

FEMINISM, THEATER, RACE: L'ESCLAVAGE DES NOIRS

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Until recently, when *Côté-femmes* committed itself to reinscribing Olympe de Gouges's presence in theater history by publishing her plays, her drama had not received much critical attention.[1] On the one hand, her literary fate does not seem exceptional, for it is often expressed that if French revolutionary drama deserves some posthumous credit it is more for the impressive quantity of plays produced during those years than for their literary quality.[2] As a result, revolutionary drama has been studied more frequently by historians and theater historians than by literary critics. The latter have tended to neglect late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century drama, which they usually consider to be lacking the aesthetic qualities associated with good theater.[3] On the other hand, it is obvious that Gouges's drama has not been evaluated seriously simply because she was a woman and a militant feminist. In Gisela Thiele Knobloch's words, "the reception of Olympe de Gouges' literary works is usually negative and characterized by an incredible misogyny." [4] It has even been suggested that she was illiterate, and that, as a result, she could not have written her plays herself, a notion convincingly rejected by Thiele Knobloch as a "myth" imposed by "Michelet, Monselet and many others." [5] Referring to "the large number of Olympe de Gouges' autographs in National Archives and the archives of the Comédie-Française" as "proofs to the contrary," Thiele Knobloch reminds us that women playwrights' claims to authorship were often ridiculed: it was "a commonplace expressed by Rousseau and so many others to think that, behind every woman writer, stood a man . . . In the registers of the Comédie-Française women playwrights' names were after all followed by a man's name precisely for that reason." [6] Still, critics who do not dispute Gouges's claims to authorship do not necessarily approve of the quality of her work. Their objections to Gouges's melodramatic style and to the political nature of her plays have fed her reputation as a bad playwright.

Even the best intentioned critics usually dismiss her dramatic style as awkward and inappropriate for the stage. Benoîte Groult, for instance, attempts to excuse this weakness by suggesting that Gouges's cultural background--her roots in an oral meridional culture--was a handicap for her as a playwright.[7] But she is nonetheless clearly perturbed by the "constant digressions" and "inflated lyricism" characteristic of Gouges's drama.[8] Her style, she concludes, "was much more appropriate for her rousing patriotic pamphlets than for the plays she took into her head to write." [9] Gouges's reputation as a "bad playwright" also rests on the more general assumption that emphasis on content, and in particular on a political message, precludes literary quality. In spite of the general consensus on this issue, I would like to argue that to criticize Gouges on the basis of her style is to consider her work from the very aesthetic perspective she rejected. The purpose of this introduction is therefore to emphasize *L'esclavage des noirs*' originality as a powerful drama committed to a double agenda of socio-political and dramatic reform and, further, by studying the play's immediate impact in 1789, to dispel some misconceptions on which Gouges's reputation as a "bad" and "failed" playwright rests.

Because of its melodramatic style and political nature, Gouges's drama has been associated with the minor, popular stages, disregarded for their lack of literary tradition. The so-called popular

stages, however, did not truly exist until January 1791 when the National Assembly abolished privileges formerly granted to Royal theaters by declaring that "any citizen was free to establish a public stage and have plays of any genre represented on it." [10] *L'esclavage des noirs* was performed in December 1789, before this ruling took effect, and on the most prestigious stage in Paris, the Comédie-Française--or Théâtre de la Nation as it was then called. [11] As Rodmell reminds us:

[t]he strength of the position of the Comédie-Française lay in the fact that not only did it possess a monopoly of plays from the golden years of the seventeenth century but also in the fact that the overwhelming majority of playwrights in the eighteenth-century eagerly sought to gain the prestige which derived from having their plays included in the Comédie's repertory. [12]

Moreover, the politization of Parisian stages did not originate from the minor stages, the Théâtre de la Nation took the lead. [13] Marie-Joseph Chénier's *Charles IX*, performed on November 4, 1789, a month before *L'esclavage des noirs*, is considered a turning point in that regard. It is precisely because Chénier's play "was a political tragedy of a type hitherto unknown in French literature;" because "it introduced revolutionary propaganda into the tragic genre" that it was well-received at the Comédie. [14] Its success therefore illustrates that it was possible to be considered a "good" playwright and to write politically committed plays. How then, can we explain that following *Charles IX* Chénier became "the foremost poet of the French Revolution," [15] while Gouges, with *L'esclavage des noirs*, allegedly only proved her "uncanny ability for writing unsuccessful plays on apparently foolproof subjects"? [16] Leaving misogyny aside, the contrast between these two critical appraisals might partially be explained by Chénier's choice of a "foolproof" genre, tragedy in verse, and by comparison, Gouges's choice of a more recent genre, drama in prose. It might also be explained, more strikingly, by the contrast between their respective treatments of their political subject matter and their divergent political views. Chénier used the St. Bartholomew Massacre to attack the monarchy, a "foolproof subject," since the topic was "used all during the eighteenth-century by the philosophes in their concerted attack on the fanaticism of the Catholic Church" [17]; Gouges openly advocated monarchist views and vehemently denounced slavery, another controversial and politically touchy issue.

L'esclavage des noirs is a drame, and as such, it belongs to an ambitious project developed during the second half of the eighteenth century which aimed at reforming French theater and at imposing the new genre at the Comédie-Française. As the endless quarrels on rules of unity and bienséances exemplify, French classical tradition--as embodied in the works of Corneille or Racine--emphasized form and "good taste." Proponents of the drame, who rejected the aesthetics of classical theater and the premises on which it was based, had quite a different agenda. For Gouges and many contemporary playwrights drama was not a remote aesthetic domain, it was part of "nature," of life. This continuity of life was expressed in the conception of drame as a bridge over the division between comic and tragic genres and in the choice of a language accessible to all, prose, as opposed to poetry--which only selected audiences of *connaisseurs* could appreciate. With the drame, theater lost its primary aesthetic function to take on a new social role: to turn spectators into better men, women, and citizens.

