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From Citoyenne to Amazon: The Evolution of Women's Political Self-Identity during the French Revolution, 1789 – 1793

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Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
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Jacob Cassens

From Citoyenne to Amazon:

The Evolution of Women's Political Self-Identity during the French Revolution,

1789 – 1793

French women were already presenting concerns and ideas into the charged atmosphere during the summoning of the Estates General before the Revolution of 1789 began. This meeting of members from all classes of French society was elected to present the citizens' concerns to King Louis XVI. From their petition to the king on January 1, 1789 to the laws prohibiting women from gathering in clubs in 1793, women made themselves heard by many means, yet there was never any one particular group or movement which encompassed the entirety of the female population of France. Women's involvement varied from impassioned pleas for assistance and new guarantees of rights for women before the Revolution to "Amazons," a reference to the classical warrior women who dominated their society and lived separately from the rest of the world. These "Amazons" used radical democratic methods, such as rioting and protesting in large crowds, to control or make changes to affairs and activities within the new Republic. During this time, however, some women paid in blood for expressing their views and



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

the newly formed “representative” government used their executions to inspire fear in these upstarts who dared to create chaos in New France.¹

This paper will analyze how the words and deeds of women from 1789 to 1793 showed progression from loyal subjects of the king to *citoyennes* and revolutionary “Amazons” based on primary source documents and historical studies covering this period. Women of all classes and from all regions in France were involved in the revolution from its inception, in ways that varied distinctly for each of the many various manners by which they categorized themselves. This essay will also delve into the relationships these women had developed with the new state as well as their actions and reactions to its governance.

During the French Revolution women began to view their place in French society in a new manner based in part on institutions of Old Regime French Society. Women had already

¹ The secondary books dealing with women’s involvement in the Revolutionary period are Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and their French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); For a collection of essays which contains some great emphasis and a wide variety of perspectives on women’s role in the period of this paper, see Catherine R. Montfort, ed., *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789* (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications, Inc., 1994). The books which deal with French history and society as a whole at this time are David Andress, *The French Revolution and the People*, 3rd ed. (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007) William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005). For specific references to laws and the constitution of 1791 I referenced *The French Constitution, Revised, Amended, and Finally Decreed by the National Assembly* (Philadelphia: Peter Stewart, 1791) (<http://exproxy.library.unlv.edu/>). Besides this, the following two works provided invaluable access to translated secondary sources: Lynn Hunt, ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1996); Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979).



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

become accustomed to roles as leaders of guilds, skilled artisans, merchant-women, and *salonnières*.² Some women, such as Olympe de Gouges, did not fit neatly into any of these categories, yet still created documents such as the “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen” during this period of great uncertainty. This bold declaration was filled with concerns which are still rallying points for women’s rights to this day, and was written at a time when women were testing the boundaries of democratic participation of *citoyens* and *citoyennes* of all social classes.³ The distinction between the two terms is purely a matter of feminist identification, because the women were merely identified as *citoyenne* due to it being the feminine linguistic term for *citoyen*, which was the term granted to define all male participants in the new French society.

Pre-Revolution: January – July, 1789

Even before the Estates-General and the Revolution began to take root in France, women had carved out a niche for themselves within the larger framework of society. They held positions of varying rank and privilege in this complex system, but were still expected to maintain their households as wives, mothers, and educators for their children. Some women, particularly in the cities, began to fill roles as guild seamstresses and ribbonmakers, while others had become various sorts of merchants, or *marchandes de mode* (female assistants in dress

² For more on *Salonnières*, please see Steven Kale *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

³ *Citoyen* and *Citoyenne* are the masculine and feminine versions of the same noun, commonly used during the French Revolution to recognize the citizens as members of the new society, rather than subjects



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

shops), fish-sellers (fishwives), and flower sellers. The women's trades which had organized themselves into guilds had taken over their administration themselves, placing women into positions of leadership and authority within their trades, particularly as "mistresses" instead of "masters" of their guilds.⁴

These guilds had allowed women a certain level of self-governance within their own trades – and of course only over other women. The guild structure created a sense of social identity among these tradeswomen by allowing them to progress through the ranks of the guilds, from apprentice to mistress. Thus, a woman could gain a level of respect which was not available otherwise in the social conditions present during the Old Regime. Some of these women even shunned marriage and families in order to focus on their work within their trades, thus empowering themselves over their own financial gains, but more importantly also over their own households.⁵ Guilds provided a rigid and time-consuming structure through which apprentice-women had to pass, and endowed women with a sense of empowerment which would be let loose during the chaos and disorder caused by the Revolution in 1789.

