

May 2013

Insurrectionary Heroines: The Possibilities and Limits of Women's Radical Action During the French Revolution


Sean M. Wright

Grand Valley State University, wrightse@mail.gvsu.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvjh>

 Part of the [European History Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wright, Sean M. (2013) "Insurrectionary Heroines: The Possibilities and Limits of Women's Radical Action During the French Revolution," *Grand Valley Journal of History*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvjh/vol2/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Journal of History by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Insurrectionary Heroines: The Possibilities and Limits of Women's Radical Action During the French Revolution

Cover Page Footnote

"History is a Rorschach test, people. What you see when you look at it tells you as much about yourself as it does about the past." - Author Jennifer Donnelly

This essay focuses on analyzing the radical actions taken by women during the French Revolution in the context of why they resorted to radical action, what made their action radical, and the results of such behavior. When referring to women who participated radically during the French Revolution, academics Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite conclude, "In discourse and act, they forced real, if short-lived and incomplete, transformations and expansions of the meaning and practice of citizenship and sovereignty."¹ These women transformed Early Modern European social ideals of women as politically absent and socially restrained by reshaping the socio-political context of the French Revolution through engaging in political protest, forming female political organizations, and asserting womankind as socially and politically equal to men. Through engaging in politically charged radical behavior, these women challenged not only French society's capacity to handle such behavior, but also challenged the extent as to how far women could really change socio-political conditions. Ultimately, women of the French Revolution, through four radical events, revealed new possibilities for women as major political actors and revealed the limitations of such behavior that resulted due to French society's inability to handle this radical female political behavior.

The possibilities and limitations of the radical action engaged in by women are reflected by four points: the March on Versailles in October of 1789, the manifestation of bread riots in 1795, the formation of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women in 1793, and *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman* written in 1791 by Olympe de Gouges. As an armed movement of working class women, the March on Versailles represented a populous uprising against governmental grievances involving bread price inflation and political failures.² Through their radical efforts, these women gained political success by forcing the French government to mend their grievances, but they were dependent upon the National Guardsman Stanislas Maillard for their success, due to his acting as a credible political source that gave the women's protest legitimacy. On April 1st and May 20th working class women also attempted an occupation of the National Convention to force an end to rising bread prices, but this uprising resulted in failure, as the National Guardsmen under General Kilmaine disbanded the female rioters due to their lack of political credibility. Inflated bread prices and the incompetency of the French government also facilitated the creation of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women.³ This Society utilized terrorist tactics in trying to protect France from domestic enemies and challenged patriarchal authority by advocating for an increased female political role, but their extremist ideology forced the French government to disband the group out of national security reasons.⁴ Furthermore, radical female action during the French Revolution was represented by *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, which was written as a direct challenge to the limiting ideals of patriarchal control over

the revolution, as the declaration asserted women as politically and socially equal to men.⁵ Ultimately, women during the French Revolution responded to bread price inflation and governmental incompetency with radical action that asserted themselves as politically and socially significant, which challenged both the traditional conceptions of women as politically absent and the limits posed by such action.

Women's large-scale and dynamic participation in the French Revolution represented not just a political movement to ensure a better government in France, but a revolution that signified both an expansion of female possibilities and a revelation of female socio-political limitations. Historian Olwen Hufton commented about women's partaking in the revolution, "The mass of women involved themselves in the Revolution not to change the status of women but to protect their own interests, which could also be interpreted as the interests both of their families and of the wider community."⁶ Even though Hufton rightfully asserts women's desire to protect their families and communities in the face of grain shortages and inflation, this rebellion on behalf of family and communal interests resulted in the direct challenging of Early Modern Europe's female status quo. The dominant social theology of Early Modern Europe defined the female status quo as one of domestication and isolation. This social structure stemmed from the Christian belief that all women were descendent from Eve, who due to her folly, forced God's hand to expel mankind from paradise.⁷ This shame directly attributed a stigma to women that resulted in the need for society to isolate women's actions and thoughts to ensure the stability of a patriarchal society. Women, across all social classes, were primarily isolated to all things domestic, which concerned the duties of caretaking for the household and teaching their children how to behave according to their specific social world.⁸ Particularly important is that women of the lower classes, who were primarily involved with French Revolution rioting, concerned themselves with survival by doing whatever was necessary, including working in the fields with their husbands and sons, while upper class women reserved themselves for ensuring the functioning of the well-cultured household.⁹ Thus, differences do arise between women, as lower class women were not completely socially domesticated due to their needs of survival, while elite women reflected the domesticated values of Early Modern Europe more precisely. In the context of the French Revolution, according to Early Modern European social structure, women were excluded from participating in the patriarchal realms of social and political control.¹⁰ Men dominated both social hierarchies and governments, which left the majority of women without a political voice or a means to question the social status quo. However, the French Revolution provided the necessary catalyst for women to channel their engrained social identities into efforts that resulted in the direct confrontation between the female status quo and female possibility. Ultimately, women who took part in

