



DOI: 10.2478/genst-2024-0001

A WOMAN'S REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE: OLYMPE DE GOUGES

JÜRGEN SIESS

Tel-Aviv University

siess.j@mail.com

Abstract: *In a landmark text written in 1791, Olympe de Gouges makes a woman's voice heard in the public arena by modulating and subverting an established genre of discourse. In her address to the queen, whose support she is seeking for the propagation of women's rights, the speaker subverts the device of the dedicatory epistle to claim complete equality between the two sexes¹.*

Keywords: *equality, women's rights, political project, subversion*

Gender studies and the new history of the French Revolution have undoubtedly helped to give Marie-Olympe de Gouges (Montauban 1748-Paris 1793) the status of a great republican and 'feminist' as well as an advocate of equality. On the other hand, less attention has been paid to the specific nature of her own words in the context of revolutionary discourse. Drawing on discourse analysis methods, I propose to analyze how Olympe elaborates her discourse on differences between the two sexes. To what extent does the speaker modify the political discourse determined by men, and to what extent is she subverting this discourse in her sense – claiming gender equality?

Born as Marie Gouze, Olympe de Gouges was a revolutionary heroine, best known for her assertion, "Women have the right to climb the scaffold; they must also have the right to climb the rostrum". In 1765, Olympe went to live in Paris with her son. She frequented the salons in the capital and dreamed of becoming a woman of letters. In 1784, she wrote *Zamore and Mirza*, the first play to denounce the system of slavery; it was included in the repertoire of the Comédie Française, but was not performed there until after the Revolution, because the

¹ The term used at that time is rather "sex" than "gender."

plantation owners residing in Paris intervened with the theatre management. In 1791, she responded to the hemiplegic universalism of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* with a *Declaration of the Rights of Women and of Women Citizens*, Article 1 of which proclaimed: “Woman is born free and remains equal in rights to man”. She wrote pamphlets against Marat and Robespierre. Accused of undermining the indivisibility of the Republic, she was sentenced to death by the Terror and executed on 3 November 1793, the third feminine victim after Charlotte Corday and Marie-Antoinette.

Today Olympe de Gouges is considered the great pioneer of feminism. Numerous books are dedicated to her, scientific as well as fictional. Let us quote only *Marie-Olympe de Gouges, une humaniste à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, by Olivier Blanc and, in literature, *J’ai vécu pour un rêve* [*La donna che visse per un sogno*], by Maria Rosa Cutrufelli and *Moi, Olympe de Gouges*, by Catherine Grimm. In Paris, she has a square named after her.

She played a major role in the debate that developed during the French Revolution, especially on the level of written discourse, from public letter to political poster. From 1788 to 1793, she claimed women’s rights. In her *Letter to the People* (1788), she submitted the project of a voluntary tax supposed to contribute to solving the economic crisis. The speaker presents herself as acting alone, as a “private individual”, but also as one of the “good citizens” and, implicitly, of the small number of “wise people” in the French nation; thus, she alludes to the right to speak claimed by a woman on par with man. In the dedicatory letter *To the Queen* serving as preface to her *Declaration of the Rights of Women and Women Citizens* (1791), the author, instead of paying her respects to the dedicatee, develops a political argument for her, asking for the queen’s support in the defence of women. In her political testament (1793), she wrote: “I bequeath my soul [...] and my frank cheerfulness to women.”

How does egalitarian discourse manifest itself, and what is its function in the chosen genre and the communication situation? Olympe’s *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791) was published at a good time since women’s clubs were in full swing; however, its resonance was weak. For obvious reasons, the National Assembly – made up only of male representatives – showed little interest in a *Declaration* written by a woman. As the chances of being listened to were very limited, Olympe sought the support of someone who would join her initiative and thus increase her chances. She chooses the queen. Nevertheless, Olympe does not approach her as the queen but as a woman who can act as a companion having the same interests as herself. On the other hand, the genre of the dedicatory epistle is traditionally used to allow the speaker

to pay homage to the addressee in the text. Olympe subverts this genre by relying on the principle of equality; she invokes this principle to project the situation of a conversation where she is placed on the same level as Marie-Antoinette.

