'Celle dont la voix publique vous a nommé le père': Olympe de Gouges's Mémoire de Madame de Valmont (1788)

Giulia Pacini
Had Olympe de Gouges ever taken her inheritance claims to court, she may or may not have obtained the name and money she wanted. Her reputation, on the other hand, would certainly have been damaged. When eighteenth-century French women “went public” with complaints or legal arguments, they forswore contemporary ideals of womanhood; they lost in ‘virtue’ by stepping into the male arena of the law.1 Furthermore, eighteenth-century lawyers tended to defend their female clients by focusing on each individual’s personal situation; they never sacrificed their chances of success by taking issue with broader questions, such as the problematic legal status of women in general, or the limits of any given judicial procedure. Lawyers did their best to send their clients back into the privacy of the home as quickly as possible, carefully avoiding any commentary that might be understood as criticism of the status quo or of conventional gender roles. Trial briefs displayed much anxiety about women’s publicity: they might attack a “private kind of abuse but remained silent on the institutional abuse embedded in laws and customs” (Bérenguier 78). Thus, with an exceptionally clever defender Gouges might have stood a chance of winning her case and proving her status as the natural daughter of the Marquis Le Franc de Pompignan.2 Had she done so, however, she never would have been allowed to articulate her larger critique of French society and its patriarchal structure. Writing an autobiographical epistolary novel allowed her instead to speak up with more freedom.

The heroine of Gouges’s Mémoire de Madame de Valmont is, in fact, the illegitimate daughter of a rich and powerful man. Mme de Valmont decides to publish her letters to and from her biological family in order to denounce the injustices to which she has been subjected, as well as to reclaim her rightful inheritance and patronym. To the extent that the novel expounds a litigation case and presents a personal correspondence as determining evidence, it offers a curious example of the formal and thematic imbrication of literary fiction and judicial memoirs in France during the second half of the eighteenth century.3 The Mémoire clearly appropriates the issues, vocabulary and rhetoric of contemporary court memoranda as it mounts a personal story into a political affaire. Gouges took advantage of the trial brief genre’s popularity when she chose it as a matrix upon which to weave a (fictional) judicial project more favorable to women. Her heroine discounts the normal arena for legal representation, namely the male-dominated law courts or Parliaments, and appeals instead to the Republic of Letters’ tribunal of public opinion. The novel thus depicts an idealized discursive space whose workings mediate...
between the public courtroom and the private home. It also represents Mme de Valmont’s readership as an empowered and critical politico-judicial body, rather than as a group of individuals merely interested in questions of literary value.

**Le Mémoire de Madame de Valmont**

The *Mémoire* sets up a discursive space in which the nature of interpersonal relationships is constantly put to the test. It does so both through its polyphonic structure, where different voices engage each other in discussion, and through its thematic development, as the novel moves away from an (apparently) sympathetic correspondence between lovers towards a bitter vindication of women’s rights. In the process, the *Mémoire* incorporates and effectively subverts early modern epistolary conventions: it mimics the genre’s sentimentality and reveals the calculating underside of its rhetoric of sincerity. From the very beginning, characters write not to exchange their feelings or establish a trusting relationship, but to manipulate their correspondents’ emotions or actions.

The novel is based on the correspondence between an unnamed female author character (the fictional editor of the *Mémoire* and recognizably an autobiographical counterpart of Gouges herself), the count de *** (her friend), and their acquaintance, Mme de Valmont. Finding herself in financial straits and in need of publishable material, the author decides to edit Mme de Valmont’s epistolary “roman,” that is, the story of her life and curious relationship with her half-brother, the son of the Marquis de Flaucourt. Yet when Mme de Valmont hands over these letters, she chooses to disclose, not only her amusing correspondence with this man, but also a collection of her letters to and from her other family members. She wants the public to learn about the “ingratitude and cruelty” with which the Flaucourts treated her mother: her *Mémoire* is therefore subtitled “Sur l’ingratitude et la cruauté de la famille des Flaucourt envers la sienne, dont les sieurs de Flaucourt ont reçu tant de services.”