Another prominent role for women in the Old Regime, at least from the mid seventeenth century, was as a *salonniere*, which was essentially a hostess for a meeting of individuals to discuss all sorts of topics. The most common were literature, enlightenment, politics, and

⁴David Andress *French Revolution and the People* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 46. See also Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁵ Andress, *People*, 45-7.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

sciences both social and natural.⁶ Though they seemed only to play the part of hostess in these meetings, and thus often excluded themselves from actual discussion or debate, these *salonnières* were the common thread that would bring together these social elites. In some instances, the *salonnière* directed the conversations by asking questions to either bring subjects for discussion or prevent disputes which could have developed regarding a sensitive topic or issue.⁷ This may not seem a particularly prolific role in which a woman could gain ideas about feminine independence and rights; however, the proximity to, and sometimes involvement in, the discussions about the states of current affairs gave these women unprecedented access to knowledge of current trends both in society and government. Another benefit for a *salonnière* was her position to learn the political leanings and ideas of not only those who gathered in their waiting rooms, but most of the leading society as well.⁸

Revolutionary Reform: 1789 – 1791

Etta Palm d'Aelders stands out as a striking example of a *salonnière* and *citoyenne* who became very vocal in her desires for equal rights for *citoyennes*. She also presented very particular examples of how women could become involved in the new revolutionary regime without breaking down general societal norms and mores. Of particular notoriety were her ideas to create networks of women's groups throughout the country so women could serve the country by "[propagating] enlightenment" and "[making] it possible to break up more easily the plots

⁶ See note 1

⁷ See note 1

⁸ See note 1



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

hatched by malevolent persons.”⁹ While not yet the militant revolutionary woman she would later become, these ideas were extraordinarily radical for their time. Men could no longer deny that women had participated in many ways, both direct and indirect, in the revolution, but acknowledging their participation did not incline them to grant women such rights as were seen to be the *duties* of men.¹⁰

In 1789, the French Revolution was beginning to rearrange political affairs. The actual control of the government was in flux as the Estates General, a meeting of all the social classes of France to petition King Louis XVI, was organized and members elected in order to present the king with *cahiers*¹¹ representing the concerns of the French people. These were to be presented via the elected members of the various estates and districts in order to confront and, hopefully, resolve the issues causing disturbances in France. This same year there were many instances of women becoming actively concerned about themselves and their families. Women in France had been performing certain public functions, such as the aforementioned guilds and merchants, for a century or longer. Since the rest of the people were working out whom to send to the Estates General, a large group of women created a petition in order to beg for assistance for these loyal subjects.

⁹ “Etta Palm D’Aelders Proposes a Network of Women’s Clubs to Administer Welfare Programs in Paris and throughout France.” in *Women in Revolutionary Paris*, Darlene Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 69.

¹⁰ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 77.

¹¹ *Cahiers* were the actual complaints filed by the regions which were passed up through their elected officials to be heard at the Estates General.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

The general discontent of society on the whole had surged so greatly by this point that the king, at the behest of his ministers, attempted to address public concerns. By allowing the meeting of the Estates General, he hoped to satisfy the concerns and requests from each district for review. This meeting created unprecedented popular representation, yet women were still mostly left out from these events. In most cases they could neither legally vote for a delegate nor attend the meeting themselves. Women's traditional roles were in the home, but the group of women concerned that their grievances would not receive due attention if left in the hands of men presented a petition directly to the king.

These women belonged entirely to the third estate of France, which included around 97% of citizens at this time in this "peasant" class.¹² This was only a legal term and not necessarily reflective of the actual wealth, social presence, nor occupation of the individuals so categorized.¹³ As women workers and individuals responsible for raising the families of their husbands, they presented the king with concerns that reflected issues they were concerned about on a daily basis, such as punishing prostitutes by making them "work in the public workshops" if they ever removed some sort of "mark of identification," and by requesting that "men not be allowed...to exercise trades that are the prerogative of women" specifically.

The women promised they would gladly maintain their current place and fulfill their duties as loyal subjects to their "tender Father" if only they were "left at least with the needle and

¹² Popkin, 11.

¹³ There were three estates in France, the First Estate was the Nobility, the Second Estate was the Clergy, and the Third estate was the (poorly defined) peasantry. These served as legal definitions to bind people to laws accordingly, primarily those of taxation, which the peasant class paid exclusively.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

the spindle” and promised thus also “never to handle the compass or the square.”¹⁴ The only right these women sought that was not included in their current set of rights and privileges was the desire for free schools wherein they might “learn the language on the basis of principles, religion, and ethics,” all in order to give their children a “sound and reasonable education so as to make of them subjects worthy of serving [the king].”¹⁵ Darlene Gay Levy points out that these women made their request to the king instead of the Estates General because “they [did] not conceive of [it] as an institution truly representative of the nation.”¹⁶ This accurately summarizes the lack of awareness, not only among women but the whole society, of how much their country would change in the months and years to come.

