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## Women and Gender in the French Revolution

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# **WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

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**Bard Masters of Art in Teaching Program  
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Nearly two hundred thirty years ago, French citizens rose up against centuries-old institutions such as feudalism and absolute monarchy to redesign the political landscape of their country. They brought the regime of King Louis XVI, part of a royal family that ruled France for nearly a millennium, to an end, overthrowing it in favor of Republicanism. Like the American Revolution before it, the French Revolution was influenced by Enlightenment ideals, particularly the concepts of popular sovereignty and inalienable rights. The upheaval caused by this transformational event would forever change the social, political, and cultural face of the country, as well as have a lasting impact on political, social and cultural developments throughout Western Europe and the New World. This event, known as the French Revolution, lasted from 1789 to 1799 and is referred to by most history books as the watershed moment in modern European history. Although it failed to achieve all of its goals and at times degenerated into a chaotic bloodbath, the movement played a critical role in shaping modern nations by showing the world the power inherent in the will of the people.

Much has been written on the subject of the French Revolution in the more than two hundred years since its occurrence, making it one of the most written-about events in modern history. As a result, the historiography of the French Revolution is both extremely complex and difficult to briefly and succinctly summarize. Accounts of the Revolution started to appear while it was unfolding beginning in the 1790's with early interpretations by two key contemporary British observers, neither of whom were historians. Conservative, Anglo-Irish politician, and philosopher Edmund Burke was an early critic of the Revolution, while the more liberal, English political journalist Thomas Paine was in favor of it. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of history as a serious modern academic discipline, and the French Revolution, an incident within living memory, was an early object of professional historical curiosity. Accounts

from this period continued along a conservative-liberal divide but began to include actual histories of the Revolution written by historians such as Thomas Carlyle, Francois Mignet, Jules Michelet, and Adolphe Thiers.

With the arrival of the twentieth-century came two main competing schools of thought that have defined historical scholarship on the French Revolution ever since. In the twentieth anniversary edition of her 1984 book, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*<sup>1</sup>, Lynn Hunt describes the main focus of the scholarly debates among historians from these two school as being primarily concerned with long-term origins and outcomes, rather than on the revolutionary experience itself.<sup>2</sup> The first of these two interpretations came about in the beginning of the twentieth century when historians began applying Karl Marx's ideas about class struggle and social and economic development to the revolution. In essence, the Marxist approach views the French Revolution as being marked by class conflict. It was a bourgeois revolution led by an alliance between the bourgeois elite and popular classes against the landowning nobility. It was not simply a political struggle from an absolute monarchy to democratic republicanism but represented a deeper shift from feudalism to capitalism. Marxists also viewed the Terror as a necessary action for the success of the Revolution. The most well-known scholars in the Marxist school include Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, and Albert Soboul. The Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution dominated the historiography of the revolution for decades, though it has since been largely discredited.

Beginning in the 1960's, historians such as Alfred Cobban and George Taylor began to question the Marxist argument, leading to an enormous shift in the scholarship of the French

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 3.

Revolution. This gave rise to a new, revisionist interpretation and heralded the near total collapse of the “classic” Marxist version. Revisionist historians refuted the Marxist view by claiming that the French Revolution could not be seen as a bourgeois revolution which destroyed feudal political structures. They insisted that class struggle played little role in the Revolution and that it had nothing much to do with the development of capitalism. The Revisionist interpretation is difficult to summarize, since within this new analysis were multiple schools of thought, which were divided both intellectually and geographically. One specific area of disagreement among Revisionists is concerns the Terror. However, some generalizations can be made in that Revisionists share a disagreement with the Marxist view and a shared effort to replace it with other social causes and effects of the French Revolution. Their view of the Revolution is also more pessimistic and takes note of the fact that many of the revolutionaries were members of the class they were supposed to be overthrowing. In spite of the differences of opinion and analyses between the Marxist and Revisionist schools of thought, they are similar in that they both, in the end, are chiefly focused on origins and outcomes of the French Revolution.

In Hunt’s view, “Because current interpretive debates focus on the analysis of origins and outcomes, it is not surprising that research efforts have been increasingly devoted to the periods preceding and following the revolutionary decade.” She does allow that there has been some research done on the revolutionary decade but points out that it failed to make much of an impact on the contours of historiographical debate about the Revolution.<sup>3</sup> French Historian, François Furet, another noted Revisionist historian, made waves when he announced that the French Revolution had ended in the late 1970’s. Furet’s concentration on political and intellectual theories for the French Revolution was a major contribution to the Revisionist interpretation. By

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<sup>3</sup> Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 7-8.

studying more carefully the meaning of revolutionary rhetoric, Furet ignited new interest in the cultural history of the revolution, and the relationship of the Enlightenment to the French Revolution was resurrected into a burning issue for debate and controversy. In the 1980's, as cultural studies grew in strength in the universities especially in the US, a new interpretation arose. This post-revisionist movement preferred to use the archival evidence and documents of the Revolution to focus more on ideas, discourse and linguistic interpretations of these sources, rather than on people and events.

The late twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of the study of women's history, gender history, and a feminist scholarship in which new and important questions were being raised about women's status and experience in the past. Women's history was first expressed as a feature of the women's liberation movement in the 1970's and was part of a broad feminist strategy to question the field of history's masculinist perspective. Author and historian John Tosh points out that these new studies demonstrated that women had not only a separate history of their own but that they were an integral part of history as whole.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as Karen Offen explains in her historiographical article, "The New Sexual Politics of French Revolutionary Historiography"<sup>5</sup>, the Bicentennial of the French Revolution stimulated an extensive reexamination of women's relationship to the Revolution leading to new works that reflect the impact of questions raised by the study of women's history and by feminist scholarship since its birth as a field of study. She describes the new scholarly and popular books and articles that appeared as offering a wide range of approaches from individual and collective biographies to investigations of women's collective action in revolutionary events, and from reexamination of

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<sup>4</sup> John Tosh, "Gender History and Postcolonial History," in *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 230.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Offen, "The New Sexual Politics of French Revolutionary Historiography" In *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Autumn 1990).

women's claims for full citizenship to issues of symbolic reconfigurations of gender (both pictorial and literary). In Offen's view, this new scholarship has raised untold questions about the need to revise our overall understanding of the French Revolution and its place in the history of France and the Western world.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will take a close look at six monographs that were, with the exception of one, all written and published around the time of the Bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989. These volumes, while very unlike, are highly complementary, often reinforcing one another at many junctures despite their differences in style, emphasis, and objective. First under consideration will be Joan B. Landes's book, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*,<sup>7</sup> published in 1988. Landes endeavors to trace the birth of modern feminism to the silencing of the politically influential women of the Old Regime court and salons and to women's expulsion from public participation during and after the French Revolution. Through overlapping areas of current research in women's studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies, Landes connects the changes in women's roles to a shift in systems of cultural representation during the era of the classical bourgeois public sphere, which she dates to the period 1750-1850. Landes juxtaposes readings of women in Montesquieu and Rousseau, analyses of paintings by David, and the writings of Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others, as well as of women's clubs, dress, magazines and language. Her main argument is that the bourgeois organization of public life in the new French Republic instituted after the fall of absolutism was constructed against women, not just without them.<sup>8</sup> Landes also argues that feminist theory and practice can offer important historical and theoretical vantage points from which to take a new

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<sup>6</sup> Offen, "The New Sexual Politics of French Revolutionary Historiography," 909-911.

