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CITOYENNE OF THE HOME: REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD AND RADICAL FEMINISM IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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“The throne of a woman is in the middle of her family. Her glory is in the glory of her children that she raises for the State. Cornelia was neither general, nor consul, nor senator; she was the mother of the Gracchii.” — F.A. Aulard¹

By the time citizens of the Third Estate stormed the gates of the Bastille in 1789, female writers and organizers like Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Mericourt had staged an insurgence through producing and circulating hundreds of letters of their own. In these radical feminist tracts, authors frequently cited “virtuous conduct” and “honor” as the key values for a civic-minded woman seeking to do her part in the Revolution.² The work of de Gouges and Mericourt reflected radical female activity on the ground: their writings frequently referred to a “Tribunal of Virtuous Women,” in which a committee of elected mères de famille sought to uphold and maintain public morality. Whether it be assisting destitute women or educating children, the Tribunal above all signified the Revolutionary-era woman’s dedication to preserving and spreading republican virtue and civic morality throughout the state and the home.³

But even if the Tribunal and female revolutionary writers helped formulate a nascent political role for French women, their activity existed within a hierarchical political tradition dominated by male, Enlightenment-era philosophers — philosophers who asserted that women were not to act in a public, political capacity.⁴ While the majority of Enlightenment literature reflected this assumption, there were

notable exceptions. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* and Marquis de Condorcet's *Sur L'admission des Femmes au Droit de Cité* attempted to include women in their political visions. These works, according to gender historian Linda Kerber, "hesitantly" constructed a new political role for women: "republican motherhood."⁵ In simple terms, republican motherhood called upon women to embody "civic virtue," to act like the motherly "Cornelia", and to educate her progeny and her husband in virtuous, republican tradition.⁶ While historians constructed this paradigm from classical examples, the writings of male philosophers, and elite white American women's lives alike, its central tenets can be found in an international audience facing similar political and social uncertainties in an Age of Revolutions — France included.⁷

Yet the couched, binary-driven language of this concept failed to provide the eighteenth-century woman exhaustive political and social agency, especially in the context of the French Revolution. With their zealous participation in the bread riots and their collusion in creating female political clubs, French women featured prominently in the radical public image of the Revolution.⁸ Notable activists and writers like Etta Palm d'Aelders (1743-1799) and Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) authored widely-circulated political tracts to accompany broader revolutionary movements, in turn criticizing the highly patriarchal state. But even the most subversive of the French feminist revolutionaries fell short of producing writings or ideologies that would actually upend the gendered institutions which kept women and men decidedly separate and unequal. Rather, de Gouges and others wrote tracts rooted in the rhetoric of republican motherhood, embracing the women's natural role as civic womb and incubator of republican men — in essence, utilizing the limiting language of patriarchy to describe a restricted model of female citizenship that fit within the framework of separate male-female spheres. Republican motherhood thus provided a half-complete solution

for Enlightenment literature's failure to account for French women in conversations on liberties and rights: women could participate in civic life but at an arm's length.⁹ For a truly radical feminist revolution to manifest within the French Revolution, there had to be an insurrection against the domestic sphere that could derail the highly gendered notions of public and private formed within a patriarchal state.

This essay demonstrates how the French Revolution complicated the image of the mother in the eyes of the state. It considers Olympe de Gouges' works against the contributions of Enlightened male philosophes, within the broader pre-Revolution French legal system, and in the context of women's roles as virtuous nurturers, mothers, and educators. This argument builds upon the literature of gender and politics in the late eighteenth century, drawing from historiographies on American and French women. Scholars primarily consider republican motherhood in the context of early American white women, and much of the literature describes the republican mother as the predominant gender role for women of the early republic.¹⁰ These women are often defined in conservative, relational roles as mother or wife, with limited political and legal autonomy — "feminism" is a term rarely used in early American literature. By contrast, the literature on French Revolutionary women is perhaps more varied, considering French "feminisms" in the context of Marie Antoinette, working women, the psychoanalyzed family, and female writers like de Gouges.¹¹ Yet comparative studies between American and French womanhood illuminate how broader Enlightenment ideals of equality and natural rights — arising out of an "Age of Revolutions" — inspired certain aspects of female intellectual and political activity. In the intricately connected Atlantic world, scholars have pointed out how the social upheaval in 1790s United States, France, and Great Britain provided the fertile grounds on which traditional social and cultural mores could be questioned and challenged.¹²

“Citoyenne”: Olympe de Gouges and the Problem of a Political
Woman

Included in the list of politically active Revolution-era women was the “beguiling” playwright Olympe de Gouges. Married against her will at 16 and widowed by the age of 19, de Gouges traded married life —refusing an offer for a second marriage — in favor of a colorful career as a playwright and political author. Her mother insisted she receive a bourgeois education, and, using this intellectual background, de Gouges launched her career by staging controversial plays about political and social issues, such as slavery, divorce, and prisons.¹³ By the advent of the French Revolution, de Gouges had authored dozens of plays and political tracts, the latter of which became central to the women’s cause in the Revolution.¹⁴ A self-proclaimed pacifist, abolitionist, and “femme de lettres,” de Gouges is perhaps most famous for her tongue-in-cheek 1791 pamphlet, Declaration of the Rights of Woman, written in response to Declaration of the Rights of Man, circulated two years prior.¹⁵ Within, de Gouges argues for everything from the woman’s “right equally to mount the rostrum,” to her fundamental status in society: “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights.”¹⁶ Such a sentiment is not unusual in the context of de Gouges’ entire body of work. The writer’s own divorce led her to draft multiple plays on marriage, and her writings reflect the feminist-centric political philosophies she eventually incorporated into her most famous tract.¹⁷ What is particularly interesting about de Gouges’ writings is that she self-fashioned her identity as a citizen, beginning many of her works by directly addressing her “fellow female citizens” and signing many of her writings and missives as “Citoyenne.”¹⁸ Her works read as radical because they provided rousing language for the actions of many Parisian and French women — those organizing women’s clubs or storming the gates of the Bastille — and described women as full-fledged political actors.