radical action during the French Revolution created new avenues of possibility for themselves and for future women, as they challenged previously held designs of how European women should act and think.

Radical action taken by women during the French Revolution was first exemplified by the March on Versailles, as the female marchers organized into a populous body, invaded the National Assembly, and asserted themselves into the realm of political policymaking. The months preceding the March in 1789 brought dire economic circumstances to the lower class Parisian masses, as bread prices increased dramatically due to the French monarchy's inability to address the national debt effectively. With their depression becoming even more dire, on the morning of October 5th, 1789, a group of approximately seven-thousand Parisian women from working class backgrounds, such as fishwives, peddlers and housewives, began their march on the National Assembly at Versailles armed with pikes, swords, clubs, muskets, and other weapons.¹¹ One acute observer, Simeon-Prosper Hardy, noted the reasons for their march as "allegedly with the design of... asking the king, whom they intended to bring back to Paris, as well as the National Assembly, for bread and for closure on the Constitution."¹² These women experienced frustrations at the lack of progress made by both King Louis XVI and the National Assembly to halt rising bread prices—a result of rampant inflation—and their failure to resolve gridlock over constitutional issues involving the power of the monarch in the new government.¹³ These reasons for the March represented their anger with an incompetent government and a lack of provision for their family and themselves, which pushed them to take radical action. The female marchers on Versailles, through radical action in the form of direct protest and intervention, intended to influence the government to stabilize bread prices and bring the King and the Assembly back to Paris in order to keep them within the realm of the populous.

On their March, these women engaged in behavior that further radicalized the procession. In certain instances, they acted violently towards people who were thought of as a threat to the March.¹⁴ National Guardsman Stanislas Maillard accompanied the women and recorded a violent assault involving bourgeois individuals on horseback wearing black cockades, "the women stopped them and made as if to commit violence against them, saying that they must die as punishment for having insulted...the national cockade; one they struck and pulled off his horse, tearing off his black cockade."¹⁵ The female marchers deemed these individuals as impeding the March and insulting the national cockade with their class oriented black cockades and so proceeded to remove them from their horses and assault them.¹⁶ During another attack against bourgeois individuals, some of the women even mounted the horses of the fallen victims, thus displaying their superiority as a militant populous body.¹⁷ These assaults further

demonstrated the radical nature of the action taken by women during the March on Versailles, as not only did they take pre-emptive action to march on the National Assembly to influence legislation, but they utilized brute force along their march to assault those deemed as a threat to the populous body.

Upon reaching Versailles, the female marchers encountered circumstances that facilitated their radical behavior. A chosen body of twelve women proceeded to discuss their grievances directly with the King; however, this attempt at political reconciliation failed, as the women only secured a verbal promise from the King to provide wheat supplies to Paris, and no concrete commitment.¹⁸ Historian Olwen Hufton illustrated the apprehensiveness of the women in regards to the King's verbal promise, "The majority were totally dissatisfied, what guarantees had the king offered? Had they got anything in writing? The women were angry."¹⁹ The women distrusted the King and felt insecure about the measures the King would take to alleviate their grievances. They desired a confirmation in writing of the King's commitment to provide grain and bread to the Parisian masses. This refusal of the King's purely verbal commitment represented the further radicalizing of the marchers' behavior, as they saw the King's image dissolve from that of the protector and provider for the people into an image of a king who possessed limited authority.²⁰ The restructuring of the King's image into that of a weak ruler incited the women to think that only through direct political action could they address their complaints.²¹ The circumstances that the female marchers encountered upon reaching Versailles, including a politically inept king unwilling to commit to any real grain and bread reform, caused these women to further radicalize, as they questioned the power of the King and demanded increased political action to alleviate their grievances.

