeed, history has shown us that women were highly engaged at every level of the Revolution.[195] The fiercest warriors to be found in battle on de Gouges' stage are not the Generals Dumouriez and Égalité but the Fernig sisters. Félicité and Théophile Fernig both fought alongside Dumouriez in Valmy and Jemmapes, where a monument still stands today attesting to their heroic contribution to the revolutionary wars.[196] Their valour is first revealed to us in Act III, Scene VIII, when an account of their bravery is relayed to young Charlotte by Dumouriez:

> J'ai deux guerrières intrépides à la tête de mon armée ; la Révolution a fait les plus grands prodiges, même sur votre sexe. Les unes à l'envi des autres se signalent ; c'est à qui servira mieux la cause publique. Dans la politique, dans les batailles, partout les femmes suivent nos pas, et votre sexe rivalise actuellement avec le nôtre ; c'est le fruit de cette souveraine révolution. [197]

[194] Camille Aubaud, *op. cit.*, p.88.
[195] For more, see *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, eds. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W.Rabine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[196] See Bernard A. Cook, *Women and War: A historical encyclopaedia from antiquity to the present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2006).
[197] *O.C.*, T.1, p.310.

Charlotte is duly impressed, and expresses her wish to join these women on the battlefield. The symbolism here is potent: the playwright is intentionally sending out a call to arms to all women, united in combat, advising them that their pursuit of equality and liberty can only be achieved if they pursue their brave intentions together. Bravery, and purposeful determination, are demonstrated by the dramatist to be the keys to success: '[…] la valeur n'a point d'âge ni de sexe.'[198] The Fernig sisters are shown to possess courage enough to overshadow their male counterparts as they singlehandedly overcome the enemy: 'Deux femmes contre cinq allemands ; je gage qu'ils vont être battus. Voyons ceci ; c'est en vérité curieux. À merveille!' [199]

As the victorious French army reaches Brussels, the women who helped forge its success stand by Dumouriez and announce to the cheering crowd:

> Imitez-nous! Faisons plus aujourd'hui que les hommes ; combattons pour défendre leurs droits, et vengeons en même temps notre sexe d'un tyrannique préjugé. Forçons la fierté, l'orgueil de ces superbes à rendre hommage à notre valeur, et qu'ils apprennent enfin que les femmes peuvent mourir à leurs côtés pour la cause commune de la patrie, et la destruction des tyrans.[200]

This speech not only demonstrates to a newly liberated nation the enlightened ideals of their saviours, it is also a universal appeal, with an emphasis on pride -'*forçons la fierté'* - directed to all of the populace, regardless of gender, and demonstrates again a sense of moral superiority whereby women are willing to battle for their rights and those of men simultaneously. By allying the cause of women to that of the revolutionaries, de Gouges

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[198] *Ibid.,* p.326.
[199] *O.C.*, T.1, p.315.
[200] *Ibid.*. p.326.

manages both to highlight the importance of the role of women in the achievement of their success and to signal the folly of disregarding same. Remarking on the effect that this play would have had on an eighteenth-century audience, unaccustomed to seeing women portrayed in such a radical fashion, Gabrielle Verdier notes that:

> What might have irritated her audience most, however, is the role she gives her female characters, which contests the place assigned to them in revolutionary ideology and constitutes a kind of 'distanciation'. They are presented not as curiosities but as models for women.[201]

De Gouges employed well-worn but nonetheless effective metaphors to convey the realities of female oppression. The symbol of the convent, with its connotations of forced imprisonment and the silencing of individual expression, represents not only the contemporary suspicion of clerical misdemeanour, but also the patriarchal fear of female emancipation. The relationship between the novice Julie and Sœur Angélique in *Le Couvent* (1790) is emblematic of the importance of female solidarity in a joyless world. They are effectively exiles from the male dominated universe of reason and decision making, the exponents of which (notably Le Grand Vicaire and Le Marquis de Leuville) condemned them to their isolation in the first place. Hope prevails, however, in the relationship between these two women. Sœur Angélique is aware(although Julie remains ignorant) of the fact that they are indeed mother and daughter. Just as Mme de Valmont acts as the '*protectrice*' of Marianne in *L'Homme généreux* (1785), so Sœur Angélique assumes the role of confidante as she attempts to ease the suffering of Julie: 'Ne me refuse point ta confiance tout entière. Si je peux te laisser l'espérance, je partagerai au moins ta douleur, elle en sera plus légère.'[202]

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[201] Gabrielle Verdier, 'From Reform to Revolution: The Social Theater of Olympe de Gouges', *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine Montfort-Howard (Vestavia: Summa publications, 1994) p.213.
[202] *O.C.*, T.1, p.214.

In the last scene of this play, Sœur Angélique rises up against her oppressors and finally reveals the truth behind her imprisonment as she implicates her brother Le Marquis:

> Sachez que m'étant mariée sans son aveu, ce frère implacable provoqua mon époux au combat où il perdit la vie. Enfermée dans ce cloître par un ordre surpris à l'autorité, une longue suite de persécutions me força d'y prendre le voile, on mit auprès de moi cette enfant ; mais par un raffinement de cruauté, on me défendit avec les plus affreuses menaces de me faire connaître à elle et de l'appeler du doux nom de fille.[203]

The bravery which infuses her speech, her courage in finally naming her persecutors, and her reclamation of her daughter all act as a moral lesson to women. Even at the risk of further persecution, the decision to assert one's own right is imperative.

As we have seen, de Gouges' theatre abounds with examples of women who despite all odds, and in contravention of prevailing social mores, rally together and find mutual strength. Again her lesson is unambiguous, and is intended to be observed by both sexes. To men she signals quite plainly; that women are not to be ignored and are deserving of equal status in society. To women, she advocates solidarity, the fostering of a firm belief in themselves, and in her dramatisation of strong female characters, she reveals to them their own capabilities and strengths. The female characters of de Gouges' plays exemplify and amplify the message contained within her *Déclaration*:

> Femme, reveille-toi; le tocsin de la raison se fait entendre dans tous l'univers ; reconnais tes droits. Le puissant empire de la nature n'est plus environné de préjugés, de fanatisme, de superstition et de mensonges…Ô femmes ! femmes, quand cesserez-vous d'être aveugles? Quels sont les avantages que vous avez recueillis dans la Révolution? Un mépris plus marqué, un dedain plus signalé. [204]

For de Gouges, no revolution could be complete without the absolute and unequivocal

[203] *Ibid.*, p.223.
[204] Olympe de Gouges, *op. cit.*, p.20.

assertion of women's natural right to equal citizenship.

8 Male Redemption through Female Intervention

While Olympe de Gouges sought to promote gender equality in her writings, and has come to be recognised as a proto-feminist, she was essentially a humanist, believing that society as a whole would be better served through the recognition of female rights. To this end, her dramaturgy is also dedicated to the notion that commonly accepted ideals of masculinity were inherently flawed, in that they proposed values which excluded the useful and valuable contribution of women. De Gouges firmly believed that female participation at all levels of society was not only desirable but indispensable. Her plays document the vital role of women, from the domestic to the political, and highlight their significant contribution to the resolution of each dramatic crisis presented. Each of de Gouges' plays features one or more strong female characters whose principal function is to remedy a 'man-made' calamity. The playwright thus adeptly employs the theme of male redemption through female intervention in an effort to redress the inferior position of woman in contemporary eighteenth-century society and culture, confirming Laurie Naranch's assertion that de Gouges found resources to: '[…] present her own active imagination when arguing for women's citizenship in revolutionary France.'[205]

Le Couvent (1790) is a play that deals ostensibly with the evils of forced religious vows. Further examination, however, reveals a preoccupation with the failure of patriarchal governance in general. Olympe divides her characters along binary oppositions based on

[205] Laura E. Naranch, 'The Imaginary and a Political Quest for Freedom', *differences: A journal of feminist cultural studies*, Volume 13, Number 3, Fall 2002 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 64-82.

gender. Whereas Sœur Angélique represents self-sacrifice, her brother, Le Marquis de Leuville, personifies greed and the pursuit of arbitrary power. While Julie symbolises innocence, Le Chevalier embodies ardent desire, and while Antoine, the convent gardener, epitomises common guile, the nuns Sœur Agathe and Félicité possess benign naivety. From such antithesis emerges a synthesis of sorts, as each of these male characters is shown at the close of the play to be transformed or redeemed at least partially by his female counterpart.

In order to maintain his power and to conceal his murderous guilt after having killed her husband, Le Marquis effectively sentences his pregnant sister (who thus becomes Sœur Angélique) to a life in the convent. When his crime is exposed in the final scene, the audience is invited to compare his sister's noble selflessness with his own indefensible behaviour. He attempts to atone by acknowledging his guilt and begs pardon for this sin: 'C'est à moi de vous demander pardon, victimes de ma haine. Et vous, ma sœur, que j'ai longtemps persécutée, oublierez-vous mes torts envers vous ?[206]

This play also addresses notions of familial responsibility. While Sœur Angélique nurtures her child in secret, Le Marquis is free to raise his son in public. Julie turns out to be a loyal and devoted daughter, despite the fact that her heritage remained a long-kept secret, whereas Le Chevalier turns against his father, for whom he feels nothing but contempt. De Gouges thus proves that the crimes of de Leuville also defy the laws of good parenting. Having separated a mother and daughter, he in turn manages to destroy his own relationship with his son. The Marquis finally appeals to his niece and son to learn from his mistakes: 'Que mon exemple vous serve de leçon. Souvenez-vous que la félicité de vos

[206] *O.C.*, T.1, p.223.

enfants est votre premier devoir.'[207]

Le Chevalier, his son, is shown to be motivated exclusively by his desire for Julie. Having merely glimpsed her from afar, he is nevertheless convinced of his love for her, and tenaciously pursues her affections as he attempts to release her from religious servitude and take her hand in marriage. His stubborn determination blinds him to Julie's own needs and is deliberately juxtaposed with her own patient forbearance. The audience registers his insistence, reminiscent of his domineering father, as Le Chevalier emphatically addresses the young novice as if she were already his wife: 'Vous êtes mon épouse; votre premier devoir est de vous confier entièrement à ma foi.'[208] The playwright reveals a terrified Julie, forced to consider one 'foi' over another, and who in her fear retreats to the security of the cloister. While she had briefly harboured notions of romantic love and all its attendant freedoms, Le Chevalier's fanatical behaviour proves even more frightening than the prospect of spending her life as a 'religieuse'. She declares: '[…] je ne demande point à sortir, je chéris ma retraite, et qu'on ne me force plus à offenser le Ciel.'[209]

The convent of the title, though inhabited by women, is a male-governed institution.[210] Men live in the outside world, denoted by light and freedom, while the women are sequestered inside the convent walls, a world characterised by darkness and shadow. The Abbess appears to have power, yet she is controlled by Le Grand Vicaire, and

