

ABSTRACT

French Feminists Throughout History: The Enduring Influence of Bold Women on the French Women's Rights Movement

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French feminist history is marked by bold and spirited women who flouted convention and paved the way for future women's rights movements. In this thesis, I analyze four women from French history and their contributions to French feminism as it stands today. Jeanne d'Arc, Olympe de Gouges, my grandmother as a member of the Resistance in World War II, and Simone de Beauvoir left lasting legacies which forever shaped French femininity. In each chapter, I examine the actions and works of these women in order to demonstrate the gravity of past feminists to the women's rights movement today. Finally, my research illustrates the need for female solidarity and demonstrates the enduring influence of our predecessors on who we are as women and who we seek to become as feminists.

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FRENCH FEMINISTS THROUGHOUT HISTORY: THE ENDURING INFLUENCE
OF BOLD WOMEN ON THE FRENCH WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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For my grandmother

CHAPTER ONE

Jeanne d'Arc et son influence durable sur les guerrières françaises

Introduction

In French war history, few names are associated with as much valor and fortitude as that of Joan of Arc. Born in 1412, her notoriety soars to join the ranks of the country's male warriors and leaders – situating itself comfortably next to the likes of Vercingetorix, Napoleon, and Charles de Gaulle. Because of her leadership during the Hundred Years' War, the English were ousted from France and blocked from conquering French territory. Tales of her boundless bravery and resolute dedication to her king and faith solidified her position as both a war hero and a feminist icon. Along with her wartime achievements, the brevity of her life and the fiery nature of her death seared her place in history as a martyr for Christianity, France, and females.

In this chapter, I examine how Joan of Arc transcended the bounds of gender to become a proto-feminist for wartime women centuries after her death. To make this argument, I reframe our understanding of Joan of Arc as a woman through an examination of her life and its implications for future French women warriors. I redefine “feminist” to include women who lived before the first women's rights movement so that Joan of Arc might be considered a feminist in both her actions and contributions to gender equality. In the next section, I show how she navigated the expectations for young women during the medieval ages to find an acceptable outlet for her beliefs and actions. It is important to review her military accomplishments as well as her time in captivity because it demonstrates the push and pull she felt between masculinity and femininity.

Finally, I discuss her death and modern cultural references to Joan, both in suffrage movements and films.

La Bergère et la Prophétesse

Born into a family of humble and pious origins, Joan of Arc never lived the life expected of her. As a diligent shepherdess, her work ethic captivated one of King Charles VII's counselors when she visited his court as a child. In a letter from this counselor to the Duke of Milan, he described the excited frenzy her birth caused among the impoverished people of her village. He continued that as a seven-year-old shepherdess, she protected her sheep so thoroughly that "not even the smallest animal was lost" (Taylor 1). At age thirteen, Joan of Arc "claimed that she received a vision from God" instructing her to "drive the English from France and see that the dauphin was crowned king" (Mark). Details about her childhood are important for two reasons: First, the youthful heroine is depicted as creating an unlikely role for herself within the confines of a rigid society and, secondly, she continually adhered to her Catholic faith as a young adult despite her rejection of the expected biblical role of women during her time. The combination creates in Joan a complex dichotomy of acting outside of what was expected of her gender while at the same time fighting for the cause of a religion and a community to which she did not conform. Although not a feminist in the traditional sense, I argue that Joan of Arc embodied attributes which would continue to characterize bold women throughout French history. These traits include her unconventionality, her denial of gender roles, and her willingness to risk her life for a greater cause. Joan of Arc could have chosen to pursue an ordinary life, yet she resolved to determine for herself the type of existence she lived through her actions.

It is important to articulate exactly how I define “feminist” for the remainder of this work. Noëlle McAfee states that the term “féministe” did not emerge as a label for women’s rights advocates until the late 1800’s. Feminism is considered “to be used most consistently with respect to a particular set of political aims” (Hogan 46). As a result, “there is a cluster of goals most of which would be shared by most people who think of themselves as feminist” (Hogan 46). This argument, though, does not accommodate for those women throughout history who made great strides for femininity without existing in a historical period that allowed for an individual awareness of women’s rights. For this reason, I consider women who shattered gender roles as feminists even if they lived before the First Wave of feminism from 1850 to 1940. Through her trailblazing actions, Joan of Arc became a symbol of the limitless abilities of women and demonstrated that females could prevail outside of the confines of a rigid and patriarchal society. As one example of how she “remains a reference for different breakthroughs by other women,” the Oregon Bach Festival likened female conductor Marin Alsop to Joan of Arc in marketing her performance of Swiss composer Arthur Honneger’s Ontario *Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher* (Tellez). Joan of Arc is a feminist cultural icon; thus, she deserves to be called a feminist. In this work, I include her as one of the valiant women who shaped future feminist movements and contributed to the vibrant character of feminist history in France. Further, I affirm that it is unjust to blame past feminists for their ideological shortcomings due to the context in which they gained prominence. Instead, it is best to respect their contributions and accept that no two feminists are identical, and no feminist movement is perfect.

As a low-status woman in a society rampant with misogyny, Joan of Arc needed to legitimize herself in order to establish a presence among the powerful men of the period. In the medieval ages, families expected their daughters to follow their mothers into the domestic sphere, and the Bible, especially the portions written by the apostle Paul, placed the female role as absolutely subordinate to men (Bovey). These traditional standards, though, did not apply to prophesying. Both women and men could engage in prophecy, and a number of women came forward as prophetesses during Joan's lifetime (Taylor 19). Harnessing the private "mystical experience" allowed women to develop an awareness of their capabilities and speak out in patriarchal communities (Barstow 30). Regardless of whether Joan actually experienced heavenly visions, prophesying served as a means of self-expression in a stifling society. As a prophetess, she fit into a role predetermined to be acceptable while maintaining a level of control over her life and beliefs. Consequently, Christianity not only guided her, but also provided her a manner of defying the expectations of her gender. She established a precedent for future French women warriors: using an established tradition to access a world from which society barred them. Just as Joan of Arc's visions served as the means for her to escape gender oppression, later women would also find creative ways to flout misogyny. In subsequent chapters, I will discuss how Olympe de Gouges communicated her beliefs through pamphlets and plays, and Simone de Beauvoir commented on the need for women's rights through her books and philosophical works. Women members of the Resistance in the Second World War demonstrated their disdain for Nazi rule by completing dangerous missions against the Germans.