Denis Diderot, Sébastien Mercier, and Gouges shared a perhaps naive assumption about the dynamics of drama performance: they thought that through the powerful emotional communion with their characters' sufferings, the spectators' true nature, their "humanity," would resurface, allowing them to shake prejudices and be better human beings. The proper way to convince was to reach the heart first, or, to quote Mercier, to make "cold, shrunken, souls" feel again. Without this emotional preparation, Mercier argued, spectators would not readily receive the grave lessons in "honesty and virtue" a playwright had to offer.[18] To that effect, sentimental and bourgeois drama resorted to various techniques. Tableaux, usually at the end of an act, presented characters in a state of emotional upheaval, with teary eyes to convey their heartfelt emotions. Melodramatic style, which combined both sentimental, flowery language and grandiloquent phrases, was used for the same purpose.

All of this, tableaux and melodramatic language, is found in *L'esclavage des noirs*. The redundant qualifiers ("scoundrel," "wretch," "barbarian"), exclamatory comments ("How we are to be pitied!", "How I pity him, this unhappy man!", "How their misfortune renders them interesting!"), lengthy monologues, and affected a-parte clearly belong to the melodramatic register. For Gouges, however, as for proponents of the drame in general, style no longer was the aesthetic cornerstone and sole measure of achievement. The play's lesson and the playwright's effectiveness in conveying it became the proper criteria by which to determine the value of a play. Gouges's own declarations concerning her lack of stylistic and literary talents have to be considered in that context. They have often been taken at face value, or at best, as indications of her feminine modesty--with a few critics rightly arguing that, judged by contemporary standards, her alleged "terrible" style was by no means any worse than her contemporaries'.[19] Both interpretations, however, fail to take into account the specific function of Gouges's emphasis on her alleged stylistic deficiencies: to stress them was her way to distance herself from the classical tradition and to direct the reader or spectator to what she considered the essential aspect of her drama, its content. As she insisted in the preface of *L'esclavage des noirs*, "talent might be wanting in this play, but not morals." [20]

Her choice of a melodramatic style as the appropriate means to convey this moral content was also no coincidence. Today, we often fail to appreciate how widely popular melodramatic style was in revolutionary France: melodrama was a dominant mode of expression which pervaded the entire public sphere, the stage, the political assemblies, and, as historian Sarah Maza has shown, the legal and political writings of the time.[21] To use melodramatic forms of expression was to speak the language of politics and thereby to assert theater's place within the political sphere.[22] Relegating aesthetics to the background, Gouges opted for this highly politicized dramatic style and thereby also asserted her filiation with drame theorists.

This filiation, however, is nowhere better exemplified than in her choice of politically relevant topics. The plot of *L'esclavage des noirs* can be summarized in a few sentences: two fugitive slaves, Zamor and Mirza, are wanted for the murder of a slave-master who had tried to seduce Mirza. On the desert island where Zamor and Mirza have found refuge, they rescue Valère and Sophie from a shipwreck, a young French couple in search of Sophie's father. But Zamor and Mirza are captured and condemned to death. Only the governor of the colony they have fled, who turns out to be Sophie's father, can save them. Thanks to him, Valère and Sophie are able to save their new friends' lives. At the end of the drama, the two slaves are freed and married.

Thematically, *L'esclavage des noirs* is linked both to Diderot's *drame bourgeois* and to Mercier's *drame civique*, but it goes further, insofar as it represents an attempt to merge the two. In his theoretical writings as well as in his plays, Diderot focused on the private sphere in an attempt to redefine relationships within the family and to replace the feudal family model, based on the absolute authority of the father, by a bourgeois model, still patriarchal, but based on love and understanding. *Zamor et Mirza*--as *L'esclavage des noirs* was first called--shares a common theme with Diderot's *Le fils naturel*, the recognition by fathers of all of their children, even those born out of wedlock. Sophie's recognition by her father illustrates Diderot's ideal of family relations centered on love and equality among children. Politically, both plays argue against *droit d'aînesse*--the Old Regime right of the first-born son to be considered sole heir--since in both cases illegitimate children inherit from their fathers. Gouges, however, goes a step further than Diderot since Sophie is not only illegitimate, but also female. She thereby exemplifies her refusal to exclude women from any redefinition of family relationships.

As frequently stated in her biographies, Gouges had a personal interest in defending the cause of illegitimate children since she claimed to be, and probably was, the illegitimate daughter of Lefranc de Pompignan, himself a playwright. Yet, it is difficult to argue that in defending the cause of illegitimate daughters, Gouges was only pleading her own case, i.e., making a direct appeal for recognition to her father: Lefranc de Pompignan had died before the play was written. This filiation was apparently of great importance to Gouges, but more so in its symbolic than in its biological dimension. Her obstinate efforts to have her first play performed where her father had been acclaimed, at the *Comédie-Française*, indicate that she was determined to be his literary daughter. In trying to establish this literary filiation, she took the burden of proof on herself: to show herself worthy of him, she had to succeed without his help and in spite of her mixed social status; like her friend *Mme de Montanclos*, she had to gain literary recognition thanks to her own merits. This symbolic filiation would then bring her what her illegitimacy had deprived her of, social status and financial rewards: to have a successful play performed at the *Comédie* meant both literary recognition and financial security. *Zamor et Mirza* therefore helps characterize Gouges's literary endeavors as feminist in two ways: her vindication of daughters' rights is doubly exemplified in her determination to be a successful playwright and in the arguments put forward in the play.

L'esclavage des noirs is not only related to the *drame bourgeois*, since, as the final title of the play indicates, its main focus is on the issue of slavery. This topic had earlier been suggested as worthy of a *drame* by Gouges's friend Mercier in *Du théâtre* (1773). Mercier did not write a play on slavery, but he listed "slave trade, this hateful public violation of natural rights" as an appropriate topic for a *drame*.^[23] For Mercier as well as for Diderot, drama's function was didactic and political, but for Mercier, drama's primary vocation was to produce good citizens. His *dramas* therefore focused not only on the family, but on the social and political sphere as well. Centered on both private and public life, *L'esclavage des noirs* illustrates Gouges's conviction that private life is part of a larger political context.

