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Speaking Out from the Home: Women and Political Engagement in the Salons of the French Revolution

Brandon Schultz

Returning from a strenuous day of fierce, partisan debate, clusters of weary Frenchmen gather in a bustling room to discuss philosophy, religion, and above all—the fate of France. The hostess of the house, a wife of one of the prominent debaters, greets the tired men and provides refreshments to encourage the ensuing, friendly deliberations. As the men strategize their future votes and proposals in the National Assembly, the pleased hostess retires to the edge of the room and listens to the complicated legislative plans, adding her own insight to the discussion. In the National Assembly, the hostess wields negligible influence, but in the comfort of her successful salon, she finds the remarkable opportunity to argue her own perspective. With the summoning of the Estates-General and the start of the French Revolution, the citizens of France began to accept the notion that they deserved input in matters relating to governance. Historically confined by their domestic roles as homemakers and thus barred from voicing political opinions, women especially capitalized on the nation's revolutionary spirit to unleash their policy views previously silenced by their patriarchal society. In particular, the French salons of the Revolutionary period expanded the public discourse to include these new, female voices—such as Madame Roland's—offering women an unprecedented level of civic engagement and hastening a reactionary backlash.

Amidst the increasingly-public debates of the French Revolution, salons offered politicians the opportunity to refine their ideas through new perspectives and excessive deliberation, improving the success of their proposals. Following the revolutionary zeitgeist of the political moment, French citizens began to feel entitled to input in their political governance, shifting the realm of policy discussion from the exclusivity of the King's courts to the unobscured streets and homes of the citizenry. With

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these newly public political deliberations receiving unprecedented attention, salons became crucial sites for focused and fruitful conferences. In *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848*, historian Steven D. Kale notes that during the Revolution, “[c]lub-based parties,’ associations linked to politicians, and a ‘politically oriented press’ [were] the instruments of the new public sphere. But the list should also include salons.”¹ Breaking from the rigidity of the established club parties and partisan press, the popular salons—and their more-fluid guest lists—presented new and varied venues for governmental discussions. Naturally, this expansion of sites for public discourse enabled more citizens to participate in the exchange of the Enlightenment ideals that informed the Revolution, thus boosting French civic engagement.

The radical Jacobin Club especially benefited from these salon discussions to consolidate power early in the French Revolution. Describing the aftermath of the collapse of the Breton Club—an organization focused on the abolition of feudal rights—Jacobin scholar Michael L. Kennedy reveals that less than a month later, “fifteen or twenty of [the Breton Club’s] former members...had founded a "Société de la Révolution" in the new capital. The infant organization was inspired, in part, by the Revolution Society of London, which had captured the hearts of patriotic Frenchmen.”² Expanding the Breton Club’s already-radical ideas of abolishing feudal rights, the Jacobin Club became the primary faction in favor of complete political overhaul in France, and members of the organization often aggressively championed progressive policies. Due to the radical nature of their beliefs, the Jacobins needed to organize quickly to gain a

¹Steven D. Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 47.

²Michael L. Kennedy, “The Foundation of the Jacobin Clubs and the Development of the Jacobin Club Network, 1789-1791,” *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 4 (1979): 701.

substantial foothold in the National Assembly, and the salons of the time enabled the Jacobins' success. Praising the benefits of the salons' impassioned discussions for the Jacobin Club, the politician Alexandre Lameth admitted that "This preliminary consideration shed a great deal of light upon the discussions in the Assembly. The resolve to decide within the society itself, by preliminary ballots...proved a great advantage to the popular party."³ By planning proposals and votes in advance at the salons, the Jacobins became a cohesive and intimidating force at the National Assembly, securing early political victories. The presence of the salons actually increased the amount of time available for politicians to debate pressing issues together, allowing more perspectives and ideas to advise and strengthen faction decisions. For the Jacobins in particular, the salons allowed the faction's radical thinkers to discuss and refine their seemingly outlandish proposals in relative privacy in order to present their progressive proposals convincingly at the Assembly. Overall, the salons offered more space and more opportunities for politicians to deliberate their decisions at the National Assembly, thus advancing civic engagement during the French Revolution.