Joan of Arc challenged gender roles in the deepest sense - through the roles assigned during wartime. She played a critical part in the Hundred Year's War between the English and the French and participated in deadly combat as a trained soldier. Judy El-Bushra and Cécile Mukarubuga argue that during war, women traditionally take on the role of shielding families and communities from its conflict, though identifying women as peace-loving victims is an oversimplification (16). Men, on the other hand, are expected to carry within themselves the qualities of a warrior at all times (Nye 417). Joan of Arc symbolizes both genders as an androgynous intersection between masculinity and femininity. The king of France sent Joan of Arc, dressed in men's clothes and "furnished with a small army," to the French town of Orleans to break its siege by the British ("Siege"). She "succeeded in entering Orléans on the 29th of April 1429" and it is "admitted that her extraordinary pluck and sense of leadership were responsible" for ousting the English armies ("Entry Name" 421). I maintain that Joan of Arc's ability to freely accept the role of a warrior required an incredible sense of purpose and resolve. Accomplishing her religious goals required denying her femininity, as medieval society did not permit women to act without a man's guidance and approval. Instead of using a man to lead her actions, Joan of Arc became the man. After her accomplishment in Orléans, "she spoke of war like the other captains" and became "very knowledgeable in matters of arms" (Taylor 67). I assert that her fortitude and prowess in warfare showed that women could tackle male roles with great acumen. Joan of Arc demonstrated for generations of women following her death that gender is not an impediment unless society makes it one.

Taking the above descriptions into account, Joan of Arc's femininity has been dissected by historians for hundreds of years. Was she transgender? Gay? What was wrong with her? The refusal of historians to accept her as simply *female* demonstrates the vast conundrum facing accounts of women throughout history. A woman in history cannot be separated from her gender - it is always present and of the utmost concern in order to understand *her* actions, *her* decisions, and *her* perceptions. Men of historical significance are scarcely probed for their sexuality and the nature of their masculinity, yet Joan of Arc's womanhood and sexuality have been examined and depicted by historians in myriad ways for hundreds of years. In several of Shakespeare's plays, Joan is characterized as "unchaste, coarse of tongue" and in cohorts with evil powers (Boas 39). More recently, Vichy France textbook author Léon Cristiani affiliated Joan of Arc with the "supernatural," as it was the only way to explain "why a woman had been not only capable of" warfare, but also successful as a warrior (Jennings 713). Today, the story of the female warrior appeals to current audiences because she represents the "collapse of 'clear' categories" such as "gender" and "power" (Meltzer 90). As historians attempt to categorize and understand Joan of Arc, they also pollute and distort the nature of her story. Such is often the case for the stories of women warriors, but not for the stories of their male counterparts.

La Captive

Joan of Arc's time on the battlefield proved to be ephemeral. Forced into English captivity, she surrendered herself to a nobleman, and by doing so proclaimed herself as his equal (Taylor 118). After her capture, the French king "made no effort to effect her ransom, and never showed any sign of interest in her fate" ("Entry Name" 421). I assert

that these two accounts demonstrate the disparity between who Joan of Arc strove to become and how the male leaders of France viewed her. She understood herself to be equal to powerful men, yet powerful men deemed her life unworthy of saving. The crown of France, whom she fervently defended against British armies, never attempted to repay the favor. I contend that many women throughout history, including Olympe de Gouges and Simone de Beauvoir, eventually become blighted by the very forces they fight to preserve. All three women strove to save their country, but the leaders of France did not grasp the implications of their unbelievable grit and spirit. As women break the molds society forms around them, they too are often left broken and battered as a result of their radical actions and progressive beliefs. When arrested, the charges against Joan of Arc included her wearing men's clothes as well as "falsely leading people to believe she was sent by God" (Linder). Even in her prison cell, though, Joan resumed wearing men's clothing (Hobbins 4). By continuing to embrace what was deemed a masculine identity, she stood by her beliefs despite the judgement with which society condemned her. This adherence to her convictions proved valuable, as Joan of Arc's unconventionality in both gender and spirit established her as a true force in female history.

Despite her strength on the battlefield, Joan did not remain completely resolute throughout the course of her trial. Before the judges revealed her sentencing, she agreed to renounce her crimes - a decision which placed her in prison for the rest of her life instead of condemning her to death (Linder). After her agreement to submit to the Church and British authorities, "Joan was escorted away, given a dress to wear, and her hair was shaved" (Linder). According to Whittington, women cross-dressed in the Middle Ages because "they were moving to an ideal that was always masculine" (126). Women of the

Christian faith “would have wanted to climb higher spiritual and social spheres,” and some medieval texts even “offer admiring accounts of these women” (Whittington 126). Because of this, I suggest that the judges in Joan’s trial viewed her donning of men’s clothes as a symbol of power that verified her strength and abilities. Since people of the Medieval Ages did not always view women cross-dressing as a sin in itself, I maintain that the judges and leaders felt more at issue with the influence Joan accumulated than with her style of dress. By forcing her to wear women’s clothing, they stripped her of the power she gained as a military leader and divine prophet. Joan’s time in a dress did not last, though, as four days after she renounced her crimes, she dressed herself in men’s clothing and recanted her confessions/admissions (Linder). When being faced with death, I maintain that it is understandable that Joan’s courage faltered. It is not the job of historians to discredit her because she waived for a few days when given the option to live or die. Instead, I affirm that Joan should be recognized for her contributions to the feminine image in the Middle Ages, as well as her dedication to her country.

La Proto-féministe

On May 30, 1491, Joan’s execution took place. The female warrior “was bound to the wooden stake” and “prayed until the fire did its work” (Linder). Once she passed, “with her clothes burnt off completely, the executioner raked back the fire so the crowd could see she was indeed a woman” (Linder). I assert that this final act proved how remarkable it seemed for a woman like Joan to lead an army to victory and act as a soldier herself. Joan of Arc exemplified the traits of a trailblazing feminist in an era when society remained oblivious to the notion of women’s rights. My argument is that she is categorized as a proto-feminist for two reasons: the first being that she fought not for a

feminist cause, but for a cause outside of the realm considered accessible and appropriate to women of the era. Subsequently, Joan was a proto-feminist because of the lasting impression she left on historians and women in the years since her death. The fact that historians fervently attempt to pin down her person demonstrates how much of an anomaly she is for generations of those studying her actions. A proto-feminist's meaning rests in the complexity of her story – if Joan appeared easy to identify and understand, then there would be no use in examining and idolizing her.