As the Estates General evolved into the National Assembly and France was plunged into uncertainty as the remaining members of that institution debated the future, women began to participate in the revolution itself, such as when Marguerite Pinaigre attended the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. At this battle, Pinaigre’s husband had been wounded and, due to his state, was assigned a pension. She argued that the pension was not enough for them to survive on any longer, and requested money for not only her husband, but his “citoyenne wife...who worked equally hard” as her husband in this iconic moment in French Republican history. In this petition, Pinaigre described her husband’s and her own invaluable assistance in the assault, emphasizing her own role. She had run “to several wineshops to fill her apron with bottles...to

¹⁴ “Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King.” in Levy, 18-20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

be used as shot...to break the chain on the drawbridge of the Bastille.” She was seeking a pension for her husband, but she reinforced her request with her *own* merit and contribution to the liberation of France. She added in her plea that she “believe[d] herself justified in coming before the National Assembly” not only because her husband became crippled during the assault on the Bastille, but because she, a woman, actively participated in the event and thus had earned the right to present her case before them.¹⁷

On October 5 and 6 1789, women once again set out en masse to speak to the king about their plight. This time, however, it was a group of patriotic revolutionary *citoyennes* who would go, not a group of loyal subjects to the king. Many women were swept up along the way, sometimes against their will but unable to defy a group so large and claiming so strongly to be patriotic. The purpose of this march was to go directly to the king for bread and to declare opposition to the counter-revolutionary ideas which were supposedly spreading among the population. The spark which incited this, though likely a culmination of myriad events and circumstances, was the purported stomping on the tricolor revolutionary cockade by some national guard troops at a banquet. When the march reached Versailles, however, the primary concern presented to both the National Assembly and the king was the shortage of food – particularly bread.¹⁸

¹⁷ “A Woman Recounts her Role in the Conquest of the Bastille” in *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁸ Popkin, 44.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

The king and the assembly both assured the female delegates presented to them that all would be done to try to ease their suffering caused by the lack of bread.¹⁹ The large number of people and the rainy conditions on the two days over which this event spanned made it apparent that simply *promising* to assist with the bread shortage would not satisfy the *citoyennes* and their entourage to return to Paris. On the morning of October 6, the king and his family were persuaded to move to the Tuileries palace in Paris from Versailles by the Marquis de Lafayette, with the women, National Guard, and cannons as an escort and bearing on pikes the heads of two royal guards who were caught in the frantic chaos which had ensued during the night.²⁰

Madelaine Glain and Marie-Rose Barré, two women who were among the delegations presented to the king and to the National Assembly, made statements after these “October Days” to the Châtelet Commission investigating the events. In their testimonies, they pointed out how they were “forced, as many women were, to follow the crowd”²¹ in the case of Glain, and because of “not being able to resist this great number of women” by Barré.²² Each of them focused on different points of interest in their interviews. Glain, for example, was mostly concerned with the incidents involving patriotism and the problems of prostitution, as she pointed out a woman whom she “knew to be a prostitute” who had said she was “going to Versailles to bring back the queen’s head.” This prostitute also threatened a Royal Guardsman on

¹⁹ “Women Testify Concerning their Participation in the October Days” in Levy., 50.

²⁰ Ibid, 48.

²¹ Ibid, 47.

²² Ibid, 49.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

a horse “with a bad, rusty sword which she held open in her hand.”²³ At this early point, such negative sentiment toward the royal family had not yet become prominent since many people were still convinced that the king was a good man, but that his ministers were misleading him. The other noticeably unacceptable action was the beheading of the two Royal Guards, “who had been massacred by the people,” though by a man, not the women.²⁴

Glain mentioned food only briefly, having referred to women asking “for the four-pound loaf [of bread] at eight *sols*, and for meat at the same price.”²⁵ Barré, however, focused upon it as the primary cause for her involvement in the march on Versailles.²⁶ She emphasized how women told the King’s Guards that the reason for their presence was to “ask him [the king] for bread,” and also the king’s compassion as he promised to provide escorts for the flour transports to Paris. The escorts were deemed necessary based on a claim that only two wagons had made it there out of the seventy commissioned.²⁷ Barré presents little concern regarding revolutionary matters, however. When asked whether a minister of the king had said, “When you had only one king, you had bread; now that you have twelve hundred of them, go and ask them for it,” the investigator only records her response as “in fact she did not hear the minister say this.”²⁸ This particular instance of women’s democratic activity, acting as a united body of concerned citizens to make the government hear them, elevated them above the roles of housewives and mothers.

²³ Ibid, 48.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 49.

²⁷ Ibid, 50.

²⁸ Ibid.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

This event began to show the solidarity of their newly-gained moniker, *citoyenne*, and the beginning of a trend toward their future identity as Amazons.

Women Become Activists and Members of Political Clubs 1791-1793

1791 saw the rise of women's involvement in political activity brought about by their increased acceptance into political clubs and organizations. The most prominent clubs in Paris at the time were the Cordeliers Club, which was opposed to a wealthy elite forming within the National Assembly; the Jacobin Club, which was an ultra-revolutionary political group (also called *Society of Friends of the Constitution*); and the Cercle Social, a club in Paris founded on the ideals of true political and religious democracy.²⁹ The exclusion of women, though easily noticed, should not be considered anti-feminist because the exclusion usually also included poorer people and all other "passive" citizens. Abbé Sieyès defined passive citizens in his August 1789 "Preliminary to the French Constitution," as "women, at least in their present state, children, foreigners, those who contribute nothing to maintaining the public establishment..." He proceeded to define active citizens as "those alone who contribute to the public establishment" and so who were "like the true shareholders in the great social enterprise."³⁰ Eventually, in the Constitution of September 1791, the ranks of active citizens would be based upon how much a *man* paid in taxes, with those who paid the highest levels gaining access to national and regional

²⁹Popkin, 56.