Though Olympe de Gouges represented the French Revolution's politically-minded feminist radicals, she operated within (and often against) broader social and political conditions that upheld rigidly-defined gender spheres. Pre-Revolutionary France featured no uniform national legal system, and the legal rights of women varied depending on the province.¹⁹ By the eighteenth century, however, France had all but reversed any form of legal equality obtained by women in the Middle Ages. In the familial realm, gender historian Darline Levy notes that the state considered women "legally totally subservient to their husbands or fathers."²⁰ Indeed, French contemporaries noted that "there is nothing in the world that is more precious than a husband."²¹ Forging a connection between a man and woman signified not only economic stability for the woman, but also social, religious, and personal fulfillment in eighteenth-century French society. Contemporary authors reinforced the husband-wife dichotomy through their works. While writers often depicted men in active terms that emphasized their positions as patriarch of the family and full citizen in the public, collected writings about young girls reveal how authors described women with communal, passive words like "household", "friendship", and "happiness." Not only did these writings reflect the contemporary Parisian understanding that a steady, traditional marriage was the basis for a perfect family unit, but they also demonstrated how tightly gender roles, based on male activity and female passivity, were wholly wrapped up in the image of a contented wedded couple.²²

The cherished institution of marriage thus provided the perfect grounds onto which distinctly male and female social spheres could materialize and reinforce each other. Male political activity only served to reinforce the separation between gendered activity in this period. In a meeting of the Constituent Assembly in 1789, politicians decided just who would be granted suffrage and, by extension, practical political rights that would amount to citizenship.²³ To little surprise,

most propertied white men were included in this definition of citizenship. Excluded from these considerations were the propertied poor, servants, and women. With the exception of Olympe de Gouges — who explicitly claimed her right to “citoyenne” by 1788, far before the phrase was used colloquially in the French Revolution — few contemporaries challenged the exclusion of women from citizenship rights.²⁴ Influenced by the French philosophes and broader Enlightenment literature, the Constituent Assembly held that men were capable of defending themselves and their family within a free market economy, presumably without the needed help of a woman.²⁵ Despite the involvement of female writers and activists, “women were not political animals,” and nature expressly contained them within the “private sphere.”²⁶

“Mère de Famille”: Overseer of the Home, Mother of the Republic

“Private” and “public” were thus political and social distinctions drawn along gendered lines. It was common to believe that man, from his position within the public world, would “provide for the needs of the household” and that the woman reigned over the private, domestic dominion.²⁷ Any neglect of these roles amounted to an unspoken breach of the family contract.²⁸ Perhaps most crucially, the woman’s role as nurturer extended from the maintenance of the household and included her role as mother. Childrearing undeniably comprised a woman’s primary and most consequential familial duty in eighteenth-century France. The author of *Lettres d’une citoyenne* wrote in 1789 that “Mother” was “that sacred title, that title, the most beautiful triumph of a woman.”²⁹ Motherly (and, in many cases, paternal) protection of the child is prominent throughout French Revolutionary literature; images of lower-class women, for example, frequently depicted children accompanying their mothers in public spaces, such as courts.

Some historians argue that the constant public connection between child and mother reflected a lower-class fear of leaving children in the house alone to get hurt — unlike upper-class families, those with less wealth could not afford childcare.³⁰ Yet, a woman's perpetual connection to her child reinforced the notion that women were visible to the state exclusively as mothers, constantly described in the context of their progeny or their husbands.

The image of the mother was not important solely because of her Biblical, traditional, or gender-based obligation to raise a child. Revolutionaries considered motherhood crucial to their cause because childrearing in the domestic sphere would inevitably produce the next generation of virtuous male citizens. In 1791, Dutch writer Etta Palm wrote, “To give the future generation healthy and robust men: oh! Is that not the field of honor where we must gather our laurels?”³¹ Palm's statements reflected a prevailing “civic motherhood” sentiment in Revolutionary France — essentially a French analog to the republican mother — which placed the training and education of republican values in the household, and thus in the hands of a mother.³² The mother's adherence to familial structure and domestic tradition was crucial in this task: the women who, “by virtuous conduct” married, carried future republican men in her womb, and successfully maintained the family economy thus had the authority to impart upon her children and husband these social mores.³³

Similarly, Olympe de Gouges encouraged women to be tempted toward republican good: “[women] cause a great deal of harm when vanity does not excite in them the virtues! But what good could they not produce if one piqued that vanity, if one excited it, if one directed it towards honor...”³⁴ The ties between man and woman and citizen and state were ultimately derived from the home, and the republic conceived of the mother as the crucial link in forging these relationships. As noted by historian Annie Smart, “the symbol of the civic

mother, who nurses generations of republicans, makes sense only if there is a corresponding ‘real’ nursing mother who births individual citizens.”³⁵ By literally birthing and raising the children of France’s future, the “*meres de familles*” inculcated republican virtue from the confines of the home, as the husband and son acted on it in the public arena.