Modern cultural references to Joan of Arc abound, proving that she truly is a fascinating subject for those outside of the realm of academia. In the years during World War I, Joan of Arc “as a warrior appealed to the filmmakers and advertisers of the era as a pretext for extravagance” (Blaetz 14). For Americans, Joan’s presence in films “provided the sense of romance that made the war seem to be part of a meaningful continuum of experience” (Blaetz 14). I maintain that Joan’s story resonates with both men and women, of both French and other nationalities. For those causes which rally against convention and the governmental *status quo*, her boldness and charisma present those who hear her story with a character to idolize. I contend, however, that it is critical for current audiences to understand her actual contributions, and for filmmakers and writers to avoid minimizing the role she played as an intersection between male and female. In 1916, filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille created the film *Joan the Woman*. Articles about the movie state that it represents a “feminist but the virgin warrior dies for love rather than principle” (Blaetz 52). In my opinion, this is exactly the problem with films that feature powerful women from history. Instead of being recognized as a woman who died for her cause, her death is transformed into a romantic plot which suggests that a

woman's story must be inextricably intertwined with that of a man. Instead, women throughout history should be remembered for their own contributions and acknowledged for both their failures and successes. Joan is an intriguing character, and she does not deserve to be reduced to cultural norms and stereotypes.

Joan of Arc is also used as a symbol for more contemporary women's rights movements. For militant suffrage movements, she proved a valuable force of imagery. By "claiming Joan of Arc as one of their own, suffragettes affirmed the religio-political nature of their struggle and its historic roots" (Collette 171). Throughout the 1910s, "medieval costume became a standard feature of the American suffrage parade," with one suffragette typically designated as Joan of Arc (Dockray-Miller). The woman warrior represented so many issues with which women continue to struggle in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and Joan of Arc provided a model that future females hoped to emulate in their own lives. I assert that her relevance rests in the various contradictions of her existence: male and female, religious warrior, dying prophet. She encompassed so much during her lifetime and exemplifies an age-old battle against religious and gender expression. She is a flexible and moveable character – one who can be shaped and molded to fit numerous causes and oppose many types of oppression. It is my desire that those groups who use her name to support their cause do so without damaging her reputation or character. Joan of Arc's legacy is owed the justice she never received during her trial in the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

Joan of Arc's legacy is deeply embedded in feminist history. As a proto-feminist icon, she demonstrated many qualities in her lifetime that reflect the nature of women's

rights movements into the present. Raised with little to no opportunities to define her own existence, she dedicated herself to a cause greater than her own life and fought to defend France and her king. Her abilities as a military tactician and leader demonstrated to the medieval populace that society created the only disadvantages women faced. Women could be just as commanding, respected, and powerful as men, while also maintaining femininity and virtue. This combination of traits proved to be alarming to male leaders who for years confined women to lives in which they lacked the ability to make decisions for themselves. Joan's trial and value as a prisoner demonstrated the discomfort that her manner of dress and life presented to the authority of the Middle Ages. Her continuous decision to don men's clothing served as a sort of masculine armor and stripping her of these vestments limited the scope of her identity and influence. Joan's fiery death seared her place in history and provided future generations of women with a symbol who embodied characteristics that remain startlingly relevant. When examining references to her in modern culture, it is evident that she is often unjustly portrayed, and her femininity overplayed. It is critical that she be remembered for her courage and dedication to France, her king, and her God. She accomplished what she felt God called her to do and established herself as a respectable leader to her male soldiers. Her death and life demonstrate the vast potential of women and remain poignant and inspiring to new generations of females.

CHAPTER TWO

Olympe de Gouges

Introduction

The unmasking of years of corruption by King Louis XVI of France and his administration from 1774 to 1792 had as one result an increased access to democratic thought communicated to the public through revolutionary writing. These writings culminated in both the French Revolution and the first major feminist movement in France. In this chapter, I review the feminist movement during the French Revolution through the lens of French author and playwright Olympe de Gouges. To begin, I discuss the intellectual and political strides which occurred in the mid to late 1700's leading up to the beheading of Louis XVI and the overthrowing of the Ancien Régime. To provide context for De Gouges' literary relevance, I will briefly examine the nature of women's rights in French history before the French Revolution. In the next section of the chapter, I examine why Olympe de Gouges became an influential leader in this movement and why her plays became influential works to the more progressive members of her audience. I argue that, as a feminist living during a period that had not yet recognized the feminist cause, her writing became a foundation for women's rights movements in France in the future. To better understand her beliefs, I review one of her greatest and most timeless works, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. Finally, I discuss the manner of her arrest and the legacy she left behind in the wake of her execution.

La Révolution française

The French Revolution emerged from an explosion of independent thought that circulated in reaction to rampant corruption and the indulgence of the monarchy and upper classes. Control of the country rested in the “one-man judgment” of King Louis XVI, but he “ceased to devote his days and nights to the service of the State,” and the government collapsed into total “disorder” (Ware 1). Under the inattentive eye of Louis XVI, France went bankrupt, and the king’s administration had no choice but to “concede to the French people a share in politics” (Ware 1). Suddenly allotted a forum to express their grievances, the populace prepared to make demands that would enhance their freedom and limit that of the monarchy. I believe that years of mistreatment by the king sparked an especially fiery response in the French public when they joined the royal administration as political participants. Although riots and uprisings had occurred throughout France in the years leading up to the Revolution, “no isolated movement” of the poorer classes “could hope to yield revolutionary results” (Rudé 31). Now, the penniless and the destitute had an opportunity to speak for themselves in unison, and they intended to do so with zeal. I maintain that the momentum gained by the inclusion of the lower class in political decision-making encouraged a total upheaval of traditional practices in French government. The public suddenly realized that the power of their combined strength could change the course of French history- including the potential to expand women’s rights.