As this increasingly radical mentality took over, the female marchers invaded the National Assembly in order to directly influence the political decision making process. According to Historians Levy and Applewhite, this mass of women invading the National Assembly, "took over the national legislature, demanded a guaranteed supply of affordable bread, passed mock legislation and also pressed the deputies into issuing decrees on subsistence."²² This invasion represented the further radicalizing of the female working class marchers, as they essentially took command of the National Assembly and enacted legislation to mend their grievances. These women not only ended up commanding the National Assembly, but also forced the King to accept stipulations within the new Constitution that limited his sovereignty, and with overwhelming outcry, they managed to convince the King to move back to Paris.²³ This act of establishing control over the French government demonstrated how women themselves, through radical action, imposed popular sovereignty over the King's authority and that of the National Assembly. Ultimately, these female marchers used radical

action to assert themselves as socially and politically significant by questioning the power of the King, invading the National Assembly, and enacting popular sovereignty over the absolutism of the King by exerting control over legislative and executive matters.

These working class women achieved a critical amount of progress through radical action; however, it is crucial to note the participation of a male presence assisting the female marchers by organizing them into a controlled body, thus limiting the extent of violent and reckless behavior. One male perspective, in particular, exemplifies this male aspect. Mentioned previously, National Guardsman Stanislas Maillard recorded his involvement with the women during the march in a testimony given to a commission after the March ended.²⁴ His account represented a reluctance to assist the women, but he was eventually motivated by the need to ensure the security of the women and to protect the National Assembly from prospective uncontrolled violence.²⁵ Maillard reflects a patriarchal need to prevent the women from causing harm or being harmed as he views gender according to the dominant Early Modern European social ideals that characterize women as being a threat to themselves. The women did not mind his patriarchal presence, however, as they unanimously voted Maillard as leader of the procession in order to take advantage of his military credibility, which allowed Maillard to exert a considerable amount of influence over the women's mob behavior, "he gave the order to halt and told them they would discredit themselves by behaving in such a manner [recklessly]...whereas if they proceeded peaceably and honestly, all the citizens of the capital would be grateful to them. They yielded at length to his remonstrances and opinions and discreetly continued on their way."²⁶ Maillard managed to ensure the civility of the March by exerting control over the violent tendencies of the female, which helped ensure that the women maintained a relatively organized and non-violent march. In yielding to Maillard's advice, a majority of the women abandoned their weapons in order to reflect the image of a credible non-violent populous body, thus ensuring that their radicalness remained somewhat controlled and ensuring that they could in fact reach Versailles and attempt to influence political change. Even with Maillard's guidance, once he finished accompanying the women to Versailles, the fate of political change rested with the women of the marching body. Ultimately, male assistance helped facilitate the success of the March on Versailles as Stanislas Maillard acted as a democratically elected military authority over the marching body, which provided the women with the organizational support and credibility necessary to reach Versailles in hopes of influencing political change.

As with the March on Versailles, bread price inflation played a further role in the radical actions taken by women during the French Revolution, as Parisian

working class and poor women initiated riots on April 1st and May 20th in 1795. The April 1st riot represented women taking a leading political role, as the growing impoverishment of their families led the women to envision their husbands as lazy patriarchs, while they saw themselves as the ones with the power to feed their families.²⁷ This non-passive female mentality is exhibited by a common saying by the women at the time of the riot, “my good for nothing husband is standing by and letting his wife and children die from hunger.”²⁸ These women felt the necessity of representing the needs of their families by taking their grievances public, as they viewed their husbands as complacent about having their families starve. These women marched unarmed on the Convention in Paris and demanded reforms to supply them with bread.²⁹ Even though they marched on the governing body of Paris without military force, the April 1st riot displayed radical behavior as the women shattered ideas of patriarchal control and marched on the Convention to make their problems heard.