[207] *O.C.*, T.1, p.225.
[208] *Ibid.*. p. 216.
[209] *Ibid.*. p. 218.
[210] De Gouges' treatment of the convent trope follows in the tradition of Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne* and Diderot's *La Religieuse* among other examples, whereby the convent acts a both a real representation of the evils of forced religious vows and a metaphorical paradigm of individual, intellectual and political suppression.

the fate of Sœur Angélique and Julie is determined by the will of de Leuville. Though the sanctity of the convent is emphasised throughout the drama, Le Chevalier has no trouble in bribing the gardener to allow him to enter disguised as a curate. Once again, we note the opposition of values represented by Antoine, on the one hand, and the humble characters of Sœur Agathe and Félicité on the other. Antoine is weak and easily corruptible, as shown in this amusing dialogue from the opening scene:

> LE CHEVALIER, *suivant Antoine* – Antoine, mon cher Antoine.
> ANTOINE, *faisant le tour de théâtre* – Point d'affaires.
> LE CHEVALIER – Mon ami.
> ANTOINE – C'est inutile.
> LE CHEVALIER –Ecoute-moi donc.
> ANTOINE – Je sommes (sic) sourd.
> LE CHEVALIER – Réponds-moi un moment.
> ANTOINE – Je sommes (sic) muet.
> LE CHEVALIER – Je te promets…
> ANTOINE – Je sommes (sic) incorruptible.
> LE CHEVALIER - Cette bourse…
> ANTOINE, *regardant la bourse, et à part* – Elle est dodue.
> LE CHEVALIER – Accepte-la.
> ANTOINE – Tout de bon?
> LE CHEVALIER – Elle est à toi.
> ANTOINE, *recevant la bourse* – Grand merci.
> LE CHEVALIER – Tu n'est plus sourd actuellement?
> ANTOINE – Ni muet. Allons, dégoisez-moi vitement votre affaire.[211]

His cunning is deftly contrasted with the innocence of the novices as they contemplate the idea of a life outside the cloister, yet fail to seize the opportunity to escape amidst the chaos. Antoine is eventually chastened by the honesty and noble actions of the women in the play, and redeemed in the final scene where he announces his new vision for equality and integrity in society, favouring the ideal of marriage over religious servitude:

> Dieu n'défend pas sans doute de vivre honnêtement et doucement dans un couvent; mais je sis (*sic*) d'avis qu'il aime encore mieux qu'on se marie et je vous assure… (*Au parterre)* …messieurs et dames, que je vais me marier le plus tôt que je pourrai.[212]

[211] *O.C.*, T.1, p.209.
[212] *Ibid.*, p.223.

La Nécessité du divorce (1790) similarly explores the theme of gender difference through a dialectic of redemption and rehabilitation of errant males by female characters who display opposite qualities to them. Here we are introduced to the character of Constance, sister of the adulterous d'Aznival, who, as her name implies, remains true to her devotion to Germeuil. Yet she is shrewdly aware of the pitfalls of love and marriage, a lesson learned through the first-hand experience of her own family's travails. In Act I, Scene III she bemoans the insincerity of male attitudes to love as she explains her misgivings to her lover Germeuil:

> Oh, monsieur ! Mon frère nous donne bien du chagrin, à sa femme et à moi. Mme d'Aznival méritait d'être heureuse et mon frère fait son malheur. Qui pourra désormais se fier aux promesses, aux serments des hommes? Il l'aimait si tendrement! Il lui a si souvent répété qu'il ne cesserait jamais de l'aimer, et deux ans se sont à peine écoulés depuis leur union qu'il n'est plus le même. La froide indifference, le dégoût ont succédé à l'amour le plus tendre.[213]

Germeuil, on the other hand, wishing someday to marry her, attempts to dissuade her from pursuing such a cynical train of thought by announcing that: 'Jamais, non, jamais je ne cesserai un seul instant de vous adorer.'[214] This blatantly sentimental statement is immediately countered by Constance with the undeniable fact that: 'C'est ainsi que s'exprimait mon frère; c'est ainsi qu'il a trompé sa malheureuse épouse.'[215]

Rosambert's lofty reflections on the importance of divorce, d'Aznival's selfish disregard for both his wife and mistress, and Germeuil's impracticable romanticism are all humbled by the quiet dignity of the female characters. Rosambert, who vehemently opposes marriage, to the extent of remaining a confirmed bachelor, is finally convinced of its merits by the cool-headed Constance, whose personal experience and practical scepticism equips

[213] *O.C.,* T.1, p.229.
[214] *Idem*.
[215] *Idem*.

her with a realistic regard for the institution. Consequently, as guardian and uncle to Germeuil, he eventually grants them permission to wed. Mme d'Aznival's bravery in confronting and exonerating Herminie, her husband's mistress, not only serves to prove her love but also acts as a far superior lesson in morality than any angry remonstrance. The selfless decision made by Herminie to leave Paris and begin a new life, frees d'Aznival from any obligation and allows him to reunite with his wife. The play concludes with a message from Rosambert, one which chimes with de Gouges' own vision for conciliation and harmony, not only within the domestic sphere, but on social and political fronts as well:

> Mais n'oubliez jamais, mes enfants, que la sensibilité, la douceur sont les seuls moyens d'entretenir la paix, et l'union dans un état… qu'on ne peut malheureusement pas changer, que chacun a ses humours et ses defaults, et qu'une indulgence mutuelle peut seule produire un accord parfait.[216]

Male cupidity and hubristic ardour are once again addressed in *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1791). Here we encounter the character of Lisette de Bontour, a young widow and a woman of overt sexual confidence. Being young, attractive and rich, she is independent of male support, yet as such is also readily considered as easy prey. Germain, valet to the bishop, makes his uninvited intentions clear to her in Act I, Scene XI: 'Quand vous voudrez, aimable veuve; vous me voyez tout prêt…A combler vos vœux, à vous épouser.'[217]

Unlike the shocked reaction of Julie to Le Chevalier's similar presumption in *Le Couvent*, Lisette's response is to laugh at Germain's 'proposal'. She confidently replies: 'Oh! Mon Dieu, non. Je ne vous aime, ni ne vous aimerai jamais.'[218]

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[216] *O.C.,* T.1. p.243.
[217] *Ibid.,* p.268.
[218] *Idem*.

If Germain is taken aback by this frank dismissal of his affections, he is further affronted by Lisette's blatant display of love for his rival, Champagne, valet to the regiment captain. Like Suzon of *Les Curieux du Champ de Mars* (1790), Lisette embodies female independence, and unlike many of the playwright's other heroines, she is unmarked by tragedy. It is Lisette who decides her own fate, choosing the man she wishes to be her husband and on her own terms. De Gouges intends her audience to view these characters as symbolic of female power and agency, capable of overcoming the restrictions brought about by patriarchal prejudice and defying prescriptive stereotyping.

Female solidarity in *Le Mariage inattendu* (1784) and *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787) is shown to be instrumental in reversing 'man-made' calamity. La Comtesse Almaviva is fully aware of her husband's adulterous intentions and as such, considers it her duty to protect these 'unfortunates' from his unsolicited advances. She openly admits her suspicions to Figaro in Act II, Scene XI: 'Je ne suis pas aussi tranquille que vous le pensez, M. Figaro. J'ai tout à craindre de la part de mon mari.'[219] She therefore conspires with her friends to keep a close eye on her husband's movements and is consequently influential in preventing his corruption of Fanchette.

Male malignancy, as epitomised by Le Baron de Montfort, is distinguished from the female virtue demonstrated by La Comtesse de Saint Alban in *Le Philosophe corrigé.* As friends to both the Marquis and Marquise de Clainville, they are in a prime position to offer aid in a time of marital discord. Their individual responses to their friend's crisis, however, could not be more different. For his part, the Baron sees the disclosure of his friend's

[219] *O.C.*, T.1. p.56.

alleged cuckoldry as an excuse to indulge in gossip and ridicule, at the expense of the family's reputation. Adding insult to injury, he audaciously contrives to make the Marquise sing a popular song alluding to her supposed affair, a verse of which includes:[220]

> Terrible dans la guerre
> Au ménage époux débonnaire
> Chez lui tout y prospère
> Et surtout un enfant
> Tandis qu'il est absent
> Arrive à contretemps.[221]

Perhaps even worse than this is his presumption that such devious behaviour would favourably impress La Comtesse, another of the dramatist's young widowed characters, and bosom friend of La Marquise. His conduct induces quite the opposite effect, however, and La Comtesse, remaining loyal to her friend, continues with their scheme to dupe the confused and misguided Marquis. La Comtesse is depicted as a particularly self-possessed and intelligent woman. Like the Baron, she has a mischievous side, but unlike him she puts it to benign use. When speaking to the Marquise of the latter's husband, she offers us an insight into her own character in admitting: 'Il connaît votre timidité ; il sait mon espièglerie !'[222]

As previously shown, the women's ruse succeeds and the play concludes on a happy note, with the de Clainville family harmoniously reunited. De Montfort is thus forced to bow to the superior wit of the ladies, as he declares in the final scene: 'Mesdames, le marquis me rend seul la justice qui m'est due. Je vous laisse le triomphe de m'avoir fait votre dupe; et,

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[220] From a biographical perspective, this 'song' closely resembles one which circulated Paris in 1760 regarding de Gouges' parentage, « Oui, tout Paris qui l'envisage/Comme un seigneur de Montauban/Le chansonne et rit au visage/ De ce Le Franc de Pompignan » (O. Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 23).
[221] *O.C.*, T.1, p.122.
[222] *Ibid.*, p.117.

loin de me plaindre, je applaudirai toujours d'avoir pu vous donner ce plaisir.'[223]

Mme de Valmont, of *L'Homme généreux* (1785), is a victim of her own brother's cruel neglect. Le Comte de Saint-Clair offers this description of her in the opening scene:

> Le marquis de Flaucourt est parti pour sa terre, sans me donner aucune satisfaction sur le compte de sa sœur, Mme de Valmont….Jeune veuve, vertueuse autant qu'aimable, instruite par le maheur dans le cours de sa première jeunesse, elle n'en est que plus sensible au sort des infortunés. Devenue philosophe pour elle-même, et sans cesse occupée à soulager les maux d'autrui, elle a renoncé au tourbillion du monde, pour se livrer aux charmes de la literature; et badinant avec grace sur les erreurs de l'âge, elle se croit assez vieille, dit-elle, pour devenir auteur.[224]

This depiction perfectly matches the portrait which history has left us of the playwright herself. As already noted, Mme de Valmont previously appeared as the main protagonist of a semi-autobiographical novel penned by de Gouges in 1784. The callousness of Mme de Valmont's brother reflects the dramatist's own experience at the hand of her half brother, as outlined by Olivier Blanc:

> À Paris, Marie Degouges, qui se disait veuve du négociant Pierre Daubry (sic) rencontra par hazard son demi-frère, Jean-Georges-Louis-Marie Le Franc, devenu un jeune homme de vingt-deux ans et fréquentant les milieux libertins. Frappé par leur ressemblance physique, un ami commun les présenta l'un à l'autre. Ils se manifestèrent beaucoup de sympathie et pendant quatre ans, ils se témoignérent même de l'affection. Le jeune homme confiait ses affaires de cœur à sa demi-sœur, lui jurant ses grands dieux qu'il réparerait les torts de leur père. Mais le moment venu, lorsqu'il hérita du titre et de la fortune en 1784, il oublia ses promesses.[225]

Whenever a young widow of independent means and lively intelligence appears in one of de Gouges' dramas, we may be certain of finding a manifestation of the author herself. In this play, there are many instances of male perpetuated malice, yet the hero of the title, a man, is none other than the Comte de Saint-Clair. Notwithstanding this, the playwright initially paints a picture of a man unsure of himself, vacillating and unclear as to

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[223] *Ibid.,* p.142.
[224] *O.C.*, T.1, p.71.
[225] O. Blanc, *op. cit.*, p.37.

how to put his good intentions to effective use. It is Mme de Valmont who points him in the right direction. Aware of his admiration for Marianne, she kindly encourages his timid affections. When she reveals to him the poor conditions in which the young girl and her family live, he is consequently motivated to anonymously pay off the family's crippling debts. De Valmont pushes him further, however, convincing him to disclose his identity as the family's saviour, thus winning him Marianne's favour, as seen in this inspirational speech on the merits of altruism delivered by her in Act V, Scene VI:

> […] vous me permettrez de vous faire observer que les traits de bienfaisance deviendraient bien plus nombreux, si l'on faisait passer à la postérité les noms de ceux qui ont rempli les devoirs que la nature prescrit à l'homme envers son semblable. Un public effréné élèvera un trône à une actrice, parce-que ses talents l'auront amusé ; il lui donnera une fête splendide sur la mer, et la recevra comme une Cléopâtre. Un voyageur aérien verra s'élever des pyramides à sa louange, et l'homme bienfaisant sera enseveli avec ses belles actions.[226]

If the evils of colonialism can be considered the product of white patriarchal notions of supremacy, then, in de Gouges' theatrical universe, it is the function of women to initiate its demise. The character of Sophie, in *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783), displays incredible courage, putting her life in jeopardy to save those of the condemned slaves Zamor and Mirza. While the male characters prevaricate, she alone thrusts herself into the thick of the action, undeterred by the constraints of colonial law and its imperious model of justice. Failing to secure their pardon, in Act III, Scene V, Sophie resorts to more drastic action as she appeals to the judge of the colony:

> Cet excès de cruauté me donne du courage. (*Elle court se placer entre Zamor et Mirza, les prend tous les deux par la main, et dit au juge.)* Barbare ! Ose me faire assassiner avec eux; je ne les quitte point; rien ne pourra les arracher de mes bras. [227]

In the final scene, when she throws herself at the feet of the governor, her moving speech is intended not only to inspire clemency, but also entreats the audience to consider their own

[226] *O.C.*, T.1, p.98.
[227] *Ibid.*, p.39.

passive complicity in the mistreatment of slaves, imposed in the name of *la patrie*.

> Ah monsieur ! Je meurs de douleur à vos pieds, si vous ne m'accordez leur grace. Elle est dans votre cœur et dépend de votre pouvoir. Ah, si je ne puis l'obtenir, que m'importe la vie! Nous avons tout perdu![228]

Through the medium of her theatre, de Gouges persistently sought to elevate the status of women. She strove to demonstrate their effectiveness in aiding and redeeming men in various situations, and places her female characters in established male-governed spaces, thus emphasising the importance of feminine intervention, empathy and perspective. From her political writings, right through to her dramatic works, the author stressed the mutually beneficial understanding that could exist between men and women, as indicated by Phillip Usher, who pinpoints the recurring tendency in all of de Gouges' works to: '[…] souligner la nécessaire collaboration des deux sexes…'[229] For de Gouges, this was the first step towards liberty, equality and the true union of men and women.

[228] *O.C.*, T.1, p. 40.
[229] Phillip Usher, 'De sexe incertain: Masculin, Féminin de Godard', *French Forum*, Volume 34, Number 2, Spring 2009 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) pp.102-119.

Conclusion

This thesis has offered an analysis of the complete theatrical works of Olympe de Gouges, with the aim of enhancing awareness of an important area of the author's literary repertoire. De Gouges was principally an author, a self-styled *femme de lettres*, whose dramatic works attest to her commitment to a sympathetic and honest portrayal of all members of society. Examining her theatre under the thematic headings of *liberté, égalité* and *sororité* not only affords us an insight into the creative legacy of the playwright, but also acts as an invaluable reflection of late eighteenth-century French cultural values and concerns. De Gouges' theatre is socially motivated, in that it seeks to promote principles of altruism over self-interest, and an end to the arbitrary subjugation of individuals, as they find themselves constrained by the dictates of custom, slavery and gender discrimination.

In the first section, we examined the theme of liberty in de Gouges's dramaturgy as it applied to aspects of personal liberty and *libertinage*, and her attempts to deconstruct the traditional framework of family. The first chapter focused on the importance of personal liberty in a time of great social upheaval. For the playwright, personal liberty was characterised by an individual's right to control of their own destiny and to the expression of independent conviction. De Gouges profoundly objected to the enslavement of black people and to this end she outlined the cruelty of such a practice with her first play, *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783). We then saw how de Gouges addressed the contentious issue

of arranged marriage with her play *Le Marriage inattendu* (1784), whereby the playwright underscored the unjust behaviour of individuals who attempt to control the lives of others. The enforcement of religious vows is critiqued by the author in her plays *Le Couvent* (1791) and *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1794), and here we saw how she portrayed the insidious power and influence of the church. We also observed how the curious decision made by the libertine Ninon de Lenclos to retire from society constituted her unique expression of personal liberty. A close reading of de Gouges' play *La France sauvée* (1792), demonstrated the playwright's interpretation of the significance of the curtailment of personal liberty as applied to the Queen of France, Marie Antoinette. This chapter also investigated Olympe's singular treatment of the condition of the human psyche, with her depiction of the doting Desyveteaux in *Molière chez Ninon* (1788).

The second chapter, Libertinage, looked at Olympe de Gouges' depiction of libertine behaviour in her theatre. We outlined how de Gouges embraced notions of sensual, intellectual and moral freedom, and demonstrated that these ideals should be exercised in a fair and unselfish manner. The ideal libertine lifestyle, according to de Gouges, was practised by Ninon de Lenclos, the heroine of *Molière chez Ninon* (1788).[230] We saw how the playwright extolled the virtues of characters such as Ninon and Suzon of *Les Curieux du Champs de Mars* (1790) as she portrayed them as idealistic manifestations of female emancipation.

We analysed de Gouges' revision of the concept of family in chapter three. The

[230] De Gouges seems to identify with Ninon de Lenclos, both the historical personage and the dramatic character (as depicted in her own works). For more see Bonnel *op. cit.*

playwright used the theme of familial relationships and their changing dynamic, in an era of revolution, as symbolic of transformation and a remodelling of societal mores. This chapter examined family division, as portrayed in *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783), as a metaphor for the discord brought about by colonial imperialism. We also examined the effects of poverty on the Montalais family of *L'Homme généreux* (1785), and observed an alternative vision of family with de Gouges's assemblage of great minds in *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791).

The second section of this thesis, Égalité, explored the theme of equality in de Gouges' theatrical works. In an effort to promote universal parity, de Gouges, as we revealed, sought to highlight cultural and social inequality in her plays. In chapter four, we analysed her critique of social divisons and feudal tradition. The playwright addresses the problematic issue of poverty and charity in *L'Homme généreux* (1785). In her plays *L'Entrée de Dumouriez aux Bruxelles* (1793) and *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787), we saw how de Gouges gives voice to the underclass of French society. Finally, we looked at the playwright's exposition of the unravelling of aristocracy and the emergence of a new social class in her satirical drama, *Les Curieux du Champs de Mars* (1790).

The fifth chapter of this thesis concerned itself with Olympe de Gouges' treatment of the monarchy, the clergy and the military in her plays. We highlighted the playwright's views on the purpose of the monarchy, and how she believed that a rightful sovereign should be accountable for his actions, and instrumental in the amelioration of the lives of his citizens. This chapter went on to uncover de Gouges' disdain for the corruptive

influence of the church, as demonstrated in her characterisations of an unscrupulous clergy in amongst other plays, *Le Couvent* (1790) and *Le Prélat d'autrefois* (1791). The playwright's treatment of the military in her dramaturgy was directly contrasted with her portrayal of the monarchy and clergy. We examined how she employed the model of the French military as an example of meritocracy and progressive secularism, particularly in *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1793).

For Olympe de Gouges, the ideals of the Revolution were incapable of prospering without the full granting of equal rights to women and slaves. Chapter six explored the playwright's quest for gender and racial equality. To this end, we analysed de Gouges' advocacy of the ideals of the abolitionists, Condorcet and Brissot, in *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1783), with her sympathetic portrait of enlightened slaves and her censure of unjust colonial practices. We also revealed how the proto-feminist message contained in her *Déclaration* is strongly upheld in her dramatic works, such as *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791) and *L'Homme génereux* (1785), wherein the playwright decried the unjust status of women in society.

The final section of this thesis, Sororité, delineated Olympe de Gouges' efforts to portray female solidarity in her dramaturgy. Chapter seven examined the playwright's endeavours to dramatise her interpretation of 'sisterhood' as she assembled an array of strong female characters in her plays. We analysed her depiction of Ninon and Queen Christine of Sweden in *Molière chez Ninon* (1788), as perfect examples of feminine virtue coupled with emancipated will. We also showed how de Gouges outlined the positive

effects of female complicity in rescuing marriages in crisis with her plays *La Nécessité du divorce* (1790) and *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787).

Lastly, chapter eight examined the theme of male redemption through female intervention in the theatre of de Gouges. Through her depiction of 'man-made' calamity and of the failure of male governance, the playwright strove to prove the importance of female intercession in redressing same. In this manner, de Gouges demonstrates the important contribution of women in society and the iniquity involved in any dismissal of such. We saw examples of how male malignancy are overturned by the female characters of such plays as *Le Mariage inattendu* (1784) and *Le Philosophe corrigé* (1787), as she intended to promote the power of women as active agents, concerned with the betterment of society and deserving of equal status alongside men.