<sup>7</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Landes, 12.



look at the emergence of this modern public. By doing so, she believes it is possible to see that the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public was not incidental but was, in fact, central to its character.<sup>9</sup>

Lynn Hunt mentions her indebtedness to Landes's analysis for her 1992 book *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*.<sup>10</sup> In it, Hunt co-opts the Freudian theory of "family romance" for her own purposes to use as a metaphor to explain the political events and ideas that informed and resulted from the French Revolution. Put simply, Hunt views the political Revolution as an enormous dysfunctional family haunted by patricide, with King Louis XVI as father, Queen Marie-Antoinette as mother, and the revolutionaries as an unruly mob of brothers. Hunt points out that in eighteenth century Europe, it was quite typical for people to view their rulers as fathers and their nations as a kind of family and argues that Revolutionary family romances were a creative attempt effort on the part of the French people to reimagine their political world. She suggests that much of this imaginative effort went on below the surface of conscious political discourse.<sup>11</sup> Although women are not the sole subject of her book, Hunt devotes a significant number of pages to the revolutionaries' struggle to establish what role women would play in the new social order. Hunt argues that women had little agency and were viewed as objects of desire or threats. The Revolution relegated women to the sidelines in favor of the fraternity of sons that had overthrown the father and had now taken control.

Madelyn Gutwirth's *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era*,<sup>12</sup> also attributes Landes's previous work as essential to her own

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<sup>9</sup> Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

thesis. Gutwirth, a literary specialist, combines perspectives from literature, history, sociology, demography, psychology, art history and criticism to show evidence that delineates a crisis in gender relations during the eighteenth century. She traces its evolution in the politics of rococo art, demographic trends, folklore, the salon, and in the theater of Diderot to illustrate how women, once depicted as erotic goddesses by the rococo, then as goddesses of liberty (Marianne), eventually came to be represented by the dominant representation of the dying waif by 1800. Gutwirth argues that a hostile gender ideology consigned women to a solely mothering role before the political revolution began, and how women who struggled to participate in politics were hobbled by the representational practices of the revolutionaries. Some of the visual representations of women and topics covered by her are identical to ones used by Hunt such as the *libelles* against Marie Antoinette, paintings by David and popular cartoons, and medical tracts by Roussel and Cabanis. Gutwirth argues that for women, the Revolution was a social and political defeat bearing almost no resemblance to the men's Revolution.

While Hunt frames her discussion of the Revolution's political unconscious as a family romance, Gutwirth has chosen the binary of equality versus difference. Joan Wallach Scott's *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*,<sup>13</sup> another monograph analyzed in this paper, cautions against this approach. She states, "By writing the history of feminism as if it were simply a matter of choosing the right strategy - equality or difference - we imply that one or another of these options was actually available, that closure or resolution was and is ultimately attainable."<sup>14</sup> In Scott's view, either position assigns fixed and opposing identities to women and men, implicitly endorsing the premise that there can be an authoritative

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<sup>13</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Scott, 17.

definition for sexual difference. For her part, Scott attempts to rethink the history of French feminism by looking at specific campaigns for women's political rights in France from 1789 to 1944. Scott concentrates on women's exclusion from the political arena during this period of time, the gendering of citizenship as a common theme in French political discourse, and the paradoxical quality of feminists' claims for rights. She argues that in order to protest their exclusion from politics and citizenship, women were forced to make paradoxical arguments in that their actions on behalf of women invoked the very differences they sought to deny. This paper will focus exclusively on Scott's chapter devoted to Olympe de Gouges and her demands during the French Revolution, that women be made citizens on the same basis as men. Scott writes, "De Gouges's challenge - to represent women as citizens - engaged with a troubling and far-reaching discussion among revolutionaries about the political and philosophical meanings of representation."<sup>15</sup> Scott reveals how feminists' claims revealed the limits of and raised doubts about the universal application of the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. She also points to how the political idea of the abstract individual, founded as a system of universal inclusion against the monarchical and aristocratic hierarchies, could also be used to exclude those who deemed different.<sup>16</sup>

Another area of overlap between Scott and Gutwirth concerns the female breast. Gutwirth devotes an entire chapter to it. Scott argues that for the Jacobins, women's entire social function could be read literally from her body's reproductive organs and specifically, from the external organ of her breasts. She writes, "The breast was synecdoche for women; it appeared with great frequency in Jacobin speeches and iconography (as Madelyn Gutwirth has so amply

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<sup>15</sup> Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, 6.

demonstrated).”<sup>17</sup> In spite of the credit she assigns to Gutwirth, on the following page, Scott writes that when women were definitively excluded from politics, their bodies were represented with obsessive frequency, most typically as nursing mothers. In her footnote, Scott points out that she is expressly disagreeing with Gutwirth, and others, who read the breast in these representations as phallic.<sup>18</sup> Gutwirth notes that Rousseau’s urging that mothers nurse their infants was the impetus to limiting women’s activity to the role of wife and mother<sup>19</sup>. Gutwirth sees women’s attempts to exploit the obsession with biological maternity as potential progress in that they were opening a wedge to try to break out of the narrower roles prescribed to them to find broader and less constricted ways to contribute to the state.

Another work considered in this paper will be Marilyn Yalom’s *Blood Sisters: The Revolution in Women’s Memory*,<sup>20</sup> published in 1993, in which she expanded on research she began with her earlier book, *Le Temps de orages; Aristocrates, bourgeoises, et paysannes racontent*,<sup>21</sup> published in 1989 in France. It is a bit of an outlier in that it uses the words of individual women to paint a portrait of the French Revolution. Yalom mines the eighty or so memoirs written by women to record their memories of the Revolution. Two-thirds of these women were against the revolution based on their positions as aristocrats, while a couple maintained a pro-revolutionary stance. Yalom explains this imbalance by remarking that a greater number of the aristocracy possessed any literacy skills.<sup>22</sup> She explains that by presenting the memoirs of women who wrote about their experiences, her goal is to restore the vision of its

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<sup>17</sup> Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> Gutwirth, 344.

<sup>20</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *Blood Sisters: The Revolution in Women’s Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *Le Temps de orages; Aristocrates, bourgeoises, et paysannes racontent* (Paris: Maren Sell, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, 2.

women to the Revolution's historiography.<sup>23</sup> She attempts to justify this further by stating that, "Their written memories add suffering faces to the canvas of lofty thinkers and fiery orators who dominate traditional historiography of the Revolution."<sup>24</sup> Yalom refers to herself as a feminist scholar who is concerned with the experiences of women and a biographer who views these female memoirists as her long-time companions, since they have long occupied space in her head.