However, when the Convention only promised an increased supply of bread and without any real change in bread prices or supplies of bread, these working class and poor women rioted once again on May 20th. Weapons once again were absent in the rioting, as the women made a clear decision to avoid using weapons, “anyone who carries arms is a cuckold.”³⁰ These women thought weapons would betray their cause because the government would identify them as armed assailants instead of a credible populous body, and so they sought to remain unarmed. Though the unarmed rioters attempting to occupy the Convention did not meet with the political and social change as the female marchers on Versailles accomplished, but rather with defeat as the women were viewed as a discredited threat due to their being unarmed.³¹ The National Guardsmen called to defend the Convention from these women rioters and did not view the women as threats, but rather referred to them lightly and derogatorily, as exemplified by the leader of the Guardsmen, General Kilmaine, “Some groups of women among those known as ‘furies of the guillotine,’ bribed to preach anarchy and pillage... They surrounded mainly the dragoons of the Third Regiment. Several persons expressed anxiety to me about these groups. I confess that I had none. I knew its [the regiment] Republican feeling and hatred of brigandage and anarchy.”³² Kilmaine’s observations of the riot revealed that even though the female rioters surrounded his men, Kilmaine and his guardsmen remained confident and untroubled by the rioters’ advances, because the women posed no military threat. His observations also revealed that because of the women’s overall reckless and anti-republican behavior, the soldiers referred to them with derogatory language that discredited the women and their efforts even further.

Despite these unarmed women posing no real threat to the Guardsmen or the Convention, the combination of the presence of arms on behalf of the male

portion of the rebelling body and the women's own reckless behavior caused these soldiers to threaten military force and to even exact physical violence upon the women. When contemplating the threat of force against the revolting body, General Kilmaine accounted that, "I only had twelve hundred men... and [considering] that we were surrounded by twenty thousand armed men and forty thousand furies-for they cannot be referred to as women-this action [military force] will be judged as appropriate."³³ Unlike the reputable male influence afforded by National Guardsman Stanislas Maillard during the March on Versailles, the massive armed body of men involved with the May 20th revolt only served to further discredit the unarmed female rioters, as Kilmaine recognized the men as a danger to his outnumbered guardsmen. Also, even though the women posed no real threat because they were unarmed, their uncontrolled and anti-Republican behavior allowed them to transcend the image of domesticated submissive females into a stigmatized portrayal as lawless "furies."³⁴ This dehumanization of the women as being anti-traditional, according to the dominant gender practices, accredited Kilmaine with the justification he needed for utilizing the threat of military violence against the women and the revolting body, whom he recognized as a completely unruly and unjustified populous body.

Kilmaine and his National Guardsmen both threatened military violence against the women and even exacted physical violence upon them. Kilmaine's account elaborated on the threat of military violence against the women rioters, "I ordered the canon pointed against the barricade, quite resolved to fire in three minutes time if our demand was not heeded."³⁵ Kilmaine did not restrain himself from using the threat of artillery fire in order to enforce his authority over the rioters. The National Guardsmen more brutally used physical violence against the rioters, as they utilized the butt ends of their bayonets to strike the women and disperse the crowd of protestors, thus bringing an end to the protest.³⁶ Ultimately, the May 20th riot met with failure due to the absence of political and military protection, such as the marchers on Versailles possessed with National Guardsman Stanislas Maillard, which ensured their success. Historian Olwen Hufton elaborated on this point further, concerning the riot, "It demonstrates how efficacy of mass, unarmed, female protest, designed to provoke sympathy and initiate change, could be very dependent on other factors to achieve its purpose."³⁷ This analysis facilitated insight into the female rioters of May 20th, that despite their desire to reform government in truly dire circumstances, they ultimately depended on external patriarchal military and political factors to ensure their success. These women rioters could not effectively intimidate General Kilmaine and his National Guard forces due to their lack of weapons and some kind of governmental protection, and so they could not exert the needed force to occupy the convention and take over legislative matters. The May 20th revolt in particular

encountered failure due to the total discrediting of the revolting body as the women rioters exemplified unruly anti-Republican behavior that general Kilmaine did not recognize. Also, the presence of many armed male civilians encouraged Kilmaine to take further military action against the rebellious body. Despite these limitations, these bread riots by lower class women on April 1st and May 20th represented radical behavior as they shattered conceptions of a passive and patriarchal controlled female race by taking over the role as primary bread winner and tried to challenge an unresponsive government in their attempt to simply feed their families.