As a political narrative *L'esclavage des noirs'* importance lies in its examination and redefinition of gender and race relations in a radically new society, based on democratic principles. In the opening scene, the topos of the desert island signals the allegoric dimension of the play. Gouges proceeds the same way *Marivaux* had done in *L'île des esclaves* (1725): in both cases, the island

serves to establish a socio-political context which greatly differs from contemporary society. But whereas Marivaux's island harbors a utopian society in which former slaves hold the political power, no organized society is found on Gouges's island: her desert island symbolizes nature at first. Stranded on a desert island, Zamor and Mirza are beings in and of nature. What does "nature" mean for Gouges? For her, nature exists at two levels: on the surface, it is complex, "bizarre et variée," but at another deeper level, it is also one. Late in the play, Zamor illustrates Gouges's conception of nature through the following remarks:

Nature seems to stand in contrast with herself in this spot. Formerly she smiled upon us: she has lost none of her attractions; but she shows us both the image of our past happiness and the horrible fate to which we shall be victim (III, 2).

Nature, without changing, can be perceived differently according to circumstances. For Gouges, the same holds for human nature: human nature does not only exist at the level of perception, where it is bizarre and variée. Like others of her time, Gouges invokes "nature as the origin of both liberty and sexual difference,"[24] but for her liberty and sexual difference are not equally weighted: nature is invoked as the origin of liberty and equality first. According to her, human nature is first revealed in that which distinguishes men from animals, not men from women, blacks from whites, or masters from slaves: in the same blood which flows in human veins. This primary distinction between humans and animals is introduced in act I, scene 9 when Sophie rejects the opinion that blacks "were born to be savages" and should therefore be "tamed like animals" as the origin of racial prejudice ("What frightful prejudice!"). Failure to stress human commonality is at the origin of racial, but also sexual or class prejudices.

It is therefore important to view the desert island in *L'esclavage* not solely as a symbol of (primitive) nature, but also as a symbol of liberty: the island is the site of resistance to political oppression. Zamor, by murdering the governor's "confidential agent," has fled from and rejected the socio-political order of the colony. Mirza, as the indirect cause of the murder, exemplifies the potential danger woman represents for that existing order. For the two runaway slaves, the island clearly means freedom from slavery. But similarly, and as we will see shortly despite Gouges's support for the king, the island also represents freedom from the prevailing feudal order for Valère and Sophie. This idea is embodied in the metaphor of the shipwreck and directly expressed through a comparison: the parallel situations of the French people (Valère and Sophie) "groaning under despotism of Ministers and Courtiers" (I, 7) and of the Black people (Mirza and Zamor) groaning under "the frightful despotism" of "barbaric masters" (I, 1). Unlike Marivaux, whose play can be read as advocating a reversal of master and slave relations, Gouges's ideal is to abolish this type of relations, to promote social equality. This notion is clearly expressed in the second act by Coraline who declares: "We lack but liberty; let them give it to us, and you will see that there will no longer be masters or slaves" (II, 2). It is already illustrated in the first act through the harmonious relations between the islands' four inhabitants. Gouges does not deny that differences exist in nature. On the contrary, her choice of characters stresses differences of race (black and white), of gender (man and woman) and of social class (slaves, bourgeois). In the touching scene where Mirza and Sophie study each other's beauty, they recognize each other as humans, and therefore as equal, and yet as different. Liberty and equality are therefore the first characteristics of Gouges's ideal society, the last one being solidarity. Better than "fraternity," solidarity expresses the main characters' natural propensity to

want the best for fellow human beings: in Gouges's play this form of altruism is far from being restricted to "brothers," it further characterizes all humans, not only men. A woman, Mirza, is the first to express that it is "sweet . . . to soothe the misfortunes of others" (I, 2), a notion repeatedly expressed by other characters throughout the play. Empathy, compassion, the instinctual desire to recognize others as human and to help them, is for Gouges what constitutes Mirza, Zamor, Valère and Sophie as human beings. This ideal of solidarity is expressed through the recurrent motive of "saving someone else's life" and illustrated through the characters' actions: Valère attempts to save Sophie from drowning; Mirza actually saves Valère's life; Zamor Sophie's. It is because human nature transcends difference that equality and solidarity are possible: the desert island is for all of them, they share it in spite of their differences. "All men are born free and equal" therefore doesn't mean "all men as opposed to women," but "all human beings as opposed to animals." In summary, the island serves to establish a new ideal socio-political framework founded on the republican principles of liberty, equality, and solidarity.

In this context, it is particularly striking that Gouges's ideal society, as presented in act I, is elaborated in the absence of a male figure of authority. Unlike Diderot, who, in *Le père de famille*, centered on the father in his redefinition of private relations, and Marivaux, who, in *L'île des esclaves*, granted political power to a male slave in his reversal of social hierarchy, Gouges presents as ideal a society which is not founded on the authority of a father-king. In act I, the concept of sovereignty of the people, symbolized by the free association of the four equal young men and women, replaces that of patriarchal authority as the foundation of society. The father, however, is not altogether absent from the play. In act I already, Sophie, and to a certain extent Zamor, are "searching for him," and in acts II and III, he figures prominently as father and governor in the person of M. de Frémont. The important role granted to the father in acts II and III therefore seems to cancel the democratic ideal presented in act one and to indicate a return to the patriarchal order. This important issue calls for an examination of gender relations in the play.