Like Yalom, Scott's book also focuses on individual women and one could argue that Olympe de Gouges was one of the lofty thinkers and fiery orators that Yalom made reference to as dominating the historiography. Scott, though, is careful to explain that she is not writing a biography of the women who campaigned for female citizenship, as she does not believe that the personal life experiences of women provide sufficient explanation for feminist politics. She writes, "Biography tends to focus too narrowly on the circumstances of individuals, reducing the thoughts and actions of women to their personal life stories, neglecting the complex determinations of language (the social/cultural means by which subjects come into being)."<sup>25</sup> Scott goes further to say that she does not view these women as "exemplary heroines" but instead as historical locations or markers where culturally decisive contests are played out and can be examined. Yalom, on the other hand, makes her views on the women memoirists clear when she writes, "I have chosen, whenever possible, to frame the words of the women with a minimum of analysis, in the belief that, whatever their class, level of education, or political loyalties, they speak eloquently of the human, and specifically female, ability to mine disaster for its redemptive ore."<sup>26</sup> Yalom's title *Blood Sisters* would also seek to demonstrate a false unity

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<sup>23</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, x.

<sup>24</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, 242.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, 12.

among women of radically different class and political positions. She writes, “Aristocrats and bourgeois women, royalists and republicans, even the few peasant and working-class women who dictated accounts of their experiences, all were bound together by a common nightmare.”<sup>27</sup> Scott, on the other hand, notes that for some, the common experience of being excluded from politics has sometimes been mistaken for a shared vision of the meaning of being female.<sup>28</sup>

The final and most recently published monograph I will focus on also asks questions about the relationship between the family, politics, and the state during the French Revolution. Suzanne Desan’s *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*,<sup>29</sup> published nearly a decade after Hunt’s book, is somewhat similar in her agreement that the internal dynamics of the family and the politics of the state paralleled and reinforced each other. And like Hunt, Desan argues that the Revolution offered the perfect arena in which to remake the family and gender relationships, allowing revolutionaries to use the family to examine the most fundamental questions they were grappling with while forging their new republic. One crucial difference between these two books is that while Hunt is using the family as a metaphor to examine and discuss larger political issues, Desan’s interest seems to be much more centered on analyzing the social revolution that occurred within the home. In particular, Desan aims to explore issues of marriage and divorce, inheritance, and paternity and illegitimacy. Hunt and Desan also use different sources in their works. Hunt uses a variety of sources such as speeches and newspaper accounts about the execution of the king to paintings and engravings of ordinary families to interpretations by scholarly works. Desan’s study relies on both nationwide and local sources as she believes that only by an in-depth study of specific areas can changes in domestic relations and attitudes be

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<sup>27</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

detected in order to gradually build a portrait of the whole.<sup>30</sup> She seeks to intertwine cultural and social approaches by concentrating on gender and political culture, while still paying attention to questions about social dynamics and legal and economic structures she feels are often ignored by other revolutionary historians.<sup>31</sup>

Nearly all of these monographs can be said to fit in with a new stream of feminist scholarship on the French Revolution identified in a 1992 historiographic essay written by historian Dena Goodman. She writes, “In recent years a feminist historiography has emerged to challenge the notion that the French Revolution was a liberating moment in the history of women just because it is seen as one in the history of man.” Not only does Goodman identify Landes’s work as being at the forefront of works in this new school of thought, she also credits her with refocusing the attention of historians, such as Hunt and Scott, on it.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, nearly all of the other authors in this paper consider cite Landes’s analysis and theories as influential on their own studies. A commonly held belief associated with gender throughout the history of Western political and social thought, as well as Western institutions and practices, is that there have been separate public and private spheres. In feminist historical accounts, the persistent exclusion of women from public roles, power and citizenship is repeatedly asserted. As it relates specifically to the eighteenth century, the subject of the dynamic relationship between public and private spheres and the construction of the “domestic woman” have been areas of interest relating to women and the French Revolution. As historian John Tosh points out, there were ideological conflicts in these accounts resulting from interpretive differences. One group of women even emphasized the controlling power of the patriarchy and the corresponding victimhood of women,

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<sup>30</sup> Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Desan, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Dena Goodman, “Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime” In *History and Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 1992): 14.

whereas another put a more positive spin on women's domestic confinement, as it were. This group argued that subservience to men did not inhibit them from developing a more autonomous women's culture (or "sisterhood") which allowed for a later development in feminist awareness.<sup>33</sup>

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is often most closely associated with public sphere theory in the form of his influential work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*<sup>34</sup>, originally published in German in 1962. Although not a concept that is easy to articulate, in its simplest form, Habermas's definition of the public sphere is that it is an area of life where private individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through their discussions influence the political process. Landes's book uses Habermas's theory as the framework for nearly all of her arguments. She attempts to reconsider and reconstruct Habermas's initial thesis on the public sphere from the perspective of both women and feminism in order to address these omissions and to propose some revisions based on these new considerations.<sup>35</sup> This is an important distinction since many feminists, including most of the other authors I focus on in this paper, use the expression "public sphere" to refer to everything that is outside the domestic or familial sphere, which is otherwise known as the "private sphere."

Landes argues that the republic that rose from the ashes of the Old Regime was a gendered republic, despite the universalist language of its male creators, resulting in a male public sphere and a female private one. The legacy of the French Revolution for women was, therefore, a life of domesticity, and the two centuries of feminism that have followed are

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<sup>33</sup> Tosh, "Gender History and Postcolonial History," 230-231.

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, transl. Marc B. de Launay (Paris: Payot, 1978).

<sup>35</sup> Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 7.



women's struggle to re-enter the public sphere from which the Revolution expelled them.<sup>36</sup> For Landes, the relationship between feminism and republicanism is paradoxical in that feminism emerged concomitantly with a specific, highly gendered bourgeois male discourse that depended on women's domesticity and the silencing of 'public' women, of the aristocratic and popular classes.<sup>37</sup> Landes contends that under the absolute monarchy of the Old Regime, political culture was represented by the personalized iconic imagery of the father/king. This imagery gave way in bourgeois thought to a more symbolic system of representation based on speech, writing, and the law. According to Landes, "I ask about the gender preferences of those who inhabit the bourgeois public sphere and propose that the central categories of bourgeois thought – universal reason, law, and nature – are embedded in an ideologically sanctioned order of gender differences and public-private spheres which ground the institutional and cultural geography of the new public sphere."<sup>38</sup> For Hunt, the execution of King Louis XVI was the most important political act of the Revolution. Therefore she seems to agree with Landes when she asserts, "Once the power of fathers as fathers is destroyed, the original political right of men over women is concealed by relegating it to the nonpolitical realm of the familial and private."<sup>39</sup> By cunning transformation, patriarchy is preserved as a mechanism for the continued subjugation of women.