Being fueled by similar circumstances of bread price inflation and an unresponsive government, the creation of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women in 1793 represented the next aspect of radical female action during the French Revolution, as they advocated for extensive social and political involvement for women. This Society represented a purely female group that formed to create a group of armed women in order to protect France from “internal enemies.”³⁸ By placing the idea of protecting the State as the Society’s essential goal, these women shattered the idea of women being isolated from domestic affairs and represented a unique form of radical behavior during the French Revolution, as these women did not revolt against the government, but protected the revolutionary status of France. These “internal enemies” represented grain shortage, the failure of the government to re-implement the Constitution of 1793, and the policies of the Girondin politicians that were hostile against any form of popular sovereignty due to their fear of the revolution spiraling out of control.³⁹ The Society combatted these enemies through terrorist tactics, as Historian Olwen Hufton elaborated, “petitioning, heckling from the tribunes of the Convention and street harassment of Girondin politicians. They organized a group which almost lynched Théroigne de Méricourt [female Girondist], leaving her beaten about the head and humiliated.”⁴⁰ The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women exercised radical actions in utilizing extremist tactics against those viewed as hindering the progression of the Revolution, and specifically, Girondin politicians, due to their increasingly moderate political views in 1793. In the late summer and fall of 1793, the Society even organized a mass effort of terrorizing aristocrats and others deemed as withholding commodities from the public.⁴¹ These women desired to protect the ability of French women to extensively participate in politics by breaking the boundaries of domesticity and targeting those thought of as “internal enemies,” and specifically, Girondin politicians who sought to limit the expansion of popular sovereignty during the French Revolution.

Along with securing a place for women in protecting the French state from “internal enemies”, the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women directly

challenged patriarchal authority and advocated the placing of women in a central role within the French government, thus further displaying radical female action. At a society meeting in the catacomb of the Church of Saint-Eustache, Society member Sister Monic illustrated the group's focus on female political involvement, "I will go further still and maintain that when the reins of government are held by men, women alone move and direct them... It cannot be denied that they [women] are the most active force in society."⁴² The Society represented radical activity by advocating strongly for the increased involvement of women in politics, as they sponsored the activities of women as already essential to the functioning of politics and society, and threatened patriarchal politics by inserting women as the primary actors in government. These women pushed their efforts to increase female state involvement, so far as to demand the right for all women in favor of the revolution to bear arms.⁴³ This right to bear arms further reflected the Society's radical mentality as being protectors of the state from interior threats. This mentality of active female participation in the French state is most effectively represented by the Society's oath to the French Republic, "I swear to live for the Republic or to die for it."⁴⁴ The women in the Society declared allegiance to the Revolution by advocating for their active participation within the Republic, even if their loyalty meant death. This radical mentality of advocating for female influence in politics along with the radical actions of utilizing terrorist tactics against enemies of the state facilitated the downfall of this all female society.

Because of their radical ideology, the Society splintered the female populous by their views on the Revolution, thus posing limits to the extent that radical behavior could reach the female population. The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women's advocacy for radical action in the form of bearing arms to protect the republic from "internal threats" and placing women as central components of the new Republican government alienated a large majority of market women.⁴⁵ Historian Olwen Hufton provided further insight into this division amongst women, "Citizenship was integral to the club's agenda, but the market women declared that it was contrary to their rights as women, because it meant bearing arms and fighting, and their duties as mothers of families were different from those as men."⁴⁶ The market women resented the radical ideology of society women, since this ideology caused women to substantially challenge previously held gender roles by distancing themselves from the domestic sphere, and engaging in the male-dominated political and military domains.⁴⁷ Class division contributed to this division in ideology, as the Society women came primarily from non-working class backgrounds, such as chocolate makers and actresses, and therefore, did not experience the same plight as the working class merchant women.⁴⁸ Stemming from this misunderstanding of working women's circumstances was the Society's push to regulate bread prices on a fixed rate,