Joan W. Scott rightly argues that for Gouges "[t]he union of man and woman replace[s] the single figure of the universal individual, in an attempt at resolving the difficulty of arguing about rights in univocal terms." [25] For Scott this notion of union is "ambiguous": "It could be read as an endorsement of functional complementarity based on sex, but also as an attempt to dissolve and transcend the categories of sexual difference." [26] But for Gouges, it is and can be both, complementarity and transcendence of the categories of sexual difference, because complementarity is not fixed: in the freely consented unions, unions based on love, complementary roles are not ascribed to a specific gender. There is no typical female character in *L'esclavage*, no typical couple, no typical relation between man and woman. In the relation between Zamor and Mirza, Mirza seems to accept the passive role, domesticity: when Zamor asks her to "go and gather some fruit," she obeys. Yet Zamor and Mirza's relationship is only one among other possible configurations. In other words, the division of labor is arbitrary; the roles of man and woman vary for every couple. Sophie, for instance plays a more "masculine" role than Mirza: she makes common cause with the slaves and is ready to die for the sake of her ideal. Since Mirza is a slave and Sophie a bourgeoisie, the different roles they fulfill as women could be construed as resulting from their different social origins. But Gouges's careful selection of her two other couples shows this interpretation to be inaccurate. In act II, for instance, it is an educated slave woman, Coraline, who exposes Gouges's political views, while Azor, a male

slave, listens; in the de Frémont couple, the wife not only has the economic power, she has also given her name to her husband. With regard to gender relations, Gouges's position is consistent with the position outlined in her general social framework: equality prevails in couples in spite of sexual difference, not in a fixed complementarity, which ascribes certain functions to a certain sex, but in a flexible complementarity. Unlike many women writers later on, Gouges does not subscribe to a kind of complementarity that would dictate gender specific roles in the couple, she does not advocate the myth of two separate spheres. Her conception of complementarity helps her sustain an egalitarian doctrine. Gender equality, however, seems curiously at odds with the prominent role granted to the father figure, M. de Frémont, in the play. By replacing the play in its historical and political context, however, we can account for this apparent contradiction.

L'esclavage des noirs was retitled to better serve the cause of abolition, but its original political scope was wider. As a political narrative, the play is a commentary on France's political options at the time of the 1789 revolution; it centers on Gouges's vision of the society to come. That Gouges herself considered the views expressed in the play and in the political pamphlet entitled *De l'Esclavage des noirs* as essential is illustrated by the fact that she referred specifically to them during her own trial in 1793. Accused of anti-republican sentiments, Gouges countered "that for a long while she had professed only republican sentiments, as the jurors would be able to convince themselves from her work entitled *De l'Esclavage des noirs*." [27] So far, my analysis seems to corroborate Gouges's claims.

As a dramatic theme, the "quest for the father" characterizes *L'esclavage* as a politically committed play: it allows the author to move from utopia (the ideal society) to reality, to the colony and by extension, contemporary France. If act I should be viewed as an illustration of Gouges's ability to conceive of a truly democratic society, acts II and III exemplify her rejection of this ideal model as utopian. As a political theme, the "quest for the father" has another function: it enables Gouges to articulate her political preference for a monarchy, but for a monarchy based on republican principles.

Gouges's political views have often been interpreted as inconsistent. Many critics find it difficult to reconcile her self-proclaimed republicanism and her monarchism. There is no question that *L'esclavage des noirs* advocates monarchy, and if there were questions we would still have to account for her vain but persistent efforts to defend the king and queen at their trials. What needs to be stressed, however, is that the binary opposition between "monarchy" and "republic" is not a particularly useful way to define Gouges's political stand. That her preference was for monarchy and a democratic ideal can only be appreciated from her historical vantage point: in 1789, France was still a monarchy, not a republic, the French were still trying to regenerate their monarchy, to rebuild it on democratic principles. *L'esclavage des noirs* provides not only evidence of the continuity in Gouges's political thought over a period of years--since the play was written in 1783 and represented in 1789--but also material of particular importance for understanding her political views and showing their consistency: it stands as an illustration of the general consensus which, in 1789, still made monarchy seem compatible with the democratic ideal proclaimed that same year in the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*.

Acts II and III focus on this issue and, in particular, on what Gouges considers as the king's duty in transforming the old feudal monarchy into a republican monarchy. As the governor of the

colony, M. de Frémont exemplifies the ideal of the citizen-king envisioned by the National Assembly, the father of the nation, dedicated to the freedom and happiness of all of his subjects. M. de Frémont loves and recognizes all of his children, daughters and slaves included. Rejecting tyranny and its "barbaric laws" which contradict his natural goodness and his sense of justice, he struggles and triumphs over institutions (justice, police) which oppress the slaves and serve the most powerful only (here, the colonists). In short, he shares the same ideal as Coraline, the woman slave who envisions a society based on freedom, education, and work, with no masters or slaves. Struck by the similarity between Coraline's republican views and M. de Frémont's, Azor exclaims: "You speak like a man! You sound like the governor!" (II, 2). As if good example was not enough, M. de Frémont directly appeals to Louis XVI to abolish all forms of oppression:

Sovereigns render their Peoples happy: every Citizen is free under a good Master, and in this country of slavery one must be barbaric in spite of oneself. Hey! how can I help abandoning myself to these reflections, when the voice of humanity cries out from the bottom of my heart: "Be kind and sensitive to the cries of the wretched." I know that my opinion must displease you: Europe, however, takes care to justify it, and I dare hope that before long there will no longer be any slaves. O Louis! O adored Monarch! would that I could this very moment put under your eyes the innocence of these outlaws! (II, 6)

Even though M. de Frémont's speech comes as a response to pro-slavery arguments advanced by the judge, the address to the king indicates that the message has to be lifted out of this particular context: the king is being asked to abolish not only slavery, but all forms of political oppression. It is obvious Gouges's "opinion" would "displease" some people. The urgency of the message indicates its true nature: it is an ultimatum to the king, a plea to recognize popular sovereignty. The hope that "before long there will no longer be any slaves" expresses the new creed that "all men are born free and equal." The sovereign people calls on the father-king to choose between the old feudal order--tyranny symbolized in the play as the violent rule of weaponry--and the new egalitarian order based on freedom, non-violence, and work. To live up to his new role, the king has to become a patriot-king, "the father of the French, the King of a free people." [28] Gouges's vision thus represents a radical departure from the old patriarchal order. The king's absolute political authority is being questioned and his role entirely redefined. This rather bold move, if we consider that the play was written in 1783, might explain why the play was not performed until 1789.

