

Explore the representation of the clergy in revolutionary theatre, with particular reference to *Charles IX ou l'École des Rois*, *Fénélon*, ou les *Religieuses de Cambrai*, *Le Couvent ou les Vœux forcées* and *Le Prêlat d'autrefois* ou *Sophie et Saint-Elme*

*S'y sera joué de manière subreptice, dans la représentation du dispositif esthétique de la claustration le passage d'un théâtre du réel à un théâtre du fantasme, d'un théâtre du collectif à un théâtre de la pulsion individuelle, d'un théâtre du sentiment, mis au service d'une idéologie, à un théâtre de la passion. En cela aussi, je crois, ce théâtre est politique.*¹

Sophie Marchand defines the convent theatre genre as on the threshold between neoclassical theatre and melodrama. I explore to what extent the transitional convent genre is 'politique' and analyse how Chénier's 'tragédie nationale' and convent play anticipate and exemplify the tension in revolutionary theatre between two modes of representation. I contrast Chénier's neoclassical aesthetics and revolutionary politics to inform my exploration of how Chénier represents the clergy. In the second section, I explore how de Gouges' theatre engages in a contemporary debate about the role of women in society during the French revolution. My results inform my analysis of how Olympe de Gouges aesthetically innovates the convent genre to propose a new model of *citoyenneté*.

Firstly, Chénier uses the Protestant Chancelier de l'Hôpital to condemn censorship. Until the legislation of 4 August 1789 abolished censorship, the Comédie Française, the Académie de musique and the Comédie Italienne enjoyed corporate monopolies on theatre and opera in Paris. The Chancelier reflects Chénier's frustration at the monopoly of theatrical institutions, which he sees as a despotic attack on personal liberty. He draws attention to the Chancelier de l'Hôpital's speech on the necessity for freedom of speech through the note which he adds to his speech:

Dans un pays libre, on doit avoir la liberté la plus illimitée de manifester ses opinions... la liberté n'est point établie sur la terre que dans quelques provinces de l'Amérique septentrionale.²

¹ Marchand, Sophie, Représenter la claustration: les décors de couvents, entre idéologie et scénographie in *Costumes, Décors et accessoires dans le théâtre de la révolution et de l'empire, sous la direction de Philippe Bourdin et Françoise le Borgne*, Collection Histoires croisées (Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2010) 41-55 p.55.

² Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Charles IX*, in *Théâtre*, edited by Gauthier Ambrus and François Jacob (Paris, GF Flammarion, 2002) p. 113. All citations will be from this text unless otherwise stated.

The reference to America links the Chancelier to Lafayette, who was involved in its 1786 Revolution. Chénier contrasts American freedom of press and religion with French censorship and lack of freedom of religion. The American Revolution increased political consciousness prior to the French Revolution, especially because France attempted to support the establishment of American nobility. Chénier associates the Protestant clergy with liberty of press and freedom of religion.

The tableau increases the impact of Chénier's denunciation of despotism. The tableau was an aesthetic technique which was very popular in neoclassical theatre. Chénier uses the tableau to visually emphasise the link between Catholicism and despotism. He admits in the preface that he changed historical fact when the Cardinal de Lorraine blesses the weapons with which the Protestants are slaughtered. The stage directions make this clear:

Le duc de Guise et tous les autres courtisans mettent un genou en terre, en croisant leurs épées. Ils restent dans cette position pendant le discours du cardinal de Lorraine. (IX, IV, vi, 1349) p.136

The genuflection links the Church to murder and presents the hypocrisy of the Church. The tableau visually implicates the Bourbon royal family with mass murder, as Louis XVI is a descendant of Charles IX. The lineal connection between Charles IX and Louis XVI explains the range of reactions to the performance. Le Chapelier, Mirabeau, Desmoulins and Danton attended the premiere of *Charles IX* on 4 November 1789, when the latter stated, 'If *Figaro* killed off the nobility, *Charles IX* will kill off the royalty'.³ Danton's comparison is ironic because Beaumarchais strongly objected to the content of *Charles IX*:

Et puis, quel instant, mes amis, que celui où le roi et sa famille viennent résider à Paris pour faire allusion aux complots qui peuvent les y avoir conduits... Ces barbares excès à quelque parti qu'on les prête, me semblent dangereux à présenter au peuple... les esprits argents, Messieurs, n'ont pas besoin de tels modèles!⁴

³ Friedland, Paul, *Political Actors: representative bodies and theatricality in the age of the French revolution* (London, Cornell university press, 2002) p. 263.