The theatrical works of Olympe de Gouges should be considered as a significant contribution to late eighteenth-century French literature. The apparent didactism of her dramaturgy is indicative of the author's positive, rather than negative world view, as she firmly believed in the human capability for transformation, particulary in an era of revolution. The playwright's theatre attests to her admiration for the ordinary and often forgotten members of society, as she depicts the drama involved in everyday life. According to Benoîte Groult:

> On a souvent qualifié le style d'Olympe de Gouges d'amphigourique, naïf, maladroit. […] mais elle savait parfois allier le génie des formules à l'audace de la pensée sans jamais négliger l'aspect concret, avec un sens de minutie qui fait parfois sourire. [231]

[231] Benoîte Groult, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-41.

On the third of November 1793, Olympe was executed for supposed seditious, pro-royalist sentiment. Her last words to her public were: 'Enfants de la patrie, vous vengerez ma mort!'[232] De Gouges the dramatist was herself a performer to the end, and she never underestimated the value of rhetoric. Patriot, proto-feminist, but above all 'femme de lettres', de Gouges the playwright leaves a literary legacy which is noteworthy and deserving of closer critical attention.

[232] Olivier Blanc, *op. cit.*, p.225.

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Appendix

The Plays of Olympe de Gouges

Listed in Chronological Order

With a brief plot summary and full list of characters.

I *L'Esclavage des noirs*

Written in 1783 and received by the Comédie-Française in 1785.

First staged in December 1789.

List of Characters:

Zamor (educated slave)

Mirza (young female slave, Zamor's lover)

M. de Saint-Frémont (governor of the island situated in the Indian Ocean)

Mme de Saint-Frémont (wife of the governor)

Valère (young French nobleman, husband to Sophie)

Sophie (daughter of M. de Saint-Frémont)

Betzi (chambermaid to Mme. De Saint-Frémont)

Coraline (slave girl)

Native Islander (attendant to the slaves of the governor)

Azor (Saint-Frémont's valet)

M. de Belfort (garrison major)

A Judge

A domestic servant to the Saint-Frémont household

An elderly island native

Several native islanders of both sexes, African slaves and French soldiers.

Act I (Scenes 1 – 9)

Opens on the shore of a tropical islet, cut off from the main island. A recent shipwreck can be seen in the background. Zamor and Mirza are witnesses to the disaster. They are fugitive slaves, evading the attendant. Zamor has killed a guard who attempted to rape his lover Mirza. They both rescue Sophie and Valère from the sea. They befriend the French couple who promise to plead for their pardon. Another vessel arrives led by the slave attendant. Zamor and Mirza are captured. The young French couple are transported to the main island.

Act II (Scenes 1 – 10)

The setting has changed to the interior of a drawing-room decorated in the colonial manner. Betzi and Azor discuss the recent events and the imminent execution of the slaves, Zamor and Mirza. The governor has no jurisdiction over their trial. The domestics and slaves are asked to leave the room by Mme de Saint-Frémont, alone she soliloquizes her sorrow at the announcement of the execution. She is also troubled by the behaviour of her husband, who she believes hides a grave secret.
Sophie is given audience with the governor's wife. She pleads for the condemned slaves pardon. Mme de Saint-Frémont is moved by Sophie's speech and is curious regarding the background of the young woman.

Act III (Scenes 1 – 13)

Opens in a outdoor space, an uncultivated area of the island where a platform has been erected. Valère is with the slave couple, and assures them that Sophie will have gained their pardon. Sophie, believing that she has received a pardon from the governor's wife gives hope to the slaves. However, this is refuted by the Judge who reminds them that the governor and his wife are powerless and that the exectution will go ahead. There are signs of insurrection as the slaves attempt to overcome their oppressors, Zamor urges them to stop.
In a moving speech, Valère informs the crowd that his brave wife is searching for her father, and that that was the reason for their voyage. It is revealed that M. de Saint-Frémont is her father, and she is received as a daughter by his wife. The governor is overjoyed. The emotional scene, and Zamor's bravery is enough to convince the Judge that the slave couple should be released and pardoned of their crime.

II *Le Mariage inattendu*

Written in 1784, and accepted by the Comédie-Italienne on the 4th of November 1784. This play was never performed, due to the objections of Beaumarchais.

List of Characters:

Chérubin (captain of the guards of the king of Spain)

Count Almaviva

Countess Almaviva

The Duke of Médoc (true father of Fanchette)

The Duchess, his wife and mother to Fanchette

Figaro

Suzanne (Figaro's wife)

Fanchette (daughter of the duke and duchess, believed to be the daughter of Antonio)

Antonio (the gardener)

Nicolas (a peasant, fiancé to Fanchette)

Bridoison (godfather of Nicolas and a judge)

Basile (musician)

La Fleur (a lackey)

A notary

Several servants and peasants

Act I (Scenes 1 – 14)

Chérubin and Figaro discuss the upcoming marriage of Fanchette, a cousin of his wife Suzanne. Chérubin reveals his love for Fanchette. Figaro jokingly encourages him to exercise his 'droit de seigneur'. Chérubin is disgusted at the proposal. Figaro goes on to warn him of the Count's evil intentions towards Fanchette's honour.
The Count arrives with the news that the Duke and Duchess of Médoc, once estranged but now reunited, are to attend the nuptials. We learn that their deceased daughter was once 'milk-sister' to Fanchette.
The Countess, Suzanne and Fanchette discuss the marriage ceremony. The other women realise that Fanchette is not happy to marry, but is wary of disobeying her father. They attempt to devise a way of delaying the ceremony.
Antonio presents Nicolas to the Duchess. He insists that the marriage take place the next day. The gardener reminds the company that Fanchette is of humble birth and therefore fortunate to have Nicolas as her fiancé. He is suspicious of Chérubin's intentions. Basile, eavesdropping on the conversation, relays the news to the Count.
The Count with the aid of Basile, plots to seduce Fanchette.

Act II (Scenes 1 – 25)

Unable to sleep on the eve of her wedding, Fanchette takes a midnight stroll. She encounters Chérubin who declares his love for her. Fanchette is overjoyed as the feeling is mutual. Unknown to them, Basile has been spying on them at the Count's request.
The next morning Fanchette is accused of immodest behaviour by the Count and Basile. The young woman is both affronted and afraid.
Suzanne and Figaro realise that a plot is afoot and suspecting the Count they confront his wife. The Countess decides to help them in their plan to foil her husband.
With the arrival of the Duke and Duchess, the marriage goes ahead. Shortly after the ceremony, the Count approaches Fanchette and insists that she spend the night with him. If not, he promises that her marriage be annulled, bringing untold shame to her and her family. Fanchette tearfully accepts the latter.
Act III (Scenes 1 – 15)
A surprise discovery of a box containing birth and death certificates reveals that Fanchette is actually the daughter of the Duke and Duchess, and that Antonio's daughter died at birth. She is free to marry her beloved Chérubin.

III *L'Homme généreux*

Written in 1785 and published in 1786. No evidence of any performance.

List of Characters:

Count de Saint-Clair

Marianne

Young Montalais (Marianne's brother and the Count's secretary)

Old Montalais (Marianne's father)

Mme de Valmont (young widow, old friend of the Count and Marianne's guardian)

La Fontaine (wicked agent of the Marquis de Flancourt)

La Fleur (recruitment sergeant for the army)

Germeuil (The Count's valet)

Laurette (Marianne's apprentice)

Act I (Scenes 1 – 15)

We learn that the Count is concerned for the welfare of his dear friend, Mme de Valmont, recently widowed and ignored by her brother, the Marquis, while she devotes her time to charity. He is fascinated by her young protégée, Marianne. Intrigued by her humble dress and demeanour and wishing to know more on her subject he sends a letter to Mme de Valmont to arrange a meeting.
His young secretary, Montalais is being manipulated by La Fontaine. Rather than reveal his true identity and the nature of his troubles (his father's debt), we learn that he was instructed by \La Fontaine to pose as an orphan with no family background. The Count is concerned for his secretary, noting his anxious behaviour. La Fontaine has wicked intentions towards Marianne and convinces the Count for his own purposes that the source of Montalais' distress is a woman, and that that woman is Mme de Valmont's protégée, Marianne.
The Count expresses his admiration for Marianne and describes how he wishes to aid her in the guise of an anonymous benefactor.

Act II (Scenes 1 – 14)

The scene is set in the sparsely furnished home of the Montalais family. In discussion with her father and Laurette, Marianne reveals her interest in a nobleman, of unknown identity that she met at the home of Mme de Valmont. Young Montalais arrives with a sack of money for his father to help pay off his debts. It is a conscription payment as he has signed up for the army. The recruiting officer, La Fleur, seeing the distress of the family, however, releases young Montalais from his duties while still allowing him to keep the money. La Fontaine arrives at the same time as the bailiffs who wish to arrest old Montalais. La Fontaine pays the debts but takes Marianne in exchange.

Act III (Scenes 1 – 13)
The Count rescues Marianne from La Fontaine before she is dishonoured, however he manages to escape first and the Count is unaware that he is the author of her distress. La Fontaine deceives him, telling him that young Montalais was her attacker. The Count and La Fontaine vow to avenge Marianne by capturing the secretary and forcing him to marry her. Marianne is too distressed to speak, Germeuil, the valet escorts her home to her family. The Count wishes to know where she lives and on his return the valet describes her miserable home.

Act IV (Scenes 1 – 10)
Marianne is finally persuaded to explain to her family the reason for her distress. Her brother and La Fleur are determined to exact revenge on La Fontaine. Father Montalais fears for their safety. In the meantime the bailiffs return for him as La Fontaine has taken back his payment. The Count arrives at the moment of Montalais' arrest. He offers the family a wallet containing a large of sum of money, enough to pay off their debts and keep them in a comfortable pension for the rest of their life. Marianne recognises the Count as the man she admired from afar but is still unaware of his identity. He wishes still to remain anonymous and informs them that he intends to depart overseas. Mme de Valmont arrives and the family recount the extraordinary tale of their mysterious saviour. Mme explains to them that this is the Count Saint Clair. They all depart for the Count's residence.

Act V (Scenes 1 – 15)
The count eventually discovers that La Fontaine is the true villain and young Montalais is exonerated and revealed to be Marianne's brother. La Fleur and young Montalais capture La Fontaine, he is killed in a duel by Montalais' sword. The Count and Marianne are engaged to be married.

IV Le Philosophe corriqé.

Written in 1787and published in 1788. No evidence of any performance.