M. de Frémont's plea is also a direct appeal for the abolition of slavery. In that respect, however, Gouges's position might appear more timid. Even though the play advocates the education of its slaves, hints that slaves should be free to farm their own land, and openly promotes the abolition of slavery as a practice unworthy of the human race--"A commerce of men! o heaven! humanity is repulsive!" (II, 2)--M. de Frémont's speech clearly indicates that for Gouges the abolition of slavery depends upon the generosity of a "benevolent and enlightened government" (III, 13). Far from advocating political empowerment by slaves, Gouges seems to postpone the abolition of slavery to a not foreseeable future: Zamor refuses to defend his own cause and he later intervenes to end the slave rebellion he has indirectly caused: "never deliver yourselves into excess to escape slavery; fear breaking your irons with too much violence. . ." (III, 11). With hindsight, then, Gouges's demands might appear modest: the end to the slave trade, humane treatment of

slaves. In fact, Gouges openly rejected the fears expressed by actors that L'esclavage would cause slaves' rebellions:

But, sirs, we are in Paris; my drama won't be performed in front of Negroes and I insist that [if it were] it would incite them to submission; I maintain that everything in it breathes morality and obedience to the laws. How can this drama be considered dangerous today when you accepted to perform it eight years ago, and when, under a despotic government, censors approved of it?[29]

Both Gouges's moderation with regard to the slavery issue and her insistence on retaining the monarchy originate in her conception of freedom as socially binding. A great number of situations in the play make it clear that for Gouges the right of the individual should not be viewed independently from the collective good, which, in turn, implies preservation of some form of governing structure to legitimize the communities' claims. The notion that to free slaves would destroy the economy of the colony, that their individual freedom would be detrimental to the good of the colony, is rejected by Coraline in the play: "Let the Masters give liberty, no slave will leave the workshop. Imperceptibly, the rudest among us will instruct themselves, recognize the laws of humanity and justice. . ." (II, 2). This declaration is only conceivable to the extent that even slaves are seen as part of the community--independently from the fact that they are mistreated and poorly rewarded for their labor: they are not the other ("our enemies"); they play an important role in the community, they are "nos cultivateurs" (our farmers).[30] Even when men are free, it is in their best interest to contribute to the good of the community (the nation or the colony); even when they are free, it is their responsibility to live by society's rules, a notion clearly expressed by Zamor in his address to the rebelling slaves and to the colonists: "Slaves, colonists, listen to me: I have killed a man, I deserve to die; do not regret my punishment, it is necessary for the good of the Colony" (III, 11). In all instances, relinquishing individual rights for the good of society and making sacrifices for the benefit of others are presented as ideals: when Mme de Saint-Frémont encourages her husband to search for his daughter at the risk of finding his ex-wife; when Sophie throws herself in front of the firing squad to defend Zamor and Mirza; when slaves offer to eat less and work more in exchange for Zamor's and Mirza's lives, their generosity, which cuts across all differences of class, gender, or race, defines them as human beings.

Gouges has accordingly little to say about individual rights in the play. It is true that she grounds the right to be free in nature; Valère speaks of "rights under Natural law" (I, 7)--but this right can also "be lost in nature"; Zamor mentions "giv[ing] man back the rights he has lost in the very bosom of Nature" (I, 1). More to the point, Valère's prediction that the people will "resum[e] all rights" (I, 7) confirms Gouges's conception of the rights of individuals as derived from their belonging to the same collective entity, from their citizenship. In other words, in 1789 Gouges still took the Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen to apply to all citizens, including women and slaves. When she wrote the Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne, two years later, her position had changed, she had come to understand that her interpretation of "man" would not prevail.

The importance Gouges attached to the father-figure of the king can be seen as representing a guarantee that the claims of the community at large would prevail against the claims of the individual: as the "father of all" the king symbolized all of his people. In L'esclavage, it is the

king, through M. de Frémont, who sets the social tone for the nation, who advocates tolerance. It is also not by chance that M. and Mme de Frémont represent the most untraditional couple in *L'esclavage*. Through this unorthodox relationship, in which the husband takes his wife's name and accepts to share her fortune, Gouges further advances her political agenda: poised at the intersection of private and public spheres, the royal couple serves to articulate the political dimension of private relations and to point to new social configurations different from the traditional patriarchal order.

As evidenced in the happy ending of the play, Gouges was confident that the "republican monarchy" she had envisioned would prevail. When the play was performed in 1789, her original political message had lost some of its topical interest since the new order she had envisioned was being realized. Later, her desperate attempts to save the king's and queen's lives show how consistent these efforts were with the political creed professed in *L'esclavage des noirs*: deprived of a royal couple's symbolic guidance, Gouges assumed, the revolutionaries would only meet her political agenda halfway. Leaving issues of gender and race unaddressed, they would be unable to achieve "perfect equality."^[31]

If, according to Howarth, the degree of commitment of a playwright can be measured by his or her willingness to defend causes that have not yet gained general approval, *L'esclavage* offers a perfect example of a truly committed play.^[32] In 1789, the abolition of slavery was such a cause. Brissot and Mirabeau had just created the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, and it is very likely that this abolitionist society played a role in ensuring the representation of *L'esclavage* at the *Théâtre de la Nation*: even though Olympe de Gouges was not a member of the *Société*,^[33] she had had contacts with Mirabeau, who had read the play.^[34] The *Société des Amis des Noirs* relied on pamphlets and newspaper articles to promote abolition, but as Daniel P. Resnick has shown, because of its "narrow base of recruitment" and its failure to provide an economic instead of a purely moral critique of slavery, it was relatively powerless in countering the diplomatic maneuvers of the proponents of slavery, who met at the *Hôtel Massiac*.^[35] According to Gabriel Debien, "Club Massiac's influence through other friendly-minded clubs" was "a particularly noticeable activity" . . . [f]rom December 1789 onward . . . , when the Club's main struggle against *Amis des Noirs* and free people of color begins."^[36] *L'esclavage des noirs* was performed during this period of intense confrontation between the pro and antislavery camps.