⁴ The quotation is from Beaumarchais's letter to M. Florence, sociétaire, dated 9 November 1789. Cited in "Charles IX, ou l'École des Rois": Tragédie Nationale, H. C. Ault, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Oct., 1953), pp. 398-406, Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3718653), Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3718653> p. 406.

Beaumarchais' concern about the timing the performance of *Charles IX* would have upon public order recalls that the premier took place one month after the October Days. He fears that the 'ardents' women and men of Paris who marched on Versailles and forced the royal family to return with them to Paris will be inspired by the tableau of mass murder to physically attack the monarchy. The contrast between Danton's comment and Beaumarchais' concerns reflect the widening gap between the monarchists and the radical partisans of the revolution.

Chénier's representation of Catherine de Médicis criticises the Church and monarchy. Henri de Navarre claims that her servile arts of corruption and Italian heritage are destroying France:

Cruelle, ainsi par vous la France est avilie! / Vous perdez tout l'Etat, reine et mère coupable. / Consommez vos destins, monarque déplorable. (V. iii, 15612-3)

Henri de Navarre anticipates the fear of women in power that permeates French revolutionary discourse. Catherine de Médicis parades her seizure of power simply by speaking in the stead of Charles when the Cardinal asks him for instructions. The sexual language ('consommez') anchors the tie between Catherine de Médicis and Marie-Antoinette as both foreign queens were subject to aggressive pornographic representation in pamphlet literature. The language also anticipates the charges of incest which Marie-Antoinette faced at her trial. *Révolutions de Paris* linked Marie-Antoinette and Catherine de Médicis when it applauded the play's political impact as instilling in the public detestation 'for ministerial despotism and the feminine intrigues of court life.'⁵ The description of 'court life' recalls that Henri de Navarre condemns the court because it is encourages feminine intrigue. He condemns 'Des femmes gouvernant des princes trop faciles' (I,ii, 176). Henri de Navarre's attack recalls that Marie Antoinette was blamed for Louis XVI's perceived alienation from his people and incompetent leadership skills ('facile'). Henri de Navarre blames Charles IX's 'facile' leadership skills on his close relationship to Catherine de Médicis.⁶ Her despotic view of kingship contrasts to the view which Chénier would have his audience accept.

⁵ Gutwirth, Madelyn, 'Stigmatizing the woman as actor: French revolutionary confrontation onstage and on the rostrum', *Eighteenth-Century Women, Studies in Their Lives, Work, and Culture*, Edited by Linda Veronica Troost, Volume five, (Brooklyn USA, AMS Press, 2007) p. 247.

⁶ He contrasts to Henri de Navarre's model childhood which Chénier draws attention to with a note on Rousseau and education (176).

Furthermore, Chénier uses the representation of clergy to contribute to a contemporary debate about the nature of power. He uses an exchange between the Catholic and Protestant bishop to contrast the Church to reason. The Cardinal says:

Un roi peut ce qu'il veut. / Quelle horrible maxime !... Nous sommes leurs sujets, ils sont sujets des lois. (III, i, 855...862)

The internal monosyllabic rhyme ('peut', 'veut') emphasises the dangers inherent to unrestrained power and links monarchical despotism to Church despotism. Ambrus argues that 'ce vers résume à lui seul l'une des idées centrales du processus révolutionnaire'.⁷ In the *épitre dédicatoire à la nation française*, written on 15 December 1789, Chénier claims that *Charles IX* is 'la seule tragédie vraiment nationale qui ait encore paru en France' (67). Rodmell argues that Chénier's 'tragédie nationale' 'was a perfectly coherent view of tragedy at a time when the demythologizing of the old institutions of Church and State was advancing apace.'⁸ Chénier contributes to the 'demythologization' of the Church and State when he proposes that constitutional monarchy replace them. His reference to Louis XVI as a 'roi plein de justice et de bonté' (67) and the subtitle *L'école des rois* indicate Chénier's optimism in 1789 that constitutional monarchy could re-unite France. In 1789 Chénier did not yet believe that violence was inherent to the French revolution.