Indeed, Landes's entire outlook rests upon the relationship between the public and private and forms the crux of her arguments since it is to this private, domestic sphere where she insists men relegated women because of the Revolution. Scott's account of de Gouges also uses Habermas's idea of the "the public" to identify a body that had a literate opinion as an institutional counter to the absolute royal authority. Additionally, she seems to agree with Landes

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<sup>36</sup> Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 199-202.

<sup>37</sup> Landes, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Landes, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 201.

that during the Old Regime, aristocratic salonnieres and women of the court influenced politics and could participate in public debates. Scott does, however, point out the limited credibility of these women to speak about political matters, and that it was something of which even de Gouges was conscious.<sup>40</sup> Hunt also pushes back on Landes's argument by pointing out how even the most militantly political women subscribed to the ideal of the virtuous republican mother, whose most important role was to birth, foster, and educate the new generation of patriots. She also discusses the women's clubs that were eventually shut down around the time of the Terror. Hunt maintains that these clubs, though they fostered women's independent political activity, almost always confined themselves to the pursuit of general revolutionary or republican objectives, rather than to any explicit feminist goals.<sup>41</sup>

Hunt focuses on the concept of separate public and private spheres further when she argues that Marie-Antoinette was emblematic of the much larger problem of the relation between women and the public sphere in the eighteenth century since her position placed her in the strategic position of being on the cusp between public and private.<sup>42</sup> This point is effectively argued in Hunt's discussion of the idea of dissimulation, something Marie-Antoinette was charged with at her trial. She was accused of having taught the king how to dissimulate, that is, how to promise one thing in public and plan another in the shadows of the court. In eighteenth century France, this ability to conceal one's true emotions, to act one way in public and another in private was repeatedly criticized not only as being the chief characteristic of court life and of the aristocracy in general, but also as an inherently feminine quality. On the contrary, Hunt describes another problem in that, "Women acting in the public sphere...were likened to beasts;

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<sup>40</sup> Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 122-123.

<sup>42</sup> Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 90.

they lost their femininity and with it their humanity.<sup>43</sup> This tendency to view women in the public sphere as inhuman and not feminine does much to explain the pornographic and derogatory treatment of the Queen in art and literature.

Most of the authors in this paper are in agreement with Hunt that Marie-Antoinette was a symbol upon whom the people's fury and hatred could be focused. Gutwirth, in particular, writes, "For resentful non-aristocratic men, the class privilege of such women - especially the nonsexual powers of influence of the queen - are perceived as an affront to their masculine pride, which entitles them to judge women of every class according to their sexual worth." Gutwirth calls her a "catch-all woman-at-the-summit" who was seen as a monster, and the product and instrument of a plot whose origin was essentially feminine. She also agrees with Hunt in that Marie Antoinette served as a source of unity.<sup>44</sup> Hunt points out that by attacking Marie Antoinette, republican men were able to reinforce their bonds to each other. She goes a step further by arguing that republican ideals of virtue were based on a notion of fraternity in which women were relegated to the realm of domesticity and any intrusion of the feminine into the public was violently rejected.<sup>45</sup> Gutwirth also identifies Marie Antoinette as providing women a way to demonstrate their solidarity with men in sexual matters. She says that for women to despise the "Austrian whore" was to give a sign not only of their national loyalty, but also of their personal purity.<sup>46</sup>

Yalom contributes to this conversation with her contention that the women who wrote about their lives during the Revolution did so because they recognized the public significance of their personal experiences and wished to be seen as active participants in public events. She

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<sup>43</sup> Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 116.

<sup>44</sup> Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses*, 232.

<sup>45</sup> Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Gutwirth, 243.

asserts that their stories describe how these women sought to participate, individually and collectively, in the revolutionary saga, and succeed in manipulating a political system designed to exclude them.<sup>47</sup> By the very act of recording their memories, she argues, these women were attempting, in their own way, to speak out against the intrusion of the public events upon their private lives while also refusing to be relegated to the traditional feminine roles of passivity and silence.<sup>48</sup> The memoirs in Yalom's book seem to illustrate a blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private as the Revolution saw some of these women assume extraordinary public positions while they maintained their allegiance to their traditional roles of private domesticity. Simultaneously, it demonstrates that women found their own ways to emerge from their domestic habitat by interweaving their private histories with the larger story of the French Revolution. Yalom takes it further by implying a collective confusion on the part of these women as to the location of the line demarcating their personal stories and national history. She is a perfect example of the aforementioned tendency of some feminists to use the term "private" to refer to anything linked to the domestic or familial sphere.

By emphasizing family and politics in her book, Desan states that her work challenges prevailing assumptions about the impact of the Revolution on gender and on women. Most notably, she questions the dominant hypothesis, most forcefully articulated by Joan Landes in Desan's view. This hypothesis holds that the Revolution laid the foundations for domesticity by excluding women from politics and mandating a more private role for them. In addition to Landes, Desan targets Gutwirth, Hunt, and Scott as she describes a conjuncture of interpretation that came together in the 1990's that offered a set of shared assumptions about the centrality of the Revolution in defining public politics as a male domain and domesticity as a female one.

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<sup>47</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Yalom, *Blood Sisters*, 241.

Desan takes issue with Hunt's argument that after the patriarchal model of politics and family had been overthrown, male revolutionaries supported female domesticity out of fear of social disorder and sexual dedifferentiation. While she acknowledges that there have been questions about the public-private dichotomy and the diversity in women's political engagement during the French Revolution, Desan describes these authors' theses as assigning a vital role to republicanism in the construction of female domesticity.<sup>49</sup>

Desan claims that her research will offer a new interpretation to what she sees as this current understanding. By analyzing social practices and cultural attitudes, she argues that there were frequent instances in which women in certain positions in the family made use of the republican ideology, new laws, and new access to the state to challenge their former positions of domestic inferiority. To illustrate her argument, Desan specifically notes new family laws on divorce and egalitarian inheritance as offering women this chance. However, she states that she does not intend to argue one way or another that the Revolution was "good" rather than "bad" for women, but in her concentration on the family, in contrast to Hunt's, she focuses more on women in the "private" sphere without integrating their place in the "public." Another claim Desan makes is her statement that her book overturns the assumption that the Revolution's primary impact on women was to create domesticity and it requires a new look at the connections between gender and republicanism. Although women did not gain full rights to political participation during the Revolution, she rejects the idea that a simple sexual contract or inclusive private sphere bolstered democratic republicanism. Nor was the abstract individual necessarily imagined as male."<sup>50</sup> This appears to be a direct response by Desan to her reading of Scott's work in which she understands Scott's analysis to be of the exclusions built into liberal

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<sup>49</sup> Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Desan, 312-313.

universalism.<sup>51</sup> This is in spite of Scott's acknowledgement of the civil advancements of women in the realm of marriage granted by the Revolution.