While this social separation fostered a sense of civic importance in the woman, it simultaneously reinforced the gendered spheres that differentiated man and woman politically. In his utopian novel, *L’An 2440, rêve s’il en fut jamais*, French dramatist Louis-Sebastien Mercier emphasized these natural differences: women were subject to “the duties imposed on them by their sex,” which meant obeying a “natural” law to have and raise children. By contrast, men had a natural duty to “build a house” or “till a field” — to cultivate the earth and participate in public politics.³⁶ Mercier’s works ascribed occupations proper and unique to each gender that were inviolable to the law of nature, and not just the law of man.³⁷

“Indecent Women”: Radical Feminism in the French Revolution

The laws of nature thus reinforced the gendered boundaries that defined women’s involvement in the French Revolution. More specifically, the contemporary understanding that men and women were fundamentally different underpinned the gendered questions that arose during the Revolution: Did women have a place in politics, and did they possess their own civic rights?³⁸ Since the mother was so central in the task of maintaining the family economy and upholding the virtue of her kin, French historian Olwen Hufton notes that the socioeconomic pressure on a mother was especially intense during a revolution: “Her death or incapacity could cause a family to cross the narrow but extremely meaningful barrier between poverty and destitution.”³⁹ In particular “times of

dearth” — which most certainly included 1789 and through the Revolution — “the importance of the mother within the family grew beyond measure.”⁴⁰ A lack of wages earned or meager amounts of food provided by the husband inevitably impacted the woman’s ability to provide for the home and family. The latent fear of slipping into poverty provides an explanation for the high number of “proud women” who became involved in bread riots and other political movements in 1789.⁴¹ If the economic struggles in France affected the work of men, it most certainly impacted the woman’s realm and thus incentivized women to become involved in the politics of the republic.

Descriptions of militant women storming the Bastille or participating in bread riots pervade the legacy of the French Revolution. Often driven by economic hardship and social dissatisfaction, women marched to Versailles in October 1789; through 1790 and 1791, they formed various women’s clubs; by 1793, the Assembly of Republican Women convened for the first time.⁴² Some women — particularly of the educated upper class — channeled their frustrations into writing and circulating pamphlets on women’s political rights, making appeals for improved women’s education, and urging legislators to include women in their Constitutional provisions for the rights of Man.⁴³ While the competing French governments oscillated on the positionality of women from 1789 through the 1790s, one theme remained consistent: women found reason to gather and exert civic influence in ways that extended beyond the household.⁴⁴

In their radical participation in the Revolution, however, women began to chip away at the traditional social and political gender divide — but not without eighteenth-century critique. As argued by historian Candice Proctor, “it was Woman who had scorned her natural destiny of wife and mother and who had deserted the sacred retreat of her home to appear brazenly in public.”⁴⁵ Many French contemporaries thus attributed the civic failures of the French Republic to the

actions of women. In the Report of Prevost on 8 Brumaire Year II (October 29, 1793), a political report, Frenchmen described their fear of members of Revolutionary Republican Women, a club which had armed itself with pikes and daggers. The men believed the arming was “humiliating” to the natural order of women, but also signified the woman’s willingness to “abandon everything and... and let a Catherine de Medici reign among the women, who would enslave men.”... Images of politically active women like Catherine de Medici repeated in Revolutionary-era literature: women constantly raised rhetorical, metaphorical, and literal arms against men, threatening to overthrow the traditional institutions and power of the patriarchal order.⁴⁷

Head of the “Petite Republique”: Republican Motherhood and the Revolution

The brutish image of a politically involved Revolutionary woman stood in direct contradiction to the idealized, virtuous, docile, and nurturing mother. Fearing social divisions and perceiving women to lack the physical and mental capacities to act in the political realm, male philosophers drove home the point that women were destined to remain in the domestic sphere. Taken together, the highly gendered social spheres, the image of a civic mother, and the political agitation of women formulated a French republican motherhood paradigm both during and after the Revolutionary period. The Revolutionary state still needed the support of a civic-minded woman, but only insofar as her involvement would remain within the framework of a comfortably traditional, virtuous motherhood figure.⁴⁸

Sketching out an image of republican motherhood in the French Revolution requires an understanding of its philosophical origins. Before the French Revolution, French philosophers postulated that women could be political equals

to men, even if they still remained within the capacity of the domestic sphere. Linda Kerber notes that Marquis de Condorcet — a prominent French philosopher and reformer during the Revolution — came closest to justifying women’s civic involvement in France. In his essays, “Sur l’admission des Femmes au Droit de Cité,” and “Lettres d’un Bourgeois de New-Heaven,” Condorcet argues that men claimed political authority because they are “sensible beings, capable of reason, having moral ideas.” But to Condorcet, these “moral ideas” and qualities could certainly be applied to women. The reason that it had not been in the past was because men had actively used their power to create “a great inequality between the sexes.”⁴⁹ Condorcet’s woman was politically equal to that of a man.⁵⁰