From the colonists' perspective, the danger of Gouges's play was not so much its content, but rather the fact that it brought attention to and openly discussed the issue of slavery at a time when their political strategy was to silence it. Indeed, by stressing France's vital economic interests in the West Indies, the colonists were able to successfully prevent the issue of slavery from being directly raised at the National Assembly, with the result that "[s]ubsidies to investors in the slave trade were not halted until the fall of 1793."^[37] This strategy was also successfully applied to silence Gouges, when overrating the didactic powers of her drama, she set out to convince an audience with a vested interest in preserving the colonial system that slavery was both immoral and cruel. There is no question that the colonists had a strong interest in opposing the performance of *L'esclavage des noirs* and that they acted to prevent the *Comédie-Française* from performing it. As it turned out, the abolitionists won the first round: the play was performed in its entirety on December 26. Given this highly politicized context, it was very difficult, if not impossible, for Gouges to obtain a clear success on the stage.

The play's success in 1789 was largely determined by two factors: the affinities between its message and the political views of the audience and its reception in the press. Chénier, for instance, whose two previous plays had failed at the Comédie and who was determined to succeed with Charles IX, made sure he had strong, influential political supporters in the audience: "Several deputies of the National Assembly attended, headed by Mirabeau, who led the applause from his box. Danton, Desmoulins, and the future nucleus of the Cordelier Club were on hand as the play proceeded, right to the end, amid shouting, stamping of feet, bravos, and without the slightest murmur of disapproval being heard." [38] Unlike Chénier, who preached to the converted only, Gouges's audience was, at best, divided along the lines of the slavery issue.

Accounts on whether L'esclavage failed or not diverge, however, with most critics arguing that it was a failure. Carlson, for instance, writes that "[d]espite the appropriateness of its subject matter to the sentiment of the times and superlative interpretations by Molé and Suin, the play was hissed from the stage." [39] Welschinger, who otherwise stresses the importance of L'esclavage des noirs as "one of the most important plays, together with the works of the philosophes, in the fight against slavery," also asserts that the play failed: "The famous Olympe de Gouges . . . could find no solace after L'esclavage des Nègres [sic] failed." [40] These assessments are problematic in several regards. First, they rely on reviews in the press without considering the partiality of the press on slavery. [41] Welschinger's comments on the play's reception are characteristic in that respect. His review is presented as an objective evaluation based on a study of the press ("according to newspapers"), when it is, in fact, just a quote--as the quotation marks indicate--taken from a single, unnamed newspaper:

According to newspapers, "this play failed on the first night. We know of few performances as stormy as that one. Outcries from both parties have nearly ended it twenty times. People shouted, harangued, laughed, whispered, whistled . . . Very poor style, patched-up plot, far-fetched situations, trite, outdated dramaturgy . . . Someone stood up and said the author was a woman, but this did not make the audience more indulgent." [42]

Defamation was a strategy frequently used by the Club Massiac to silence abolitionists, [43] and Gouges's reputation as "an eccentric old lady" or "half-mad" originates to a large extent in these biased accounts. [44] But as Gabriel Debien has stressed, many newspapers were partially financed or at the service of the colonists. In the Gazette de Paris, for instance, Rozoi, "who made himself useful to the club [Massiac] by directly attacking books, pamphlets and plays in favor of abolition" denounced, after the performance of L'esclavage des noirs, "the `indirect link' between theater audience and National Assembly as a way of preparing public opinion to blame or confirm decisions of vital interest." [45] Second, critics have frequently evaluated the literary merits of the play on the basis of its alleged failure: the play failed, it was therefore a "bad" play. Summarizing Gouges's career as a playwright, Carlson clearly establishes a link between the two when he mentions her works to prove that "pièces de circonstance were not necessarily successful even in the receptive surroundings of Revolutionary Paris." [46] Last but not least, critics have largely ignored Gouges's own testimony: according to her the play was a success. [47] Pitting one opinion against another does not help, however. A more useful and neutral way to assess the success or failure of L'esclavage des noirs is to consider the following:

according to the rules of the Comédie-Française, had the play failed to bring in at least 1500 livres on opening night, it would not have been performed a second time. Since *L'esclavage* was performed three times, there is no reason to question Gouges's testimony: the play succeeded on opening night.[48]

In *Les comédiens démasqués* Gouges accused the actors, Molé in particular, of having done all they could to ensure the failure of *L'esclavage*--she mentions for instance the actors' refusal to paint their faces black to play the roles of slaves. According to her, colonists had used their influence to warn that if the play succeeded, they would voice their protest by cancelling forty subscriptions for loges at the Comédie; they had also used their money to buy actors, she said: those who played poorly were financially rewarded.[49] These accusations have usually been treated with sarcasm by critics--Welschinger views them as yet another proof of Gouges's paranoia ("délire de la persécution")--as a proof of Gouges's inability to concede defeat and to admit simply that her play was "bad." [50] But since critics such as Carlson and Welschinger have wrongly argued that the play failed on opening night, serious consideration should be given to Gouges's account of the fate of her play in December 1789. Why, if the play succeeded at first, did it cease to be represented after January 1790?

According to Gouges, her efforts to defer the second performance of *L'esclavage* and to make proper revisions to her manuscript were rejected by Molé, who convinced her not to adjourn the second representation. She soon realized, however, that Molé's eagerness to go on with the performances of *L'esclavage* was meant to better ensure its failure.[51] Granted, this accusation sounds absurd at first: why would an actor insist on performing a play if he wanted it to fail? Gouges was far from raving, however. There was a good reason, alluded to in *Les Comédiens démasqués*, and later clearly exposed by Le Chapelier at the National Assembly in 1791: it was a question of literary property.[52] A Royal ruling for the Comédie, still enforced in 1789, stated that a play had to be performed twelve times during the winter months (or ten in the summer) and bring in 1500 livres per performance to remain the property of the author. If it did not, it "fell into the rules" and became the property of the Comédie.[53] When a play failed to bring in that amount twice, the author no longer could ask to have it performed; he or she also lost his or her property rights. This is precisely what happened to *L'esclavage*. Gouges lost her rights to her play because the second and third performance failed to bring in 1500 livres.[54]