Goodman, in her article is careful to point out that if the public and private spheres are indeed mutually exclusive categories of experience in today's world, they were not in the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century was a time in history during which public and private spheres were in the process of being articulated. She asserts that no stable distinction can or could be made between them because individuals needed to negotiate their actions, discursive and otherwise, across constantly shifting boundaries between ambiguously defined realms of experience. Her whole piece centers on the implications of drawing or avoiding what she sees as the false opposition between public and private spheres present in our understanding of the political culture of the Old Regime and Revolution. Goodman allows that Habermas's conception of the authentic public sphere is an extremely useful tool for understanding the role of the most visible women in the Old Regime. It might even provide a new direction for a feminist historiography that is not trapped within the public/private opposition, as she clearly feels that Landes's work.<sup>52</sup>

After careful examination of all six monographs, the argument that eighteenth century French women did not experience the same French Revolution as their male counterparts cannot be ignored. Desan's monograph, though it is fifteen years old, astutely points out the extremely complicated gender messages nineteenth century republicans inherited from the Revolution. I would hope that future studies in this vein of scholarship might tackle the question of what kind of Revolution these women did experience and how their lives were changed. Another area of for

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<sup>51</sup> Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime" In *History and Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 1992): 14.

possible further exploration would be a study solely on the men who were in favor of having women as part of the political sphere. Who were they? What did they believe? Most importantly, what did they have in common, if anything? Were women the only ones who experienced a “different” revolution from the one in the history books? While, it is a fact that women were not enfranchised in France until 1944, what changes did women experience, if any, in the Revolution of 1848? Even with the passage of more than two centuries, it is clear that there is much more to be revealed about the French Revolution.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a French writer and philosopher during the Age of Enlightenment. His political philosophy, particularly his ideas on liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty, had an enormous on French Revolution. Also influential on the French were Rousseau's ideas on women and the boundaries between women and men, as well as between the public and private. Rousseau was also a proponent of the role of nature in determining the differences between men and women. Over the centuries, Rousseau has been criticized heavily for his confinement of women to the "domestic" sphere. The excerpt below is from an essay he wrote in 1758:

*"Is there a sight in the world so touching, so respectable, as that of a mother surrounded by her children, directing the work of her domestics, procuring a happy life for her husband and prudently governing the home?...A home whose mistress is absent is a body without a soul which soon falls into corruption; a woman outside of her home loses her greatest luster, and, despoiled of her real ornaments, she displays herself indecently. If she has a husband, what is she seeking among men? If she does not, how can she expose herself to putting off, by an immodest bearing, he who might be tempted to become her husband? Whatever she may do, one feel that in public she is not in her place;...everywhere [in all the countries of the world], it is seen that, when they take on the masculine and firm assurance of the man And turn it into effrontery, they abase themselves by this odious imitation and Dishonor both their sex and ours."*

Source: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d'Alembert of the Theatre*, p.87-88, as cited in Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 85.



Olympe de Gouges was a French playwright and political activist whose writings reached large audiences. The *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* was published in 1791. It was modeled on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789, which de Gouges stated was not being applied to women. She addressed *Les Droits de la Femme* to Queen Marie Antoinette, hoping that the Queen could be converted to become principal spokeswoman for the cause of political rights for women. De Gouges followed the seventeen articles of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* point for point. The following excerpt is the postscript, which urges women to recognize the unequal ways they are treated in society and to take action to remedy those injustices. This excerpt is relevant to my sources because many of them contend that the women did not experience the same kind of Revolution that men did. It is clear from this postscript that even in 1791, that was painfully evident to Olympe de Gouges.

### Postscript

*Woman, wake up; the tocsin of reason is being heard throughout the whole universe; discover your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition, and lies. The flame of truth has dispersed all the clouds of folly and usurpation. Enslaved man has multiplied his strength and needs recourse to yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust to his companion. Oh, women, women! When will you cease to be blind? What advantage have you received from the Revolution? A more pronounced scorn, a more marked disdain. In the centuries of corruption you ruled only over the weakness of men. The reclamation of your patrimony, based on the wise decrees of nature-what have you to dread from such a fine undertaking? The bon mot of the legislator of the marriage of Cana? Do you fear that our French legislators, correctors of that morality, long ensnared by political practices now out of date, will only say again to you: women, what is there in common between you and us? Everything, you will have to answer. If they persist in their weakness in putting this non sequitur in contradiction to their principles, courageously oppose the force of reason to the empty pretensions of superiority; unite yourselves beneath the standards of philosophy; deploy all the energy of your character, and you will soon see these haughty men, not groveling at your feet as servile adorers, but proud to share with you the treasures of the Supreme Being. Regardless of what barriers confront you, it is in your power to free yourselves; you have only to want to....*

Source: Olympe De Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman," as cited in Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 92-94.

This excerpt is an anecdote describing the intimate details of the Queen's prison experience. It comes from the memoir of Rosalie Lamorlière. A native of Breteuil in Picardy, Lamorlière was hired in 1793 as a servant in the Conciergerie, the judicial palace and prison on the banks of the Seine from which the condemned were led to the guillotine. Lamorlière acted as servant to the Queen in her final days and hours. Attention to the Queen's person and body had given rise to polar extremes of idolatry and vilification during and after the French Revolution.

*"Finally, the dreadful day of October 15 arrived; at eight o'clock in the morning she went up to the court room to receive her sentence, and since I do not remember having given her any kind of food that day, I believe they made her go up on an empty stomach.*

*During the morning, I overheard several people talking about the session. They said: "Marie Antoinette will get off; she answered like an angel; they will only deport her."*

*Around four o'clock in the afternoon, the concierge said to me: "The session has been suspended for three quarters of an hour; the accused is not coming down; go up at once, they have asked for some bouillon."*