While Condorcet’s musings on women and politics veered on the side of radical, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s conceptions of gender provided a more conservative, republican motherhood-based image of the ideal revolutionary woman. Rooted in the words of Rousseau’s 1762 text, *Émile, ou de l’éducation*, and drawn from the influence of the newly independent United States, republican motherhood represented a kind of halfway point that addressed the political concerns of women but also the gendered insecurities of men and their patriarchal society.⁵¹ In *Émile*, Rousseau describes this through a metaphorical dichotomy between the characters Émile (a young French boy), and his female counterpart, Sophie. Where Émile is given the free reign to express his political beliefs and act on them — to “leave the nest and scatter his wild oats at will,” as Hufton describes him — Sophie exists in the domestic sphere, rearing the child from the chaste and virtuous walls of the home.⁵²

In many ways, this parallels the clearly separated and unequal gender binary existing in Revolutionary France. But to Rousseau, this distinction allowed for a political engagement befitting of both genders. The man will write legislation and engage in court sessions. The woman, through raising her

children and teaching them the ways of republican virtue, can express political involvement from within her intimate domestic sphere, but cannot herself step outside those naturally derived boundaries. “The Sophie model,” according to Hufton, “is always in the [French] politicians’ intellectual baggage, to be exposed when the going gets rough; but she can easily be stored away in the attic.”⁵³ By doing so, Rousseau situated civic life within the home and made it accessible to the influence of the woman, all the while upholding those conventional, conservative archetypes of the French social patriarchy.

“Women, Wake Up!”: The Limited Radicalism of Olympe de Gouges

Republican motherhood thus assuages the fears of men while providing a half-complete model of female citizenship that links the private domestic sphere to the public necessity of the state. And yet, many of the Revolution’s contemporary feminist writers recycled the language and core tenets of republican motherhood in their own writings. On the surface, Olympe de Gouges’ writings read like radical feminist tracts: she fashioned herself, a woman, as a *citoyenne*, and blatantly called for women to “wake up” and reclaim their rights.⁵⁴ Recognizing women as “too weak and too long oppressed,” de Gouges directly contradicted the common perception that women were, by nature or personality, unfit for politics and government. To de Gouges, “beauty does not exclude reason and love of a country.”⁵⁵

Although de Gouges reinforced a Condorcet-like notion that women possessed the same political and civic capacities as men, her writings embodied the republican motherhood rhetoric promulgated throughout the Revolutionary period. For as much as de Gouges was a product of the Enlightened philosophes she learned from, she still lived in a society dictated by gendered obligations. For example, scholars frequently

categorize de Gouges' play, *Zamore et Mirza* (1784), as an abolitionist work that demonstrates the author's "militant feminism" and desire to extend her activism to "the cause of the slaves."⁵⁶ Yet, literary historian Gregory Brown argues that such interpretations "read as static the multiple selves Gouges wrote for herself" precisely because they ignore the very ways de Gouges renegotiated her personal public image around her plays in order to survive within a precarious, male-driven public intellectual world. Through early writings like *Zamore et Mirza*, de Gouges could thus formulate her political beliefs at the same time that she fashioned her self-identity as a *femme des lettres* who operated "within — and not in opposition to — an established social code."⁵⁷ Even though the theater world was overwhelmingly male-dominated in this period (and de Gouges' playwriting could perhaps be viewed as a subversive act in itself), Brown notes that de Gouges wanted more than anything for her works to be taken seriously. After male members of the Comédie française critiqued her "indecent" and bold actions in her early playwriting years, de Gouges switched her tone to appeal to the gens de lettres. De Gouges apologized for her abrasive attitude toward the theater and her unwomanly actions: "In my first overtures, I overestimated myself, but I am a woman and I merit some indulgence for that early enthusiasm... I learned to moderate myself and become modest." Instead of acting outside the traditional theatrical norms and defying men in positions of power, de Gouges' actions surrounding her early plays instead demonstrate an adherence to the "center," or to the patriarchal hierarchy of the Comédie française.⁵⁸ She was, according to Smart, "a private woman aspiring to a public identity as a political writer," and she made certain concessions in her writing to achieve that goal.⁵⁹

De Gouges could thus toe the line between penning radical feminist tracts and producing letters that still adhered to the confines of male political written tradition — *the gens des*

lettres. This balancing act extended beyond her plays and into her political writings during the French Revolution: de Gouges's political writings similarly reinforced the feminist limitations of the republican motherhood concept. Despite invoking the title of "*Citoyenne*" for herself and all women and blatantly addressing male politicians like Jacques Necker, de Gouges' writings self-consciously made these political contributions from the margins of the Estates-General, reiterating her status as *woman* as she invoked the words of *man*. Indeed, historian Dorinda Outram argued that the revolutionary political sphere featured a decidedly male voice: the *langage mâle de la vertu* (male language of virtue).⁶⁰ At face value, de Gouges rejected the *langage mâle de la vertu* and other masculine notions of civic involvement in order to advance her feminist arguments; but de Gouges inevitably incorporated the words, structures, and arguments of male philosophers into her writings. In this context, the craft of the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* makes sense: the first clause of Declaration claims that "woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights." This claim is immediately followed by a qualifier: "Social distinctions may be based only on common utility" — utilitarian distinctions which, presumably, would maintain the image of the woman as nurturing mother.⁶¹ Rather than acting as a solely radical tract of the feminist's French Revolution, parts of *Declaration* demonstrate how de Gouges adapted and reshaped her political commentaries to fit male-centric, Enlightenment, republican ideals.