which infuriated the merchant women who depended on selling bread according to their own flexible rates for their livelihoods.⁴⁹ For the women of the Society, French citizenship represented one's ability to bear arms and protect the Republic from enemies, while the market women felt that their female rights and family livelihoods were under attack from the Society's radical positions.

This ideological division set in motion the collapse of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women as the Jacobin government sought to capitalize on these female divisions. The Jacobin government felt the organization challenged their ideal of the status quo, as represented by fellow male Jacobin administrator, J.P. Amar, "A women's honour confines her to the private sphere and precludes her from a struggle with men."⁵⁰ The Jacobin government resented the Society's advocacy of female involvement in politics and military action, as it challenged their ideas of the female status quo. Even Hérault de Séchelles, who resided as the Convention's president several times from 1793 to 1794, tried to instruct the Society's women in 1793 to abandon public radical action and harness their radical activity in the domestic realm by taking on the primary role of ensuring that children were raised to despise tyranny.⁵¹ Under de Séchelles' advice, the Society women "should confine themselves to giving birth to 'a people of heroes' and nourishing them with breast milk to develop their martial virtue."⁵² The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women represented a component of the Revolution that, according to the government, needed to confine itself to traditionally imposed gender roles. Even though the Society would still have a radical role in raising Republicanized children, the French government once again took on tyrannical tendencies to force these women back into the domestic realm. Despite the French government's attempt to subvert the Society and isolate their radicalness to the domestic sphere, the Society continued their terrorist tactics and attempts at placing women in a central role in politics, which caused massive ideological division in the female community. The Society's radicalness led to the Jacobin government scapegoating them as being too unruly and as representing the crux of national instability, and thus, the radical female organization was targeted and forced to disband.⁵³ The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, ultimately, represented radical action during the French Revolution, as they advocated for active female participation in protecting France from "internal enemies" through terrorist tactics, and challenged established gender roles by advocating for substantial female involvement within society and politics. In the end, the Society's radical agenda facilitated the group's collapse as ideological divisions splintered women's views of the Revolution and allowed the French government to target the organization's radicalness as a threat to national stability.

Women's radical actions, as represented by challenging established gender roles and advocating a central position in politics for women, were first outlined in the form of a declaration by Olympe de Gouges and her *Declaration of the Rights of Women* in 1791. The analysis of de Gouges and her declaration can be divided in two components: the driving forces behind the writing of the document and the ideas represented within the declaration. The underlying reason for the writing of the declaration rests with the contradictory nature of the French Revolution.⁵⁴ The Revolution represented the fight for universal rights that each individual has the right to possess, but this ideal of universality applied only to men.⁵⁵ Only men were involved in the political decision making processes behind the Revolution, and specifically, the primary document that signified the Revolution, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* written in 1789.⁵⁶ This document represented a purely male view of the Revolution as it excluded any mention of expanding rights to women, while advocating for the political and social rights of men.⁵⁷ Academic Joan Wallach Scott commented on the contradictory nature of the French Revolution, "the attribution of citizenship to [white] male subjects- complicated enormously the project of claiming equal rights, for it suggested either that rights themselves, or at least how and where they were exercised, depended upon the physical characteristics of human bodies."⁵⁸ With the monopoly on politics by male voices, the Revolution underwent a male oriented course that dictated the distribution of rights based upon physical attributes such as sex, which excluded women from the ability to possess certain rights. This exclusion from the conversation about the meaning of rights in revolutionary France motivated Olympe de Gouges to break through these male imposed limitations, as she sought to bring women into the forefront of the Revolution by demanding equal rights within her document, the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*.