³⁰"Preliminary to the French Constitution," Abbé Sieyès in *French Revolution and Human Right*, Lynn Hunt (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 81.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

elections and offices. This was complemented by a lower tax level wherein a man could vote and hold office in local assemblies.³¹

The Cordeliers Club was open to women from its inception, allowing them to attend the meetings and even to contribute to the debates.³² While initially there was no restriction on the number of women, eventually a limit of 60 women's seats was instituted. The Jacobins were slower to accept women even into the meeting halls, in part because of initially high membership fees. Eventually, however, in late 1790 and early 1791, the 'Fraternal Society of Both Sexes, meeting at the Jacobins' was introduced and met in a room directly below the regular Jacobin meeting hall. This group stands out because of its admittance of women to full membership and also to active roles as officers.³³ Finally, the *Cercle Social* was a group of both *citoyens* and *citoyennes*, founded in January 1790, who advocated women's rights using journals, articles, and active lobbying to obtain their goals. A prominent male member of this group, the Marquis de Condorcet, wrote in favor of women's equality in French society, including politically.³⁴ All of these groups represented women's political involvement on a large scale from 1791 to 1793, but also provided a springboard from which individual women gained both fame and notoriety.

Olympe de Gouges and Etta Palm d'Aelders stand out as remarkable figures who participated in these groups and also came to gain a level of recognition on their own as

³¹ *The French Constitution, Revised, Amended, and Finally Decreed, by the National Assembly* (Philadelphia: Peter Stewart, 1791) Chapter I, Section 2

³² Andress, *People*, 143.

³³ *Ibid.*; "Stanislas Maillard Describes the Women's March to Versailles, October 5, 1789" in Levy, 42.

³⁴ Hunt, 26-7, 119; Levy, 62.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

individuals. Olympe de Gouges came from a poor background, had educated herself and became a playwright in Paris, where she formulated her ideals for female equality. Etta Palm d'Aelders, on the other hand, came not only from a wealthy background, but was born in the Dutch Republic, so was a foreigner.³⁵ She worked to bring about changes in women's rights through equality in divorce, education, and other basic needs rather than appealing directly for active female political rights.³⁶ Both stood adamantly for direct democratic involvement of women in all levels of society, however, and each contributed according to her own abilities and status to present her message to France.

Etta Palm D'Aelders, Olympe de Gouges and Charlotte Corday

Etta Palm d'Aelders played a vocal role in the *Cercle Social* and in providing her opinions regarding the roles of women in the new social order. Her membership in the *Cercle Social*, however, was only part of her identity, and she spoke repeatedly of her concerns to members of political clubs and the National Assembly. She wrote a document addressed to the National Assembly in the summer of 1791 appealing to the "august senate" to "no longer allow woman to groan beneath an arbitrary authority."³⁷ Palm appeals to their pride and honor by the myriad forms of address she chooses: "Fathers of the country," "Majestic legislators," "Representatives of the nation, in the name of your honor..."³⁸ Palm's moderate approach to seeking women's equality is evident in the seemingly mild requests she makes, specifically that

³⁵ Levy, 62.

³⁶ Hunt, 122.

³⁷ "A Call for an End to Sexual Discrimination" by Etta Palm d'Aelders in Levy, 75.

³⁸ Ibid., 77.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

the National Assembly give “girls a moral education equal to that of their brothers,” and that they “vote down the unjust and unpolitic code” being considered that allowed only husbands to pursue adultery charges.³⁹

On April 1, 1792, Palm addressed the newly formed Legislative Assembly with her renewed plea for education for girls. This time, however, she also added requests to specify girls’ coming of age at 21, to allow divorce, and to grant complete “political liberty and equality” to men and women alike.⁴⁰ She used language that implied that women were requesting a restoration of their rights, not seeking new ones, when she asked the assembly to “take into consideration the state of degradation to which women find themselves reduced as far as political rights are concerned.”⁴¹ The common idea of women’s rights as based upon responsibility and duty to the state were reiterated as well in her request for women to be “admitted to civilian and military positions.” She implied that women not only deserved the rights granted to men, but given the chance they could equally earn them. The president of the assembly, however, merely passed the petition along to the Committees on Legislation and Education, with a vague promise to “avoid... everything that might provoke their [the women petitioners’] regrets and their tears.”⁴²

Olympe de Gouges, self-educated *citoyenne* in the new French Republic and daughter of a butcher, meanwhile wrote and published her Declaration of Rights for women in reaction to the

³⁹ Ibid., 76-7.