Revolutionary literature naturally evolved into a popular form of communication and collaboration for the masses of French citizens incensed by the Ancien Régime. As

an example, French intellectuals published their opinions in pamphlets with the intention of “[influencing]” their readers’ perspectives on government (Chisick 626). As “brief” works focused on “contemporary issues,” pamphlets had the ability to persuade and manipulate vast audiences (Chisick 626). In my opinion, these works shaped the public similarly to news media today: it both educated them and molded their beliefs while including them in otherwise exclusive political discussions. Maximilien Robespierre, one of the most influential authors of the French Revolution and the facilitator of the bloody Reign of Terror, stated that “le secret de la liberté est d’éclairer les hommes, comme celui de la tyrannie et de les retenir dans l’ignorance” (Robespierre 253). Here, Robespierre sums up the importance of revolutionary writing in pushing French citizens towards revolutionary action. By allowing the French access to radical ideas, pamphlet authors permitted citizens across the country to perceive themselves as direct participants in the movement against the monarchy. Consequently, more citizens, including women, developed into revolutionary voices. Pamphlets and other forms of writing granted French citizens access to a more democratic, engaging form of citizenship and inspired them to become politically involved despite their social class.

The egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution and revolutionary writing roused politically marginalized groups like women to action. The revolution “marked” the beginnings of coordinated participation of women in politics as women militants fought for democracy and social equality as well as equal rights for their gender (Rose 188). I believe the radical ideas circulating during the mid to late 1700’s in France called for a total re-evaluation of the traditional understanding of citizenship and equality. In effect,

women reconsidered their own roles within society and sought to take advantage of revolutionary chaos and the collapse of conventional institutions in order to broaden the definition of female duty in France. The disbandment of feudal structures that defined the roles of women for hundreds of years stimulated the social activity and “consciousness” of women and created the first feminist movement in France (Diamond 96). For the first time, women could evaluate themselves as valued citizens of the country. Although feminism had partially existed before the revolution, it lacked the “depth of analysis and concrete social objectives” needed to be considered seriously on a national stage (Racz 151). I argue that women authors helped specify and characterize the revolutionary feminist movement by publishing works that directly addressed the issue of women’s rights. These writers not only questioned the legitimacy of the Ancien Régime but also questioned the legitimacy of female inferiority in the context of an upheaval of tradition. Consequently, women writers showed French women that they played a vital role in the transition from authoritarian monarchy to democracy.

La Femme

In order to fully understand the implications of Olympe de Gouges in feminist theory, it is essential to examine society’s perception of women’s rights leading up to the French Revolution. To put it simply, women held essentially no rights to citizenship, property, or their own lives. A woman “remained under her father’s authority until she married,” and “marriage transferred her to her husband’s rule” under which she “had no control over her person or her property” (Abrey 43). I assert that many women initially rejected de Gouges’s beliefs because they remained entrenched in the conventional ideas

of their families and patriarchs. The introduction of de Gouges's ideas of gender equality presented comfortable women with the terrifying proposition of change. De Gouges believed that class divisions caused the isolation of women from each other, which in turn prevented the level of female solidarity women needed to pursue equal rights (Diamond 101). As a result, I hold that upper class women felt threatened by the thought of banding together with women of the lower classes. Instead of understanding de Gouges's call for mobilization as an effort to unite all females, many women viewed her words as placing their comfort and lifestyles in a precarious position. The majority of women ignored the feminists that emerged alongside de Gouges through the revolutionary era (Abrey 46). Consequently, de Gouges and other thinkers and writers fervently published their feminist pamphlets and books knowing that many of their fellow women found their ideas detestable and incomprehensible.

Qui était Olympe de Gouges?

During the period of revolution in France, feminist author and playwright Olympe de Gouges became a vivacious voice of activism for diminished groups throughout the country. As a member of the middle class and the supposed illegitimate daughter of a prestigious aristocrat, she had "basic at best" schooling and could "read and write, but poorly" (Mousset 12). She also "complained bitterly about her lax education" and needed to "[dictate]" her thoughts to "secretaries" to be written down in order to avoid insecurity in spelling words properly (Mousset 12). I assert that her social status – a dichotomous mix between the aristocracy and the lower classes – exposed de Gouges to a variety of social problems dispersed throughout society and equipped her to comment on the issues

she observed. Because she felt as though she received an inadequate education, I believe that she experienced firsthand the need for unprejudiced access to knowledge and equal rights in France. De Gouges's unorthodox life made her enemies, and "she was often accused of being illiterate" despite history widely discrediting this rumor (Woolfrey). Her first play, titled *The Unfortunate Shipwreck*, centered around a woman and a slave as "parallel victims of social injustice" and contained "revolutionary implications" for readers and viewers (Diamond 97). I understand that the most powerful feminist themes are implicit messages housed in works of literature and art. De Gouges used plays as a medium by which she could communicate her discontentment with French society. Thus, her work became a form of power in a period of powerlessness for women.

As the French Revolution progressed, de Gouges remained committed to her beliefs despite the danger it posed to her life. Male leaders condemned her because she not only advocated for equal rights for all citizens, but because they also understood her to be a defender of the monarchy they fervently sought to destroy (Woolfrey). On the contrary, I suggest that her femininity gave her greater influence because she served as proof that women could determine for themselves the type of life they desired to lead and the type of regime under which they wanted to live. De Gouges adamantly knew for herself what she viewed as morally right and wrong for the society in which she lived, and she courageously defended the rights of those overlooked by the revolutionary men rewriting the French government. Many consider her to be the founder of modern feminism, and her desire for women to band together in support of each other remains a focus of modern feminists (Woolfrey). Just as revolutionary leaders realized the need for

French citizens to unite to defeat the monarchy, I maintain de Gouges understood, years ahead of her time, that women could further their cause in the same way. During the French Revolution, “women were left to deal with the exigencies while their menfolk participated in male-only political meetings” (Roelofs 573). Even the women who participated in the revolution did so for reasons other than feminism, such as seeking price controls for bread or currency controls (Roelofs 573). It is my view that de Gouges’s trailblazing writing is all the more remarkable because of her isolation in her beliefs. Both women and men rejected her principles, yet she forged ahead with the knowledge that the implications of her work would extend beyond her lifetime.