List of Characters

Le Marquis de Clainville

La Marquise de Clainville

La Comtesse de Sant-Alban (young widow, friend of the Marquise)

Le Baron de Montfort (friend of the Marquis)

Le Commandeur

M. Pinçon (valet to the Marquis)

Mme. Pinçon (governess)

Babet (nursery maid and lover of Blaise)

Blaise (gardener and lover of Babet)

Troop of villagers

Act I (the garden of the Marquis' country residence)

Scenes 1 – 8, Mme Pinçon and her husband discuss the affairs of their Master and Mistress. Their Master has returned to his country home after some time spent away with his regiment. In the meantime, unknown to him, his wife has given birth to a baby girl. This well-guarded secret has been kept from him by the three women: the Marquise, the Countess and Mme Pinçon, for a deliberate reason. The Count arrives and is flabbergasted to hear from Blaise that his wife is now a mother and is cast into deep despair, believing that his once virtuous wife has cuckolded him.
Acts II and III (summarised), The Commander arrives and, on learning the news, orders his nephew, the Marquis, to throw his wife out of the house as she has dishonoured the family name. The Marquis remains stoical, as his philosophy dictates, and refuses to bow to his uncle's anger. In a conversation with the Countess it is revealed that during the three years of marriage (Marquis and Marquise) she has shown him nothing but respect and devotion

while he, adhering to a philosophical ideal of reason over emotion, has remained indifferent and unemotional. The Baron being his devious self, is thoroughly enjoying the controversial event. He receives correspondence from Paris which, he later discloses to the Countess and the Marquise, containing the lyrics of a new popular song satirising none other but the supposed cuckolding of the Marquis. The Marquise, now distraught after a tempestuous confrontation with her husband, is at breaking point and is anxious to reveal the truth before incurring any further disgrace. Mme Pinçon urges her to remain steadfast, pointing out that the Marquise's anger and jealousy are an indication of progress.

Act IV, Scenes 1-12,

The Marquis approaches his uncle and agrees that it is time that his wife is banished for her actions. At the same time he reveals his love for a mysterious woman he met some time ago at a masked ball in Paris, with whom he had a brief affair. It is later revealed to the Commander that this mysterious woman was actually the Marquise herself, as she donned the disguise in an endeavour to trap her husband and elicit from him a form of passionate response. The Commander forgives his niece-in-law and is now party to their plot. In the meantime, the Marquis is beginning to lose his calm and is shown to be more in his behaviour towards his servants. It has been decided that a letter from the 'mystery woman' be sent to the Marquis, requesting a midnight rendez-vous in the park, where all will be finally revealed.

Act V, Scenes 1-14,

The Marquis intercepts the letter before it is delivered to him and misunderstands its content, believing it to be a love letter from a stranger (presumably the father of the baby) to his wife. This is the final straw and he is consumed by rage. In a highly dramatic scene he raises his sword above the sleeping baby's cot before finally coming to his senses, moved by the image of the innocent sleeping child. His wife discovers him and, throws herself at his feet and is about to reveal all when he kicks her away and orders her to take care of her child. Mme Pinçon, disguised as a man (masquerading as the Marquise's fictitious lover) following the Commander's instructions, is found by the Marquis in the park and is challenged to a duel. M. Pinçon intervenes, to prevent any bloodshed and he and his wife are finally forced to tell the truth. The philosopher has been adequately "corrected", re-animated in a sense and revitalised through a new found love for his wife and joyfully re-united with his family.

V Le Siècle des grands hommes ou Molière chez Ninon

Written in 1787 and refused by the Comèdie-Française on the 17th of February 1788. Published in 1788. No evidence of any performance.

List of Characters

Molière – friend of Ninon

Le Grand Condé

Le Marquis de la Châtre (Ninon's lover)

M. de Gourville (former lover of Ninon)

Le Comte de Fiesque (Ninon's new lover)

Le Chevalier de Belfort (biological son of Ninon and Olympe's lover)

Chapelle (Ninon's friend)

Scarron (Ninon's friend)

Desyveteaux (Ninon's friend)

Le Marquis de Châteauroux (Olympe's father)

Le Grand Prieur

M. de Saint Faur (military policeman)

Francisque (Ninon's valet)

Mathurin (peasant)

Blaise (Desyveteaux's valet)

Lucas (servant of the above)

Mathurin (peasant)

Blaise (servant)

Lucas (servant)

La Reine Christine (queen of Sweden)

Ninon

Olympe (daughter of Châteauroux)

Mme Scarron (friend of Ninon)

Mme La Marquise de la Sablière

Mlle Le Roi

Mignard (painter and architect)

Act I, Scenes 1 – 22

Ninon is harassed by the Le Grand Prieur who declares his love for her and, when spurned, promises to exact revenge. He leaves a love letter later perused by Molière and Chapelle. Molière reveals to the company that he has received a letter from a young lady of sixteen years of age who has found herself in a personal crisis. She wishes to become an actress and leave her family as she is in love with a young man of whom her father disapproves. She seeks an audience with Ninon and Molière and on the occasion of their meeting Ninon is very taken with her. They warn her of the pitfalls of a life in the theatre and the fickle nature of young love. However the young lady, who is called Olympe, is determined, staying at a hotel with her maid, she asks for them to intercede with her father. We learn also that Ninon is saddened by the imminent departure of her lover, La Châtre. Her former lover Gourville arrives on the scene, having returned home from war. He is seeking to retrieve a large sum of money he consigned to Ninon before his departure. Suspecting that it has been spent, he is overjoyed to find that Ninon has kept every cent for him. He apologises profusely for his suspicion and recounts a terrible tale of deceit. Before leaving, he split his fortune in two giving one half to Ninon and the other half to a well respected clergyman known throughout the capital for his austerity and strict morals. On his return, it transpired that the holy man had given away all his money stating that all ‘donations’ to the Church were routinely distributed amongst the poor of Paris. Prayers had been said in his praise, and his just rewards awaited him in heaven. Ninon ironically reminds Gourville that she is a woman, a friend and not a member of the clergy.
La Châtre, Ninon’s current lover arrives and, spending some time on his own with her, pleads for her to pledge her fidelity to him before his departure. He goes so far as to ask her to sign a declaration of her love. She reluctantly agrees. A servant announces the arrival of de Fiesque of whom Le Châtre is wary, knowing his reputation and his

admiration for Ninon. Out of respect for her lover, she agrees not to frequent the company of de Fiesque. La Châtre departs, Ninon is heartbroken and is comforted by Mme Scarron. Ninon and her entourage prepare to visit their old friend Desyveteaux in his country home of Faubourg Saint Germain where he has withdrawn into seclusion, his servants ordered to dress as country peasants.

Act II(The parkland surrounding Desyveteaux's residence)

Ninon and her friends arrive at Desyveteaux's home. He has succumbed to the folly of old age and now abetted by his loyal domestics lives in a fantasy world where he believes himself a lowly shepherd in love with a shepherdess (La Dupuis). In his blissful ignorance he doesn't recognise his friends. They are alarmed at first but decide eventually to play along with this masquerade as he is evidently happy.

Act III(Ninon's home)

All return to Ninon's house. We note the arrival of Scarron. A policeman arrives with orders that vile accusations have been made against Ninon's moral virtue by religious fanatics and that she has been ordered to retire to a home for 'repentant girls' or to a convent. The company is horrified and Ninon declares that she is neither a girl or repentant. It seems that the orders have come from the Queen of France herself. All of Ninon's friends resolve to go to the Tuileries Palace to show their allegiance. Ninon is left alone with de Fiesque who declares his love for her. It transpires that the feeling is mutual, but they are both aware of how dangerous an affair could be at this inopportune time. Ninon's friends return with good news: the Queen is gravely upset by the false reports made against Ninon and linked to herself, and vows to punish any false informants. Christine, Queen of Sweden, who for personal reasons has recently stepped down from her throne, has expressed a desire to meet with Ninon, whom she greatly admires.
Ninon meets up with Saint Evremond, Olympe's father, who still resists the idea of his daughter marrying a young man with no familial connections.

Act IV, Ninon imparts this news to Olympe, who decides to leave with her governess. A great party is now organised for the visit of Queen Christine. In conversation with Molière we learn that Ninon is forty five years of age. The affair between de Fiesque and Ninon becomes ever more complicated when he admits to a great fear of losing her because he would not be able to stand a life without her. Instead of enjoying their time together he is consumed with paranoia and jealousy. In the meantime Christine arrives and demands a private audience with Ninon. There follows a frank and enlightening discussion between the two formidable woman on politics, art, culture and society.
A ballet is then performed for the illustrious visitor and depicts, amongst other themes, the loves of Psyche and the victory of France over her enemies. A surprise arrival in the form of Desyveteaux and his troop of shepherds further charms the Queen. Ninon is delighted with the success of her festivities but falls into a self-reflective, melancholic mood.

Act V,

Ninon has decided to retire from society and enter a convent. Ninon summons the young Olympe to her home. In a soliloquy we learn that Ninon was made to abandon her newborn son eighteen years ago and has no knowledge of his whereabouts. Ninon receives a letter from de Fiesque informing her that he can no longer be her lover, but hopes to be counted amongst her devoted friends. On impulse she cuts off a lock of her hair and sends it to him in return. Young Belfort arrives to see Ninon, she is immediately struck by his resemblance to the Count of Coligny an old flame from her youth. Belfort describes his pain at being denied the hand of Olympe and explains how his deceased father was once a friend of her father but, as the identity of his mother was unknown he was deemed unsuitable as a suitor. They realise that they are mother and son and are overcome with joy. Ninon meets with de Fiesque who is brokenhearted at the idea of her retiring from society. He pleads for her to change her mind but she is resolute. He decides to leave Paris permanently or until Ninon returns to society.
Olympe's father arrives, and it is finally revealed to him by Molière that Ninon is Belfort's mother. The young couple are allowed to marry. Châteauroux is delighted with the outcome. Ninon preaches against the dangers of prejudice. Despite the protestations of her friends, she is still resolved to retire to a convent.

VI Les Curieux du Champ de Mars (a short one act comedy)

List of Characters

M. de Bélisle (officer of the National Guard, impartial)

Père Ambroise (a blindman and Jacquot, his dog, both of them aristocrats)

Frontin (a domestic servant of M. Bélisle)

Suzon

Bertrand (a simpleton)

Une sentinelle (Suzon's lover)

Gagne Denier and Gagne Petit (both working men of low wages)

Une Poissarde (a fishwife)

La Fleur (a domestic, democrat)

La Jeunesse (an aristocrat)

Mme La Marquise de la Branche du Blason (an aristocrat)

M. Le Chevalier du Rocher

M. Séné (a democrat and doctor of medicine)

M. Rapine (a prosecutor)

M. Poignardin (an author of tragedies)

M. de l'Ecusson (genealogist)

An officer; a bourgeois citizen; a patrol guard; several other citizens.

(Theatre represents the Champ de Mars with the river in the background)

Scene 1:

M. de Belisle and his manservant help the old blind aristocrat Père Ambroise through the crowd. He in turn explains his personal philosophy as an aristocrat and how the old constitution is better than the new one, as the latter, he claims, hails directly from holy scripture. His belief is that the sign of the cross is represented therein. 'In the name of the father' means in the name of the king, 'in the name of the son' being the nation which cherishes all its children and the Holy Spirit is the law that binds them all together. M. de Belisle is amused and decides to eavesdrop on the crowd for his own amusement.