Chénier's representation of the clergy in *Charles IX* anticipates the rise of the convent play genre. Mita Choudhury argues that 'by 1789 cloistral despotism was a common perception, as the laity's access to the cloister was limited to those who could visit their family, so the reading public struggled to differentiate between the daily lives of women religious and the fictive fantasies of sorrow and bitterness raging in the public space... by 1789 the convent had become synonymous with forced vocation'.⁹ The dispossession of the clergy in November 1789 inspired revolutionary playwrights to develop the representation of the nun as a politically active citoyenne and indulge audience expectations of sorrow and bitterness. The following February, recognition of existing vows was withdrawn and new vows were forbidden. Hufton argues that 'the Assembly... demonstrated a stunning ignorance about female religious and their psychological attributes'.¹⁰ The average age of the nuns in 1789

⁷ Ambrus, p. 395.

⁸ Rodmell, E., *French drama of the revolutionary years* (Cornwall, 1990, Routledge) p.50.

⁹ Mita Choudhury, p. 42.

¹⁰ Hufton, Olwen H., *Women and the limits of citizenship in the French revolution*, (London, university of Toronto press, 1989) p. 57.

was over fifty, so they were unable to reintegrate into society through marriage following the legislative changes. As a result of the annulment of their vows, some of the fifty-five thousand female religious turned to counter-revolutionary activity.

Fénélon is an innovative development of the convent play genre through the aesthetic portrayal of anti-clerical ideology. *Fénélon* presents anti-clerical ideology through set, costume and scenery. The stage directions indicate:

Le premier acte se passe dans l'intérieur d'un couvent de femmes ; le deuxième et le quatrième, dans un souterrain du même couvent ; le troisième et le cinquième, dans le palais de l'Archevêque¹¹. (266)

The visual progression from the interior of a convent, to a dark and gloomy 'souterrain' to Fénélon's bright palace highlights the ideological progression from darkness to enlightenment. Marchand argues that the convent theatre set gains in importance because prior to February 1790, religious presentation was banned from the theatre: 'De ce fait s'instaure un régime... dont l'efficacité visuelle et signifiante réside dans sa puissance de défamiliarisation.'¹² Chénier's set captures audience imagination because his 'souterrain' defamiliarises the audience as it transports them back in time to a space which has not existed for three years.

Fénélon uses linguistic imagery to re-enforce the visual portrayal of ideology through the set. The progression of the action from the souterrain to Fénélon's palace is paralleled with dramatic imagery of darkness and light. Héloïse's liberation from the dark and sterile 'souterrain' allows her reunification with her former partner d'Elmance in Fénélon's sunlit palace in act five. Héloïse draws attention to the beautiful palace set when she says:

Je puis donc te revoir, astre brillant du jour !/ Que ses rayons sont purs ! Que la nature entière/ s'embellit à mes yeux de sa douce lumière! (V.vi. 1163-5)

In the sterile dark 'souterrain' Héloïse was separated from nature and society. The visual and thematic progression from darkness to light demonstrates how the republic is enlightened following its liberation from the fanatic Ancien Regime and Church. Héloïse's imagery subverts Racine's motif of light to emphasise Phèdre's incestuous desire for Hippolyte,

¹¹ Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Théâtre*, edited by Gauthier Ambrus and François Jacob (Paris, GF Flammarion, 2002) p. 266. All quotations will be taken from this text unless otherwise stated.

¹² Sophie Marchand, p. 50.

recalling Chénier's claim in the preface that he wrote a revolutionary *Phèdre*. It recalls that the classification of *Fénélon* as a 'tragédie' infuriated contemporaries because Chénier violates the Aristotelian principle that the protagonists of the tragedy must have noble origins. His desire for a new genre anticipates the melodrama and recalls his desire for social unity following the division and political factions of the Terror.

Chénier negotiates the tension between the Church and atheism in *Fénélon*. The power struggle between the Girondins and the Montagnards had paved the way for the Terror by winter 1792, when Chénier composed *Fénélon*. In the Préface to *Fénélon*, Chénier writes:

J'achevai en peu de temps *Fénélon*, car je l'écrivais avec une émotion profonde, et sans me refroidir un instant sur mon travail, qui me subjuguait tout entier. (248)

The atmosphere of fear was encouraged by both the approaching war and the memory of de-Christianisation during winter 1791 and 1792. Government intervention in theatre increased, and censorship was re-introduced in 1791. In his first appearance in Act Three, Fénélon uses the 'mur' motif to reassure his people that he will look after them:

Bon peuple! Dans ces murs je fixe mon séjour/ je ne quitterai point mes enfants pour la cour (III.i. 563-5)

The internal rhyme ('murs/ séjour/ cour') presents Fénélon as a responsible leader because he rejects the court which separates the leaders of society from the French people. The 'mur' motif links the (visually presented) convent walls to social division. Bara argues that 'Abolir ces espaces de réclusion... c'est à la fois rétablir partout les lois naturelles et réunifier le monde placé intégralement sous la lumière divine'.¹³ The Christian imagery ('lumière divine') recalls that the convent play responds to de-Christianisation with horror, as atheism was linked to disorder and instability. Marchand argues that 'le mur symbolise l'arbitraire idéologique'¹⁴. Chénier uses the convent play 'mur' motif to discursively and visually condemn 'l'arbitraire idéologique' of the Church and to condemn the Terror in *Fénélon*.