This is the central paradox of Olympe de Gouges' "radicalism." Some historians argue that de Gouges' ability to exert a civic voice merges the public and private spheres of political, gendered involvement, [thus] opening the door for a "female civic voice."⁶² And even then, de Gouges' works were radical enough that she faced her death at the guillotine in 1793.⁶³ Yet de Gouges' comfortability with replicating the prose of patriarchs and arguing within the political paradigms

set forth by male philosophers does little to loosen the embedded, rigid distinctions they made between man and woman. Women may have the ability to have their voices heard in the political sphere — as de Gouges demonstrates — but it was still acceptable for that voice to almost inevitably arise from the confines of the domestic realm and in the rhetorical structures of male philosophes.⁶⁴ Even if liberated to the extent that women could comment on politics, their “rights” as “citoyennes” never included the practical hallmarks of a liberal republic that were frequently afforded to landed white men.

Indeed, Rousseau posited that “A woman outside her home loses her greatest luster; and, stripped of her true ornament, shows herself with indecency.”⁶⁵ Condorcet held that a woman’s domestic responsibilities may be reason to not vote for her in an election.⁶⁶ De Gouges herself lamented the fact that women had “abandoned the reins of [their] homes... separated [their] babies from [their] maternal breasts.”⁶⁷ Without seeking to overturn the social obligations of domesticity that chained a woman to her petite republic of the home, Olympe de Gouges’ writings presented a republican motherhood-based version of “radical” Revolutionary feminism that tied a woman to the “old time-honored differentiation of sexual destinies and duties.”⁶⁸

Destabilizing the Domestic: Divorce and Women’s Politics Against the Binary of the State

Instead of declaring de Gouges’ classic Declaration as the hallmark of Revolutionary “feminism,” it is perhaps more pertinent to view reforms on marriage, divorce, and the home as the most subversive contributions to French Revolutionary women’s lives. True “freedom” for the woman would entail her liberation from the domestic sphere and full incorporation into the political realm — not just through her ability to advise her husband and sons, but in her capacity to enact political change

through public civic involvement.⁶⁹ In Etta Palm's *Adresse de la Société patriotique et de bienfaisance des Amis de la Vérité aux quarante-huit sections*, Palm claimed that the domestic sphere made women "slaves at all times and at all ages: girls to the will of their parents; wives, to the caprices of a husband, of a master." The seamstress work and cleaning and child-rearing were the "servile prejudices with which their sex has been surrounded." Most dramatically, Palm claimed that "from the cradle to the grave, women vegetate in the form of slavery."⁷⁰ By 1793, Palm was among the women who called for the true equality of rights — especially if that meant removing the woman from the binds of the home.⁷¹

While Palm's works undermined the values of a traditional female sphere, developments in marriage law solidified the Revolution's domestically subversive streak. France first legalized divorce on September 20, 1792, making marital separations relatively easier.⁷² These changes departed from norms in the family and the house: if both spouses mutually sought separation, neither party would be named as a guilty; in cases of abuse or incompatibility, one person could unilaterally file for divorce; and divorce was now available throughout France regardless of class or religion.⁷³ Developments in divorce policy came to represent more than liberal social views wrought by a revolutionary period. French politician and "father of divorce" Alfred Naquet — Naquet championed the cause for rational divorce laws after the Revolution — believed that new divorce laws were "the work of the Revolution" and simultaneously represented heightened anxieties surrounding the French family, gender mores, and women's roles within society.⁷⁴ Where divorce was all but unheard of in the *Ancien Régime*, the 1792 changes introduced new ideas about shared custody, circumscribed a father's legal authority over his children, and importantly allowed spouses of either gender to decide just when a marriage and, thus, a family could be separated by law.⁷⁵ A divorced woman could now live apart

from an abusive ex-husband, could benefit from legally divided property ownership, and, perhaps most importantly, could willingly escape from a home in which a husband monopolized family politics and subjected her to abuse. No longer confined by the Catholic Church or Ancien Régime beliefs about marriage, a divorced or divorcing woman could turn the tenets of republican motherhood on its head, opening avenue for a post-revolutionary woman's legal and political autonomy.⁷⁶

While divorce law perhaps reflected contemporary antipathy towards Catholicism, it served as an important shift in conceptions of the family for Revolutionary-era women — including for de Gouges, herself widowed after an arranged marriage. Writing that “marriage is the tomb of trust and love,” many of de Gouges' plays reflected the issues of power differentials in marriage.⁷⁷ Forced marriages much like her own featured prominently in her plays, and the image of a female breaking out of the restraints of an oppressive home life and marriage comprised many of her most celebrated plot lines.⁷⁸ A woman's ability to select and reject a husband implied a level of independence and self-assertion unprecedented for women in French society — so much so that many saw changes in marital traditions as “simply not compatible with the female condition.”⁷⁹

Challenges to existing gender norms and familial institutions thus provided the greatest threat to gender-driven social and political norms and, by extension, to the cult of French republican motherhood. When de Gouges' theatre works criticized the power differences between husbands and wives, she simultaneously undermined the sociosexual justification of the female “home.” When revolutionaries formed women's clubs, their mere existence threatened the notion that women existed only in domesticity.⁸⁰ In spite of these actions, many of the writings of Olympe de Gouges and her feminist contemporaries exemplify how radical women's rights were often expressed within the confines of

Enlightenment-based, republican motherhood rhetoric. Yet, if republican motherhood served as the perfect intellectual rationalization to deny women political privileges or a proper education — while “generously” allowing women a half-complete, motherhood-based civic duty — a revolutionary woman could reclaim those political rights by asserting herself in the public sphere and renouncing those domestic duties burdened on her by tradition and patriarchy. As long as a public-private distinction existed and for that distinction to take on a highly gendered tone, so too would the “*femme des lettres*” be subjected to the limitations of the patriarchal social world.