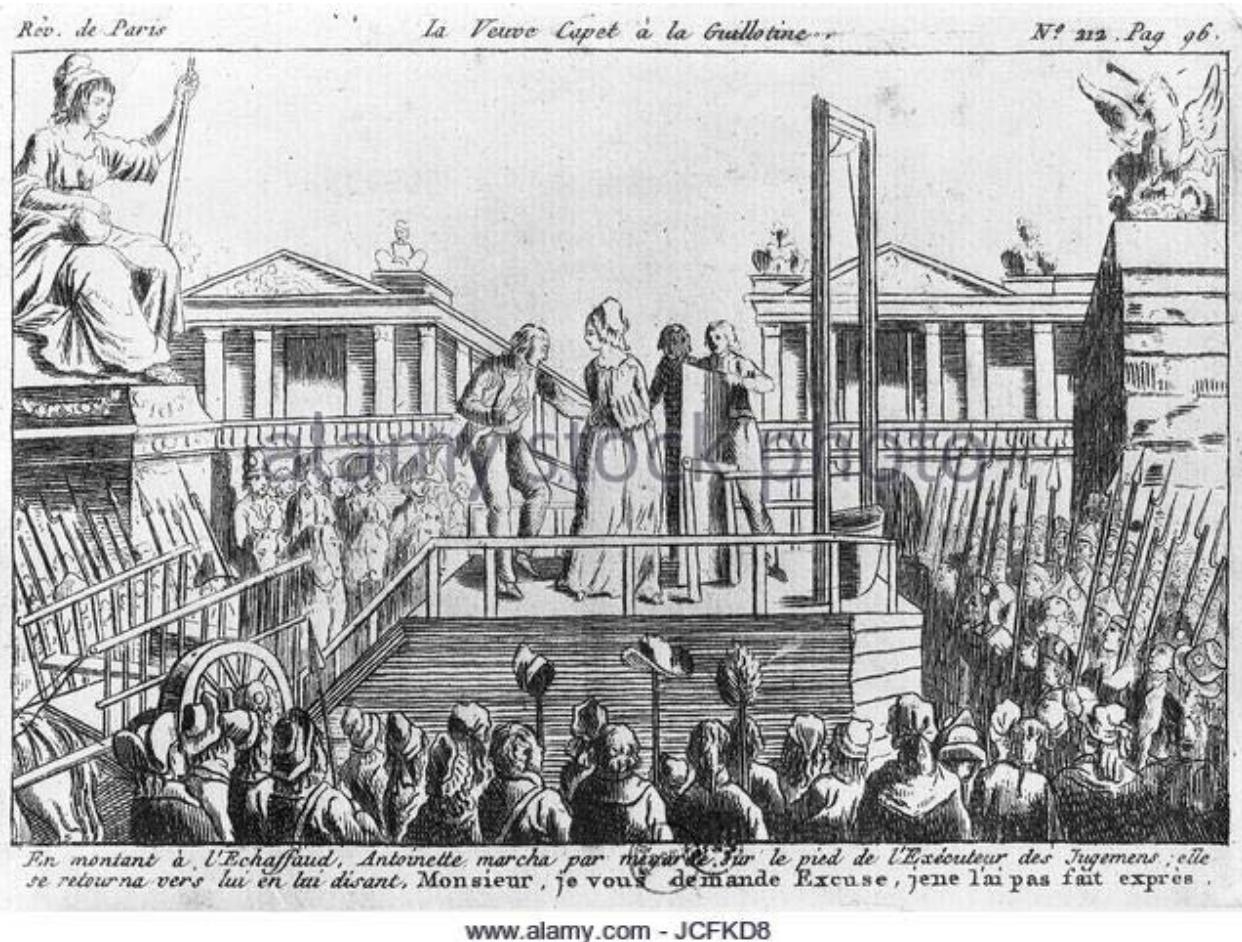
*I immediately took some excellent soup that I had been saving on my stove, and I went up toward the Queen.*

*As I was going into one of the rooms near her, one of the police commissioners named Labuzière, who was small and flat-nosed, grabbed my soup-tureen from my hands, and giving it to an extremely well-dressed young woman, he said to me: "This young woman has a great desire to see the Capet widow"...and that woman immediately withdrew carrying the half-spilled soup.*

*I begged and pleaded in vain with Labuzière. He was all-powerful, I had to obey. What must the Queen have thought receiving her soup from the hands of someone she did not know."*

Source: Rosalie Lamorlière, "La Dernière Prison de Marie-Antoinette" in *Récits des grands jours de l'histoire* (Paris: H. Gautier, 1897), pp. 75-91 as cited in Marilyn Yalom, *Blood Sisters: The Revolution in Women's Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 68.

The image below is a picture of an engraving of Marie Antoinette at the Guillotine from *Révolutions de Paris*, no. 212, 3 August - 28 October 28, 1793. It is titled “La Veuve Capet à la Guillotine” or “The Widow Capet at the Guillotine.” The caption below the picture recounts the story of when Marie Antoinette was mounting the scaffold to her death, she accidentally stepped on the foot of the executioner. She turned to him and said “Sir, please excuse me, I did not do it on purpose.” Also of note in this image are the presence of women among the spectators, and the statue of Liberty on the left who oversees the scene of execution.



Source: <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/marie-antoinette-execution.html>

This piece is entitled, “The Intervention of the Sabine Women,” by Jacques-Louis David. David was a member of the National Convention and a faithful partisan of Robespierre. In 1794, after Robespierre's downfall, David was imprisoned, and it was during this time that he began thinking about painting this subject. It was meant to demonstrate that he was a man of peace and thus in tune with the spirit of the age. The canvas, eagerly awaited by the Paris art world, was finished five years later in 1799. The central female figure, Hersilia, leads a group of Sabine women who put their own bodies between the Romans and the Sabines, forcing them to give up the fight. The women represented the dutiful, protective daughter, who intervenes to calm disputes between men. Women, who had been the object of struggle between men, now try to restore harmony themselves.



Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Intervention\\_of\\_the\\_Sabine\\_Women#/media/File:The\\_Intervention\\_of\\_the\\_Sabine\\_Women.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Intervention_of_the_Sabine_Women#/media/File:The_Intervention_of_the_Sabine_Women.jpg)



## Textbook Critique

The textbook chapters I chose to critique comprise the first two sections of Chapter 23, “The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789-1815,” from *World History: Patterns of Interaction* by McDougal Littell, Inc. published in 1999. The first section is entitled, “Revolution Threatens the French King,” and the second section is entitled, “Revolution Brings Reform and Terror.” Although the history of the French Revolution is complex and complicated, I feel that overall, the textbook does a nice job of covering the main points so that students can get an accurate picture of what happened. There is however a lot that is, understandably, left out. As my Academic Research Project focuses on women’s history and gender in the French Revolution, I tried to read these sections with that in mind. What I found was that this textbook account leaves much to be desired with respect to the story of women’s contributions to the Revolution.

Although these textbook sections do not leave women entirely out of the picture, they certainly do not feature heavily into the story. The main text sections rarely mention women except to say that they did not receive any of the rights that men did. It also relegates them to side notes, literally, by placing most information about them into special boxes on the side on the page, rather than in the main text. One might argue that this was done in an effort to have this information stand out to readers. I would argue the opposite. The boxes for Marie Antoinette and Olympe de Gouges are both labeled “History Makers,” which should imply exactly what the label says. However, each box gives only the briefest of descriptions of each woman and her achievements. If the textbook authors truly felt they were “History Makers,” which indeed they are, they could have and should have devoted more text and more space to them in the main text instead of in boxes. The current view seems to make them more into mere footnotes on the periphery than anything else.

Since I've spent quite some time with my six monographs, it is difficult not to want to rewrite the entire section to be solely about women and all of the reasons they were denied political rights, but that would not be historically accurate. I must allow that men did play a significant role in the French Revolution. I have done my best to add in the information I felt was most pertinent which keeping the Revolution itself center stage. I made sure to point out the contradiction between Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau's views on equality and women. I did my best to flesh out Marie Antoinette and Olympe de Gouges a little more so that they appeared in the main text of the chapter sections, as well as to add in a bit about Charlotte Corday. If appropriate, I included anything that I could related to women. I was unsure whether a textbook was an appropriate place for discussions of discourse and patriarchy. I tried to stay closer to the facts.