Historians and literary critics such as Olivier Blanc, Benoîte Groult, or Raymond Trousson have remarked upon the novel’s autobiographical interest. When Mme de Valmont assures her readers that “tous les faits que je vais avancer sont autant de vérités authentiques,” to a large extent she could be said to speak for Gouges herself (492). The marquis de Flaucourt is the literary persona of the marquis Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, Gouges’s biological father. Gouges’s uncharitable uncle, Jean Georges Le Franc de Pompignan, archbishop of Vienna, figures as the fictional Monseigneur de Flaucourt. It seems curious, however, that Gouges should have decided to cast herself in two different roles: she appears simultaneously as the fictional editor (“l’auteur”) of the *Mémoire* and as its heroine, Mme de Valmont. This becomes clear in the last letter of the novel, when the editor character casually refers to “mon Homme généreux,” thereby claiming for herself an authentic theatrical piece written and published by Gouges just two years earlier, in 1786. In similar fashion, earlier on, Mme de Valmont admits to resembling the same author-editor, to whom she confides: “il y a tant d’analogie entre vous
et moi, que je ne doute pas qu’on ne nous confonde ensemble” (499). In this transitive relation, Gouges identifies with both of her characters.

According to the fictional author character and the count, the Mémoire is interesting—and will sell—because of its comic content. The first half of the novel narrates the story of Mme de Valmont’s joke on her half-brother: pretending to be a young woman (an “Inconnue”) from a recent masquerade ball, the intrepid heroine initiates a romantic correspondence with the young Flaucourt. A series of relatively banal love letters follows, while the mysterious correspondent constantly invents excuses so as not to reveal her true identity. When the fiction of the Unknown woman wears thin, Mme de Valmont creates a second “Inconnue” in order to continue this exchange. This part of the Mémoire presents itself as a comical romance, a silly story with the usual topoi of missed appointments, lovers’ quarrels and epistolary clichés (including classics such as “Que je voudrais suivre ma lettre!”; or: “On m’apporte une lettre de vous. Je vous quitte d’une main pour vous retrouver de l’autre” 507; 510).

Regardless of the frivolous character of this part of the novel, the motives behind Mme de Valmont’s prank bespeak larger concerns. At issue here is a woman’s desperate desire to communicate with her half-brother: Mme de Valmont resorts to a written correspondence because this is the only way in which she, an illegitimate female relative, can possibly voice her opinions. While the young Flaucourt simply enjoys the fun of an intrigue, taking (sexual) pleasure in the letters he receives, Mme de Valmont’s interest in the exchange lies in her strengthened influence over him. As a half-sister (that is, as a woman and as an illegitimate relative of a socially inferior class), she is doubly incapable of giving her brother the advice he appears to need. She has to fashion herself as a fictitious character in order to have the right to interfere in his life and critique his actions. She may comment upon the Marquis’s lifestyle only when, disguised as the “Inconnue,” she has both risen in social status and assumed a lover’s role.

For Mme de Valmont, a disenfranchised woman, letter writing is a most useful strategy: insofar as missives are disembodied messages which communicate in the absence of their author, they allow her to mask her identity and recast herself as an entirely different person. The ruse of amatory discourse, moreover, grants her a rhetorical power which ordinarily she would not have had: it is clear that the Marquis only listens to her concerns because he is romantically involved with her. In addition, an artful performance of femininity allows Mme de Valmont to take advantage of Flaucourt as she exploits his cultural assumptions about her natural—essential and inevitable—spontaneity and sincerity. The Mémoire thus rests on the fiction that a letter can transform Mme de Valmont into the Marquis’s social peer. By quoting banal clichés, she then pretends to be a candid lover and obtains the right to be heard.