The ability to sacrifice oneself for a cause that surpasses the limitations of a lifetime makes for a passionate and powerful feminist. De Gouges is a prime example of this gallant quality. Woolfrey notes that she “[continued] to publish works deemed seditious” despite the growing “danger of arrest” and the potential of death by her enemies. Like Joan of Arc, de Gouges considered her cause to be worthier than her life, and for good reason. Woolfrey insists that she “contributed markedly to the depth and breadth of the discourse on women’s rights” later in the century, and that her work remains foundational in modern women’s rights movements. I assert that the unique nature of her beliefs as well as the poignancy of her writing created a boundless outline for approaching feminism in the coming years. De Gouges wrote as much as possible during her life in order to leave French society and the world with a grasp of feminism unlike anything published before. Because of this perspective, Diamond argues that she “was less concerned with her life than with being heard” (102). Her great tenacity,

though, would be the death of her, as she would be the only woman executed for sedition during Robespierre's Reign of Terror, which followed the French Revolution (Woolfrey). In a fashion eerily similar to the death of Joan of Arc, the French government put de Gouges on trial for her progressiveness, found her guilty, and executed her by guillotine. She fought for a more egalitarian France, yet the very country that she defended brought an untimely end to her life. As made evident by her life and legacy, De Gouges's martyrdom is a reminder that the strength of a woman resides first and foremost within the woman herself, and that no repressive law or custom can limit the impact she has on the unfolding future.

Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen

De Gouges's *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* is groundbreaking in its concrete assessment of the plight of women in eighteenth century France. In the Preamble of the manifesto, she "[considers] ignorance of, neglect of, or contempt for the rights of women" as the "sole causes of public misfortune and governmental corruption" (De Gouges 49). I maintain that by acknowledging women's rights as a core issue in the politics of the day, she brings immediate focus and clarity to the feminist cause. Her language is simple and straightforward, and she avoids any nuance or ambiguity that might lead her readers to misinterpret her argument. She is resolved: if the French government is to operate on the principles of equality that the Revolution sought to establish, then women must be considered equal to men in all respects. De Gouges goes a step further by stating that females are "superior in beauty" to men and "in the courage that [they need] to endure the suffering of childbirth" (49).

Instead of standing by the traditional belief that women operated as mindless vessels for new generations, she considered the incredible strength the act of childbearing implied for her sex. Her belief that childbearing – which for years had limited female participation in the male world – should be viewed as an act of courage, proved vastly unconventional. De Gouges turned tradition on its head and questioned the exact reasoning for why women experienced life as second-rate members of society for hundreds of years. She remained adamant that women’s rights should be understood as “natural” and “inalienable” (49). As a result, I believe she created, for the first time, an unmistakable, compelling argument for gender equality that could be used to create clear goals for future feminist struggles.

De Gouges demonstrated that the French Revolution would accomplish nothing if it did not grant equal rights to all citizens. She based *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* written by the National Constituent Assembly in 1789. She transformed the Revolutionary work into a piece that specifically included women in the definition of French citizenship. For example, in the National Assembly’s *Declaration*, the first article states that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights”¹ (*Declaration*). In De Gouges’ version, her first article states that “woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights” (De Gouges 50). Despite female Revolutionary involvement and mobilization, the writers and approvers of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* totally omitted women from the new French Constitution. I believe that by tailoring the

¹ The French word for man, “homme,” can be about one man or a generic term to describe all people.

Declaration's articles to the feminist cause, De Gouges underscored the importance of women's rights in creating a truly egalitarian society. Female equality would "[alter] the character of French civilization" even more than the total "abolition of the monarchy" (Abrey 43). I maintain that De Gouges viewed the more noble and important purpose of the French Revolution as providing equal rights for all citizens. Her *Declaration* states that the "aim of any political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman" (De Gouges 50). Thus, she viewed the revolution's power not in the dissolution of the monarchy, but in the promotion of equality for all citizens.

Sa Mort et son héritage

Due to her strong decision to remain vocal about her beliefs, the French government arrested and threatened De Gouges with execution. The government viewed her "insistence on representing herself repeatedly in her political pamphlets" as "unconventional" and "unprecedented" (Vanpée 54). Most female writers during the period published anonymously, but De Gouges defied this tradition by "flaunting herself" throughout her work (Vanpée 54). I assert that admitting ownership over her texts and ideas is one of De Gouges' most revolutionary qualities. Fearlessly claiming her identity despite the threat to her life made her a forceful and threatening anomaly to the men holding power. De Gouges showed the world that women deserved to be recognized for their ideas and contributions to society, for this recognition demonstrated the vast capabilities of women outside the shackles of the domestic sphere. Although the French government legally entitled De Gouges to a defense lawyer in her trial, the sitting judge

denied her this right with the reasoning that she “[had] enough wits to defend [herself] on [her] own” (Vanpée 50). Finally, the French public acknowledged her intellect and acumen. Unfortunately, this acknowledgement came in the form of condemning the great writer and feminist to execution by guillotine. De Gouges became the only woman during the Revolution “condemned specifically for her political writings and publications” (Vanpée 49). Thus, her commitment to her work and herself also, ironically, led to her death and contributed to her everlasting legacy.

Conclusion

To conclude, Olympe de Gouges transformed the feminist cause into a palpable, concrete movement with long-term goals and persistent reasoning. The French Revolution presented French citizens with new ways to participate in the shaping of a democratic government through easily transferable pamphlets. De Gouges used these pamphlets as a mechanism by which she could spread her ideas and change the landscape of women’s rights. In a period fraught with misogyny and ruled by an authoritarian patriarchy, she defied the norms of her gender by publicly laying claim to her work and refusing anonymity. Because of these characteristics, De Gouges became a feminist prototype for future women’s rights movements in France and around the world. She demonstrated that women deserved to be educated and recognized for their ideas, and she understood that the French Revolution would be useless without the establishment of equality for all. I maintain that De Gouges is one of the most powerful French feminist figures because she laid the groundwork for future feminists and accepted that the

feminist movement would extend far beyond her lifetime. The ephemerality of her life motivated her to publish as much as possible for future generations, and the threat of execution did not slow her down. Ahead of her time, De Gouges is owed immense gratitude and respect for changing how generations of French women perceived themselves as citizens, individuals, and intellectuals.