## **THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (NEW OFFERING OF TEXTBOOK SECTION)**

### **SETTING THE STAGE**

France, in the 1700's, had a large population and a prosperous foreign trade. It was also the center of the Enlightenment. Thought to be most advanced country in Europe, France served as a model for the rest of the world. However, appearances were deceiving because high prices, high taxes, and difficult questions raised by Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Voltaire were causing unrest to grow.

### **THE OLD REGIME**

In the 1770's, while the **Old Regime** - a system of inequality based on feudalism left over from the Middle Ages - was still in place, the people of France were separated into three social classes, known as **estates**.

#### **The Privileged Estates**

The First Estate, or clergy, numbered around 130,000 (out of a total population of 27 million) and owned about 10 percent of the land. There were sharp divisions among the clergy. The higher clergy - cardinals, bishops, and heads of monasteries - were from noble families and shared their outlook and interests. The parish priests were often poor and from the class of commoners. The First Estate provided education and relief services to the poor and contributed about 2 percent of its income to the government.

The Second Estate, the nobility, numbered about 350,000, owned about 25 to 30 percent of the land, and paid almost no taxes. Not all members of the Second Estate were wealthy, successful or prestigious.

Not all noble titles were of equal status either since the nobility, like the clergy, had its own natural hierarchy. The Court nobles (those closest to the monarch) were the most

prestigious. Then, there were nobles who earned their titles through military service, so considered themselves of greater importance. Finally, there were those who were granted their noble titles for non-military service, for their work as financiers, administrators, magistrates or court officials. Hundreds of men also acquired titles venally, by purchasing them from the crown rather than having them bestowed for service. **Venality** allowed wealthier members of the Third Estate to join the ranks of the Second Estate.

### **The Third Estate**

The Third Estate had many different kinds of people in it, with vast differences in occupation, level of education, and wealth. About 98 percent of people belonged to the Third Estate and it was made up of three groups.

Peasants, the largest group, made up about 75 to 80 percent of the Third Estate and owned about 35 to 40 percent of the land. Middle class members of the Third Estate owned the rest.

Peasants owed certain duties to the nobles, which were a holdover from medieval times when serfdom was widespread. For example, a peasant had to pay a fee to grind his or her flour or press his or her grapes because the local lord controlled the flour mill and wine press. When harvest time came, the peasant had to work a certain number of days harvesting the noble's crop. Peasants fiercely resented these duties.

Urban craftspeople, shopkeepers, and workers - cooks, servants, and others - made up another part of the Third Estate. Paid low wages and frequently out of work, they often went hungry. If the cost of bread rose, mobs of these workers might attack carts of grain and bread to steal what they needed. These two groups both resented the clergy and the nobles for their special privileges and special treatment.



The last group was known as the **bourgeoisie**, or middle class, consisted about 2 million people, or 8 percent of the population. They owned about 20 to 25 percent of the land. The bourgeoisie included merchants, bankers, artisans, and industrialists, as well as professional people - lawyers, holders of public offices, doctors, and writers.

The middle class was also unhappy with the privileges held by the nobles. Some members of the bourgeoisie did not necessarily want to abolish the nobility, however, but to better their own position. Some bourgeoisie had managed to become nobles by being appointed to public offices that brought with it noble status. The bourgeoisie also shared certain goals with some nobles. Some member of both of these groups were increasingly upset with a monarchical system resting on privileges and on an old and rigid social order. These people were drawn to the new political ideas of the Enlightenment, such as liberty and equality.

The heavily taxed and discontented Third Estate was eager for change.

## **THE FORCES OF CHANGE**

In addition to the growing resentment of the lower classes, there were other factors contributing to the revolutionary mood in France.

### **Enlightenment Ideas**

Even though eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideas included increased criticism of the old order of society, the philosophes did not advocate Revolution. Their views about power and authority in government made people begin to question long-standing notions about the structure of society and using words like *liberty*, *equality*, and *democracy*. People were inspired by the success of the American Revolution, and the radical ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire. Their ideas, however, were widely spread among the literate middle class and noble elites of France.

While Rousseau is often credited with a view of human equality, the reality is that his thoughts on equality did not extend to women. For Rousseau, women were weaker and less rational than men, and must depend on men. Men, for Rousseau, desire women but do not need them; women, he wrote, both desire men and need them. Additionally, Rousseau believed that women had different educational needs than men since the main purpose in life, according to Rousseau, is for a woman to be a wife and mother. Rousseau's ideas on women were no less influential than his ideas on equality.

“Is there a sight in the world so touching, so respectable, as that of a mother surrounded by her children...procuring a happy life for her husband and prudently governing the home?...A home whose mistress is absent is a body without a soul which soon falls into corruption; a woman outside of her home loses her greatest luster, and despoiled of her real ornaments, she displays herself indecently...Whatever she may do, one feels that in public she is not in her place...”

-Jean-Jacques Rousseau

### **Economic Woes**

An immediately pressing problem was the near collapse of the French budget. Rapid expansion was occurring in the population, trade, and production. However, the heavy burden of taxes made it impossible to conduct business profitably in France. The cost of living rose for everyone. Bad harvests in 1787 and 1788 and a slowdown in manufacturing led to food shortages, rising prices for food, and unemployment.

During this period, France's government sank deeply into debt. Despite this, the French king and his ministers continued to spend enormous sums of money on wars and court luxuries. The queen, **Marie Antoinette**, was especially known for her extravagance and this too caused popular resentment. France's government nearly doubled when Louis XVI, borrowed heavily to help the American revolutionaries in their war against Great Britain - France's chief rival - sending the budget into total crisis.

## **A Weak Leader**

Strong leadership might have prevented the coming crisis, but Louis XVI was often indecisive and paid little attention to his advisors. He preferred to spend his time hunting or tinkering with locks rather than attending to the details of governing.

Louis had married his wife, Marie Antoinette, when he was 15 and she was 14. Marie Antoinette, was a member of the royal family of Austria, France's long-time enemy. For that reason, she became unpopular as soon as she set foot in France. Artist Elisabeth Vigee-Labrun, who was painting Marie Antoinette for the first time in 1779, described her as being, "in the heyday of her youth and beauty." She also said of the Queen:

I do not think that Queen Marie Antoinette ever missed an opportunity of saying something pleasant to those who had the honour of being presented to her, and the kindness she always bestowed upon me has ever been one of my sweetest memories.

-Elisabeth Vigee-Labrun

As queen, Marie Antoinette spent so much money on gowns, jewels, and gambling, that she earned the nickname "Madame Deficit" from the French people. Indeed, Marie Antoinette became a symbol upon which the revolutionaries would heap all of their fury and hatred against the monarchy and the old regime.