⁴⁰ “Etta Palm D’Aelders’ Plea to the Legislative Assembly, April 1, 1792.”. in Ibid., 123.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

passage and implementation of the new French Constitution in September 1791. This constitution noticeably neglected the mention of women in its articles, particularly in the preamble, The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (Declaration of Man in this work). This essentially failed to address the issues women had been fighting for, such as divorce rights and education for girls and women. This led Gouges and others to believe their appeals and efforts had been entirely ignored, which is supported by the lack of attention these issues did receive in the constitution.⁴³ Gouges' response was to rewrite the Declaration of Rights of Man to either include women or to alter sections where women had been most noticeably left out of it. The result was a radical document in which Gouges declared, in Article I, that "woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights."⁴⁴

Gouges' Declaration of Woman provides insight into the concerns she and other women felt the National Assembly had neglected in drafting the Constitution of 1791, particularly in the preamble. She argues in Article Two of her Declaration, for example, that women were not guaranteed any rights in the original when she declared that "the purpose of any political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of *woman* and man."⁴⁵ She continues to express that she feels she is doing her patriotic duty by emphasizing "resistance to oppression" among the original document's right by adding "especially" before it.⁴⁶ One of the most exceptional ideas she offered in her declaration was Article Thirteen, where she stated

⁴³ Levy, 61.

⁴⁴ "The Declaration of the Rights of Woman" Olympe de Gouges in Levy, 90.

⁴⁵ Ibid. – *emphasis mine*; Ibid in Hunt, 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid. in Hunt, 78; Ibid. in Levy, 90.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

that woman “shares all the duties and all the painful tasks; therefore, she must have the same share in the distribution of positions, employment, offices, honors, and jobs.”⁴⁷ The original Declaration of Rights in its corresponding article had been centered on the idea that “common taxation is indispensable.”⁴⁸ Investing women into roles within the administration of the new Republic, she argues, would give truly equal rights to women.

In contrast to the articles which Gouges felt necessary to alter significantly, there were a few which she felt needed little or no attention. Her Article Five differs from the original only in her addition of the adjectives “wise and divine” before the word “law,” for example, because the article does not explicitly mention men or women.⁴⁹ In addition to these similarities between the original and her own declaration, de Gouges also deviated entirely on some points. In Article Nine of her pamphlet she completely avoided most of the language in the original Declaration, and left men out of it entirely: “Once any woman is declared guilty, complete rigor is [to be] exercised by the law.”⁵⁰ The same article in the Declaration of Man was not insignificant, having declared that every man was “presumed innocent until judged guilty.” Gouges was more intent upon reinforcing women’s legitimacy by showing that they not only deserved the rights, but should possess the responsibilities as well.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid. in Levy, 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. in Hunt, 78-9; Ibid. in Levy, 90.

⁵⁰ Ibid. in Levy, 91.

⁵¹ Ibid. in Hunt, 78-9



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

Charlotte Corday stands out distinctly from Olympe de Gouges and Etta Palm d'Aelders because of her unique choice of self-identity. As Jean-Paul Marat, editor of *L' Ami du Peuple* and member of the Legislative Assembly, was bathing in his apartment on July 13, 1793, Corday stabbed him to death in a very personal attack which she considered her duty to fulfill.⁵² The most prolific women's political group of the time, the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women (SRRW), condemned this attack as traitorous and used it to show their own patriotism when they later denounced the National Convention for being too moderate toward traitors.⁵³ Corday's assassination of Marat showed that women at that time had already begun to think and act politically and independently instead of as part of a unified system. These divisions were already present in many cases, particularly within the SRRW,⁵⁴ but Corday's very public action became a turning point as the entire society suddenly faced the very real involvement of women in a role considered not only distasteful, but very deeply within the sole realm of men: that of a political assassin.

Corday's trial became an issue not only of the murder of a public official by a *woman*, but also of the role of *women* in this new society where the rules were changing so quickly and severely. The fact that Corday had acted on her own behalf and for her own political feelings regarding Marat seemed either to have been difficult for many in society to comprehend, or to

⁵² Nina Corazzo and Catherine R. Montfort, "Charlotte Corday: Femme-Homme," in *Literate Women of the French Revolution of 1789*. (Birmingham: Summa Publications, Inc., 1994), 41-2.

⁵³ Popkin, 80.

⁵⁴ Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and their French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 143-4.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

simply have been put to use very quickly in an effort to place the blame on the opposing factions as propaganda.⁵⁵ A considerable obstacle to these efforts to understand this attack was Corday's sex itself, which was called into question enough that she felt necessary to reply to a question during one of her interviews, "Am I therefore not of my sex?"⁵⁶ Corday came from Caen in northwestern France, so was not directly involved with the Parisian societies and circles working within the capital city. She did, however, read many newspapers, journals, and books, which allowed her to maintain at least some idea of the events and political discussions of the National Convention and the other groups within Paris.⁵⁷ In spite of, or perhaps because of, the severity of the crime and the many difficult questions now facing the members of the National Convention, Corday, who had waited patiently in Marat's room for her arrest, was executed on July 17, 1793, only four days after the assassination.