The novel becomes much more complicated when it abandons this romantic plot and starts presenting, instead, Mme de Valmont’s correspondence with the Flaucours and her mother. This part of the novel includes a letter
from the fictional author character, as well as an epistolary exchange between Mme de Valmont and the count. Issues of female voicing take on larger proportions as the heroine attempts to prove that she is the illegitimate child of the Marquis de Flaucourt, who at her birth had recognized her as his daughter, but then repudiated her as the undesirable fruit of his youthful indiscretions. As an adult, Mme de Valmont contacted her father in the hope of reestablishing their relationship. She claimed that a natural bond compelled her to love him, despite all social barriers; moreover, she needed to ask him for financial help because her mother was fatally ill. The Marquis awkwardly acknowledged her as his illegitimate child, but refused to grant her any legal rights. He admitted: “Je crois, sans effort, et trop malheureusement pour moi, que vous ne m’êtes pas étrangère; mais vous n’avez aucun droit pour réclamer, auprès de moi, le titre de la paternité” (532). He also promised to help her mother, not because of their past history, but as an ordinary act of charity. Unfortunately, however, the Marquis died soon after and his wife and brother—two fanatical bigots—refused alimony to the woman who had brought sin into their family. Mme de Valmont’s letters lament the cruelty of these allegedly religious people; she complains that even her half-brother has now turned against her, forgetting previous promises of help.

This part of the novel reiterates Mme de Valmont’s natural rights and demonstrates her relatives’ fanaticism through their very own letters. At first, this makes for a highly sentimental novel, full of tears and sincere manifestations of despair or affection (537, 540). Yet the narrative shows its calculating underside as Mme de Valmont mounts a case against the Flaucourts by amassing evidence in the form of incriminating letters. There are so few turning points or events in the second half of the story that the Mémoire ultimately builds a rhetorical argument, instead of developing a real plot. With hammering insistence, the novel condemns, first, the Flaucourt family and, then, religious fanaticism and patriarchal rule in general. Mme de Valmont aggrandizes her story, presenting it as a politicized affaire of societal interest. After having described her relatives’ cruelty, she cries out: “A tout péché miséricorde. Voilà ce que Dieu nous ordonne. . . . Dans quelle classe, dans quel état, dans quelle société d’hommes peut-on désormais trouver cette sensible piété, cette tendre humanité?” (495). This political language of “class” and “condition” inflates the importance of Mme de Valmont’s statements, implying that, if all communities are troubled by internal strife, human sociability necessarily must be nothing more than a utopian ideal.

The count’s letters reinforce the Mémoire’s programmatic bent, especially to the extent that they model, en abîme, an appropriate response to Mme de Valmont’s story. He predicts the public’s reactions to her case, underscoring the interest of her plight: “Vous devez intéresser tout l’univers à votre sort” (533). He concludes: “[Le Marquis] ne vous égalera jamais en vertu et en mérite. Il a cependant bien de la supériorité sur vous; un nom, de la fortune, l’avantage d’une riche éducation; malgré cela, vous obtiendrez plutôt que lui, l’estime du public, et la bienveillance de toutes les puissances de la terre”
In similar fashion, most of the letters in the Mémoire appeal to the judgment of an all-inclusive public interpellated as the natural arbiter of social causes. The latter’s judgment is said to transcend positive law, as well as religious conventions; moreover, it is clearly marked as sympathetic to a ‘feminist’ position.

When Mme de Valmont writes her father for the first time, she introduces herself as “celle dont la voix publique vous a nommé le père” (528). She invokes public opinion as the guarantor of her natural status, as well as as the entity that legitimates her decision to contact the Marquis. The authority of this public and oral sentence is highlighted by the contorted syntax of a phrase which could have represented her much more directly and privately as “votre fille” instead. By similarly discarding yet another obvious alternative, namely “celle que la voix publique a nommée votre fille,” Gouges’s text takes pains to cast the father, not the daughter, as the object of a public verdict. By implying that his role, not hers, is the object of everyone’s concern, the Mémoire displaces social blame from the child’s innocent shoulders onto those of her irresponsible male parent.