Notes

¹ Francoise Victor Alphonse Aulard (1849 - 1928) was a historian of the French Revolution and authored many of the earliest histories of the revolutionary period. F.-A. Aulard, "Le Féminisme pendant la Révolution française," *Revue bleue* (March 1898), p. 362-366; Candice E. Proctor, *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 57; Joseph Tendler, "Alphonse Aulard Revisited," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 20:4 (2013), p. 649.

² The term "feminist" is perhaps anachronistic or imperfect in this context, if considered in the varied ways we define feminism today. This paper is first and foremost a study of women's history in the French Revolution, and as such it is entirely sensible to describe the French female writers as just that: women living in Revolutionary France. But leaving these descriptors at "women" or "female writers" alone undercuts the extent to which their activism and writings reflected a type of budding French proto-feminism, advocating for women's civic rights. My decision to use "feminist" and "feminism" throughout this paper is thus intentional, demonstrating how writers like de Gouges were not just female writers, but female writers specifically opining on topics related to female liberation and equality. Moreover, this decision reflects decades of prior scholarship on French revolutionary women, which frequently describes these women in the context of their contemporary feminism and feminist activism. See R.B. Rose, "Feminism, Women and the French Revolution," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 21, no. 1 (1995): p. 187-205; Jane Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (1975): p. 43-62; and David Williams, "The Politics of Feminism in the French Enlightenment," in Peter Hughes and David Williams, eds., *The Varied Pattern: Studies in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1971).

³ Proctor, p. 58-59.

⁴ Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment - An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1976), p. 188.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, p. 202-203.

⁷ One of the most cited women in this framework is Abigail Adams and women similar to her: those middle- to upper-class white women whose political influence originated in the household, where they could advise

their husbands and sons on republicanism from a mother's perspective. See also Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair, "The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, and Women's Voice, 1789-2002," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2002): p. 565-599; Dana C. McClain, "Rewriting Republican Motherhood: Mentorship and Motherhood," *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2019).

⁸ Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution: The Donald G. Creighton Lectures*, 1989 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), xxi; Hufton, "Women in Revolution, 1789-96," *Past and Present* 53 (1971), 90-91; *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795*, eds. Darline G. Levy, Harriet B. Applewhite and Mary D. Johnson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 11.

⁹ As explained by historian Annie Smart, "a woman's voice might emanate from the domestic sphere, but it can and should be heard in the political arena." Though the term "republican motherhood" can be considered anachronistic in some sense, its tenets — of a civically-ordained mother figure raising virtuous children — would have been recognizable to people living through the Age of Revolutions. Annie K. Smart, *Citoyennes: Women and the Ideal of Citizenship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), p. 115-117.

¹⁰ The republican motherhood concept is not without its critics, however, as the paradigm applies best to a certain type of wealthy white woman and cannot fully account for the various lived experiences among early American women — particularly for women of color and for middle- to low-income women. See also Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (Oct. 1987): p. 689-721; Ruth H. Bloch, 'American feminine ideals in transition: the rise of the moral mother, 1785-1815', *Feminist Studies* iv (1978): 101-26; and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

¹¹ See Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 108-130; Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolu-*

lution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹² Jane Rendall, "Feminism and Republicanism: 'Republican Motherhood,'" in *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States 1780 - 1860* (London: Palgrave, 1985).

¹³ Her first play, "L'Esclavage des Noirs," a critique of slavery in the French colonies, was performed at the Comedie-Francaise in 1785, to much criticism. *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*, eds. Lisa L. Moore, Joanna Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), p. 245-246. See also Janie Vanpée, "Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges," *Theatre Journal* 51, no. 1 (March, 1999): p. 47-65.

¹⁴ "Feminism" in France has roots in the Renaissance and Middle Ages, and has argued (at different times) for women's education, economic position, and political influence both in the home and in the public sphere. These issues took on importance during the Revolution, when groups of women demanded political and social rights to reflect those same transformations happening in male-dominated politics. See Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution," 43; *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*, 245; Smart, p. 115-118.

¹⁵ Gregory S. Brown, "The Self-Fashioning of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2011): p. 383.

¹⁶ Olympe de Gouges, *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (September 1791).

¹⁷ *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*, p. 245.

¹⁸ *Smart*, p. 120-121.

¹⁹ *Women in Revolutionary Paris*, p. 6.

²⁰ For example, female guilds had been destroyed for Parisian working women, noblewomen lost seigneurial rights to plead cases, and marital institutions like inheritance laws and child custody laws were written in favor of the husband. *Women in Revolutionary Paris*, p. 6-7.

²¹ Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Streip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 17.

