



PORTRAIT: OLYMPE DE GOUGES (FRANCE)

Simon Férelloc

A woman of letters and a French revolutionary, Olympe de Gouges was an avant-garde figure in several ways. She is mainly known for having drafted the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen (1791), a riposte to the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789. It is also worth noting that she was involved from an early stage in the fight against slavery and that she stayed true to this cause throughout her lifetime.

The birth of an abolitionist conscience

Marie Gouze was born in 1748 in Montauban in the south of France. As a child, she is believed to have witnessed the horrific sight of a black woman sold for auction in her hometown. It is to this sad event that the writer attributes her interest in the “fate” of black people and her awareness of the prejudices targeting them. Widowed before 1772, she began an affair with a man familiar with colonial spheres: the director of the Financial Office of the Navy and Colonies, Jacques Biétrix de Rozières. Moving to Paris, Marie Gouze made use of a pseudonym, Olympe de Gouges, with which she integrated Parisian literary salons. In 1783 (or 1784), she wrote her first play, [Zamore et Mirza](#) (Zamore and Mirza), depicting the escape of two fugitive slaves “condemned to death for having killed their tyrannical master” (Jonathan Israel). However, it was not until the Revolution that this play was actually performed. It was then renamed *De l’esclavage des nègres* (On Negro Slavery), making its political message clear. Directly targeted by the play, the colonial milieu rallied together and succeeded in having it censored in January 1790. Around this time, the writer also published two other abolitionist works: *Réflexions sur les hommes nègres* (Reflections on Negroes) from 1788, where she wrote that “force and prejudice” had “condemned [Black people] to this horrible slavery”, and a second play entitled *Le marché des noirs* (The Market of Negroes), published in 1790.

Political commitment

Olympe de Gouges did not limit her actions to the literary and cultural sphere. She was also involved in politics. She gravitated towards the Société des Amis des Noirs (Society of the Friends of Black People) founded in 1788, although it is still uncertain as to whether she formally became a member. In 1791, she once again used her qualities as a writer to defend political equality between whites and free people of colour (a term used at the time to designate the free populations of African origin in the slave colonies). Nevertheless, Olympe de Gouges was a victim of the misogyny of her day which prevented women from becoming directly involved in politics. Therefore, she



wrote [the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen](#), in which she claimed: “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility” (Article 1). With this declaration, she continued to plead the cause of people oppressed by the colonial system. In the last paragraph, she denounced: “The Colonists, brothers and fathers of the men they affect to reign over as despots, disregard[ing] the law of nature and pursu[ing] its source as far as the lightest tint of their blood”

Death sentence

However, the role played by Olympe de Gouges in the revolutionary process remains complex and ambiguous. Despite her pioneering views in terms of the emancipation of women and the abolition of slavery, the playwright advocated for a moderate form of Republicanism and was a relatively conservative Royalist. For example, in 1789, she defended the need to “respect the three orders” in order to “save the fatherland”, thereby positioning herself in opposition to the frontal combat of the Third Estate deputies against the two privileged orders. In December 1792, she even went so far as to offer to assist the defence of King Louis XVI during his trial. A self-declared enemy of the Montagnards (a radical Republican group), she was arrested for her writings deemed counter revolutionary. She was guillotined on 3 November 1793. She has nevertheless been recognized as the main figure of early French feminism. Her commitment to the abolitionist struggle was also praised in 1808 by the Abbé Grégoire when he paid tribute to those who served the cause of the victims of colonial slavery.

Translated by Emma Lingwood



About the author

Simon Férelloc is a doctoral research student in history at Nantes University. He is currently researching the consequences of French colonial policies and revolutionary movements on the French West Indies.

Further information

Video : Olympe de Gouges, Pionnières !, les documents de BnF-Gallica, 2019 : <https://youtu.be/nJ9ZKtpODUw>.

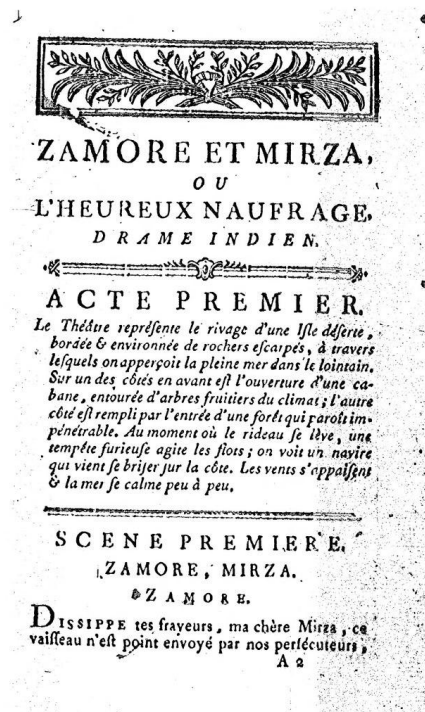
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Pionnières ! Episode 1 : Olympe de Gouges, Le Blog de Gallica, 2019. View online : <https://c.bnf.fr/OlympeDeGouges>.

Olivier BLANC, Marie-Olympe de Gouges. Une humaniste à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, Paris, René Viénet, 2003.

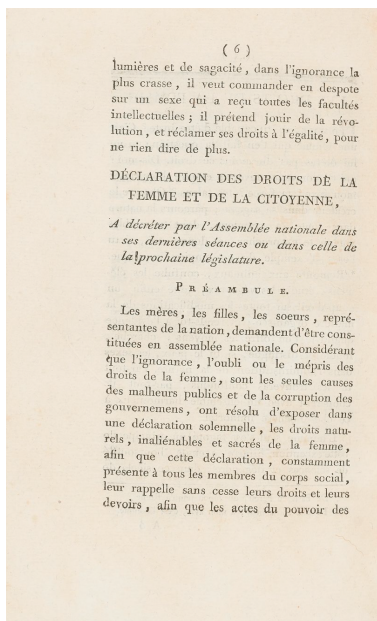
Illustrations



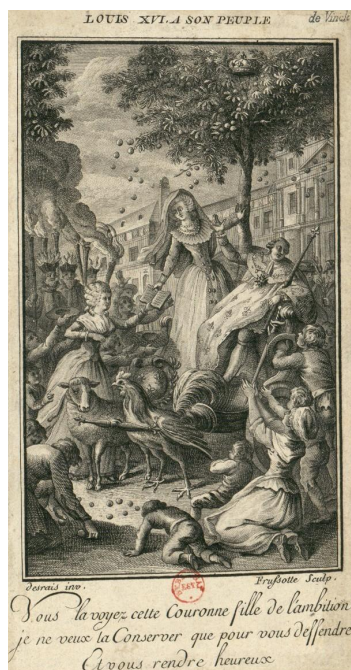
Excerpt of the play Zamore and Mirza, Olympe de Gouges, 1784, public domain.



Portrait of Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), Alexandre Kucharski, 18th century, private collection, wikipedia.



Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne (Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen), 1791, © bibliothèque nationale de France.



Representation of Olympe de Gouges, *in* Louis XVI à son peuple : vous la voyez cette couronne folle, etching, Frussotte, 1790, © bibliothèque nationale de France.