As clinching proof of her birthright, Mme de Valmont proffers explanations about her own filial instincts, along with a mention of the similarly oral “aveu de ma mère” (528). In this regard, it is important to remember that in early modern France the word “aveu” still maintained its medieval meaning; it could be used as a legal term sealing a contractual agreement between two freely consenting individuals. When Mme de Valmont’s mother recognizes her as the child of the Marquis de Flaucourt, she establishes and therefore legitimizes their familial relationship. Her proclamation is an affirmative gesture operating within a liberal legal framework: she authorizes—on her own, without the need for any official ratification—her daughter’s right to inherit her father’s name and patrimony. This avowal is founded on the principles that would later underlie Gouges’s Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne and, in particular, its article XI: “La libre communication des pensées et des opinions est un des droits les plus précieux de la femme, puisque cette liberté assure la légitimité des pères envers les enfants. Toute Citoyenne peut donc dire librement: je suis mère d’un enfant qui vous appartient.” (Ecrits politiques I 208). Gouges thus declared freedom of speech an inalienable and indispensable possession for women, one that protected children by ensuring that they would inherit their father’s name and estate. She implied that women had the right, not only to speak their mind, but also to participate in social, political, economic and juridical matters. Naming a child’s father meant introducing it, before the law and society, into a family’s genealogy and inheritance line.

Mme de Valmont’s legitimacy is therefore decreed by nature’s and her mother’s voices, before being ratified by that of the general public. These three entities are in fact endowed with a sovereignty superior to that of (written) patriarchal law. Mme de Valmont tells her father, in fact: “Si je suis votre enfant, quoique la loi ne l’avoue pas, je ne dois point vous en être
moins chère, et vos obligations ne sont pas moins sacrées envers moi, qu'envers ma mère” (530; emphasis added). Her words question the conventional grounds of legitimacy, crediting instead the notion of natural right. When supported by public opinion, a woman’s freely given avowal seems to have a more legitimate basis for authority than any positive legislation: she, rather than tradition, should have the “sacred” right to sanction the truth value of such a statement. As Mme de Valmont refers to “le sentiment public,” “la voix publique,” “l’estime du public” or even to information circulating “dans le public,” she clearly envisions a social body capable of feeling and knowing, as well as a judicial construct endowed with the right to sanction or to condemn (496, 528, 533, 543). Gouges thus represents public opinion as an active political entity supportive of women’s rights and entitled to contest the French legal system.

According to Mona Ozouf, during the second half of the eighteenth century the adjective “public” was used in situations that questioned royal authority (420). If the adjective was used in so oppositional a context, “the public,” as a noun referring to an assembled body, must have been all the more powerful. Gouges’s Mémoire investigates this public’s political function by implicitly setting it in competition with the authority of the law courts and, by extension, of the French Parliaments. Regardless of the book’s actual effect as it circulated among the French readership of 1788, the mere fact that its protagonist could conceive of a preferable legal forum meant that judicial alternatives were thinkable. In Keith Baker’s terms, one could say that the text participated in the eighteenth century’s “politics of contestation” insofar as it questioned the legitimacy of the monarchy’s traditional representatives (Inventing 168).

Equally interesting are the Mémoire’s descriptions of the public sphere for, according to today’s historians, in the eighteenth century this political category was generally conceived in masculinist terms. Joan Landes shows, in fact, that “the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public was not incidental but central to its incarnation” (7). Baker makes a similar claim, although he notes that in the eighteenth century’s understanding of the concept this sexual divide was not inscribed as a philosophical necessity (“Defining the Public Sphere” 181-211). Given this cultural context, Gouges’s idealistic representations of a ‘feminist’ public sphere are quite remarkable.10

“Je romps le silence”: Speaking up

Similarly to her eponymous predecessor, the Vicomte de Valmont in Choderlos de Laclos’s Les Liaisons dangereuses, Mme de Valmont throughout her correspondence quotes or actually copies people’s letters, which she then redistributes as testimonial and potentially incriminating documents. At first she simply includes a letter to her father within another to her brother, asking the latter to check her tone and words: “J’ai suivi vos conseils, mon cher frère, auprès de l’auteur de mes jours. Voilà la lettre que je lui écris... S’il y a quelque chose qui puisse vous déplaire, vous me le direz” (528). Despite
its apparent simplicity, this editing of letters for rhetorical efficacy contributes to the Mémoire's general debunking of epistolary conventions: it indicates the extent to which the authenticity of her sentimental declarations is already compromised.