CHAPTER THREE

Ma Grand-Mère et la Guerre

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the courage and contributions of my grandmother as a member of the Resistance in Normandy during World War II. The chapter provides context for my grandmother's story through background information about the French Resistance and the strategic advantage of Normandy to Allied troops. I discuss the birth of the Resistance through General Charles de Gaulle's appeal in 1940, as well as how the movement enabled women to participate in combatting the Germans. Normandy's wartime relevance rested in its location, and thousands of local lives faced death and unbelievable obstacles due to the region's significance. An interview with my grandmother details the suffering she endured as a consequence of the Nazi invasion into Normandy and her brave contributions to the anti-German efforts. My purpose in translating and telling her story is to present her as one of the multitudes of women who risked their lives to defend their country, families, and freedom throughout French history. Unlike Joan of Arc and Olympe de Gouges, women like my grandmother are rarely immortalized by historical literature. I argue that these women fought for their country by means which required no less heroism than the actions of more thoroughly commemorated figures.

L'Appel de Charles de Gaulle

When General Charles de Gaulle addressed France via radio on June 18, 1940, nothing short of the destiny of his country was on the line, and he needed to convince the French to fight for it. Just a few days earlier, Nazi troops filed into the country's beloved and quintessential city: Paris. France became the victim of a "catastrophic, stunning, and total defeat" which bewildered French citizens (Blatt 2). During this period of shock and uncertainty, French men and women had two choices: submit to the vile domination of Hitler or defend a freedom that may never be reobtained. General de Gaulle's brief speech from a studio in London appealed to the latter. Through his broadcast, he wove hope into the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen and women. He implored them to believe that "the cause of France [was] not lost," and that the country had "everything" they needed to "crush" the Germans (De Gaulle). It is my belief that General de Gaulle's appeal showed French citizens that the country's capacity to win the war rested in their mobilization. He established that saving France was possible, and he placed the duty of its defense in the hands of French citizens. As a result, his appeal gave birth to the Resistance.

General de Gaulle's speech not only commenced the Resistance, but also subliminally invited women to take part in the movement. He told his country that "whatever happens, the flame of French resistance must not and shall not die" (De Gaulle). When he spoke to French citizens, it was with a sense of familiarity and trust – as though he desired for everyone to accept and act on his message. At the end of his speech, General de Gaulle calls for those "with or without arms" to lend a hand in subverting the Nazis. With the radio as his medium, listeners heard this appeal in the

intimacy of their own homes while surrounded by family and friends. I believe the inclusive rhetoric General de Gaulle employed and the manner in which he delivered his speech allowed French women to feel empowered to help in his cry for aid. Women understood they were also needed to win the war, as the Resistance was a nationwide endeavor that required the commitment of as many French citizens as possible in order to succeed. I assert that General de Gaulle permitted women to feel empowered as French citizens separate from their traditional feminine roles. Consequently, the Resistance became a movement for France as a whole, regardless of gender.

La Femme et La Résistance

Much of the literature written about the Resistance excludes French women from the movement. In Gordon Wright's 1962 work *Reflections on the French Resistance*, he altogether overlooks the possibility of female involvement and instead asks "what kinds of Frenchmen chose to enter the resistance" (Wright 339). A meager "2 percent of all the books on the Resistance published between 1944 and 1995" center on the actions of female members of the campaign (Andrieu 15). I contend that the lack of historical focus and review on female involvement in the movement is due to the discreet nature of their contributions. Whereas men fought on the front lines, most women engaged in subtle Nazi sabotage within their home villages and communities. Women like my grandmother do not easily conform to the stereotypical interpretation of traditional valor. As mothers and daughters, their role in society "[diminished] the contributions they [made] in the conduct of war" (Alfonso 7). I would argue that, for those few women who "directly participated in sabotage and ambush activities" per Alfonso, many historians unfairly interpret them to be exceptions and peculiarities (11). Thus, historians frequently omit

women resistors or portray them as anomalies, and they consider their contributions less seriously than the contributions of their male counterparts.

The delay in the French feminist movement until after World War II also resulted in less literature about female resistors. With the war occurring just a few years before the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist manifesto, *Le Deuxième sexe*, women's rights remained a periphery issue during the war. As a result, I maintain that women lacked the information to equip themselves with a fully feminist outlook. Women resistors "were not feminists" and "resistance and feminism were not connected" (Andrieu 16). In fact, when the French government finally granted women the vote in 1944, they often made "more conservative political choices" than men (Mossuz-Lavau 1). This proves how few women actually experienced exposure to full-fledged feminist beliefs. During wartime, it is my view that the fight for equal rights became outweighed by the fight for freedom that the German invasion of France brought to the doorsteps of French families. In order for the concept of equal rights to exist, there needed to first be a foundation of freedom from which to pursue these rights. Frenchwomen in World War II needed to defend their liberty as French citizens before seeking social justice as feminists. Unfortunately, this contributed to their exclusion from later analyses of the Resistance.

We must redefine "the Resistance" in a broader, more inclusive manner in order to account for the contributions of all French citizens involved. Because the movement was so far-reaching, members inevitably fall into the cracks of history and are forgotten in the wake of grander political figures. I suggest that the majority of these members erased through the years are women. Though the Resistance had the undeniable, singular purpose of "hostility to German domination," the exact courses taken by individual

French men and women are muddled by history and the passage of time (Hadsel 334). As a result, it is easier for historians to omit the actions of these individuals than to acknowledge their less visible contributions. To solve this problem, I define the Resistance as a far-reaching collaboration of French men and women directed toward “assisting the forces under General de Gaulle” – per Hadsel – and against the Nazis (338). In my view, this definition should be the lone qualification for Resistance membership. By interpreting the campaign broadly, a place in history is allotted for the women resistors who were otherwise overlooked because their actions and gender did not fit the mold of the traditional warrior.

Normandie

The Normandy beaches are not unfamiliar with armed conflict. Its position “as a gateway to the continent” has made it strategically valuable to a number of powers throughout history (Berman 469). For the purposes of the Allied forces in World War II, they selected the beaches of Normandy as the ideal landing point for the invasion of France because of their nearness to “the port and rail facilities in southern England” as well as a host of other “logistical” and “geographical” reasons (Berman 470). The choice of Normandy as the central point of the Allied efforts brought the battle to the doorsteps of thousands of French citizens living throughout the region, including my grandmother. Anywhere from 13,000 to 20,000 French civilians died as a result of the conflict in the weeks between June 6 and August 21 (Fact Sheet). Despite the massive and devastating toll on Normandy and the troops that landed there, “June 1944 was a climactic month that set the stage for the final victory in World War II in Europe” (Morgan 30). I assert that with such an important point in the war taking place in their own hometowns, the

Normandy public was prepared to sacrifice their own lives to aid the Allied cause. My grandmother's story serves as an example of the lengths to which Normans were willing to go to liberate their homeland.

