

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND NAPOLEON

Biography

Olympe de Gouges was a French social critic and feminist who lived around the time of the French Revolution. In 1791, she demanded equal rights for women in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. ♦ *As you read, note the ways that her views placed de Gouges out of the mainstream of her time. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793)

Olympe de Gouges, originally called Marie Gouze, grew up in the south of France. Although she was an intelligent child, Marie received very little formal education and could barely read or write. She married at the age of 16 and became the mother of a son. When her husband died, Marie swore she would never marry again. She moved to Paris and changed her name to Olympe de Gouges.

In Paris, de Gouges began to write plays, articles, and social commentaries on subjects such as marriage, divorce, and human rights. Among her works was a 1792 play that attacked slavery. As a result of this unpopular political stand, she was criticized in French newspapers. The mayor of Paris had her play closed down after just three performances.

A strong supporter of the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges was a regular visitor to National Assembly sessions. De Gouges was disappointed, however, that the Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen did not also extend equal

rights to women. She believed that women, just like men, should have the right to vote, own property, hold office, and receive government jobs.

In 1791, de Gouges challenged the Declaration by writing her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. In it she wrote, "Woman, wake up; . . . discover your rights. . . . Enslaved man has multiplied his strength and needs recourse to yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust to his companion. Oh, women, women! When will you cease to be blind? What advantage have you received from the Revolution? A more pronounced scorn, a more marked disdain."

Besides supporting equal rights for women, Olympe de Gouges openly opposed the execution of the king. Her views and political alliances eventually led to her arrest in the summer of 1793. Convicted of being an enemy of the Revolution, Olympe de Gouges was sent to the guillotine in November 1793, during the Reign of Terror.



Olympe de Gouges

Questions to Think About

1. What actions and ideas of Olympe de Gouges stirred controversy?
2. What rights did de Gouges think women should have?
3. **Analyze Information** Reread the quotation from the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. What does de Gouges mean by this statement: "Having become free, he has become unjust to his companion"?