²² Despite the overwhelming emphasis on marriage, Godineau notes that "free union" was common in Paris. Free union involved no official or legal marriage compact, but instead provided the couple with the public-facing social benefits of a domestic partnership or cohabitation: "it was the publicity of the union that formed the chief characteristic of mar-

riage.” Godineau, p. 17-19, 24-5.

²³ Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3; Smart, p. 115.

²⁵ While this includes considerations of political involvement, labor distinctions were almost an entirely separate matter. Though women were relegated to domestic duties, many (particularly in the Third Estate) made meager wages by practicing small trades, such as working as a seamstress. See “Pétition des femmes du Tiers-État au Roi, 1er janvier 1789,” (n.p., n.d.) in *Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris*, 12,807, vol. 1, no. 17; *Women in Revolutionary Paris*, p. 19.

²⁶ Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*, p. 4.

²⁷ It is important to note that these gendered distinctions could become somewhat muddled if considered outside the context of the more “middle-class” women that occupied part of the Third Estate. Historian Jane Abray points out that lower-class women often worked in the outside world because they literally could not afford to not work. It was the upper class that, according to Abray, “developed a hagiographic tradition around the family” that defined femininity from within the domestic sphere and linked it closely to the family. Abray, “Feminism in the French Revolution,” p. 62; Godineau, p. 25.

²⁸ In the case of middle-class, pregnant Parisian Marie Anne Maison, leaving a husband who “refused her the daily expenses for food for the house” was a perfectly reasonable decision in French public opinion: If the woman was responsible for managing the economy of the household, and the man failed to provide enough of that “economy”, the woman and those she watched over would bear the brunt of his shortcoming through a poorly-managed household or hunger. Godineau, p. 25-7.

²⁹ *Lettres d'une citoyenne à son amie sur les avantages que procurerait à la nation le patriotisme des dames* (Grenoble and Paris: Vve Lambert, 1789); Proctor, p. 59.

³⁰ Godineau, p.28.

³¹ Etta Palm nee d'Aelders, “Adresse des citoyennes françaises à l'assemblée nationale,” in *Appel aux Françaises sur la régénération des moeur et nécessité de l'influence des femmes dans un gouvernement libre* (Paris: Imprimerie du Cercle Social, 1791), p. 40.

³² Proctor writes that civic motherhood had roots in the writings of Jean-

Jacques Rousseau and other philosophes across the Atlantic. She argues that the French Revolution drew upon these sentiments and reinforced the importance of the mother as “incubator of the male race,” as central yet relational to the public and political development of her male counterparts. This description directly parallels the framework of republican motherhood scholars similarly identified in the early American republic. Proctor, p. 56-61. See also Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary backlash: women and politics in the early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

³³ Proctor, 58; Beatrice Fry Hyslop, *French Nationalism in 1789 according to the General Cahiers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 182; Archives parlementaires (AP), Vol. 4, Art. 47, p. 90.

³⁴ Olympe de Gouges, *L'Ordre national, ou le Comte d'Artois inspiré par Mentor, Dedie aux États Généraux* (n.p., 1789), p. 10.

³⁵ Smart, p. 73.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71-72.

³⁷ The 1794 Amer Report stated that “each sex is ascribed an occupation that is proper to it; its action is circumscribed in this circle, which should not be overstepped because nature, which has posed these limits to man, commands imperiously and does not accept any law.” Women were “les personnages les plus physiques qui soient au monde, les femmes,” [women, the most physical beings that exist in the world], and derived their civic duties from their physicality and from nature — both authorities which stood outside the jurisdiction of the public politics and legislation of man. Godineau, 274; Mercier, *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1770), p. 383.

³⁸ Godineau, p. 268.

³⁹ Hufton, “Women in Revolution,” p. 92.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴¹ “Proud women” were destitute women who in effect comprised a fifth of the entire French population by 1790. They were “fighting to remain so and to hold their families together.” Hufton, “Women in Revolution,” p. 94-5.

⁴² Jane Abray notes that different types of female organizing attracted women from various class positions, often dependent upon geographic location: women’s clubs in rural areas, for example, had membership primarily drawn from the middle class, while Parisian clubs tended to attract lower-class women. Female writers like Olympe de Gouges and Etta

Palm often came from middle- to upper-class families and received good educations. Abray, p. 50, 62. See also Elizabeth Racz, "The Women's Rights Movement in the French Revolution," *Science & Society* 16, no. 2 (Spring, 1952): p. 151-174; Godineau, p. 268-270, 369; *Women in Revolutionary Paris*, p. 38; "Stanislas Maillard's testimony to the Châtelet Commission," in *Procédure criminelle instruite au Châtelet de Paris*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1790), vol. I, 117-32, reprinted from George Rude, ed., *The Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1965), p. 198-205.

⁴³ Abray, p. 48.

⁴⁴ Many of these women were of the Third Estate and scorned the hierarchy of the *Ancien Régime*. However, many male French revolutionaries did not view their political involvement in such a favorable light. Seeing their protestations as mere religious fanaticism, contemporaries believed that women were not only wrongfully involved in the public sphere, but that their political beliefs were in themselves incorrect. If revolutionary men viewed the *Ancien Régime* as an immoral, base society, they saw the brash and rioting woman as similarly to blame for undermining the specific political goals set forth by revolutionary men, and for rejecting the principled spheres which separated men and women. Hufton, "Women in Revolution," p. 92-3.