Fénélon explores the growing division between the Girondins and the Montagnards 1792-3. In his 1802 preface Chénier links social division to the political disputes in the Convention

¹³ Bara, Olivier, 'L'imaginaire scénique de la prison sous la Révolution. Eloquence et plasticité d'un lieu commun' in *Les arts de la scène et la Révolution française*, (Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2004) 395-419 p. 402.

¹⁴ Marchand, p. 47.

over the necessity of the Terror. He responds to critics that his political stance was unclear with the claim that the play condemns Jacobinism:

Comment n'ont-ils pas vu que les principes d'une faction cruelle étaient combattus dans *Fénélon*, et la faction elle-même attaquée ouvertement dans le discours préliminaire? (264)

Chénier argues that the play contrasts Jacobinism with the political stance of his protagonist. Chénier endows the name of his protagonist with thematic significance. The first time Amélie hears it she says:

Fénélon! Par vos soins j'appris dès mon enfance/ A chérir ses vertus et sa douce éloquence.
(I, ii, 77-8)

Chénier associates the name 'Fénélon' with hope as Amélie is optimistic that Fénélon will save her from her forced vocation. Amélie associates him with 'éloquence' to anticipate that his discourse dissolves the religious vows of Isaure and Héloïse. Fénélon demonstrates his eloquence on his return to Cambrai, when he calls for the pacification of a France torn apart by the persecution of Protestants and Catholic soldiers. Fénélon engages in a contemporary debate about the best way to govern when he says:

Nous avons oublié la nature et ses lois; / Les cris des préjugés ont fait taire sa voix...Puissent nos successeurs, un jour plus éclairés, / Dissiper les erreurs qui nous ont égarés! (III.iv. 231-6) (298)

The Rousseauian rhetoric ('la nature') recalls that Rousseau condemned political factions because they were incompatible with 'la volonté générale' or sovereignty of the people. Fénélon contrasts the superstitious Church ('préjugés' 'erreurs') with a religion based upon Rousseau's philosophy of contact with nature or the Supreme Being. He anticipates Robespierre's cult of the Supreme Being in June 1793, ironically the only revolutionary festival for which Chénier was not requested to compose the words for the songs. Ambrus links Fénélon's optimism about the bright future (éclairé) with the abolition of the convent: 'le monde est désormais... un et indivis grâce à l'avènement de la liberté politique. Il n'y a plus guère d'opposition entre un dedans protecteur et un dehors incertain ou hostile.'¹⁵ Chénier uses Fénélon to call for social unification and to condemn the political factions within the Convention.

¹⁵ Ambrus, p. 419.

The confrontation between Héloïse and the Abbess contrasts the views of the Catholic Church with the views Chénier wants his audience to accept. Héloïse argues that Catholicism is fanatic and unnatural and associates the convent institution with abstinence, solitude and sterility. She says:

Dieu créa les mortels pour s'aimer, pour s'unir: / Ces cloîtres, ces cachots ne sont point son ouvrage; / Dieu fit la liberté, l'homme a fait l'esclavage, / Mais l'esclave ne porte aux pieds de l'Eternel / Qu'un hommage stérile, un encens criminel. (307)

Chénier contrasts 'sterile' Catholicism to an alternative religion based upon Rousseau's call for social unity. Héloïse re-integrates into society through marriage to d'Elmance to demonstrate the central tenets of Rousseau's religion.

To conclude my exploration of Chénier, *Fénélon* develops the innovative aesthetic experimentation, which Chénier first demonstrated when he created the 'tragédie nationale' of *Charles IX*. His relatively late contribution to the established convent play canon is aesthetically innovative. Indeed, Olivier Bara argues that *Fénélon* is the greatest of the convent plays. He says: 'elle offre une ultime synthèse idéologique sur la question. Explicitement, la prison religieuse condamne à la solitude, à l'esclavage, et à la stérilité.'¹⁶ Chénier associates political factions with 'stérilité' and anticipates that the social division they create will lead to the Terror. The oppressive political atmosphere of 1793 contributes to the urgency of his call for social reunification.