Mme de Valmont's deferential attitude changes after her father's death, when the newly vested and suddenly proud marquis decides to disavow their relationship. In her very last letter, she writes him:

Les lois, le préjugé vous rendent maître de tout, mais l'honneur ne vous dispense pas de verser sur une soeur naturelle une légère partie du superflu de votre fortune, vous me l'aviez offert et promis, et vous me l'avez réitéré dans votre lettre, dans un moment où le coeur plein d'une véritable affliction s'abandonne à tous ses épanchements qui sont purs et bienfaisants. Je la remets sous vos yeux.

Vous apprendrez par ma lettre, ma très chère soeur, le triste événement qui nous afflige. Nous avons perdu hier mon père, il a succombé aux souffrances cruelles qu'il éprouvait depuis huit mois ... Bonjour, ma très chère soeur; je vous quitte, car je suis accablé de lettres, et vous prie de croire aux sentiments bien tendres que je vous ai voués, et à la promesse inviolable de réparer les torts que mon père a eus trop longtemps envers vous.

LE MARQUIS DE FLAUCOURT

La voilà, mon frère, cette lettre, et pouvez-vous la révoquer en doute . . . . Vous-même m'aviez fait entendre que je serais à la tête de votre maison, si cette proposition pouvait me convenir. (548; emphasis added)

Regardless of her personal belief in the authority of the oral word ("la voix publique"; "l'aveu de ma mère"), Mme de Valmont seems to have realized that she must fight the Marquis according to his own rules. She confronts him with his own signed writing. In similar manner, she presents her readership with her correspondence with the Flaucourt family (543). Once again, she defends her best interests by exploiting the epistolary cliché of authenticity: the validity of her brother's promise, for example, is guaranteed by his emotional state of mind; it must have been sincere, she implies, since it was spontaneously produced in "un moment où le coeur [était] plein d'une véritable affliction." The traditional gendering of this convention is subverted, however, as Gouges makes a man's—not a woman's—writing the intrinsically transparent and truthful result of a sentimental outburst.

The political implications of this last letter are important, for the novel hints at the fact that it might be impractical (if not impossible) to combat ingrained customs or established laws with arguments foreign to their conceptual universe. Mme de Valmont certainly wants to destabilize the status quo, but she does not consider overthrowing it completely. While the content of Mme de Valmont's letters pits natural law against the authority of patriarchal legislation, when she finally wants to take action and defend her financial interests, she resorts to traditional methods of legal representation. She
substantiates her claims by quoting the Flaucourts’ written and signed declarations, not with references to her mother’s avowal or to her own filial instincts. Speaking from a disenfranchised position, she does not have the power to fight on her own terms; she can only manipulate her opponents’ rules and re-address their past correspondence. She thus insists that “Mme la marquise. . . a répété sa promesse verbalement [et] me l’a confirmée de nouveau par écrit” (538). Mme de Valmont even locates witnesses “à même de me rendre justice,” well-known people at court who will testify to her sincerity and good intentions (494).

Gouges’s autobiographical heroine points out that she could have requested the help of her father’s literary rival or “antagoniste,” recognizably that illustrious denouncer of injustice known as Voltaire (494). Several well-known people at court had, in fact, recommended that she ask him to defend her against “l’excès du fanatisme” (535). Yet Mme de Valmont, as Gouges before her, chose not to enlist Voltaire’s—or any male lawyer’s—immediate assistance. Instead they made use of intertextual references which boost their overarching argument. Their specific vocabulary, their epistolary strategies, the preface’s mention of the persecution of the Protestants and the night of Saint-Barthélemy, and, finally, Gouges’s reference to Voltaire in a jeremiad against fanaticism all place the Mémoire squarely within a long tradition of eighteenth-century affaires. By virtue of this intertextuality, Mme de Valmont’s and Gouges’s stories inherit the weightiness and philosophical scope of Voltaire’s previous cases: here too, an individual’s personal problems become of universal interest to the extent that society at large is interpellated and then indicted as a whole. Like Voltaire’s famous defense of the Calas family, Gouges’s novel exploits the rhetorical prowess and the open-endedness of its epistolary form: it addresses the reader directly, demanding that he or she sit in judgment on the matter.