On September 6, 1944, my grandmother, Georgette Meleder, joined her family at a friends' house near the woods in Le Havre, Normandy. Allied forces headed towards Meleder's village to expel occupying Nazis from the region, and locals expected intense and constant bombings at any moment. Meleder and her parents abandoned their family home in the city because officials informed them that the countryside would be safer. When it was too late, they realized the officials gave them incorrect information. As her family gathered together in their friends' backyard, a green flare fell from the sky as a warning that a bombing would occur in the exact spot where they stood. They chose to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and in war, it was the difference between life or death. The group started to run.

"We ran about one hundred yards and bombs started dropping all around us and in front of us," Meleder said. They attempted to reach a sizable bomb shelter nearby, but the route was too dangerous. They turned back.

"The blast from the bombs hit our chests, and we crossed our arms over our hearts to keep our lungs from blowing up," she stated while breathing deeply, as though reminded of the breathlessness of the moment. Around her, homes of friends and family crumbled to the ground and dead bodies littered the roads. There was nowhere else to go, so they found their way back to the home by the woods and hid in a makeshift wooden shelter in its backyard. The impact of the bombs was too powerful, though, and the shelter rapidly collapsed in an explosion of wood, earth, concrete, and shrapnel.

“There was dirt everywhere, but we were not dead - we came out of the hole,” Meleder said. Later, she discovered that the large bomb shelter they did not initially reach collapsed from the impact of bombs, and all three hundred civilians hidden inside suffocated. “If we had gone there, we would have died,” she said.

The next day, Meleder and her family sought shelter in a bunker in the city. According to her, “the shelter was supposed to fit two hundred people but there were over seven hundred in it.” For nearly a week they survived with nothing to eat or drink and slept on cold concrete floors. Among them laid the bodies of the dead- those who died in the shelter because they had been too sickly or elderly to survive in the harsh conditions. It was not until after the Liberation that Meleder and her family left the bunker. Even today, her feet and ankles remain swollen from the days she spent in the freezing shelter.

The war thrust Meleder into a violent, ghastly version of the world she once knew and trusted. To see one’s home and life turned on its head by the corruption of a greedy regime is enough to motivate a person to fight back, and Meleder’s conscience did not allow her to rest while her country faced attacks from the Nazis. If the France she returned to after the war stood by the malicious principles of the Germans, she did not desire to live to see it. She preferred to risk her life and face death rather than exist under Hitler’s leadership, and I assert that women and men across France faced this same, terrifying realization. My grandmother’s experience reflects the experience of thousands of other French citizens who chose to follow General de Gaulle’s call for the survival of their country as they knew it. The Resistance provided citizens with a means by which to persevere.

Before being confined to the bomb shelter, Meleder and her family worked as members of the Resistance. “As soon as Général de Gaulle called for the Resistance in 1940, I agreed with him,” Meleder said. As a woman, she did not feel as though her gender barred her from participating. “I had a colleague who was part of the underground network, and she asked for my help. I said yes right away.” Though the movement was widespread, it was also incredibly secretive. This explains why so many members are forgotten in historical literature- the tasks they completed required absolute confidentiality.

As one of her duties for the Resistance, Meleder delivered letters and packages with unknown contents to undisclosed locations. “Everything was executed in silence,” she stated. On one of her excursions, she conveyed a package to a friend from grade school who she had no idea was a member of the Resistance. She could never be sure which of her neighbors or friends also joined the movement but based on her encounters I estimate the number is high.

Another part of her work for the Resistance required dyeing recycled German uniforms khaki to be used by Allied armies. Resistance members delivered the uniforms - stripped from the bodies of dead Germans - to Meleder’s family home. Her and her parents worked together to unstitch the uniforms’ original Nazi buttons and replace them with the buttons of the Allies. Once completed, they sent the uniforms to the frontlines to be worn during battle.

Though a seemingly small contribution, Meleder continually placed her life in danger by aiding Resistance efforts. She remembers concealing a jar full of Nazi buttons behind bottles of alcohol in her home during a German raid of her village one day. The

Germans never came to her house, but if they discovered the buttons, she faced potential execution on the spot.

The French community in Normandy was terrifyingly silent during the days of Nazi occupation, and Meleder worked diligently to complete her designated tasks for the Resistance. “Nobody knew what I was doing, but I was not a hero,” Meleder stated. She repeats this several times as though to emphasize the ordinariness of her courage. She believed she could do nothing else but provide assistance in whatever way she was able. Reflecting on her story, it is clear that the women and men who fought for the Resistance did so for their country. My grandmother views the higher purpose of her actions as serving France, not a feminist cause. I assert that this makes her actions and the actions of other French women even more valiant. Without intending to do so, they paved the way for the slow dissolution of gender roles in future feminist movements. Their stories show future generations of women that they are capable of much more than what is defined by the gender roles of their time period.

When Meleder emerged from the bunker after days of constant bombings, the damage done to the Normandy countryside and the lives lost by the invasion came as an agonizing shock. Tattered wooden crosses lined the roads with the names of the civilians who died during the conflict, and one of the first crosses she saw bore the name of an incredibly close friend. She always cries when recounting this to my family.

In her neighborhood, bombs levelled nearly all of the homes except Meleder’s, though an unexploded bomb rested on one of their beds. Meleder’s family called the bomb squad to safely remove it, and the bed remains a family heirloom to this day.

Eventually, Meleder and her parents rebuilt their home and pulled together the pieces of their lives. Only in the last year, though, has Meleder been able to write down the story of her time during the war. “It is too painful,” she states. I maintain that the immense suffering the French public endured during World War II is another reason why the stories of individual resistors are so frequently lost to history. The wounds are too deep to probe, so those who once fought for the Resistance protect themselves by continuing the silence they practiced during the war.