While the French salons aided the male politicians in improving their output, they also shifted public dialogue into the realm of women, enhancing the Revolution's ideals of liberty and citizen participation in government. In his description of the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, an anonymous soldier related the popular opinion that held women as subservient, for he recalled "Those without arms threw stones at me, and women grimaced their teeth at me."⁴ Even after the people of France invoked liberty to justify storming the Bastille, this detail asserts that the female attackers simply frowned at the soldiers instead of

³Alexandre Lameth, "Origin of the Jacobin Club, 1789," in Jennifer Popiel, Mark Carnes, and Gary Kates, *Rousseau, Burke and Revolution in France, 1791*, ed. 2. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2015): 124.

⁴Anonymous Soldier, "A Defender of the Bastille Explains His Role," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/383>.

taking up arms, revealing both society and the male spectators' perception of women as inherently inept at fulfilling traditionally-masculine roles. Unfortunately, French women continuously and often-unsuccessfully fought against traditionalist categorizations during the Revolution, with one unnamed woman informing the citizen legislators, "you have given men a Constitution; now they enjoy all the rights of free beings, but women are very far from sharing these glories...we now demand the full exercise of these rights for ourselves."⁵ Encouraged by the public appeals to universal rights and the developing enfranchisement of the male citizenry, women began utilizing the developing political platforms of their Revolutionary France to advocate for their own rights—often employing the same impassioned language leveraged by prominent members of the National Assembly. Alas, despite the appeals to the rights of the Revolution, these stirring pleas failed to spark consequential action from legislators, but French women retained their new platform in the public sphere even with these legal losses.

In terms of civic engagement, women faced severely-limited options for political action. However, the bourgeois André Amar noted that women "can illuminate their husbands, communicate to them precious reflections...and the man, illuminated by informal and peaceful discussions in the midst of his household, will bring back to society the useful ideas that an honest woman gives him."⁶ Since women in Revolutionary France failed to gain support for their ideas when acting as their own agents, they could influence their brothers, husbands, and fathers to advocate on their behalf. With the popularity of the salons, women gained unprecedented access to respected male leaders within the confines of their own

⁵Jane Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (1975): 43-62.

⁶André Amar, *Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des Chambres françaises*, in *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1867, 1990), 50.

homes, enabling women to exercise a newfound influence on civic discussions. Salon hostesses capitalized upon the residential settings of the meeting sites in order to vouch for their personal agendas, expanding civic engagement to a new populace.

Curiously, the ideals of the Revolution and the female-hosted salons coalesced in the considerable figure of Madame Roland—who championed the civil participation of the nuanced Girondin faction. Writing in her private memoirs about the time she and her husband first learned of the Revolution, Madame Roland reflects:

The Revolution ensued and inflamed us; friends of humanity, adorers of liberty, we believed that it would regenerate the species, and destroy the disgraceful misery of that unfortunate class at whose lot we had so often been affected; we received the intelligence with rapture.⁷

Evidently, Madame Roland and her husband—Jean-Marie Roland—welcomed the news of political upheaval and hoped the Revolution would restore a sense of order to the messy and unstable Pre-revolutionary France. This goal, combined with her politically-conscious diction such as “inflamed” and “adorers of liberty,” signified an inclination toward political activism, which Madame Roland would pursue with her friends in her own salon. In fact, in her examination of Madame Roland’s patriotism, Susan Dalton finds that “It was here [in Madame Roland’s salon] that friendship was forged into ideology, and it was here that Roland had unmediated access to politics. She hosted a salon for the Brissotins [Girondins], and she attended the debates of the National Assembly, the Jacobin club, and the Cercle Social.”⁸ Tirelessly, Madame Roland participated in a plethora of

⁷Jeanne Manon Roland, *The Private Memoirs of Madame Roland* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1901), 358.

⁸Susan Dalton, *Engendering the Republic of Letters: Reconnecting Public and Private Spheres in Eighteenth Century Europe* (Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press, 2003): 57.

Revolutionary engagements, and she also managed her own salon for the Girondins. With such a bevy of primary experience and access to prominent Revolutionary thinkers, Madame Roland almost-certainly developed a politically-strategic intellect to inform the discussions at her own salon, solidifying her stature as a woman who employed French salons in order to secure her own civic engagement.