The Mémoire underscores the importance of Mme de Valmont’s decision to represent her birthrights on her own. Instead of turning to a male lawyer she prefers to argue her own case, first, before the count and the author, and then before her reading public. She initially does so because her own voice will presumably be more enthralling and persuasive than that of any third party. Yet by presenting her case before the Republic of Letters’ tribunal of public opinion, rather than in a traditional law court, Mme de Valmont—as Gouges herself—can also formulate her accusations in the terms of her choice. She is not subject to the ideological constraints normally imposed upon women by eighteenth-century lawyers, and is therefore free to turn her individual case into a larger affaire. Gouges raises the stakes, in fact, as she asks: “A qui peut-on accorder sa confiance dans la société quand ceux qui enseignent la religion et la clémence nous abandonnent. Il n’y a donc plus de probité sur la terre?” (495). The count then echoes this point: “le fanatisme entraînera-t-il donc toujours les abus les plus odieux, l’inhumanité, la barbarie, l’ingratitude la plus noire et la plus atroce, enfin la division de la nature entière?” (533). Mme de Valmont’s personal history is thus used as a springboard for a larger social critique.
Speaking up, however, is said to be difficult for Mme de Valmont. Through its fragmented structure, the novel highlights the fact that her prises de parole are important breakthrough moments: the Mémoire’s epistolarity repeatedly forces her to justify her decision to pick up pen and paper again and again. A rhetoric of violence runs through her letters as she explains the reasons for which she has chosen to publish the correspondence: the Flaucourts’ “ingratitude atroce, et leur dureté inexprimable, ont poussé ma discrétion au-delà de toute réserve”; “je romps le silence que j’avais gardé trop longtemps” (493, 497). This disclosure has a liberating effect on her, for “enfin révoltée,” she finally takes her revenge: “je vais faire connaître au public le comble des mauvais procédés, l’abus de la confiance que j’avais en eux, leur cruauté, leur odieuse hypocrisie” (534). She insists that she never would have protested, had it not been for her mother’s illness and those cruel letters which literally forced her to take action: “je vous communique toutes les lettres qui ont dû me forcer à mettre de la publicité à tant de mauvais procédés” (537).

Yet Gouges decided that Mme de Valmont should not simply disclose her personal correspondence, just as she herself did not merely print and distribute her letters to and from the Le Francs de Pompignan. Rather, both of these women protected their reputation through complex publishing techniques. Mme de Valmont’s correspondence is embedded in a curious narrative frame, which, over the course of nine interspersed letters, explicitly stages the conditions of production of the Mémoire. The novel rests on the fiction of a financially insecure author who needs to publish (that is, sell) something quickly. Since she does not have any printable material of her own, she agrees to edit Mme de Valmont’s “roman.” The thwarted heroine only accepts this deal—under the condition of anonymity—in order to take revenge on the Flaucourts and to find public sympathy and compensation for her mother’s suffering.

The two characters form a stark contrast, for if Mme de Valmont indulges in tearful displays of affection or sadness, the author is much more phlegmatic:

c’est une imprudence... que de prendre le parti du sexe opprimé; jadis, dans ce fameux jadis, c’était une vertu, et aujourd’hui c’est un ridicule.
... Mais laissons là mes tristes réflexions; elles n’arrêteront point le train que les hommes ont pris; je ne dois m’occuper que de ma besogne, qui me paraît de plus en plus pénible et épiqueus. (549-50)