Scene 2:

Mme. De Branche arrives indignant at the current state of political affairs, she asks M. du Rocher if there is any chance of a counter revolution. M de Belisle listens on amused. Mme de la Branche is overcome by the fact that her illustrious name, that of an antique family will be taken from her to be replaced by the title Mme. Cornu. M.de Rocher replies in riddles before repeating over again – 'don't speak of it again'. Throughout the scene Mme de la Branche bemoans the plight of aristocrats.

Scene 3:

M.de Belisle thinking aloud, decides to stay on to listen to more interesting snippets of conversation and notices a pretty young woman approach, walking arm in arm with a young man.

Scene 4:

Suzon and Bertrand – it is clear that Bertrand is a jealous young man as he accuses his lover of flirting with other men in the crowd and of having got lost on purpose. She protests her innocence while he continues to accuse her of making eyes at a young sentinel. As he speaks the crowd begins to build up and he pushes forward.

Scene 5:

Gagne Denier and Gagne Petit try to push forward, the better to see the ceremony. Bertrand who earlier accused Suzon and the sentinel now urges her to ask his permission for him to mount the scaffolding therefore affording him a better view.

Scene 6:

The sentinel allows Suzon to mount the scaffolding, causing uproar in the crowd.

Scene 7:

La Jeunesse arrives dressed in livery. La Fleur chides him for wearing a prohibited costume. La Jeunesse explains that having had everything confiscated he has nothing else to wear. He explains that the nobility is like a tree whose roots destroy all other plants. The aristocracy he claims were the branches of those trees, and being uprooted they are all fallen. La Fleur then tells him that, being part of a revolution they are now obliged to move forward and assume other identities.

Scene 8:

A member of the public draws the attention of M. Poignardin to a patrol officer, he believes that he is a conspirator with bad intentions. M. Poignardin recounts the plot of his play aloud; it involves a murder attempt on the king. The officers overhearing him have him arrested on the spot. On reading his manuscript, however, they apologise for interfering with the work of an esteemed poet, clearly devoted to the monarch.

Scene 10:

Séné and Rapine discuss the change in their societal roles since the revolution. Under the new regime, they tell each other, doctors no longer fool or con their patients and neither will prosecutors have the power to destroy whole families at a time. They finish their debate in anger, throwing their wigs at each other.

Scene 11:

The crowd looks on at their comical exchange and agree amongst themselves that that breed are better off destroying each other for good.

Scene 12:

M. de Belisle pleads for peace at the auspicious occasion of the Act of Union, which is being made in the interests of all. Séné condemns him aloud as an aristocrat. Rapine calls him an attention seeking crowd provoker. Belisle reprimands them, asking why they cannot express their opinions without giving in to violence. They all gather to observe the ceremony which has since commenced.

Scene 13:

Belisle meets M. de L'Ecusson, a genealogist who bemoans the fact that since the revolution he is out of work. He goes on to explain that he himself brought into existence more than 200 marquis, 600 counts, and 2,000 barons, without counting knights – all of them paid for their fabricated family trees. He wonders what good now are family trees. Belisle replies that they can always be cut down and burnt as firewood to warm himself in the winter. M. de L'Ecusson asks in what country could he now ply his trade. Belisle informs him that other countries will follow in France's footsteps and will dismantle all

illusions of nobility. They are all taken in by the pomp of the ceremony and the sound of the cannon. Poignardin declares it as theatrical as one of his own tragic plays and is inspired to write a poem: *Bouquet National,* featured in the preface to the play.

VII Le Couvent

Written originally as a two act play but divided into three when performed in the Théâtre Français, Comique et Lyrique, October 1790. Published between 1791 and 1792.

List of Characters

L'Abbesse

Sœur Angélique

Julie (a young novice)

Sœur Agathe

Sœur Felicité

Le Marquis de Leuville

Le Chevalier (son of Le Marquis)

Le Grand Vicaire

Le Curé

Antoine (a gardener)

Several nuns, a commissary, several soldiers.

Act I (Theatre represents a courtyard which leads to the back entrance to a convent)

Le Chevalier bribes Antoine the convent gardener in order to gain access to the convent where young Julie is about to take her vows. Le Chevalier is convinced of his love for her and of her mutual devotion even though they have merely previously exchanged glances, as Julie has been locked up in the convent from infancy. He is aware of a conspiracy between his father and the Abbess to initiate Julie to the order against her personal wishes, and has decided to release her from this 'prison'. We witness a great confrontation between Le Grand Vicaire and the humble Curé regarding the morality of forced vows. The Grand Vicaire is paid by Leuville to ensure that Julie never leaves the convent and takes the habit

immediately. The Curé is on the side of pure, unadulterated faith and is wholly against the forcing of a vocation, believing such an act to be an offense to God. He believes that young men and women should be free to experience life to the full before making the personal choice of devoting their lives to God. He is threatened with expulsion from the clergy for such controversial views.

Antoine smuggles Le Chevalier, disguised as Pére Hilarion, into the convent, a priest who has been summoned with the special task of convincing the reluctant Julie to take her vows. Le Curé warns Leuville and Le Grand Vicaire that he will not hesitate to have recourse to the law if there is any intimation of violence and coercion involved in Julie's conversion.

We learn also that Antoine has been paid by Le Chevalier and that Leuville has paid for Julie's pension at the convent, the dramatist's way of demonstrating the monetary value of a young woman's life. Le Chevalier discovers that Sœur Angélique, Julie's only confidante in the convent is none other than Leuville's sister, his aunt.

Act II, Sœur Angélique and Julie in the chapel: Julie is adamant that she will not take her vows. In her sorrow she appeals to Sr.Angelique as if to her own mother, a woman she has never known. They both bemoan the cruelty of any family capable of abandoning their own. Sr. Angelique suspects that Julie has another reason for not becoming a nun and presses her for the truth. Julie admits that there is indeed another reason but is too embarrassed to divulge it. The Abbess arrives, hypocritically sermonizing on the conquest of heaven over hell when a new nun is anointed. An occasion, she admits, which encourages the shedding of tears of joy at the opportunity of release from a world full of temptations. Julie informs her that she has heard no inner voice compelling her to become a nun and that she is not rejecting God but merely feels no vocation. The Abbess argues that her resistance comes from the Devil. The women plead for more time but are informed that this is impossible, as Leuville will discontinue her pension otherwise. Sr. Angelique appeals again to the Abbess, asking that she not sacrifice an innocent victim for the sake of Le Marquis de Leuville. In response the Abbess separates the two women. Julie is handed over to Père Hilarion (Le Chevalier).

Le Chevalier alone with Julie informs the frightened girl that he is here to protect her and asks why she truly refuses her vows. She tells him that her only request is that she not be banished from the convent as she is ignorant of the outside world, has no family or friends outside these walls and would like more time to reflect before finally sacrificing herself fully to God. She then reluctantly admits that she believes she may be in love, having caught the eye of a visiting young man while serving in the parlour. Le Chevalier takes off his disguise much to the surprise and fear of Julie. She begs him to leave lest she incur the wrath of the Abbess.

They are duly discovered and in great fear Julie throws herself at the mercy of the Abbess and begs that Leuville not be told of his son's misdemeanour. Le Chevalier begs Julie to listen to him and not to trust those who surround her. He vows not to rest until he rescues and marries her. His father and Le Grand Vicaire arrive on the scene, his father orders him to leave immediately threatening him with the law for having violated a sacrosanct place.

Le Chevalier declares that in these times of enlightenment and justice, nothing or no-one can stop someone from liberating another human being. The Vicaire calls for help seeing this as an opportunity to show up the righteous curé. Julie is upset by all the drama for which she feels responsible, and approaches the altar to take her vows to the consternation of the curé and Le Chevalier.

The Commissaire arrives and an interesting dialogue regarding civil law and its relevance in religion ensues. Julie declares that she does not wish to be saved and implores Le Chevalier to return to his father and forget her. Le Chevalier produces a pistol, aims it at himself and is arrested. A mob of civilians has gathered outside the convent walls protesting against the forced vows of a young novice. The Vicaire points the finger of blame at the cure, declaring that this is the result of his liberal views, who in turn accuses the vicaire of being a persecutor of innocents.

Act III. The other nuns are intrigued and frightened by the events and contemplate how life might be outside the convent walls. The Abbess orders them to scourge themselves to ward off worldly temptations and further terrifies them with apocalyptic tales of the world shortly coming to an end. The Abbess, the Vicaire and Leuville concoct a new way to coerce Julie into taking her vows; they will play on her good nature and convince her that she must become a nun, otherwise Le Chevalier will be cut off and lose his inheritance. Antoine, however, overhears them and decides to report all to Le Chevalier and the Curé.

The Marquis is reluctant to go along with the plan and we learn that he, the Abbess and the Vicaire are privy to a secret regarding the long deceased husband of his sister, Sœur Angélique. The Abbess reassures him that Sœur Angélique is well locked away. The Marquis is softening and beginning to show some sympathy for the plight of Julie as he was moved by her innocence and concern regarding the fate of his son. Julie is summoned and is convinced by the Abbess and the Vicaire that by taking her vows she will save Le Chevalier. She blindly accepts. The Curé arrives at the beginning of the ceremony and is enraged. Julie announces tearfully that she willingly approaches the altar, in the knowledge that she is saving the young man's life and that his image will console her for the rest of her days. The Curé recognises emotional blackmail. Le Chevalier arrives with some soldiers, Antoine and the Commissaire. Just as Julie is about to pronounce her vows, Sœur Angélique arrives on the scene and puts a stop to the sham ceremony. She announces to everyone present that she is Julie's true mother and that her brother, Le Marquis de Leuville, murdered her husband.

She goes on to explain how she married Julie's father against the wishes of her brother and how the latter challenged the former to a duel where her husband lost his life. She was then committed in secret to the convent, where she underwent persecution and torture and was eventually forced to take vows. When her daughter was born she was sworn to secrecy and threatened with unspeakable punishment if she were ever to reveal her true relationship to the child. The Marquis de Leuville hearing the story thus told, is overcome with grief and guilt and throws himself at the feet of the Curé begging for forgiveness for his crimes. The family reunite and the touching scene inspires the Abbess to change her ways as she now announces that she will consult no other than the Curé on the everyday running of the

convent. He in turn advises her that she should only look toward truth and justice and to turn her back on persecution. The play ends with Antoine the gardener vowing to find himself a wife as soon as possible, as he believes that marriage is the only natural way of living out one's days.

VIII La Nécessité du divorce

Written in October 1790. No evidence of any performance.