To the Queen opens with the address “Madame” – instead of the obligatory (Your) Majesty. From the beginning, the ethos of the speaker is that of a woman placed on the same level as the queen. The initial words, “Not made for this language”, suggest that she will not use the language of the Court but speak “frankly”, in a direct manner. The text’s ethos then projected shows a courageous, energetic woman, distinguished by her actions. “I did not wait [...] for the era of freedom: I showed myself with the same energy at a time when the blindness of despots punished such noble audacity. When the Empire accused you [...], I had the strength to defend you.”² These assertions imply that what the author had done in the past in favor of the queen legitimizes her to address her now as her equal. She assumes that she has the right to have a woman-to-woman conversation with the queen. When the addressee reads the letter, she will no longer be the persecuted woman; on the contrary, she will be judged by the action the speaker invites her to take. Not only should Marie-Antoinette call back the family members conspiring against the Revolution, but also take responsibility for women’s causes, occupying the position of the mother on their behalf. Thus, the woman’s facet in the public sphere is completed by the facet of the wife and mother. The principal appeal is for the queen to join the request that Olympe as a spokesperson for the female sex is making. While a prominent role is thus ascribed to Marie-Antoinette, the initiative remains in the speaker’s hands: it is her own project in which the addressee is invited to participate³.

This serves Olympe’s goal: to change Her Majesty into a women’s representative, a change that offers women the very opportunity to obtain – together with the author – full gender equality, i.e., the main goal of the *Declaration of the Rights of Women*. One must highlight here the function attributed to intimations: “Support, Madame, such a noble cause, defend this unfortunate sex [...]. Believe me, Madame, our life means very little [...] when [it] is not embellished by love for the People”, as well as the function of the modalization – “these are the exploits by which you must distinguish yourself” (1993, p. 205). The figure of the speaker here bears the features of a guide the addressee is expected to follow.

² The translations are mine.

³ *To the Queen* must have been written before the end of June 1791, the date of the failed ‘Varennes Escape’ – the episode during which Louis XVI, Queen Marie-Antoinette and their immediate family attempted to reach the Royalist stronghold of Montmédy, and which resulted in the arrest of the royal family.

If we look at the constituent elements of the discourse, we can see some strong implications. In “She whom chance has elevated to an eminent place”, it is implied that everyone is equal, and positions appear to be interchangeable: Olympe could be in the place of the queen and vice versa. Equality becomes a crucial, unsurpassable presupposition. In the closing, the figure of the model citizen appears, capable of being imitated by the queen herself: “I lose the purpose of this dedication. This is how every good citizen sacrifices his glory, his interests when his only object is his country’s interest”.

On the one hand, the cause of gender equality is at the heart of the address to the queen; on the other hand, the text establishes a woman-to-woman relationship. The expectation is that they should join forces in the struggle against men to achieve equality. Together, they should lead women in their struggle for equal gender relations. In the discursive dimension, this concords with the relationship between the two images: a balance is created between the speaker’s ethos and the addressee’s image.

We may conclude that the discourse-analysis approach has enabled us to highlight the purpose of the speaker and the means likely to achieve that purpose, as well as the interrelation of *ethos* and image of the other, and to distinguish a feminine voice meant to subvert the political discourse produced by men.

References:

- Fraisse, G. (2000). *Les deux gouvernements: la famille et la Cité*. Gallimard.
Gouges, de, O. (1993). *Ecrits politiques* 1-2. O. Blanc (Ed.). Côté-femmes.

Jürgen SIESS, Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at the University of Caen, France, has received his habilitation to supervise research at the University of Bielefeld. He has been a guest professor in Düsseldorf, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv (here he is an active member of the ADARR Research Group). He has organized numerous colloquia, most of which were followed by publications: *La lettre, entre reel et fiction* (1998), *Qu’est-ce que la tolérance?* (2002), *Le rapport de places dans l’épistolaire* (2005), *L’Epistolaire au féminin* (2006). More recently, his book, *Vers un nouveau mode de relations entre les sexes. Six correspondances de femmes des Lumières* (2017), has appeared. In the field of theatre studies, he has done extensive work on Samuel Beckett and modern drama, and in the field of comparative literature he has published *Rilke, Images de la ville, figures de l’artiste* (2000) and numerous articles.