When the novel creates two distinct alter-egos for Gouges’s biographical persona, it seems to imply that, in the society in which she lived, a woman could not, simultaneously, accept money and hope for public sympathy; she would have had to sacrifice either her femininity or her financial interests. In other words, had Gouges gone to court, she would not have received the compensation she desired. Instead, with the double fiction of a sentimental autobiographical protagonist and a business-like editor, the Mémoire cleverly splits Gouges’s personality, separating her judicial and economic concerns from her social or psychological needs. With a tinge of bitterness in her words, the fictional editor explains: “elle [Mme de Valmont] jouit de l’anonyme, et moi
je me mets à découvert pour elle” (550). She jeopardizes—or even sacrifices—her reputation in the hope of economic gain: the author “[s]’occupe de [sa] bésogne,” while Mme de Valmont can find “un soulagement salutaire aux maux [que sa famille lui] a causés” (496). By allowing Gouges to split her persona this way, autobiographical fiction let her rehearse her ‘feminine virtue’ and, at the same time, attend to her material exigencies. While she fashioned herself as the sentimental Mme de Valmont, she—as her author character—could still guarantee a certain income for herself by selling the story.

In order to enhance the rhetorical force of her narrative, Gouges strategically adopted a sentimental tone connecting the world of her characters with that of her readers. Imitating the style of contemporary judicial memoirs, she too made use of “techniques aimed at fostering the Rousseauian (and revolutionary) ‘transparency’” (Maza 323). Far from being cold case histories, in fact, late eighteenth-century trial briefs tried to appeal to their readers’ emotions:

By bringing to the fore the personality and reactions of the barrister-author and inviting their readers to share the intimacy of the sensible protagonist, the authors of mémoires sought to create an unmediated connection between the presumed virtue and sensibility of their client and that of their readers; this intimate connection between reader, lawyer, and client was then pressed into the service of the political argument spelled out in the mémoire. (Maza 323)

Gouges’s melodramatic Mémoire sets up a similarly sympathetic system: its embedded narrative framework allows Mme de Valmont, the author-editor, the feminist count and their readers to identify with each other’s feelings. This “intimate connection” reinforces the heroine’s argument, granting it additional credibility, as well as a louder voice. By multiplying the responses to Mme de Valmont’s story, the novel effectively functions as a resonance chamber for her claims.

In order to reinforce her argument even further, in her preface to the novel Gouges beckons to, and thereby assembles, a community of “très chères sœurs” whose support is declared necessary to the success of her project (489). She begs her dear “sisters” to defend her work and espouse her cause, despite the novel’s literary and personal weaknesses. Gouges stresses the importance of women’s collaboration and deplores the rivalries that prevent her sex from forming a unified group. Given this divisiveness, she asks, “est-il étonnant que les hommes l’oppriment [notre sexe] et n’est-ce pas notre faute?” (489). These notions of female solidarity are distinctive, both because they are so heavily gendered and because this support system is celebrated not for its own sake, but for strategic purposes. This community of women readers and writers is in fact expected to engage in political resistance.

Thus, although the Mémoire recalls a tradition of judicial memoirs, it distances itself from the conservatism of contemporary legal practice. When Mme de Valmont dismisses Voltaire’s help, she erases the canonical male lawyer figure from her forensic picture and adds a supportive group of women
friends. Having assumed responsibility for her words, she is relatively free to criticize patriarchal society as a whole. She views her readership as a politico-judicial body entitled to critique France’s legislation, and assumes that this public will be particularly supportive of women’s rights. In addition, by fictionalizing her story and presenting it as the life of Mme de Valmont, rather than as her own, Gouges wittily protected her female ‘virtue,’ while also acquiring the freedom to universalize her charges. In the Republic of Letters, she conquered a voice and an agency difficult to obtain elsewhere, and, of course, by selling the story of the inheritance she was denied, she finally converted her impossible legacy into concrete financial income.