From Organized Protests to the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women

Women (and men) used *taxation populaire*⁵⁸ both before and during the revolution to combat what they considered to be excessive prices caused by hoarding, speculating, and simple greed. Particularly, in April through May 1775 there were market riots using this method of "taxation" across the urban centers of France and ultimately stopped, temporarily at least, only

⁵⁵ Corazzo, 40-47.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁸ *Taxation Populaire* was the term used by citizens when they would protest high prices. Essentially they would declare what the market value should be, sell the items at that price, and give the money to the person they took it from. It was possible, of course, that some citizens would simply take the merchandise without paying for it, essentially theft. The term, therefore, was vague but used mostly to gather support for their actions, whether well-intended or otherwise. See Andress, *People*, 74.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

after military forces were deployed to protect the markets.⁵⁹ The leaders of these episodes took goods from merchants and spread them amongst the crowds at a price they considered fair.⁶⁰ During these outbursts of public emotion, there were inevitably disturbances and acts of pillaging. The various political clubs and politicians used those acts as propaganda against each other.⁶¹ Women, who were responsible for most household shopping, invariably participated in these riots in at least some form, and the clubs and National Assembly members used this knowledge in their attacks on each other.⁶² These massive democratic statements made by protesting and using mob activity to present a desire for change provided a precedent for demonstrations and petitions women continued to press throughout the revolution. The tone and content gradually began to lean towards more political issues through 1792 and into 1793.

The Jacobin party, although greatly divided in its political views about concepts such as war and radical popular uprisings, nevertheless inspired one of its members, Louvet, to appeal to women to stop the “sugar crisis” of January and February 1792.⁶³ The divide in the Jacobin party was between the Montagnards and Girondins, who disagreed particularly on the issue of popular uprisings. Girondins began as the more pro-war members of the Jacobin club, so named because most of their primary members were from the Gironde, the department of Bordeaux.⁶⁴ The Montagnards, however, were more concerned about the lower classes and so were less afraid of

⁵⁹ Andress, *People*, 74-5.

⁶⁰ Levy, 5.

⁶¹ Andress, 75-7.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “A Jacobin Appeals to the Women of Paris to End the Sugar Crisis” in Levy, 112-4.

⁶⁴ Popkin, 65.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

the mobs and riots which the Girondins feared could not be controlled.⁶⁵ Louvet's appeal, based on the Girondins' idea to ask women to stop buying sugar as a "patriotic sacrifice,"⁶⁶ sought an end to the *taxation populaire* during these riots, which actually were used to procure most dry goods, though sugar was the primary concern.⁶⁷ This abstinence from sugar was expected from all *citoyens* and *citoyennes* equally and even refers to other districts that already had begun to do so. This request could not overcome need and discontent, however, as national guardsmen proved when they required significant reinforcements to disperse the women who led February's Monnery sugar riots in the Faubourg Saint Marceau of Paris.⁶⁸ Female leaders had begun to stand up more fiercely for their causes, and proved they would only back down when faced with threats by armed soldiers.

Though *taxation populaire* predated the revolution and continued to be used throughout, women began using petitions as the primary means of addressing their issues. Petitions became prominent after they gained exposure to the new political processes by sitting in and, sometimes, participating in political club meetings. Pauline Leon, who would later become one of the leaders of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, led a group of women to petition the National Assembly in March 1791 for permission to obtain "pikes, pistols, and sabres" and to be allowed to "practice maneuvers" with them.⁶⁹ Significantly, Leon did not request autonomous

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁶ "A Jacobin Appeals" in Levy, 112.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Levy, 108-114.

⁶⁹ "Petition to the National Assembly on Women's Rights to Bear Arms in Ibid., 72-4.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

female leadership at this point, but instead requested that the French Guards command them.⁷⁰ Leon used strong language throughout her petition to make demands for women's individual rights. She does not, for example, *request* the petition's privileges, she "demand[s]...the honor of sharing their [male guardsmen's] exhaustion and glorious labors..." This demand followed the pattern of other revolutionary women, such as Etta Palm and Olympe de Gouges, by requesting rights based upon a willingness to earn them.⁷¹ Men and women also sometimes signed petitions together, such as to the National Assembly in July 1791 wherein they declared their distaste for "a leader who broke his most sacred oaths," King Louis XVI. They further stated that "Frenchmen chose representatives to give them a constitution, not to restore" this type of leader to any form of monarchy, even the Constitutional Monarchy of the 1791 Constitution.⁷²

From 1792 to 1793, women were fighting to maintain the ground they had already gained as *citoyennes* and *against* new opposition in the radical government which had begun to settle into a permanent form. In July of 1792 another group of women, this time from the Hotel de Ville section of Paris, petitioned to arm themselves for "the defense of the capital" after presenting a "pike with a liberty cap on its tip" before the National Assembly.⁷³ The following February saw severe discontent turn into more riots, uprisings, and appeals to the Legislative Assembly for assistance. Many of these actions were, as usual, led by concerned *citoyennes* who were seeking aid from the political clubs and Legislative Assembly. One such group sought

⁷⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Women Sign a Petition to the National Assembly on the Fate of the King" in Ibid., 78.