With France on the verge of financial collapse, Louis attempted to tax aristocrats. The Second Estate forced Louis XVI to call a meeting of the Estates-General, an assembly of representatives from all three estates. This was the first meeting of the Estates-General since 1614.

## **REVOLUTION DAWNS**

### **The National Assembly**

Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General at Versailles on May 5, 1789. In the Estates-General, the First and Second Estates each had about 300 representatives. The Third Estate had almost 600 representatives. Most of the Third Estate wanted to set up a constitutional government that would make the clergy and nobility pay taxes, too.

From the start, there were arguments about how the voting in the Estates-General would be organized. Traditionally, each estate had one vote, meaning that the First and Second Estates could outvote the Third Estate two to one. The Third Estate demanded instead that each deputy have one vote: one person, one vote -- not one vote per whole group. Under the one -person one vote proposal, system, with the help of a few nobles and clerics, the members of the Third Estate would then have a majority vote. The king, however, stated that he favored the existing, one-vote-per-Estate system.

On June 17, 1789, the members of the Third Estate, frustrated that their proposal was ignored, boldly voted to declare that they, as a group, were the **National Assembly**. They stated that the only legitimate law-making body in France was the National Assembly, and that they would draft a constitution. This vote was the first deliberate act of revolution.

Three days later, on June 20, the deputies of the National Assembly arrived at their meeting place, only to find that the doors had been locked. They then moved to a nearby indoor tennis court and swore that they would continue meeting until they had a new constitution. The oath they swore is known as the **Tennis Court Oath**.

## **Storming the Bastille**

Louis XVI prepared to use force against the Third Estate. In Paris, rumors flew that foreign troops were coming to massacre French citizens. On July 14, 1789, about 900 Parisians gathered in the courtyard of the Bastille - an old fortress used as a prison and armory. They stormed the Bastille, and after four hours of fighting, the prison warden surrendered. The rebels cut off the warden's head and demolished the Bastille brick by brick.

When King Louis XVI, returned to his palace at Versailles after a day of hunting, he was told by a duke about the fall of the Bastille. Louis is said to have exclaimed, "Why, this is a revolt?" "No Sire," replied the duke. "It is a revolution."

Ever since, July 14 has been a French national holiday, similar to the U.S. Fourth of July.

The king's authority had collapsed in Paris. Meanwhile, all over France, revolts were breaking out. Popular hatred of the entire landowning system, with its fees and obligations, had finally spilled over into action.

Peasant rebellions became part of the vast panic known as the Great Fear. Rumors spread from village to village that foreign troops were on the way to put down the revolution. The peasants reacted by breaking into the houses of the lords to destroy the records of their obligations.

## **End of the Old Regime**

The National Assembly reacted to news of peasant rebellions and rumors of possible foreign invasion. On August 4, 1789, the National Assembly voted to abolish all legal privileges of the nobles and the clergy.

## **Declaration of the Rights of Man**

On August 26, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Inspired by the English Bill of Rights of 1689 and by the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution, this charter of basic liberties began with “the national and imprescriptible rights of man” to “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.”

Reflecting Enlightenment thought, the declaration proclaimed that all men were free and equal before the law, that appointment to public office should be based on talent, and that no group should be exempt from taxation. Freedom of speech and of the press were affirmed. The declaration raised an important issue. Should equal rights include women? Many deputies agreed, provided that, as one man said, “women do not [hope] to exercise political rights and functions.”

**Olympe de Gouges** was a playwright and a journalist whose writings reached a large audience. As a strong supporter of all-inclusive democracy, she refused to accept that the Declaration of the Rights of Man excluded mention of women. She demanded the same rights for French women that French men were demanding for themselves. In 1791, she challenged the oppression of male authority and the notion of male-female inequality in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. De Gouges later got in trouble with anti-monarchist revolutionaries, who objected to the fact that she addressed her “Declaration” to Queen Marie Antoinette. She was eventually sent to the guillotine due to accusations that she was a monarchist. Echoing the words of the official declaration, she wrote:

“Believing that ignorance, omission, or scorn for the rights of woman are the only causes of public misfortunes, and of the corruption of governments, the women have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of women in order that this declaration, constantly exposed

before all the members of the society, will ceaselessly remind them of their rights and duties.”

- Olympe de Gouges

### **The King Concedes**

In the meantime, Louis XVI remained quiet at Versailles. He refused to accept the National Assembly's decrees. However, another problem was about to force his hand. Due to a poor harvest and famine, bread was scarce and the prices were high. On October 5, 1789, about 6,000 Parisian women armed with broomsticks, pitchforks, pistols, and other weapons marched met at City Hall to demand bread. When they were refused there, they marched the 12 miles to Versailles to confront the royal family. Some of the women then met with the king to demand that bread be made available in Paris and for a reasonable price. After relating their need to Louis, he promised the women that he would send grain to Paris.

This was not enough for the crowd however, and they insisted that the King and his family return with them to Paris. On October 6, they did so. They were escorted by women who chanted: “We are bringing back the baker, the baker's wife, and the baker's boy.” The king, queen, and their son were virtual prisoners in Paris.

On October 6, the royal family returned to the city that was the heart of the revolution escorted by women carry pikes, some of which held the heads of the King's guards. This was extremely significant because the king displayed that he was subject to the pressure of the people.

### **The October Days - The March on Versailles**

The period during which the March of Versailles occurred is known as the October Days. Fueled by high bread prices and the Revolution, the women who marched were part of a long

tradition of women's participation in popular protest, especially during times when subsistence was an issue.

Revolutionary leaders would later honor these women as heroes of the Revolution. In spite of this, however, there is evidence that there was also an ambivalence about women's participation in politics. Male witnesses expressed a fear of women as hysterical furies, while women witnesses did not want to be associated with or identified as those furies in any way. Some of these women were labeled "assassins" or "savages" by some observers and commentators, or likened to beasts by others. These views can be observed in works of art from the period. It seemed that these women had lost their femininity and with it their very humanity.

**Edmund Burke**, one of the earliest historians of the French Revolution wrote:

“[W]hilst the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women.”

-Edmund Burke

The changeable quality of women's response to Queen Marie Antoinette can also be found in this event. Before leaving Versailles, the Queen made an appearance before the crowd on the palace balcony holding the hands of her children, but the crowd protested. They cried for her to appear alone.

Motherhood was a category that was sacred to most of these women. By asking the Queen to show herself without her children, the crowds of women were refusing to accept her or see her as a mother. When the Queen obeyed the crowds' demands, reemerging without her children, they chanted, "Vive la reine!" or "Long live the Queen!"



Marie Antoinette had become a symbol upon which the hatred and fury of many of the revolutionaries had been placed. The hatred that some of these women displayed for the Queen can be explained by a desire to show signs not only of national loyalty, but of personal purity.

There are countless other examples of women's struggles with gender issues to be found throughout the history of the French Revolution.

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