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Rob Wohl

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Shifting the Spotlight: A Review of *The Revolutionists*

Rob Wohl

The historical play *The Revolutionists*, put on by the Santa Clara Department of Theatre and Dance, details the struggle of four women during the French Revolution. Many ideas we view as axiomatic today, such as political equality for women and freedom from traditional gender roles, were subjects of intense debate during the time in which these women lived. Even today, such ideas have only really been widely accepted for a few decades. Modern gender equality is still much more de jure than de facto, with unwritten biases pervading every sector of society. The women of the French Revolution were incredibly progressive for their time and are an often-overlooked aspect of the most important event of the early modern period. The play allows audiences to view their actions in simultaneously comedic and dramatic lights. Ultimately, the women of the French Revolution laid the groundwork for generations of future activists, even if, during their time, their ideas were left unheard.

It's hard to overstate the transformative nature of the French Revolution on Western political culture. Practically every tradition was up for debate. Revolutionaries openly questioned the authority of the Catholic Church (and, more broadly, the legitimacy of the Christian faith). With this came the rejection of the divine right of kings as the basis for legitimate governance. Inherited titles were done away with, and the monarchy's centuries-long rule was replaced by the first French republic.

While these changes were progressive, the Revolution was still a largely bourgeoisie-driven phenomenon. Recall the Estates-General system that preceded the Revolution. The First Estate represented the nobility, the Second Estate represented the clergy, and the Third Estate represented everyone else. The Third Estate itself was primarily represented by the rising upper-middle class. It was a political entity dominated by wealthy men. The

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Enlightenment-driven reforms served to largely further their interests, as opposed to those of the broader French populace and, importantly, women.

Paris immediately prior to and during the Revolution was still a hotbed of radical ideas bent on upending tradition. With the destruction of the throne that had existed since the days of Charlemagne came the destruction of the basic assumptions of the old European political system. The more radical among the Revolutionaries advocated for atheism, proto-socialist concepts, and women's rights.¹

This is where the four protagonists of *The Revolutionists* come into frame: Olympe de Gouges, Charlotte Corday, Marie Antoinette, and Marianne Angelle. All four represent different aspects of the Revolution, and all four have their own unique story to tell. The play mainly consists of dialogue between the four protagonists, covering the actions and motives of their historical selves. The play regularly intertwines each of their stories, while also individually highlighting unique aspects of revolutionary France and the people whom the revolution forgot. Their perspectives on each other serve to demonstrate the diversity of thought between them.

The character of Olympe de Gouges, played by Lucy Gilbert, highlights the vital importance of women to the intellectual life of the revolution. Her writing of the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* was a direct response to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, the famous civil liberties document written by the National Assembly in 1789. This document served to legitimate the concept of political equality between men and women and emphasized the National Assembly's

¹ Charles A. Gliozzo, "The Philosophes and Religion: Intellectual Origins of the Dechristianization Movement in the French Revolution," *Church History* 40, no. 3 (1971) 273–83; Nedinska Angelica Donaldson, "Rousseau's Contributions to Socialism," (Master's Thesis, Political Science, University of British Columbia, 2014).

lack of advancement of women's rights.² Her declaration would also ultimately get her killed, in real life and in the play, as she was executed for her writings by the Jacobins via the guillotine in 1793. Her inclusion in the play is well earned as she is one of the most influential female intellectual figures of her time.

The character of Charlotte Corday, played by Juliet Kulusic, highlights a more extreme end of female participation in the Revolution. She murdered Jean-Paul Marat, an influential Jacobin. She was a Girondin sympathizer and viewed Marat as a detriment to the revolutionary cause. The Jacobin versus Girondin divide was an important part of the Revolution and was largely split along geographic lines. The radical intellectual life behind the Revolution was centered around the salons of the upper classes of Paris, as opposed to the agrarian provincial countryside. As the Revolution progressed, some in the French provinces felt that it had gone too far. Some revolutionaries simply wanted a constitutional monarchy, or their staunch Catholicism made them oppose many of the anticlerical practices of the Jacobins. These moderate elements coalesced in the Girondins. Charlotte Corday, due to her gender, was largely blocked from the legitimate political channels available to men at the time. She solved this by resorting to assassination in order to realize her pro-Girondin political goals.

Marie Antoinette, played by Emma Lenza, is probably one of the most famous figures of the Revolution. Her character represents the excesses of Ancien Régime life, and she is often thought of as completely out-of-touch with the realities facing the people of France prior to the Revolution. The play, however, rightfully represents her as a more complex character. Her inclusion offers a unique perspective on the political situation in France prior to and during the revolution. While she was not a revolutionary, she was not responsible for the injustices of the Ancien Régime. It may even be fair to say she was a victim of it,

² Caroline Warman, ed., "Olympe De Gouges (1748-1793), Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, 1791," *Tolerance: The Beacon of the Enlightenment*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 49–51.

being shipped from her native Austria to be married off to the King of France as a teenager. Ultimately, she was an unfortunate victim of circumstance, and her inclusion allows her oft-overlooked perspective a chance to be heard.

Marianne Angelle, played by Naïma Fonrose, is a *gen de couleur* from the French colony of Saint-Domingue, or today's Haiti. As a composite, fictionalized character, she draws from multiple real-life inspirations and serves to highlight the political complexities of race and gender in revolutionary France, particularly with regard to Haiti. She is the wife of Vincent Ogé, a Haitian man of mixed African and French descent who violently agitated for voting rights for men of color and was ultimately executed for his actions. Her inclusion highlights the selective lens through which the egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution were seen. France's struggle to free itself from its king directly inspired the Haitian struggle for freedom from slavery and colonization, and the negative attitudes of many French revolutionaries towards Haiti lays bare their racist hypocrisy. Due to her background, her voice is a uniquely important one in the discussions among the four protagonists.

The Revolutionists covers a wide scope of individuals and perspectives involved in the French Revolution. It teaches us a valuable lesson when reading history: we must always consider which groups certain political movements neglect to mention. *The Revolutionists* turns the spotlight towards these marginalized voices, serving to bring their efforts to the forefront of the popular understanding of the French Revolution. The women of revolutionary France laid the ideological foundation for centuries of progress, and generations more of unborn activists of all genders and backgrounds will pay homage to them.

Author Bio:

Rob Wohl is currently a sophomore pursuing a double major in History and Political Science, in addition to a minor in Philosophy.

He enjoys studying nineteenth-century Europe and the role of political ideologies in shaping history.