I now explore how the representation of the clergy in *Le Couvent* links to the pursuit of de Gouges' feminist ethos. De Gouges intends to encourage women to engage intimately with contemporary events through theatre:

C'est à vous que ces faibles fruits de mes talents s'adressent, femmes vertueuses, femmes citoyennes, que le patriotisme s'embrace d'un saint zèle.¹⁷

De Gouges subverts Rousseau's vocabulary ('vertueuses') as she juxtaposes virtue and female political activism ('le patriotisme'). Her concept of female citizenship ('femmes citoyennes') anticipates the work of the *Cercle Social* 1790-1. Gary Kates argues that 'the Cercle Social constituted the most significant centre for women's rights during the early

¹⁶ Olivier Bara, p. 402

¹⁷ *Action héroïque*, p.5, cited in Thiele-Knobloch, p. 25.

years of the French Revolution.’¹⁸ The Cercle Social called upon the government to pass a liberal divorce law and major reforms in inheritance law. De Gouges was intimately engaged with *Cercle Social* issues, as she calls for divorce law reform in her excellent play, *La Nécessité de divorce*, in which a strong female protagonist forgives her husband’s mistress instead of being jealous of her. Her husband recognises his wife’s exceptional nature and generosity and begs forgiveness. Whilst the successful dénouement occurs without recourse to divorce, his fear that his wife will divorce him encourages the husband’s contrition. Cercle Social feminism called for an end to primogeniture and the passage of inheritance law reform that would divide property equally between all children, regardless of age or sex. *Le Couvent* engages in the debate about the republican family, a debate which the Cercle Social prioritised. Etta Palm d’Aelders supported matrimonial and inheritance law reform and called for the new regime to transform the family into a compassionate, egalitarian unit. My analysis of *Fénélon* demonstrated that social reunification is at the thematic centre of the convent play. Like Chénier, de Gouges uses the reunification of the divided family to call for social reunification. Angélique loses her family, including her daughter, when she is forced to take vows against her will. She says:

Enfermée dans ce Cloître...on mit auprès de moi cette enfant; mais, par un raffinement de cruauté, on me défendit avec les plus affreuses menaces de me faire connaitre à elle.¹⁹

De Gouges’ use of the divided family motif links *Le Couvent* to Cercle Social feminism. Unlike Héloïse, whom Fénélon reunites with her lover d’Elmance, Angélique remains in the convent after Julie’s marriage to Le Chevalier. Angélique’s abandonment to solitary confinement at the close of the play anticipates the end of the Girondins and *Cercle Social*.²⁰

De Gouges uses the convent theatre genre to call for women’s right to freedom of speech. The right to freedom of speech was important to de Gouges, as it was to Chénier and to all revolutionary playwrights. In Article X of her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* she asserts that ‘la femme a le droit de monter sur l’échafaud, elle doit également

¹⁸ Kates, Gary, “‘The powers of husband and wife must be equal and separate’”; the Cercle Social and the Rights of Women 1790-1’ 163-181 in Levy, Darline G., and Applewhite, Harriet B., *Women and politics in the age of the democratic revolution*, (London, University of Michigan Press, 1990) p. 176.

¹⁹ Olympe de Gouges, *Le Couvent ou les Vœux forcées*, accessed in <http://gallica.bnf.fr/> on 04/05/11 p.80. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this text unless otherwise stated.

²⁰ Future Girondin deputies from the Cercle Social failed ‘to push their feminist agenda when they emerged as deputies in the Legislative Assembly and the Convention... from the spring of 1792 the Girondins were overwhelmed by more pressing issues of survival.’ (Gary, 77)

avoir celui de monter à la Tribune'.²¹ Unlike Chénier, de Gouges uses the convent genre to explore the relationship between women and freedom of speech. De Gouges uses Angélique to highlight the necessity for women to actively engage in politics through political speech. Angélique's revelation of identity takes place at the dramatic climax of the play to draw attention to the description of female oppression. She halts the ceremony of Julie's forced vocation:

Arrêtez! Non, cet affreux sacrifice ne s'achèvera pas. (79)