Building on the ideologies of the Revolutionary factions she frequented, Madame Roland's salon became a platform for her to pursue both liberating policies and her own political success. In exploring the intersection of female and philosophic aspirations in 18th century salons, Dena Goodman divulges that, "These salons and the women who led them actively asserted the idea that nobility could be acquired, and that the salonnières were instrumental in helping the initiate to do so."⁹ Goodman argues that salon hostesses—possibly emboldened by their rising prominence in society—played a crucial role in convincing citizens born without the privileges of the nobility that they could still attain equivalent statuses through legislation, radically shifting the citizenry's preconception of the nobility as a class protected by birthright. In accordance with the Revolution's disillusionment with feudalism and its lack of social mobility, this position argues that lower-class individuals deserve the same treatment as their noble counterparts, rejecting the previously-held idea that the claim to nobility only transfers through birthright.

Intriguingly, this logic mirrors the rationale used by Madame Roland and the other salon hostesses to justify their own ascent in society, for they sought to earn the advantages associated with active citizenship. To further her influence, Madame Roland also sought to attract prominent political leaders to her salons. In one case, she wrote a letter to the radical Maximilien Robespierre—a prominent and outspoken member of the Jacobin Club (and

⁹Dena Goodman, "Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22, no. 3 (1989): 331.

eventual leader of the totalitarian Reign of Terror)—confessing “the masses everywhere are good . . . but they are seduced or blind,” and academic Peter McPhee claims this “letter would have confirmed Robespierre’s judgement about the precarious road the Revolution had to travel before it would reach secure ground in the provinces.”¹⁰ Madame Roland’s revelation regarding the uncertain loyalties of rural France expertly appealed to Robespierre’s paranoid nature, hastening his radicalization, and it also served to encourage the Jacobin celebrity to visit the salon to further discuss these pressing concerns, boosting the stature of Madame Roland’s salon.

After learning how to counterfeit her husband’s signature, Madame Roland further exercised civic influence from her salon by editing correspondence with his name, such as the letter he wrote to Louis XVI calling for war with Austria. Boldly, the letter proclaims, “The Declaration of Rights became a political gospel, and the French constitution has become a religion for which the People are ready to perish.”¹¹ While researchers cannot undoubtedly attribute this text to Madame Roland, it strikingly demonstrates the monumental significance of the types of correspondence she accessed while her husband served as a minister to the King. The letter to the King echoed the Girondin calls for liberty, and Madame Roland certainly maximized her position as salon hostess to advocate for the civic abilities of the French people.

Unfortunately, after the formation of the Republic in 1792, a schism within the Revolutionary factions led to the end of Madame Roland and her salon of civic engagement. Based on the Girondins slight reluctance to abandon the monarchy, Robespierre and his Jacobin supporters “saw their enemies as ‘the most educated, the

¹⁰Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (Yale University Press, 2012), 110.

¹¹Jean-Marie Roland, *Jean-Marie Roland to King Louis XVI, June 1792*. Letter. Paris: Dupont, 1879–1913. From *Exploring the French Revolution* Project Staff, *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/423/> (accessed December 6, 2017).

most scheming, the cleverest,' who, Robespierre declared, 'favor with all their power the rich egoists and the enemies of equality.'"¹² Caught in the crosshairs of the paranoia she helped instill in Robespierre, Madame Roland suddenly and violently found both herself and the Girondin faction the enemy of the Revolution she originally supported. In his biography of Madame Roland, John S. C. Abbott reveals "Great efforts had for some time been made, by his [Jean-Marie Roland's] adversaries, to turn the tide of popular hatred against him, and especially against his wife, whom Danton and Robespierre recognized and proclaimed as the animating and inspiring soul of the Girondist party."¹³ Due to the immense stature Madame Roland established for herself through her Girondin salon, Robespierre and Danton devised a complicated conspiracy to strip her of her clout—a testament to her influence—which eventually culminated in her execution.

Ironically, the civic engagement she actively pursued in order to contribute to the development of the new France ultimately warranted her execution in the minds of the Jacobins. In his description of the coup against the Girondins, witness Louis-Marie Prudhomme announced, "A good woman and citizen is far removed from those women who run through the streets under a banner that is not one of decency and civic responsibility"¹⁴ Threatened by the increasing influence of liberated and increasingly independent women such as Madame Roland and other salon hostesses, the ruthless, paranoid Jacobin faction launched a bloody offensive with the violent Reign of Terror in order to consolidate power. Betraying the aspirations of the original French Revolutionaries who aspired to increase civic

¹²Roland N. Stromberg, "The Philosophes and the French Revolution: Reflections on Some Recent Research," *The History Teacher* 21, no. 3 (1988): 330.