List of Characters

D'Aznival

Mme d'Aznival

Rosambert (old friend of d'Aznival)

Germeuil (nephew of Rosambert and Constance's lover)

Constance (d'Aznival's sister)

Herminie

Basilic (Abbot)

Philippe (old manservant of d'Aznival)

Act I. (The d'Aznival residence)

We learn of the distress of Mme D'Aznival as her husband has spent yet another night away from home. Constance and Germeuil in discussion reveal how Mme and M. D'Aznival began their married life very much in love, how he promised to always remain faithful, yet after two years love has turned to cold indifference and he is clearly unfaithful. All of this makes Constance herself fearful of marriage. Germeuil pleads with her not to confuse him with other fickle men and reassures her that if they were married he would always remain devoted. Constance reminds him that her brother made the same promises to his wife. There follows a discussion on the state of matrimony and Germeuil explains his belief that a wife also has a duty towards her husband, in that she must always remain cheerful and positive and must support him under any circumstance. Constance, though wishing to find some way of forgiving her brother, reminds him that devotion from a wife is not enough to keep some men in a happy harmonious world away from the temptations of the outside world.

Rosambert arrives and seeing his nephew in deep conversation with Constance reminds him that flirtation is futile as he will never consent to a marriage as long as he lives, therefore denying Germeuil his inheritance. He explains that he is against marriage, as experience has shown him that the young couple start off in love, then later begin to despise each other, leading to a terrible example to the children, the eventual ruination of the family and the corruption of society in general. His only wish is that the legislators would finally come around to introducing divorce laws.

Enter the Abbé Basilic, and Constance excuses herself, exits, as she is suspicious of his motives and involvement with the family. Basilic describes to Rosambert his role as spiritual advisor to Mme, a virtuous woman in despair as a result of her husband's conduct. Rosambert reminds him that being celibate and a clergyman he has no right to meddle in marital affairs. Rosambert goes on to lambast the state of celibacy as being unnatural. The subject of divorce arises and its prohibition by the Church. Rosambert goes on to show how Christianity and divorce lived hand in hand from Constantin to the Emperor Leon. He believes that the indissolubility of marriage serves not to strengthen its state but rather to undermine it. As for separation, abandoned children and broken families, he believes their incidence a lot less with than without divorce.

D'Aznival arrives home much to the joy of his faithful manservant Philippe, who implores Rosambert to dissuade his master from his wicked lifestyle. D'Aznival admits to Rosambert that he has been seeing another woman, not one of easy virtue, but a young lady (Herminie) who has spurned fortune and a good marriage for their love and lives in the hope of marrying him herself. She is unaware of the fact that he is married. They go on to discuss Basilic, whom they both despise. D'Aznival, hypocritically, is wary of the Abbé's intentions with regard to his wife. He envies Rosambert's status as a single man and also speaks of the necessity for divorce. Rosambert admits to being lonely and regrets not having children, but has spurned marriage because of the prohibition of divorce.

Act II, Rosambert and Mme d'Aznival discuss the state of her marriage. She explains to him that in an endeavour to regain her husband's affections she has concocted a plan. She has decided to meet with Herminie, her husband's mistress, and determine from her how she has managed to make D'Aznival her lover. Rosambert has devised a plan of his own, he suggests to her that Herminie be invited directly to the house, as she is unaware that it is d'Aznival's residence. Mme agrees and composes a letter to her, they both promise to keep this a secret.

Away from Mme, Rosambert calls for Philippe and instructs him on receipt of the letter to make it visible to d'Aznival. He then goes on to ask Constance to keep Mme occupied. D'Aznival is now aware that his wife has sent a letter to his mistress and instead of leaving for the evening, decides to secretly stay at home to spy on events.
Rosambert then goes on to dupe d'Aznival into believing that he is departing for a special meeting of the Assembly where an important decision on divorce will be made. D'Aznival regrets that he will not be able to accompany him as he has private business to attend to. Rosambert knows that his plan is working.
Act III. Herminie arrives, intrigued to meet this woman who has signed herself under her

maiden name and whose identity remains a mystery. After questioning Herminie with regards to her relationship with her husband, the young woman admits to harbouring strong feelings towards him. Mme d'Aznival then goes on to reveal the fact that she is indeed her lover's wife and Herminie is duly shocked and contrite. Rather than anger, Mme feels great sympathy for this 'victim of love' and reassures the young woman that she has nothing to blame herself for. Herminie takes her leave, vowing to quit Paris indefinitely.

Mme D'Aznival is moved, as is her husband, who has witnessed the meeting, hiding in his wife's wardrobe. Impressed by his wife's handling of the affair, he vows to return to this woman for whom he regards with new found-admiration. He remains hidden and the Abbé arrives, revealing his true nature, as he advises Mme to abandon her husband and accept his 'guiding hand'. Mme is incensed, as is her husband, who jumps out from his hiding place, causing the corrupt clergyman to flee.

In the meantime, Rosambert arrives with the great (false) news that the Assembly has finally legalised divorce. He informs the couple that they are now free to live their lives separately. D'Aznival rather than being overjoyed at the news, is emotionally crushed and declares a renewed love for his wife, whom he is now loath to lose.
Rosambert then goes on to reveal the truth, that divorce has not been legalised, and how his story was a mere ruse to bring the couple together again. Rosambert gives his consent to Germeuil and Constance, who declare that if ever there should be a problem with their marriage they would choose him as their mediator.

IX Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées (political dialogue written for the stage in nine scenes)

First staged in Paris on the 15th April 1791, in the Théâtre des Italiens. Mirabeau died on the 2nd April 1791. In 1987 this play was performed in Clermont Ferrand.

List of Characters

Mirabeau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Montesquieu

Franklin

Henri IV

Louis XIV

Désilles

Fortuné

Le Cardinal d'Amboise

Solon

Le Destin

Mme Deshoulières

Mme de Sévigné

Ninon de Lenclos

(Prologue)

Destiny arrives onstage on a chariot and goes on to speak of the life and death of Mirabeau. Destiny speaks of the amazing progress of France, and admires the success of the Revolution and the new constitution. The scene is set in the Elysian Fields, where the souls of the departed have gathered together to receive the new arrival, Mirabeau.

First Tableau (Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu)
Voltaire announces that the world has finally banished ignorance and that the spirit of the enlightenment reigns supreme. He attributes this happy occurrence to Rousseau of all people. Rousseau replies that it was Voltaire who first set the people of France on the road to enlightenment. Montesquieu does not share their enthusiasm. He believes that France still has a long way to go towards achieving political and social perfection, he bemoans the financial affairs of France as well the inefficacy of the present government. Voltaire feels that these problems will soon be resolved and that they are the result of years of tyranny from previous times. Rousseau agrees, admitting that these are the first effects of a revolution. Montesquieu announces the arrival of Henri IV and Désilles. Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau exit stage.

Second Tableau (Henri IV and Désilles)
Henri IV addresses the republican hero, Désilles, describing how Louis XIV has spoken of his heroism and asks for news of the recent events in France. Désilles informs the former king that his legacy lives on in the spirit of his grandson and speaks admiringly of Mirabeau's contribution to the state of France. They announce the arrival of Rousseau and Voltaire who join them onstage.

Third Tableau (As above, now joined by Rousseau and Voltaire)
They speak of the French people who are now in mourning at the death of Mirabeau. They wonder who will take over the role of Mirabeau on earth. Louis XIV and several of his courtiers approach.

Fourth Tableau (As above, now joined by Rousseau and Louis XIV)
The two monarchs discuss events in France. Louis XIV declares that he has little respect for the new-found spirit of equality that now pervades the nation. He feels that he should return to earth, to reign again as a proper monarch. He also believes that the French people are lost without a king like him, and that he still has sympathisers on Earth.

Fifth Tableau (As above, now joined by Montesquieu)
Montesquieu announces that Franklin extends his highest regards to the assemblage. Funereal music announces the arrival of Mirabeau's cortege.

Sixth Tableau (As above, now joined by Mirabeau and Franklin)
Franklin announces his sadness at the death of Mirabeau, but is also happy that he is now in the realm of the divine. Mirabeau is pleased to be in the company but admits his fears for the future of the French people, for whom he has fought bravely. The characters go on to discuss the current and future affairs of their country.

Seventh Tableau (As above, now joined by Deshoulières, Sévigné, and Ninon de Lenclos)
Fortuné arrives, in the guise of a child who also lauds the virtues of Mirabeau. He praises Mirabeau as his 'protector', and shows Mirabeau the temple that will house him in paradise. Sévigné now interrogates Mirabeau, asking him if he has paved the way for achieve the happiness and glory they merit on earth. Deshoulières interrupts, saying that she believes that any efforts he would have made in their favour were surely now forgotten in the wake of his demise. She believes that it is only there, in the afterworld of the Elysian Fields that women will achieve equal rights. Mirabeau agrees that the revolution needs women like them to achieve full success. Ninon goes on to declare that all the efforts of the revolution are in vain if they do not seek to elevate the status of women.

Tableau VIII and IX (As above, now joined by Destiny, Solon, and Cardinal d'Amboise)
Mirabeau is elevated to a throne and crowned to the music of a celestial choir.

X *Le Prélat d'autrefois*

Performed for the first time in Paris at the Théâtre de la Cité-Variétes in 1794 in the third year of the French Republic, some months after the death of the author. It is supposed that the play was written during the seventeen months which separate the staging of *Mirabeau* (15 April 1791) and the 10th of August 1792 when *Le Tyran* was written.

List of Characters

Saint-Elme (infantry captain)

L'Évêque (bishop of a diocese outside Paris)

Joseph (the convent prior)

Hilaire (monk in the same convent)

Champagne (Saint-Elme's valet)

Germain (the bishop's valet)

A labourer

Lisette or Mme de Bontour

Sophie

The Abbess

Sœur Tourière

Sœur Ursule

Sœur Agathe

Silent Nuns

Speaking Nuns

An infantry officer

The theatre represents a town square; in the background we see a church and a convent.

Act I (Scenes 1-15)

The scene opens with a monologue from the prior. He is upset with the job expected of him by the bishop. He feels disgust at having to take orders from a man who insists that he carries out the duty of forcing young innocent women to take religious vows against their wishes. Enter Hilaire, who reminds the prior of his obligation to the work of the diocese and the church. He is told that he is to blindly obey and never to question his duties. On the other side of the town square Saint-Elme arrives with his men. He orders his men to respect the town and its people and distributes money to them. The men salute his generosity.

Alone Saint-Elme soliloquises on the men's happiness. We learn that he himself is unhappy as he in love with a young woman named but has no idea of her whereabouts. He is in constant pursuit of her. In his contemplation he comments on the convent in the background, he compares it to a tomb in which young innocent women are interred.
Champagne, Saint-Elme's valet arrives drunk on the scene. He informs his master that he has found lodgings for them with Lisette, a former lover. He feels certain that as he has found Lisette that his master will also find Sophie. Saint-Elme orders him to inquire about the convent and the townspeople. We learn that on the death of Sophie's father, her mother gave all the man's fortune to her brother. Sophie's mother, preferring her son and with her husband dead, decided to send her daughter to a convent before she had the chance to marry her lover, Saint-Elme. Therefore, Saint-Elme has since made it his business to travel around France to find the convent in which she resides.