Written in 1791, Olympe de Gouges' declaration represented radical action, as the document advocated for women's political and social equality with men. She began her declaration with a preamble criticizing the contradictory nature of the Revolution, "Man, are you capable of being just? It is a woman who poses the question; you will not deprive her of that right at least. Tell me, what gives you sovereign empire to oppress my sex."⁵⁹ De Gouges directly challenged the authority of men and declared that it is a woman who is contesting patriarchal control over the female sex. By challenging the status quo, de Gouges represented radical behavior, as she inserted women into the conversation about rights in the male-dominated socio-political sphere. She furthermore signified radical behavior in her preamble, as she represented an active female engaging in political activities resigned for men, thus shattering the conception of female passivity. She continued radical critiques within the main body of the declaration, as de Gouges declared equality amongst men and women.

It was de Gouges' intention to equate political and social rights for men and women. Article I of the declaration addressed social equality and reads as follows, "Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights. Social distinctions can be based only on the common utility."⁶⁰ De Gouges asserted womankind as independent from man as she is free from birth, and advocated that women share the same social rights as man without discrepancy, besides that of a biological nature. Through de Gouges' advocacy of equal social rights, she also exhibited radical behavior by directly challenging traditional gender roles of the man as patriarch and the woman as dependent and socially isolated. Along with social equality, the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* demanded equal political rights for women as well, and this is represented by Article II.⁶¹ The article reads, "The purpose of any political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man; these rights are liberty, property, security, and especially resistance to oppression."⁶² Olympe redefined the reasons for government as not just protecting the rights of man, but the rights of women as well. She goes on to name political rights that women share with men. Most importantly these rights allow women the opportunity to be autonomous individuals with the right to own property and the right to exercise personal freedom over the tyranny of men. Article II exemplified radicalness as de Gouges advocated for female political autonomy, equal political rights with men, and redefining the purpose of government, as to protect the rights of both men and women. Ultimately, due to the limited nature of the French Revolution, as only male political and social rights were officially recognized and established, Olympe de Gouges wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, and tried to expand the Revolution to women by challenging patriarchal society and establishing women's social and political equality with men.

Academics Levy and Applewhite concluded about women's radical involvement during the French Revolution, "As part of that struggle, women repeatedly challenged, eluded, or subverted cultural constructs that dictated rigidly defined gender roles and limits (including those based on a presumption of women's innate or socially determined incapacity for assuming political identities)."⁶³ Through four primary examples, women exhibited radical actions and revealed the possibilities and limitations to such behavior as they contested patriarchal authority, and engaged in protest to assert themselves as socially and politically significant. The March on Versailles represented a body of working class women that protested the National Assembly due to inflated bread prices and government incompetency, to the extent of invading the assembly and taking control of legislative and executive matters. The bread riots on April 1st and May 20th in 1795 revealed a movement of working class and poor women who shattered concepts of patriarchal authority, as these women took over the male as breadwinner role by seeking to provide food for their families through forcing the

Convention to enact legislative change. The all-female Society of Revolutionary Republican Women advocated for extensive female involvement in society and politics, to the extent of utilizing terrorist tactics to combat enemies of the state. Olympe de Gouges published the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* in opposition to patriarchal dominated politics, and within the document, advocated for female social and political equality with men. Limitations on women's radicalness are critical to note, as it is important to analyze both the capacity for women to initiate radical behavior and French society's capacity to handle this behavior. National Guardsman Stanislas Maillard served as a crucial component in the success of the female marchers on Versailles, as he represented military support that gave the marchers the credibility necessary to influence the National Assembly. Also, the absence of weapons amongst the female rioters along with reckless anti-Republican behavior and the presence of armed men in the 1795 bread riots caused General Kilmaine and his National Guardsmen to view the rioters as a non-credible threat to the Convention and proceeded to disperse the rioters with force. Limitations affected the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women as well, as their radical positions caused division within the female community, which allowed the French government to scapegoat the Society as being a threat to national stability and so forced the organization to disband. Furthermore, the Revolution's limited scope, as being reserved for male political and social rights, sparked Olympe de Gouges' response in her declaration that tried to confront this gender limitation by asserting women's equal rights to men in the Revolution. Overall, women's radical action in the French Revolution aimed to create a better world for themselves by fighting to feed their families and fighting to uphold a republican government, and in doing so, revealed both the possibilities and limitations of radical actions. Despite the threat of limitations, these female revolutionaries challenged the engrained social ideals of Early Modern Europe that defined womankind as primarily domesticated and ultimately politically absent by raising the possibility of a new female identity as insurrectionary heroines.