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Notes

1 I take the expression “going public” from Goldsmith and Goodman.

2 Literary critics and historians generally accept the legitimacy of Gouges’s claim (cf. Lacour 10-11; Braun 37-9; Groult 14; Trousson 478). According to her main biographer: “Si la paternité présumée de Le Franc ne fut jamais prouvée de manière absolue, elle fut de notoriété publique et ne fit aucun doute pour nombre de contemporains” (Blanc 18-19). Blanc gives eighteenth-century references which support this statement. In any case, I would argue, the truth value of Gouges’s claims is not of paramount importance: even if one wanted to question Le Franc’s paternity, one could still read the Mémoire as a representation of the political and cultural strategies best suited to a disenfranchised woman or illegitimate daughter in late eighteenth-century France.

3 Maza explains that eighteenth-century trial briefs were written as sentimental autobiographical narratives; their discursive strategies included the adoption of a rhetoric of transparency, a strong theatricality and the melodramatic representation of moral tableaux. This fictionalized style guaranteed their appeal to a very wide readership: by the 1770s, press runs could reach six to ten thousand copies, and, by the following decade, they could even amount to twenty thousand. Since the genre was not subject to preliminary censorship (it was considered internal court memoranda), it was easy to print and to distribute (2-17). By the time Gouges started writing her novel, the judicial memoir was one of the most successful forms of ephemeral literature distributed in Paris.

4 Blanc 11-30; Groult 14-17; Trousson 477-78.

5 This is an important affair because Flaucourt is falling under the sway of a perfidious friend who condemns the former’s relationship with his half-sister.

6 Flaucourt has to be reminded that love does not consist in “un penchant idéal, mais dans la même manière de sentir et de voir” (526). In this letter to him, the “Inconnue” suggests that intimacy requires an exchange of both feelings and ideas; she implies that a lover has the right to express his or her opinions and the duty to consider those of his or her partner.

7 Although anachronistic, I use the term ‘feminist’ for the sake of convenience and clarity.

8 DeJean, Tender Geographies 118-24. DeJean underscores this point because today’s readers are generally more familiar with the term’s modern meaning: they take “aveu” to refer to a publicly extorted confession of guilt, as described by Michel Foucault in Surveiller et punir.

9 In this regard, Gouges anticipates the French revolutionaries’ belief in the power of oral pronouncements, as described in Hunt 19-51: “In the absence of a common law tradition, or any acceptable sacred text of reference, the voice of the nation had to be heard constantly. Speaking and naming took on enormous significance; they became the source of significance” (Hunt 44).
Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni had already imagined a ‘feminist’ readership in *Les Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* (1757), but she had not investigated its political role as fully. Fanni Butlerd publishes her personal correspondence in the hope of obtaining psychological support from her readers; Mme de Valmont, on the other hand, fights for her inheritance and social status. As a result, contrary to Riccoboni’s protagonist, Gouges’s heroine envisions her public as an empowered politico-judicial body.

Regarding Voltaire’s relationship to *Le Franc de Pompignan*, see Braun 9-63.

The novel’s preface denounces religious fanaticism and the particular cruelty of women: “je tremble de m’expliquer; je sens mes cheveux se dresser sur ma tête; à chaque instant du jour, elles [les dévotes] profanent, par leurs excès, nos saints préceptes, qui ne respirent que la douceur, la bonté et la clémence. Le fanatisme rend la femme encore plus inhumaine: car si elle pouvait se livrer à sa fureur, elle reproduirait, suivant son pouvoir, toutes les horreurs de cette journée cruelle, à jamais mémorable dans la nation française” (491).

Altman defines “epistolarity” as the “pressure exerted by form on meaning” (189).

Of course, both the heroine and the author write, but the former only expresses herself through the most feminine of media, the personal letter, whereas the author intentionally publishes all kinds of scripts.

Although we know that the *Mémoire* was published and sold, we do not know how much money Gouges made. Blanc notes: “sur la nature et l’origine de ses revenus, Olympe de Gouges ne donne aucune indication dans ces écrits” (29). Yet Harth suggests that Gouges may have embarked upon a literary career precisely to guarantee an income for herself (213-14).

**Works Cited**


___, *Le Mémoire de Madame de Valmont*. Trousson 489-551.