¹³John S. C. Abbott, *Madame Roland, Makers of History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904), 174. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28445/28445-h/28445-h.htm>.

¹⁴Louis-Marie Prudhomme, "Prudhomme's Description of the Coup against the Girondins (31 May–2 June 1793)," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/394>.

engagement, the Jacobins murdered influential women in order to secure their own government.

Most notably, this Jacobin attack against the Girondins triggered a major backlash against women in general, dramatically hindering their newfound capacity for civic engagement. Following the notion that women and politics must remain separate, one official decree from October 1793 stated, “The clubs and popular societies of women, under whatever denomination, are prohibited.”¹⁵ With this decree, women lost their primary mode of exercising civic influence, for the salons offered women their first chance to actively learn from current political leaders and exchange ideas openly with them. Cruelly, this rule imposed isolation on women, gravely crippling their ability to engage with society.

Less than one month after this decree, politician Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette delivered a speech condemning female activists, in which he threatened “Remember that haughty wife of a foolish and treacherous spouse, the *Roland woman*, who thought herself suited to govern the republic and who raced to her death...Is it for women to make motions?”¹⁶ Citing the politically-motivated execution of Madame Roland, Chaumette hoped to frighten a group of women wearing red liberty caps into submission. This position marked a concerted effort to expunge women from the public sphere—a sinister development of the Terror. Examining the social factors contributing to the French Revolution, Jack R. Censer solemnly reflects that the new, individualistic society of the French Revolution “allowed women to compete for political attention in the Revolution and beyond. To

¹⁵Fabre d’Eglantine, “Discussion of Women’s Political Clubs and Their Suppression, 29–30 October 1793,” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/294>.

¹⁶Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette, “Chaumette, Speech at City Hall Denouncing Women’s Political Activism (17 November 1793),” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/489>.

be sure, in the end, disapproval from men—oppression—pushed women out of public debate (as well as from holding positions).”¹⁷

Although the liberating ideals that fueled the Revolution led more women to participate in political discussions and maneuvers, leaders of the Revolution ultimately betrayed these values. These oppressive men—fearful of the new potentials for female authority and eager to preemptively silence voices potentially critical of their political goals—aggressively undermined the female-hosted salons, dismantling women’s primary mode of learning and engaging with civics. Despite the ceaseless toil of salon pioneers such as Madame Roland, the growing presence of women in the public sphere frightened the men in power into significantly crippling women’s capacity for civic engagement.

Ultimately, the French Revolution offered women the unprecedented opportunity to actively engage with civic life through the popularity of their salons, and Madame Roland’s influential career captures the tempestuous spirit of civic engagement during the political upheaval of the Revolution. With the impassioned discussions of universal human rights prevalent in the public sphere at the beginning of the Revolution, inspired French women—with the aid of their recently enhanced public platforms—began joining the general citizenry in advocating for the expansion of political rights. Furthering this trend, at the start of the National Assembly, French hostesses transformed their salons into invaluable gathering sites for politicians planning legislative proposals and votes, securing women’s role in legislative deliberations. Soon, the hostesses of these salons realized they could exercise a certain degree of influence over the men in attendance, thus expanding women’s role in facilitating the public dialogue and political action. Madame Roland exemplified these salon hostesses by providing a meeting space for the Revolutionary Girondin faction and manipulating her husband’s

¹⁷Jack R. Censer, “Amalgamating the Social in the French Revolution,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 148.

correspondence in effort to influence public policy. Disastrously, this progress of female participation in civic life triggered a massive retaliation, with women achieving enough prominence in society to make the once-supportive Jacobins—who benefitted from the female-hosted salons to secure power—fear their political influence. In response to this paranoid fear, the paranoid Jacobins—whilst retaliating against their opposition groups (and outright executing the Girondins)—banned women from organizing to protest, stunting women’s political development and severely hindering women’s newly accessed public influence. However, despite these significant setbacks, the French Revolution proved to women that they possessed the same aptitude for civic engagement as the noteworthy men in their salons, setting the stage for their continued progress in French society.