Murphree notes that 'in all but one example, the ordinary inmates of the convent are depicted as powerless over their own fates. The exception (is) Olympe de Gouges'²². The re-assignment of the revelation which liberates the novice to a female character is an aesthetic innovation which highlights the feminist causes which were debated in 1790-1. De Gouges draws attention to the 'revelation that frees the heroine' as she situates it at the dramatic climax of the play. Furthermore, Godineau argues that women gave proof of a very central involvement in the course of events in the French Revolution, both through issuing calls to action and direct participation. She says: 'We see on July 14 1789, Pauline Leon "stirring up (male) citizens against the partisans of tyranny", and on August 10 1792, Claire Lacombe 'rallying (male) citizens who were being routed by continuous gunfire.'²³ Like Lacombe and Léon, Angélique uses speech to incite action. Her speech leads directly to the successful dénouement as the ceremony is interrupted, Julie is liberated from forced vow-taking and the family is re-united.

The portrayal of the clergy in *Le Couvent* recalls the contemporary debate about active and passive citizenship. Darline G. Levy argues that 'in the weeks preceding the April 9th 1793 procession, a concept of female citizenship was emerging. This concept dissolved distinctions between active/ passive, male/ female citizens and the public/ domestic spaces where citizenship could be acted upon; combined women's right of self defence with their civil obligation to protect and defend the *patrie*; and placed these rights and duties directly in

²¹ Gouges, Olympe de, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de citoyenne*, from http://www.aidh.org/Biblio/Text_fondat/FR_03.htm accessed 04/05/11.

²² Murphree, Patrick D., *The spectacle of the cloister in French revolutionary drama*, Presentation [The CESAR Project](http://www.cesar.org.uk/cesar2/conferences/cesar_conference_2006/Murphree_paper06.html), (Oxford Brookes University, © 2006) accessed at http://www.cesar.org.uk/cesar2/conferences/cesar_conference_2006/Murphree_paper06.html on 04/05/11 p. 2.

²³ Godineau, Dominique, 'Masculine and feminine political practice during the French Revolution, 1793- Year III' in Levy, Darline G., and Applewhite, Harriet B., *Women and politics in the age of the democratic revolution*, (London, University of Michigan Press, 1990) 61-81 p. 78.

the centre of a general definition of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.²⁴ De Gouges links social discord to lack of female citizenship. She uses the Curé to call for the '(re)definition of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship'.²⁵ The Curé links monarchical and ecclesiastical tyranny to sexual subordination when he says:

Sexe faible et malheureux... on t'interdit le pouvoir de te déterminer sur la moins importante des considérations de fortune, et cependant on t'enchaîne par des serments inviolables.

The Curé deplors the lack of political power women hold in society and calls for a shift in attitude to female citizenship. The imagery from Rousseau ('enchaîne', 'raison') contrasts the Church to nature and reason. De Gouges had a passion for Rousseau and declared her love of him 'malgré les sarcasmes qu'il a lancé contre nous.'²⁶ She undermines Rousseau's hostile attitude to women when the Curé employs Rousseau's rhetoric to lament that women lack political status as active citizens. She associates the Church's fanatic attitude to women with political fanaticism, which denied women the status of citizen.

De Gouges exploits the convent play opposition between interior and exterior. The threat of the eruption of the people on stage is the dramatic climax of the second act. The Curé's optimism that the power of 'le peuple' will influence change recalls the October Days, when the people of Paris demonstrated the power of direct action when they brought the royal family from Versailles to Paris. The Curé refers to it when he says:

Une fermentation générale agite le Royaume ; nous touchons à la plus importante des révolutions ; les abus, les tyrannies de vos pareilles, Madame, et des nôtres, ont depuis longtemps rebuté les cœurs et aigri les esprits. La constante persécution produit à la fin l'indépendance. (75)

The Curé criticises the Abbess because she prevents other women from forging an independent political identity when she isolates her novices from the 'fermentation générale (qui) agite le Royaume'. Vérdier argues that in the theatre of de Gouges 'although the male authority figure is not overthrown, he is displaced from centre; he is corrected and must share moral authority with the strong independent women who invariably erupt on stage in her

²⁴ Darline G., and Applewhite, Harriet B., 'Women, Radicalization, and the Fall of the French Monarchy', *Women and politics in the age of the democratic revolution*, (London, University of Michigan Press, 1990) 81-109 p. 90.

²⁵ Levy, p. 90.