⁷³ "Women from the Hôtel de Ville Section of Paris Ask for Arms, July 31, 1792" in Ibid., 124.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

permission to appeal to the Assembly to reduce the price of food and to “denounce hoarders,”⁷⁴ while another group sought permission from the Jacobins to use their meeting hall to gather and “discuss hoarding.”⁷⁵ Though the main concern on these women’s agenda was hoarding and speculating, which pertained to survival, they claimed and used their right to gather and participate in the formation and building up of their society. By presenting their cases before the government and meeting in large groups to “discuss” their well-being, they took their political lives into their own hands.

These advances in empowered self-identity were best represented by the formation of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women (SRRW) in May 1793. These self-proclaimed “amazons,”⁷⁶ admitted only women to their society, claimed that moniker with pride and used it to describe their willingness to “[objectively deliberate] on the means of frustrating the projects of the republic’s enemies.”⁷⁷ The classical imagery of Amazon warriors was appropriate to the period of the revolution because classical feminine symbols were commonplace in the new government, particularly as Liberty and Justice. Claire Lacombe, an actress from outside of Paris, and Pauline Leon, a chocolatier who had been petitioning and attending political clubs since 1791, were among the leaders of this society who endorsed and proposed radical activity and changes.⁷⁸ Radicalism caused division not only within the society, but also among the

⁷⁴ “A Deputation of Citoyennes at the Commune, February 24, 1793” in *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “Account of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women” in *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁷ “The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women Registers with Authorities at the Commune” in *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁸ Levy, 144-6; “Lacombe’s Demand for the Replacement of LaFayette as French Chief of Staff” in *Ibid.*, 156.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

political groups that were involved in the Assembly. The radical Jacobin Montagnards began to attempt to restore order in France, and so began to concede many of their former demands in order to win a broader support base. This encouraged the SRRW to begin to align itself more with the *Enrages*, a group of extreme radicals who fought against what they saw as a new oppressive government, and so pushed away support of the Jacobins.⁷⁹

From its creation, the SRRW was designed as a militant group. Article I of its regulations stated this clearly: “The Society’s purpose is to be *armed* to rush to the defense of the Fatherland.”⁸⁰ Article XV, which lists the vows that new members made, emphasized this further: “I swear to live for the Republic or *die* for it.”⁸¹ They also made sincere efforts to become recognized as a serious group and so they formed in the same format as mainstream male societies – with a president, vice-president, and secretaries to handle various functions, including “keeping a register of all the deliberations of the society.”⁸² The significant difference was the placement of women in *all* leadership positions within the society. The seriousness with which these women took their new responsibilities was described in a transcript of Pierre Roussel, who attended one such meeting as a guest. The topic for discussion was “the utility of women in a republican government,” which led to suggestions such as “raising an army of 30,000 women to go into battle” and a proposal to allow women “into all branches of

⁷⁹ Levy, 146.

⁸⁰ “The Regulations of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women” in *Ibid.*, 161. *Emphasis mine.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 163. *Emphasis mine.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 162.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

administration.”⁸³ The women of the SRRW continued to gain ardor and devotion to the republic, which they considered as much theirs as the men’s who were fighting and dying to maintain it.

By September 1793, the SRRW had begun to alienate all but the most radical groups and citizens because of its increasing fervor. Specifically, these women began to appear as Amazons not only in the sense of being militarily inclined, but as separate and different from the rest of French society. They were not solely feminist because they often confronted and challenged women in the streets of Paris regarding their republican spirit. Most of these conflicts related to the wearing of the tricolor cockade, showing their divided mission of empowering women politically while also focusing strongly on patriotism.⁸⁴ These attacks regarding the cockades caused enough trouble that the National Convention on the 21st of September actually sided with the SRRW in passing a law requiring women to wear the tricolor cockade with penalties ranging from eight days to six years in jail depending on the particular offense.⁸⁵

The violent and conflictive interventions and patriotic activities of the SRRW, as well as other less-known individuals and groups, eventually led the National Convention to outlaw clubs and women’s popular societies. Andre Amar, a member of the Committee of General Safety, tied the need for this law to the actions of members of the SRRW when they had supposedly

⁸³ “Account of a Session” in *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸⁴ “Decree of the National Convention Requiring the Wearing of the Tricolor Cockade” in *Ibid.*, 197.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

attempted to force market women to wear the patriotic red bonnet.⁸⁶ This bonnet was worn as a “liberty cap” throughout the revolution as a sign of men’s patriotism, and had been an iconic part of King Louis’s proof of devotion to the new constitutional government.⁸⁷ Women’s use of the cap was sporadic throughout the revolution, but following their victory with the law of September 1793, these Amazons of the SRRW felt that these (mostly) market-women who would not don their liberty caps were unpatriotic. On October 28, these two groups began the process by which Amar, on the thirtieth, effectively nullified all the gains of the SRRW and other independent-minded women during the previous four years of revolution.⁸⁸

Amar discounted the patriotism of the SRRW by claiming that some of the members “may have been led astray by an excess of patriotism,” but that many were “motivated only by malevolence.”⁸⁹ He went further to discredit the actions of these women by claiming that “several malevolent persons have put on the mask of exaggerated patriotism to foment disturbances...and a kind of counterrevolution in Paris.”⁹⁰ In effect, these Amazon women believed they were, and had been, gaining political rights and presence by organizing and fulfilling patriotic duties. Amar claimed that these gains had been misguided and ineffectual, and moreover that they had actually caused this wickedness in otherwise normal *citoyennes*.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁸⁷ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180, 186.