Notes

¹ Darlene Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 98.

² Levy and Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship," 83.

³ Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500-1800* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 483.

⁴ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 483.

⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, "A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer: Olympia de Gouges Claims Rights for Women," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 102-103.

⁶ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 464.

⁷ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 29.

⁸ For more information regarding the domestic duties of Early Modern European women, refer to Chapter 1, "Constructing Woman," in Olwen Hufton's, *The Prospect Before Her*.

⁹ For more information regarding marriage in Early Modern Europe, refer to Chapter 1, "Constructing Woman," in Olwen Hufton's, *The Prospect Before Her*.

¹⁰ For more information regarding the social and political status of women in Early Modern Europe, refer to Chapter 1, "Constructing Woman," in Olwen Hufton's book, *The Prospect Before Her*.

¹¹ Levy and Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship," 83.

¹² Levy and Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship," 83.

¹³ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 477.

¹⁴ “Stanislas Maillard Describes the Women’s March to Versailles, Oct 5, 1789,” in *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 39.

¹⁵ “Stanislas Maillard,” 39.

¹⁶ “Stanislas Maillard,” 39.

¹⁷ “Stanislas Maillard,” 40.

¹⁸ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 479.

¹⁹ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 479.

²⁰ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 85.

²¹ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 85.

²² Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 84.

²³ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 479.

²⁴ “Stanislas Maillard,” 39.

²⁵ “Stanislas Maillard,” 39.

²⁶ “Stanislas Maillard,” 39.

²⁷ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 480.

²⁸ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 480.

²⁹ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 480.

³⁰ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 481.

³¹ “The Military Establishment in Year III Offers Its Perspective on the Prairial Days,” in *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 298.

³² “Military Establishment in Year III,” 298.

³³ “Military Establishment in Year III,” 296.

- ³⁴ “Military Establishment in Year III,” 296.
- ³⁵ “Military Establishment in Year III,” 297.
- ³⁶ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 481.
- ³⁷ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 481.
- ³⁸ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 93.
- ³⁹ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 93.
- ⁴⁰ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 483.
- ⁴¹ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 93.
- ⁴² “Account of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women,” in *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 168-170.
- ⁴³ “Account of a Session of the Society”, 168-170.
- ⁴⁴ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 93.
- ⁴⁵ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 484.
- ⁴⁶ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 484.
- ⁴⁷ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 484.
- ⁴⁸ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 482-483.
- ⁴⁹ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 482-483.
- ⁵⁰ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 484.
- ⁵¹ Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 94.
- ⁵² Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 94.
- ⁵³ Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 484.
- ⁵⁴ Scott, “Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes,” 102.
- ⁵⁵ Scott, “Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes,” 102.

⁵⁶ Scott, "Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes," 102.

⁵⁷ Scott, "Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes," 102.

⁵⁸ Scott, "Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes," 102.

⁵⁹ Olympe de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Women," in *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary* by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 89.

⁶⁰ de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Women," 90.

⁶¹ de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Women," 90.

⁶² de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Women," 90.

⁶³ Levy and Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship," 98.

Bibliography

“Account of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women.” In *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson*, 166-171. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Gouges de, Olympia. “Declaration of the Rights of Women.” In *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson*, 87-96. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Hufton, Owen. *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500-1800*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Levy, Darlene Gay and Harriet B. Applewhite. “Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris.” In *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, edited by Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Scott, Joan Wallach. “A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer: Olympia de Gouges Claims Rights for Women.” In *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, edited by Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

“Stanislas Maillard Describes the Women’s March to Versailles, Oct 5, 1789.” In *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson*, 36-42. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

“The Military Establishment in Year III Offers Its Perspective on the Prairial Days.” In *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated With Notes and Commentary by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson*, 296-298. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980.