⁴⁵ Proctor, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Catharine de Medici, an Italian noblewoman, exerted significant power over French politics during her time as queen consort of France (c. 1547 - 1559) — a position in which many viewed her as de facto ruler of France. Invoking her image and legacy is a nod to her unprecedented political involvement in state affairs normally reserved for male politicians and monarchs. Rachel Weil, "The Crown has Fallen to the Distaff: Gender and Politics in the Age of Catherine de Medici," *Critical Matrix* 1, no. 4 (January, 1985), 3; Report of Prevost on 8 Brumaire, Year II; Godineau, p. 272.

⁴⁷ Fears of women subverting men manifested itself in the upper echelons of the French Republic as well. Contemporaries saw Marie Antoinette's dissimulation of her husband, Louis XV, as one of the ways women overturned the political power of men and affront the authority of the patriarchy. See Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution" (1991).

⁴⁸ Proctor, p. 56.

⁴⁹ Kerber, p. 191.

⁵⁰ Many link Condorcet's image of a woman to his wife, Sophie de Grouchy, a popular and accomplished salon hostess during the French Revolutionary period. She frequently entertained Olympe de Gouges in her salons, produced many prominent translations of Enlightenment-era texts, and she hosted women's clubs in her home. Sandrine Berges, "Sophie de Grouchy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed.

⁵¹ Smart, p. 27.

⁵² Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*, p. 4.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 4-5.

⁵⁴ Smart, p. 121; de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*.

⁵⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, "The Uses of Imagination: Olympe de Gouges in the French Revolution," in *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 31.

⁵⁶ Brown, p. 384.

⁵⁷ Smart, p. 121; Brown, p. 383-386.

⁵⁸ Brown, p. 389, 394.

⁵⁹ Smart, p. 121.

⁶⁰ Dorinda Outram, "Le langage mâle de la vertu: Women and the Discourse of the French Revolution," in *The Social History of Language*, ed. Peter Burke and Roy Porter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 120-35.

⁶¹ de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*. Italicized emphasis is my own.

⁶² Smart, p. 116; Brown, p. 384-386.

⁶³ Vanpée, "Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe De Gouges," p. 47.

⁶⁴ It may be unfair to argue that de Gouges had to not only write feminist ideas, but also serve as a sole counterweight to the decidedly male field of public intellectualism. Historian Joan Landes argued that there was a distinct "post-revolutionary identification of masculine speech with truth, objectivity, and reason," which in turn tended to devalue the contributions women made to the Revolution. de Gouges' decision to write within the rhetorical bounds of male intellectualism is not surprising, given the ways her contemporaries would likely interpret and scrutinize her works. Even so, recognizing that her works inadvertently replicated gender binaries and mimicked the male public intellectual voice reiterates the strength of patriarchy in the political image of the French Revolution. R.B. Rose,

“Feminism, Women and the French Revolution,” *Historical Reflections* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1995), 192; J.B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca and London, 1988), p. 12.

⁶⁵ Proctor, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Marquis de Condorcet, *Sur l'Admission des femmes au droit au cité* (1790), p. 10-11.

⁶⁷ Olympe de Gouges, *Le Cri du sage, par une femme* (n.p., n.d.), p. 3.

⁶⁸ Proctor, p. 59-60.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁷⁰ Etta Palm d'Aelders, “Adresse de la Société patriotique,” *Appel aux Françaises*, p. 41-42.

⁷¹ Proctor, p. 124.

⁷² James Chastain, “Divorce and Women in France,” in *Encyclopedia of 1848 Revolutions* (2004).

⁷³ Grounds for divorce could include contracting a sexually transmitted disease, a husband’s verbal or physical abuse, or, as was witnessed in one 1782 case, a husband’s descent into insanity. Roderick Phillips, “Women and Family Breakdown in Eighteenth-Century France: Rouen 1780-1800,” *Social History* 1, no. 2 (May 1976), p. 200; Chastain, “Divorce and Women in France.”

⁷⁴ Naquet authored Religion, propriété, famille in 1869, the culmination of decades of political work surrounding divorce first started in the years of the Revolution. Though its effects only really trickled into the late nineteenth century, its origins are often traced back to Theresa McBride, “Public Authority and Private Lives: Divorce after the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1992), p. 748-749.

⁷⁵ McBride, “Public Authority and Private Lives: Divorce after the French Revolution,” p. 749-750.

⁷⁶ It’s important to recognize that divorce was but one of the many liberal reforms that changed attitudes toward the traditional French family and the woman’s role within it. Historian Roderick Phillips argues that while divorce had a “deleterious effect... on the authority of the husband and father” as well as opened up exciting new opportunities for women’s general autonomy and wellbeing in France, broader attitudes toward women may not have shifted significantly as a result of its existence. Yet, feminist writers latched onto the concept of divorce reform because it provided tangible opportunities for furthering women’s position within the home and within society. Phillips, “Women and Family Breakdown in Eighteenth-Century France: Rouen 1780-1800,” p. 216-218.

⁷⁷ The most obvious example of this is de Gouges's 1790 play, "La Nécessité du divorce (The Necessity of Divorce)."

⁷⁸ Justine Carre Miller, "'Marriage is the Tomb of Trust and Love': Marriage and Divorce in Olympe de Gouges' Plays," *Concept Journal* 41 (2018).

⁷⁹ Proctor, p. 102-103.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 60-62.