⁸⁸ “The National Convention Outlaws Clubs and Popular Societies of Women” in Levy, 213; Doyle, 420.

⁸⁹ Ibid. in Levy, 214.

⁹⁰ Ibid.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

These women had dedicated themselves to a complicated collection of causes which included patriotism, belief in the revolution and the rights of *all*, and the opportunity for women to come out of their homes and take their place in the world to which they had already been contributing. Amar finally accomplished what no one else had during the revolution: he defined women's roles in the new society. These roles centered around educating young children, "preparing [their] minds and hearts for public virtues,...to educate them in the political cult of liberty."⁹¹ Women had been relegated to the household not by culture or tradition, which they had shown could be thrown aside, but by law that the dominant men could enforce. They proved their willingness to do so by executing several women, including the former queen Marie Antoinette on October 16, 1793, and the outspoken author of the "Declaration of Rights of Woman and Citizen," Olympe de Gouges on November 3, 1793.

Conclusion

The French Revolution allowed people of every part of the society, from all categories of wealth, class, and even gender, to participate in and recreate themselves in new ways and with new perspectives on how their world could operate. Women had expanded their roles in France by gaining new rights over their trades in the formations of guilds, by assisting husbands, fathers, and brothers with their trades, by selling goods, and by maintaining a near-monopoly on shopping. As they fought for these positions and earned their tenure in them, the benefits and expansion of rights had begun. These had allowed women to maintain their own households and

⁹¹ Ibid., 215-6.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

businesses as master seamstresses, ribbon-makers, and even as leaders of guilds representing their trades, consisting entirely of women. These sorts of gains were not sought, nor even desired, by all women. They were, however, sought by enough of them to seek and define their identities themselves, creating the groundwork which other women during the revolution began to build upon with the access to new, previously unknown freedoms.

As men were granted the title of *citoyen* and women were granted the honorary title of *citoyenne*, some women began to think of themselves not as “partners of citizens,” but as “citizenesses” entirely in their own right. Citizens were defined by the rights granted to all French men in their Declaration of Rights. Even though the men who wrote it did not see a need to specify whether *l’homme* meant “man” or “mankind,” this very lack of specificity allowed women to see a possibility for involvement, acceptance, and equality that men could not have imagined prior to the writing of this document. These politically-minded women took a term granted to them in passing, and only by the nature of the French language’s distinction of masculine and feminine words,⁹² and made it their own by identifying themselves as active *citoyennes* of the new revolutionary France. They knew they would have to deal with a long history of women’s oppression, but battled this by removing themselves from the roles of

⁹² In French, words have a “gender,” which does not necessarily reflect the word’s actual gender, but in situations where a word refers to a person there are usually both a masculine and feminine version. In this case, *citoyenne* was not intended to empower women, but simply was the feminine version of the word *citoyen*.



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

dependents of men and focused on their willingness to suffer, work, and perform all the duties required of them in order to *earn* their citizenship.

As time passed, some women became content with the level of political participation allowed by their acceptance into the galleries at political meetings and the idea of an eventual, gradual progression into new roles. Other women, however, felt they had to pursue the ideal of the ultimate female equality by behaving in a manner which seemed absurd not only to the men, but many of the women of revolutionary France. Women had gained rights such as the ability to speak out about their concerns, to be represented in the Assemblies, and in their acceptance by at least some as true members of the new society. The Amazons, however, felt they had already earned their rights to equality, and used force of words and, in the events which led to the removal of women's rights to organize, sometimes used physical force as well. A lack of a finite definition of women's role in the new society was essential to the growth of both of these self-identities for women, and the factionalism of politics at the time prevented any of the groups, before Amar, from actively restricting women's actions to keep the support of the groups to which these women belonged.

Ultimately, the legal restriction of women's rights passed, but only backed by the threat of execution, exemplified in the cases of Olympe de Gouges and Charlotte Corday. The end of organized women's clubs and groups allowed the government to control an otherwise powerful and focused democratic force which asserted its rights as members of the French world at the least, and as proud defenders of their rights with the force of arms if necessary. *Citoyennes* or



Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the
National History Honor Society : Fall 2011

Amazons, these women had made their mark on not only France, but also the world. Their peers may have silenced them for a time, but they did so only by the threat of death. Their voices remain today in their writings to remind all citizens of all countries that the first step toward rights may not have taken them very far on the path to equality, but the journey continues, and those pioneers of the French Revolution are not forgotten.

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