The comédiens' practice of making a play fail in order to assume the rights was widespread and protested by all playwrights. Their outrage led to the measures which gave France her first "copyright" legislation, the Le Chapelier law of 1791. Summarizing playwrights' complaints, Le Chapelier justified the new law with the following arguments:

But to crown it all, playwrights are told: if actors perform your play in a cowardly manner, on a day when other entertainments will attract audiences; if they choose to put on the program another play which keeps spectators away; all these ifs which foul play and interest make not only likely, but very common: you've lost your property.[55]

Gouges's complaints about the comédiens were identical:

. . . they'll pick bad days, they'll perform my play three times in the same week and cut it crudely, they'll put the most outdated play the repertory has to offer on the program with it; they'll choose days when the audience is sure to be absent . . . and as a result of these gentle precautions, my drama will fall into what the Comédie calls its rules; which is another way of saying that they will own it, simply because the takings will not have reached the fixed minimum.[56]

In her case, however, the comédiens truly won. They not only became the owners of the play, it is more than likely that they were paid for it. The Club Massiac was known for having offered or given money to political figures in exchange for their influence on similar occasions; it is probably no coincidence that, for some "unaccounted" reason, the treasury of the Club Massiac was empty in December 1789, precisely at the time of the first performance of *L'esclavage des noirs*. According to Debien "the account of the position on December 26 [1789] shows a deficit of [unknown] origin" but which "must be important,"[57] a statement confirmed by Lucien Leclerc: "It is doubtful that all revenues and expenditures appear on the books and registers located in the archives. We know, however, that in November 1789 expenditures were such that the treasurer had to remind club members of their obligation to pay their dues."[58]

Failure to take into account the historical circumstances under which *L'esclavage des noirs* was performed has led to Gouges's reputation as a failed and bad playwright. This reputation has actually little to do with the literary merits of her play; it proceeds more from the unpopular political views she defended. Gouges, however, was proud of her achievements as a playwright, and she had good reasons to be. Shortly before her death, she abandoned the modesty characteristic of earlier statements concerning her alleged lack of talent. In *Testament politique* she compared herself to Chénier, whom she had admired but bitterly envied, insinuating that political correctness, rather than literary talent, was the source of Chénier's success on the Parisian stages. To make it clear that she considered her achievements to rank at least as high as his, she wrote: "I bequeath . . . my creative genius to playwrights, they can use it [il ne leur sera pas inutile], and to the famous Chénier in particular, my know-how in drama [ma logique théâtrale]."[59] The comparison with Chénier is not out of place, for it is true that Gouges's willingness to experiment with dramatic forms and language certainly exceeded Chénier's. In that respect, her attempts to break new ground in drama are remarkable in themselves (her insistence that actors should "adopt negro color and clothing" to portray *L'esclavage's* characters, for instance, was seen as such a radical suggestion with which actors refused to comply.)

Yet Gouges's emphasis on form (*logique théâtrale*) as the distinguishing factor between her and Chénier is of particular interest because it situates her work as a counter-discourse which opposes tragedy as expression of the revolutionary doxa. Through her own conception of *drame*, Gouges successfully challenges the authority of the revolutionary dominant discourse in order to allow the minority voice raised against it to be heard: on the woman question, which she embodies in her determination to be a successful playwright; on her vision of the ideal form of government for France; and also on the issue of slavery--however moderate her demands might seem today. Functioning as discourses of dissent, her plays, and *L'esclavage des noirs* in particular, articulate Gouges's opposition to the male, revolutionary consensus. They should therefore be viewed as politically committed drama.

NOTES

[1]. My essay deliberately focuses on Gouges's drama and on her role as a playwright, not on her life. In the last two hundred years, critics have devoted most of their writings on Gouges to the story of her life, but in my opinion, this emphasis on biography has largely contributed to divert attention from her literary work. Works dealing with her biography are listed in the bibliography.

[2]. Most literary critics share Rodmell's view that no play produced during the Revolution "can be rated as an incontestably first-rate drama." Graham E. Rodmell, *French Drama of the Revolutionary Years* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 205.

[3]. Summarizing a common attitude toward French revolutionary theater, Rodmell writes: "The publisher's 'blurb' on the cover of Daniel Hammiche's book *Le Théâtre et la Révolution* accurately defines the impression which is too easily gained by students of French drama: 'The history of the theatre in France seems to drop off to sleep with *Le Mariage de Figaro*, to wake up again with the uproar surrounding *Hernani*. Nothing seems to have happened in between.'" Rodmell, *French Drama*, 11.

[4]. *Olympe de Gouges, Théâtre politique*, ed. Gisela Thiele Knobloch (Paris: Côté-femmes, 1991), 8. As illustrations of Thiele Knobloch's assertions, see: Marvin Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 55, 89, 148.

[5]. Thiele Knobloch, in: *Gouges, Théâtre politique*, 8.

[6]. Thiele Knobloch, in: *Gouges, Théâtre politique*, 9-10. See also: A. Joannides, *La Comédie Française de 1680 à 1900. Dictionnaire général des pièces et des auteurs* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1910).

[7]. Without completely rejecting Groult's argument, it is important to remember that Gouges's case was far from being exceptional. After all, as Martine Reid reminds us, "dialects, patois, and foreign languages [were] spoken by more than half of the population" (578) at the time of the Revolution. Martine Reid, "Language under Revolutionary Pressure," *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 572-579.

[8]. Benoîte Groult writes: "Olympe de Gouges' style has often been called inflated, naive, awkward. Just reading her *Déclaration*, however, we see that sometimes she knew how to combine brilliant formulas and daring thoughts." *Olympe de Gouges, Oeuvres*, ed. Benoîte Groult (Paris: Mercure de France 1986), 41. Thiele Knobloch comments on this passage: "This also applies to her plays." In: *Gouges, Théâtre politique*, 31.

[9]. *Gouges, Oeuvres*, 20.