The bishop, knowing that Saint-Elme is in pursuit of Sophie, orders his valet, Germain to spy on the regiment captain.

Act II (Scenes 1-9)
The interior of a convent. Preparations are being made for the Sophie to take her solemn vows. We learn that the abbess was once romantically attached to the bishop, and that he is determined now to force Sophie into becoming a nun. The abbess is his accomplice as he has power over her because of their secret past. The bishop also wishes to seduce Sophie. A sense of urgency now takes over the abbess and the bishop as they know that Saint-Elme is in town and wish that Sophie be ordained before he discovers her whereabouts.

We learn that Sophie's name has been changed to Cecile to disguise her identity. The young novice bemoans her fate, and declares that as long as she and her companions are 'imprisoned' then true happiness is beyond their reach. She also speaks of her love for Saint-Elme, and wonders where he might be.
The abbess overhears Sophie's lamentations and with a sudden change of heart, recalling her own experiences at the hand of the bishop, decides to help the young novice.
Act III(Scenes 1-15)
Saint-Elme decides to visit the convent, in pursuit of Sophie. He is accompanied by Lisette

and Champagne (who is hidden in a large bag carried by two men). He passes Lisette off as his niece who is interested in becoming a nun, in order to gain entrance to the convent. They are invited to meet the abbess. They leave the bag containing Champagne in a corner of the convent. Enter Germain, valet to the bishop and former enemy of Champagne. He discovers Champagne in the bag, and tells the bishop, who immediately orders that the bag containing Champagne be thrown down a well. Germain exits in search of some labourers.

Saint-Elme arrives and finds his valet in some distress. Together they take a holy statue from a pedestal and put into the bag, while Champagne assumes the pose of the statue on the pedestal, covering his face with a veil. The labourers arrive and take the bag containing the statue.

There ensues a comic scene with some nuns praying before the 'statue' which moves at intervals. The nuns are convinced that a miracle has taken place.
Enter Germain brandishing a key that allows him to open any door in the convent. He meets Lisette, whom he once knew along with Champagne. He audaciously declares his love to Lisette who rejects him laughingly. She advises him of her love for Champagne, who, still disguised as the statue, proceeds to slowly descend from the pedestal. Germain and Lisette are terrified. Champagne seizes the key from Germain and leaves with Lisette. Germain falls to the ground, believing he is being pursued by the devil for leading a wicked life.

Act IV (Scenes 1-17)
Saint-Elme continues to search for Sophie in the convent. The bishop prepares for the evening ceremony which will see Sophie finally become a nun. In the chapel the women arrive, and the abbess decides to open a small door at the back of the altar in order to help Sophie escape. They are discovered by the bishop. There follows a confrontation between the bishop and the abbess, the latter uncovers his crimes.
Saint-Elme and his troops arrive and liberate the women. Sophie is reunited with her lover and the townspeople are overjoyed at the liberation of the nuns, for whom they have always felt sympathy.

XI *L'Entrée de Dumouriez a Bruxelles ou les vivandiers*

Brussels was liberated on the 14th of November 1792 after the Battle of Valmy (20th September 1792) and the victory at Jemmapes (6 November 1792). This play was written immediately after and performed on the 23rd of January 1793 at the Théâtre de la République, rue Richelieu. It was staged on only two occasions after public disorder.

List of Characters

General Dumouriez

General Égalité

The French Adjutant-General\

The Fernig Sisters

Charlot (French-born sulter in the Austrian army)

Mme Charlot (his German wife)

Charlotte (their daughter)

General Clerfayt (Austrian general)

Le Chevalier de Clerfayt (his son)

Lucas (Suzette's lover)

Suzette (Lucas's lover)

The Prince of Würtemburg

Würtemburg's aide-de-camp

A German officer

Grisbourdon de Molinard (chaplain of the Austrian army)

Tape-a-l'œil (French spy)

Three Austrian soldiers

Albert (Archduke, governor of the Netherlands)

A Bürgermeister

Balza (town councillor)

A Criminal Judge

Lafeuillette (wine merchant)

Mme Lafeuillette (his wife)

Le Père Hilarion

Act I (Scenes 1-5)

Grisbourdon heads an assembly of monks from the monasteries of Brussels. He informs them of the imminent arrival of General Dumouriez and his army. He is angered at the treason of town-councillor, Balza, who has sided with the French. He sends out a call to arms to all the clergymen.

Enter Charlot, his wife and Lafeuillette, the wine merchant. They poke fun at Grisbourdon for his 'taking care' of the wives of the officers when their husbands are away on duty. Grisbourdon, aside, remarks how he would like to 'take care' of Mme Charlot.

The Bürgermeister and Balza meet. They speak about the advancing French army and the preparations for battle being made by the Austrians.

Act II (Scenes 1-7)
The theatre represents the Austrian army camp.
Le Chevalier Clerfayt leaves his father, the general's tent after a meeting. He expresses his intent to the audience out of earshot of his father, to leave the Austrian army and to join the French, who he regards as 'liberators'. We also learn that he is in love with Charlotte, the sulter's daughter. He realises however, that he will never be permitted to marry her, as she is of humble origins. We also learn that Charlotte feels the same as he.

Charlot is approached by Tape-a-l'œil, a French spy, and is asked to help recruit Austrian soldiers to the French side.

Charlot manages to convince 1,500 Austrian soldiers to join him on the side of the 'liberators'. They all leave together to meet Dumouriez.

Act III (Scenes 1-9)
When Charlot's treachery is uncovered by the Austrian officers, Mme Charlot fears for her safety and that of her daughter. She is especially afraid of Grisbourdon, whose amourous advances she tries to repel.

The French army advance quickly, and Mme Charlot and Charlotte, bravely flee the Austrian camp to join them.

Dumouriez graciously welcomes the women, who now join the ranks of the French army. They are reunited with Charlot, who later is again captured and send to prison in Brussels for his treason.

Act IV (Scenes 1-14)
Young Clerfayt has deserted the Austrian army and he also joins the French side, reuniting with Charlotte, his beloved, in Dumouriez's camp.
The French advance proves too strong for the Austrians, who have now lost many men. The Fernig sisters are shown to be particular courageous in battle.

Act V (Scenes 1-5)
Clerfayt and Charlotte fight bravely together on the battlefield. The French are finally victorious.

Act VI (Scenes 1-19)
The theatre represents the town square of Brussels.

The opening scene portrays a confrontation between town-councillor Balza and the cleric Grisbourdon. Balza is sympathetic to the French and welcomes their presence in his town. He dismisses Grisbourdon as a hypocrite and expresses his wish that the revolution will put an end to the corruptive influence of the church. The people of Brussels are happy to welcome the French revolutionary army as their 'liberators', and propose to storm the town prison, thereby releasing those prisoners held for treason, among them Charlot.

A great festival is prepared in honour of Dumouriez and his troops. General Dumouriez addresses the great crowd that have gathered. He extols the virtues and ideals of the Revolution, and praises the exceptional bravery of the women who helped to bring about their victory. The play ends with a version of '*L'hymne de la Marseillaise'* sung in honour of the Belgian people.

XII *Le Tyran détrôné ou La France sauvée*

The manuscript of this play was found amongst the authors personal documents after her execution. Written by the author in 1792, all that remains of the play is the first act and four scenes from the second.

List of Characters

Louis XVI

Marie-Antoinette

Princess Lamballe

Princess Tarante

Mme Élisabeth (the Queen's sister)

Barnave

Olympe de Gouges

Laporte

Pétion (Mayor of Paris)

Deputies from the National Assembly

Clermont-Tonnerre

Bucman (major of the Swiss guards)

The division chief

Charton

The dauphin

Mme Royale (his sister)

Various courtiers of the Queen

Pages

Royal knights of the sword

National Guards

(The action takes place at the Tuileries Palace, 10th August 1792)

Act I (Scenes 1-15)

The opening scene depicts Mme Élisabeth and Barnave as they discuss recent events. Mme Élisabeth expresses her fear for her safety.

The Queen, Marie-Antoinette, is depicted alone in her private chambers. She soliloquises on her possible fate and that of her family. She declares that she would prefer death to the idea of being forcibly dethroned, and thus becoming a slave to the vulgar citizens of France. She is resigned to the putting aside of all feelings of sadness, or pity for her husband and children.

Her lady-in-waiting, Princess Lamballe enters her chambers. She assures Marie-Antoinette that the people are merely confused, and that they will reject the revolution and eventually side with the King. The Queen is reassured.

They are joined by Princess Tarente, who reiterates the opinions of Lamballe.
A valet arrives and announces that a female visitor has arrived, requesting an audience with the Queen. He advises the Queen that she should listen to this woman, whom he feels is full of wisdom. The Queen requests this woman's name. The valet replies that she has not given him any name, but describes herself as a 'good patriot.'

Unsure as to what to do, the Queen seeks the advice of Lamballe and Tarente. The women tell her that it would be undignified of her to receive such a person in the royal chambers. They remind their Queen of her obligation to royal protocol and etiquette, and also go on to say that they suspect the woman in question to be Olympe de Gouges, the famous patriot who has for some time fascinated the Queen.

Princess Lamballe devises a plan. She suggests hiding the Queen in the room, while she meets Olympe.

Olympe enters the room and casually seats herself without waiting for invitation to do so. The ladies-in-waiting are enraged by her casual attitude, and admonishingly remind her that she is in royal chambers. Olympe responds by laughingly dismissing their archaic notions of royal protocol. She then goes on to condemn for their pride and vanity, which she

suspects is responsible for their misleading the King and his wife. She warns them that the revolution will succeed and that if they do not counsel the Queen of her duty to her citizens that blood will certainly be shed and the monarchy be vanquished. Olympe is escorted out of the royal chambers.

The Queen is troubled by Olympe's visit. She begins to wonder whether the Olympe may be right in her convictions, but is quickly reprimanded by Lamballe and Tarente.
The daupin arrives. He is full of childish exhuberance and cries out 'Vive la nation', to the horrified reaction of his mother. The young prince reveals his patriotic sympathies as he declares that to be a good king one must also be a good citizen. His father, the King is particularly moved by his son and he now senses the danger which confronts his family.
Clermont-Tonnerre arrives and advises that the King take military action against his people in order to re-establish his might. The King is uneasy about this decision and fears for the loss of life that would ensue. He wonders whether he would not be better advised to bowing to the demands of his people, but is lambasted by his wife for entertaining such a notion.

Act II (Scenes 1-4)
Marie-Antoinette dispatches a letter to Pétion, the mayor of Paris, advising him to support the monarchy.

The mayor arrives at the palace and warns the King's guard that the people, having now broken the chains of tyranny, will no longer support a King who will not recognise their struggle. He declares that if the people arrive at the doors of the palace he will attempt to dissuade them from violence. However, he further cautions that if they are attacked by the King's guards, he himself will rise to the defence of the people.
(The play ends here).