²⁶ *Action héroïque*, p.6, cited by Thiele-Knobloch, p. 24.

plays.²⁷ The Curé shares moral authority with Angélique, who voices de Gouges' belief that women harm society when they separate themselves from it. Like Chénier, and all convent theatre playwrights, de Gouges sees the separation of religion from society as unhealthy and unnatural. The Curé calls for an end to the interior/ exterior binary which separates religious women from society.

De Gouges uses the clergy to condemn the decline of female rights during the Terror in *Le Prêlat d'autrefois*. Olympe de Gouges wrote *Le Prêlat d'autrefois* in spring 1793 in an atmosphere of increasing hostility and political suspicion and tension. Scott Lytle argues that the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women were the most vocal champions of the feminist cause 1793. Lytle argues that 'the Revolutionary Women identified their cause of economic relief for the Paris poor with the Mountain's conquest of its Girondin rivals in the Convention.'²⁸ Like the Cercle Social, the Society prioritised the issues of other causes above equal rights for women, especially devoting energies to the insurrectional Jacobin cause. Founded by Claire Lacombe on tenth May 1793, they were associated with radical parties in the Convention, including Jacques Roux, Leclerc and the Enragés. On 26 May 1793, Clare Lacombe appeared before the National Convention despite Robespierre's efforts to prevent her, and asked that the Montagnard constitution be put into effect. She also repeated Leclerc's demand for an armed insurrection against domestic enemies. When Roux was arrested by the government of the Terror, which proclaimed itself on the fifth of September 1793, the Society's days were numbered, and Chabot denounced the Society of Revolutionary Women to the National Convention in September 1793. *Le Prêlat d'autrefois* employs the rhetoric of suspicion which was employed in 1793 by Chabot against the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. The Abbess associates the Church with counter-revolution. She challenges the Bishop to torture her rather than sacrificing Sophie to his desire. She tells the Evêque that she will oppose and disrupt his plans to seduce the women in her care:

²⁷ Verdier, Gabrielle, 'From reform to revolution : the social theater of Olympe de Gouges' in Montfort, Catherine R., *Literate women and the French Revolution of 1789*, (Birmingham, Ala. : Summa, 1994) 189-221 p. 215.

²⁸ 'The Second Sex (September, 1793)', Scott H. Lytle, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Mar., 1955), pp. 14-26, Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1877697) , Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1877697> p.18.

Va, le voile est déchiré, ton hypocrisie te cache mal à mes yeux...je veillerai moi-même sur les victimes innocentes qui me sont confiées, et que tu voudrais empoisonner de tes maximes.²⁹

The rhetoric of conspiracy ('maximes' 'empoisonner' 'hypocrisie') recalls when Claire Lacombe employed counter-revolutionary rhetoric when she denounced the 'ambitious hypocrites in the Convention committees' on 26 May 1793.³⁰

Like Claire Lacombe, the Abbess is a model for ideal female citizenship. She resists injustice and oppression, and prioritises solidarity for women over jealousy for her past lover. The Abbess is the aesthetic culmination of de Gouges' outgoing, altruistic female figures, including Mme D'Azinval in *La Nécessité de divorce* and Mme de Valmont in *L'homme généreux*. She challenges the Bishop to sacrifice her to save the women in her protection:

Ose faire porter sur moi tes mains sacrilèges, appelle ces prêtres irrégieux, assez lâches pour être les instruments de tes vengeances, ordonne à tes complices de me faire trainer dans un cachot affreux (243)

The language of conspiracy links the Church to the counter-revolution ('tes complices'). The imagery of despotism links the hypocrisy of the Church to the hypocrisy of the Convention ('ces prêtres irrégieux', 'sacrilèges'). De Gouges contrasts the unity among the women in the convent to the fracture of society engendered by the factional disputes in the Convention.

De Gouges exploits the voyeuristic convent theatre set in *Le Prêlat d'autrefois*. The cave is the location for the dramatic climax, as 'dragonnards' save Sophie from her forced vow taking, organised by the comic Champagne. The location of the dramatic climax is a secret room. The stage directions describe it:

Le théâtre représente une église...d'un côté de l'église est une grande grille avec une porte en fer. (266)

De Gouges defamiliarises the trappings of the Church ('un confessionnal', 'un Autel') when she associates them with secrecy ('une porte secrète', 'un souterrain', 'grilles'). Patrick D. Murphree argues that 'the staging of the invasion of a convent could be experienced by male

²⁹ Olympe de Gouges, *Le Prêlat d'autrefois ou Sophie et Saint-Elme, Théâtre politique II*, edited by Gisela Theile-Knobloch, (Paris, côté-femmes, 1993) p. 243. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this text unless otherwise stated.

