

Olivier Blanc, *Marie Olympe de Gouges, une humaniste à la fin du XVIII^e siècle*, Cahors 2003, Editions René Viénet, 270 pp.

Olivier Blanc made himself known as the author of at least ten monographs concerning various aspects of the history of France of the times of Enlightenment, Revolution and Napoleon; the work especially worth mentioning among those he has published so far is a valuable book devoted to the last moments of the victims of the Terror awaiting execution: *La Dernière Lettre. Prisons et condamnés de la Révolution*, issued by Robert Laffont in Paris in 1984 with a preface by Michel Vovelle. The history of Marie Olympe de Gouges had intrigued Blanc for a long time, and he published her first biography as early as 1981¹. In the work here under discussion, based as it seems, on much richer sources, he in many places changes, specifies or verifies his ascertainments and opinions presented earlier.

Marie Olympe de Gouges was indeed an uncommon person and her life was unusual. She was born in 1748 to the family of a butcher in Montauban, named Gouze; however her biological father was supposed to be the aristocrat and poet Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, who never admitted his paternity, nor was willing to come to her assistance in any way. In the social stratum to which her family belonged no care was taken of the girls' education — Olympe could not write well till the end of her life; brought up in Languedoc, in a milieu using a dialect, she did not always speak correct French. As a seventeen year old she was married to a restaurant owner L. Y. Aubry. A son was born in due time, but it was not a happy marriage and when a year after the wedding her husband lost his life in suspicious circumstances, the young widow soon found consolation. She changed her name Marie Gouze into a better-sounding Marie-Olympe de Gouges, established a relationship with a wealthy supplier for the army and moved to Paris. Her lover's generosity allowed her to become materially independent, and her beauty and liveliness of mind allowed her to enter at least some of the Paris salons, where she liked to shine and where she met the society of writers and

¹ *Olympe de Gouges*, Syros, Paris 1981. Without having this book at our disposal, we cannot compare both versions of this biography.

actors. Soon she started to write plays herself, or in fact, because she could not handle a pen correctly, to dictate them to her secretaries. Some of her plays were staged, although without much success, but the majority were rejected. Marie-Olympe attributed her failure as a playwright to the bad performance of Comédie Française, with which she was in a long conflict.

She was a prolific author — Olivier Blanc mentions over forty titles of her plays. Confident in her inspiration and talent inherited from her father, whom she saw not in the butcher, but in the poet, she dictated them in haste, without caring for style or correcting the texts once they had been written. She took the subjects for her plays from social life, sometimes from her own experiences. She boldly took up risky problems, such as illegitimate birth, adultery, divorces, imprisonment for debts, taking vows under compulsion, showing her liberal and by the standards of her times, modern views. One of her first plays, and at the same time one of the few presented in the theatre, entitled *Zamore et Mirza*, was devoted to the criticism of slavery in colonies. Having no chance to present her plays on the stage, she issued them in print.

The outbreak of the Revolution, welcomed by her with enthusiasm, made her direct her energy towards political activity. One of its leitmotivs was the emancipation of women. In her pamphlet entitled *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne* of 1791 she called for granting women full civil and political rights — however, as is well known, this was a hopeless demand. An admirer of Mirabeau, adherent of constitutional monarchy, she declared a readiness to defend Louis XVI in his trial, later she did not conceal her solidarity with the Girondists and finally, mindless of the danger, sharply reprimanded Robespierre. Convinced of the rightness of her views and her power of persuasion, she inundated the National Assembly and later the Convention with her letters, and published pamphlets, press articles and posters. Olivier Blanc has found almost a hundred of such items, issued in print at the time of the *Etats Généraux* till her arrest on 20 July 1793. Accused of propagating federalism she was sentenced to death and executed on 3 November 1793.

In the biography under discussion there appeared two Polish names. The first is probably the author of the portrait reproduced on the cover, painter Aleksander Kucharski, who worked in Paris in the 1780s and was valued as a portraitist, on account of his ability to present a good likeness. Another is Klaudiusz Franciszek Łazowski, accused by Marie Olympe of an attempted attack on her.

The documentation collected by the author of this biography is genuinely imposing; without confining himself to abundant printed sources, he made extensive research in the Archives Nationales and Archives des Armées, departmental and some municipal archives, as well as collections of manuscripts in many libraries etc. While possessing a thorough knowledge concerning Olympe de Gouges, he however, could not avoid the danger, often affecting biographers, of an excessive fascination for the object of his research. Olivier Blanc at the very outset of his work takes the position of a defender of his heroine against any possible charges and accepts without reservation everything she tells us about herself. Hence the book under analysis lacks even the slightest attempt at providing a deeper psychological analysis of this complicated person. One can perceive in her many contradictions: exaltation is combined with moderate political views, a surprisingly right anticipation of events on the political scene with an enormous naiveté. Having a very good opinion of herself and her talents, and no distance and criticism towards herself, she was frequently an object of ridicule. Could she draw conclusions from that? By emphasizing her virtues on every occasion she probably tried to recompense to herself the humiliation she suffered because of her poor education. We do not know the reasons for her numerous conflicts with and attacks on various persons, beginning with the Pompignan family and her former lover, through the actors of la Comédie Française, to the activists of the Revolution. How can one assess the proportions

between sheer graphomania and the reflections of an intelligent observer of social life in her writings?

A reviewer's duty obliges me to rectify two inaccuracies that I noticed. The first concerns Mary Wollstonecraft (spelled, mistakenly, Woolstonecraft in the book). While making a conjecture that Olympe de Gouges might have met the authoress of *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in the Condorcets' salon, Olivier Blanc writes she was Shelley's mother. But even the designation of Mary Wollstonecraft as Shelley's mother-in-law would be anachronistic, since her daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born only in 1797, and when she eloped with the already married Shelley to France, her mother had been long time dead.

The second inaccuracy is, unfortunately, more serious. Olivier Blanc with indignation accuses the authors of *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française* of presenting Olympe de Gouges as a bloodthirsty harpy, the founder of the club of *les tricoteuses* — those common women who assisted the executions, while not stopping their knitting². In fact there is no mention of this in the dictionary part of this book, either in the entry *Gouges (Marie Olympe de)*, or in the entry *Tricoteuses*; in the historical part, on the other hand, the authors write with appreciation of her struggle for the political rights of women.

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² Jean Tulard, Jean-François Fayard, Alfred Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française 1789–1799*, Editions Robert Laffont, Paris 1987.