[10]. Augustin-Charles Renouard, *Traité des droits d'auteurs dans la littérature, les sciences et les beaux-arts* (Paris: Renouard, 1838), 315-316.

[11]. See Rodmell, *French Drama*, 14; Carlson, *The Theatre*, 338.

[12]. Rodmell, *French Drama*, 8.

[13]. "[T]he ideological direction of the cultural revolution in theater did not come from the minor stages [...] but from outside the boulevard and even outside the world of theater." Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ann Arbor, MI.: UMI, 1981), 240.

[14]. Alfred Jepson Bingham, *Marie-Joseph Chénier. Early Political Life and Ideas* (New York: privately printed, 1939), 8.

[15]. Bingham, *Marie-Joseph Chénier*, 8.

[16]. Carlson, *The Theatre*, 55.

[17]. Bingham, *Marie-Joseph Chénier*, 8.

[18]. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Du théâtre ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique [1773]* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), 7.

[19]. See Claude Manceron, in: Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges* (Paris: Syros, 1981), 5.

[20]. Olympe de Gouges, *L'Esclavage des noirs, ou l'heureux naufrage* (Paris: Duchesnes, 1792), 3.

[21]. Sarah Maza, "Domestic Melodrama as Political Ideology: The Case of the Comte de Sanois," *The American Historical Review* 94 (December 1989): 1249-1264.

[22]. Codified as a genre by Pixierécourt in the 1790s, melodrama lost much of its overt political content but continued to prosper during the first two decades of the nineteenth-century.

[23]. Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 261.

[24]. Joan Wallach Scott, "'A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer': Olympe de Gouges Claims Rights for Women," *Rebel Daughters. Women and the French Revolution*, eds. Sara E. Melzer, and Leslie Rabine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 104.

[25]. Scott, "'A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer'," 111.

[26]. Scott, "'A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer'," 114.

[27]. "The Trial of a Feminist Revolutionary, Olympe de Gouges," *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795*, eds. Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson (Urbana IL: University Press of Illinois, 1979), 257.

- [28]. Simon Schama, *Citizens: a Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 424.
- [29]. Olympe de Gouges, *Les comédiens démasqués, ou Mme de Gouges ruinée par la Comédie française pour se faire jouer* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Comédie-Française, 1790), 48.
- [30]. "If negroes are freed, a few will leave [their masters], but in far smaller numbers than the inhabitants of French rural areas have." Olympe de Gouges, "Réflexions sur les hommes nègres," *Oeuvres de Mme de Gouges* 3, (Paris: Cailleau, 1788), 96.
- [31]. "French people, [...] you want neither liberty nor perfect equality." Olympe de Gouges, *Testament politique d'Olympe de Gouges* [S.I. 1793]. (Fonds Rondel. Rf. 18.231. Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal), 12.
- [32]. William D. Howarth, "The Playwright as Preacher: Didacticism and Melodrama in the French Theater of the Enlightenment," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 14 (April 1978): 99.
- [33]. On *Amis des Noirs*, see also: Claude Perroud, "La Société française des Amis des Noirs," *La Révolution Française* 69 (1916): 122-147; Valérie Quinney, "Decisions on Slavery, the Slave Trade and Civil rights for Negroes in the Early French Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History* 55 (April 1970): 117-130; Valérie Quinney, "The Problem of Civil Rights for Free Men of Color in the Early French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 7 (Fall 1972): 544-558; Daniel P. Resnick, "The Société des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," *French Historical Studies* 7 (Fall 1972): 558-569.
- [34]. Welschinger writes: "In 1787, Olympe de Gouges had sent Mirabeau her drama *L'Esclavage des Nègres* [sic]. Mirabeau answered her on September 12." Henri Welschinger, *Le Théâtre de la révolution* (Paris: Charavay Frères, 1880), 407. Mirabeau's letter is reproduced in: Gouges, *Théâtre politique*, 94-95.
- [35]. Resnick, "The Société des Amis des Noirs," 561.
- [36]. Gabriel Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue et la révolution. Essai sur le Club Massiac (Août 1789-Août 1792)* (Paris: Colin, 1953), 111, 119.
- [37]. Resnick, "The Société des Amis des Noirs," 564.
- [38]. Bingham, Marie-Joseph Chénier, 13 [my underlining].
- [39]. Carlson, *The Theatre*, 148.
- [40]. Welschinger, *Le théâtre de la révolution*, 15.
- [41]. For a discussion of *L'esclavage des noirs*'s reception in the press, see Blanc, Olympe de Gouges, 73-75.

- [42]. Welschinger, *Le théâtre de la révolution*, 303-304.
- [43]. See Quinney, "Decisions on Slavery," 122.
- [44]. Carlson, *The Theatre*, 88, 154.
- [45]. Debien, "The Société des Amis des Noirs," 128.
- [46]. Carlson, *The Theatre*, 148.
- [47]. ". . . at last, the battle-field is mine, it is a triumph." Gouges, *Les comédiens démasqués*, 45.
- [48]. Blanc writes that "nearly a thousand people" attended the first performance of *L'esclavage*. The source of this figure, however, is not mentioned. Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges*, 73.
- [49]. Gouges, *Les comédiens démasqués*, 45.
- [50]. Welschinger, *Le Théâtre de la révolution*, 297.
- [51]. Gouges, *Les Comédiens démasqués*, 46.
- [52]. See Renouard, *Traité des droits d'auteurs*, 309-313.
- [53]. Quoted in Renouard, *Traité des droits d'auteurs*, 216-217, 220.
- [54]. "My play is now buried under the Comédie's insane rulings, it has become its property." Gouges, *Les comédiens démasqués*, 47.
- [55]. Quoted in Renouard, *Traité des droits d'auteurs*, 311.
- [56]. Gouges, *Les comédiens démasqués*, 46.
- [57]. Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue*, 115.
- [58]. Lucien Leclerc, "La politique et l'influence du Club de l'Hotel Massiac," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 14 (1937): 348.
- [59]. Gouges, *Testament Politique*, 11.