³⁰ Lytle, p.18.

audience members as an enactment of the sexual domination of a site of female power.’ Like Chénier, de Gouges gratifies the expectation of voyeurism through her elaborate set as the morbidity of the dark and gloomy underground room increases the atmosphere of eroticism. The set in *Le Prêlat d’autrefois* adheres to Marchand’s definition of the melodrama as it creates ‘un théâtre du fantasme’.³¹

De Gouges’ presentation of the clergy in *Le Prêlat d’autrefois* anticipates the melodrama. Thomasseau describes the stock mélodrame villain: ‘Le grand seigneur méchant homme... donne souvent toutes les apparences de l’honnêteté et de la grandeur. Rapidement, cependant, il dévoile sa suffisance, son orgueil et sa cruauté.’³² The Bishop recalls the stock figure of ‘le grand seigneur méchant homme’ because he intends to seduce the innocent novice Sophie. He says:

L’ambition est satisfaite, mais le cœur ne l’est pas; la nature est plus forte que la raison... il faut céder. (I. vi, p221)

De Gouges presents the Church as unnatural as the Bishop was forced to enter the Church by his family but it does not allow him to cede to natural impulses. The Bishop reveals ‘son orgueil et sa cruauté’ when he uses the rhetoric of Rousseau (‘la nature’) to justify seducing a novice. He speaks ‘d’un ton mieilleux’ (225) to disguise his hypocrisy. The adherence of the Bishop to ‘le grand seigneur méchant homme’ anticipates that contemporaries defined the play as a melodrama. For example, at the premier on 18 March 1795, a critic warmly responded to the play: ‘Sujet du melodrama, traité avec tout les agreements du genre et chaleureusement accueilli’.³³

De Gouges exploits the tension between the voyeurism of the set and her feminist ethos. Gregory S. Brown argues that women writers were forced into a ‘double bind’ whereby they were obliged to project one identity in the public space and another in the domestic space.³⁴ The Abbess demonstrates the ‘double bind’ when she projects an image of herself to the Bishop. She speaks ‘avec ironie’ when she addresses him to disguise her true feelings, which she reveals in her soliloquy. The Abbess delivers a soliloquy ‘seule, agitée’ (240). She says :

³¹ Marchand, p.55.

³² Thomasseau, Jean-Marie, *Le Mélodrame*, (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) p. 33.

³³ O. Blanc, 222, cited by Thiele-Knobloch, p.22.

³⁴ Gregory S. Brown. "The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34.3 (2001): 383-401. *Project MUSE*. Web. 21 Jan. 2011. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> p. 389.

Voici ces murs, rappelle tes serments, regarde ces voiles qui te couvrent; tu es morte au monde et tu brules pour un mortel ! (240)

The reference to the set and costume ('ces murs' 'ces voiles') associates the female religious condition with physical and psychological oppression. The phonetic repetition ('morte'/'mortel') links the Abbess's painful mental condition to her distress at her betrayal by the Bishop. De Gouges portrays the Abbess with psychological realism to recall the distresses which women in the public sphere encountered. The portrayal of the Abbess contrasts with the farcical elements of the play. Thiele-Knobloch argues that 'le personnage de Champagne est d'un comique très réussi.'³⁵ De Gouges debases the clergy through the farce of Champagne's disguise as a statue. Thanks to the combination of melodrama, farce and realism *Le Prêlat d'autrefois* is the climax of de Gouges' aesthetic innovation.

To conclude, the representation of the clergy by revolutionary playwrights is aesthetically and politically innovative. Chénier exploits the tensions between the neoclassical drama and melodrama to call for social reunification. De Gouges uses aesthetic innovation to call for a politically-engaged active female citizenship which demands that women use their shared sense of sisterhood to combat female exploitation. The authors' concern at de-Christianisation and the increasing violence of the Terror leads to their presentation of an alternative religion inspired by Rousseau. They present corruption as inherent to institutionalised religion, which is associated with despotism and the Ancien Regime. Their alternative non-institutionalised religion calls for tolerance, understanding and respect for the views of others. The concept responds to the oppressive climate of the Terror. The convent theatre genre exemplifies how the personal is political for the French revolutionary playwright, as Chénier and de Gouges are precursors of the modern playwright because they are more interested in presenting their thoughts on political actuality than in writing a 'good' play.

Word Count: 4, 330

³⁵ Thiele-Knobloch, p. 23.

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