

Cowles on Sherman (2013)

Sherman, Carol L. *Reading Olympe de Gouges*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 125. ISBN: 978-1-137-34306-2. Digital.

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Carol Sherman's purpose in producing this volume is to correct the distortion and neglect from which Olympe de Gouges has consistently suffered since her works first appeared. Despite the renewal of interest in de Gouges's work, spurred by early feminists' celebration of her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, Sherman argues that critics have paid little attention to the specifically literary qualities of her œuvre, focusing instead on the turmoil of her personal life and the intertwining of biography and literary text. Sherman does not entirely succeed in abstracting the work from the life of the writer, but she does, particularly in the third chapter of her book, underscore the dominant themes of de Gouges's plays and enrich our understanding of de Gouges's contributions as a writer.

Sherman's first chapter, "Reception," briefly evokes the two texts for which de Gouges is known (the play, *L'Esclavage des noirs*, in addition to the *Déclaration*) and gives a summary of evaluations of her work by her contemporaries and ours. The second chapter, "The Drama of Rhetoric," examines de Gouges's use of the rhetoric of persuasion in some polemical texts, most notably in the *Mémoire de Madame de Valmont*. Identified by Sherman as belonging to the genre of "judicial brief or memoir," the *Mémoire* represents de Gouges's barely fictionalized attempt to earn recognition from the family of her noble biological father, author Lefranc de Pompignan. Sherman contends that de Gouges's use of rhetorical tools, such as redundancy, the assertion of verity, and topicality, serves to highlight the oratorical form of the *Mémoire*, yet Sherman's framing of the oratorical gestures as literary techniques is not entirely convincing. More interesting is her observation that the multiple perspectives of letters such as those contained in the *Mémoire* constitute an example of a profoundly dialogic text.

The third and longest chapter, "The Rhetoric of Drama," is also the most successful in addressing Sherman's purported goal of demonstrating the literary qualities of de Gouges's texts. In studying the texts of nine extant plays, Sherman claims that de Gouges's originality stems in large part from her pedagogical aims, as she questions and revises authoritarian structures in the course of the action. In general, as Sherman demonstrates, the focus of the drama shifts from the marriage plot of the younger couple to the conflicts experienced by the already married older couple. In some instances, the abuse of male power and privilege, such as Almaziva's seduction plot in Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro*, is portrayed as the threat of violent rape in de Gouges's sequel to *Figaro*, entitled *Le Mariage inattendu de Chérubin*. The husband's infidelity in these and other plays threatens the stability of the family: occasionally, the threat of rape is defused through the moral actions of the male protagonist; frequently, however, the recognition that re-establishes family bonds results from women characters working together rather than as rivals. The plot of the play generally brings about a recognition both psychological and dramatic that ultimately strengthens family bonds. According to Sherman, de Gouges's representation of family relations privileges the portrayal of husband and wife as equal partners. Equally innovative in her eyes is the dramatic importance de Gouges gives to children, valued ultimately for themselves despite their lack of a patronymic or their indeterminate origins.

Despite a strong discussion of individual plays, Sherman's argument would have benefited from a more thorough overview of the theatrical conventions of de Gouges's time at the beginning of the third chapter. Her comparison between de Gouges and Diderot at its conclusion tends to call into question some of her claims regarding de Gouges's originality. Sherman's evocation of certain concepts of psychoanalysis is superficial, and the reader might wish that she delve deeper into such issues as the treatment of rape and the status of the abandoned child. One could also wish for a more rigorous prose in general and a more clearly articulated structure, especially in the earlier chapters. Nonetheless, this volume legitimates de Gouges's work as a writer by identifying fundamental themes in her œuvre, suggesting ways in which she reflected her own time, and highlighting the visionary feminist quality of her thought.

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