According to John Talbott, war trauma experiences are “re-enacted” in the survivor’s mind, and this mental replication of horrific events is the “cruellest feature of the disorder variously labeled soldier’s heart” or PTSD (437). I assert that the inherent silence of my grandmother and other Resistance members results from the distress that their memories caused them. At ninety-seven years old and seventy-five years since the end of the war, Meleder still cries when she recounts her experiences.

Despite the lives lost and the danger she surrounded herself with, Meleder never failed to fight for France. “It is normal because I love my country. It was my duty. That’s all,” Meleder articulates. When she speaks of her commitment to her country and community, her voice breaks. “I did everything I could to save France. It was not much, but it was done with my heart.”

Mai 2019

My grandmother has lived in solitude for decades. Until her move to a nursing home several years ago, she remained isolated and comfortable in the house her family built nearly one hundred years ago. She is a woman of unbreakable routine and strong habit. Every morning she wakes around five o’clock to fix herself *un café* and *une tartine*

for breakfast. During the day, she reads history magazines, examines photographs with a magnifying glass, and chats with family on the phone for hours. Her life is a simple safe haven she spent years crafting for herself in order to cope with the trauma of her twenties. As an embroidery instructor, she dedicated most of her life to teaching young women how to create artwork with a needle and thread. She is petite and modest, and at just barely over five feet tall it is difficult to imagine her running errands for the Resistance. I often wonder where she got her strength during World War II and if it ever left her, or if it is what has subtly and diligently carried her through her ninety-seven years. She has never been recognized for her participation in the Resistance nor does she feel as though recognition is necessary. Recognition, to her, is superfluous. What she views as important is that France still exists as a free state, and that the world is free of the threat of Nazi domination.

Se souvenir des femmes

The story of my grandmother's participation in the invasion of Normandy and the Allied liberation of her hometown demonstrates that women should not be excluded from historical accounts of warfare. Most female warriors throughout French history have not been as fantastically immortalized as Joan of Arc. They do not brandish swords nor conquer battlefields as army commanders, but these women are nonetheless valuable factors in the history of France. I affirm that the similarity between these myriad figures is the dedication and commitment they demonstrate towards their cause and country. They are not necessarily feminists in the traditional sense, yet they further the feminist cause by proving that they are no less capable of courage and tenacity than men. Not every courageous act by these women is recognized in the recounting of history, but my

hope is that this thesis acknowledges the deeds of the invisible female heroes who quietly broke boundaries and barriers for the sake of France.

CHAPTER FOUR

Simone de Beauvoir et le Mouvement de libération des femmes

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the exceptional character of the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* as it developed and culminated throughout the twentieth century. To begin, I examine the life and work of French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. Her writing and fearless lifestyle demonstrated the obstacles women faced as they strove for gender equality and battled traditional misogynistic practices. To better understand de Beauvoir's contributions to the French women's rights movement, I delve into several parts of her revolutionary and most-renowned work: *Le Deuxième sexe*. Next, I discuss the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* and its unique and diverse character as the first major feminist movement in French history. De Beauvoir's influence on these groups remains indisputable, and their development shaped the character of the future of feminism in France. To conclude, I consider modern feminist groups and the persistence of the women's rights movement in France today. This includes examining the bold character of current feminist groups in France as well as the slow movement towards gender equality in the French national parliament. In the final section of the chapter, I also discuss the prevalence of social media and how it may or may not serve as a uniting force for French feminists. I address the flaws in its structure and suggest that solidarity remains the key to an effective feminist movement.

Simone de Beauvoir

Raised during the tumultuous years of the First and Second World Wars, the life of French philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir exemplified the struggle women of her day faced in proving the value of their work and acumen. She presented other French women with a progressive example of femininity – one free from sexual, biological, and intellectual constraints. Like Olympe de Gouges, de Beauvoir challenged the assumption that maleness served as a precondition for participation in academia. Shannon Musset points out that at just twenty-one years old, de Beauvoir became the youngest student to pass the French civil exam for philosophy, making her France's youngest teacher of philosophy. I maintain that her success on this exam allowed her to indisputably prove her genius as one which surpassed that of most of her male competitors. As a result of her achievement, French existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre invited de Beauvoir to join his coveted and extremely private "intellectual circle." Sartre and Beauvoir maintained a "liberal intimate relationship" for the rest of their lives which Musset suggests "often unfairly tarnished Beauvoir's reputation" as a scholar. It is my belief that the practice of limiting women to the domestic sphere created a harmful, permanent link between a woman's work and her personal life. Unlike Sartre and other male philosophers of the early to mid 1900's, French society minimized de Beauvoir's academic contributions because of her romantic relationships and avant-garde lifestyle. Though she later proved to be ahead of her time, Megan Burke remarks that de Beauvoir "was not considered to be" the philosopher she defined herself as "at the time of her

death.” Her battle for legitimacy demonstrated the obstacles a more enlightened French female populace endured as they strove for gender equality.

De Beauvoir published her most influential feminist work, *Le Deuxième sexe*, several years after the end of the Second World War. Within the piece, de Beauvoir insisted that feminists return “to the drawing boards” to develop a new plan for obtaining political and social freedom (Coffin 123). I maintain that after the horrors of the Second World War, de Beauvoir understood the urgency with which women needed to approach the equal rights movement. Disillusioned like the male philosophers and writers of the era, de Beauvoir knew the establishment of women’s rights could no longer be postponed or delayed. Though a minor member of the Resistance during the war, de Beauvoir wrote *Le Sang des Autres*, a novel “which was heralded as one of the most important existential novels of the French Resistance” (Mussett). Her participation in existential discourse while the Germans occupied her country anticipates the critical nature of her approach to feminist topics following the war. Her “impatient tone” in the “famous first paragraph” of *La Deuxième Sexe* demonstrates her attitude as a citizen of “postwar France” (Coffin 124). I believe she equated her freedom after the expulsion of the Nazis as an opportunity to redefine the place of the female within French society. Like Olympe de Gouges and Jeanne d’Arc, the circumstances surrounding de Beauvoir’s life presented her with a unique opportunity to deliver her feminist, progressive message to the French public. Before *Le Deuxième Sexe*, de Beauvoir “never considered herself to be a ‘feminist,’” but the work “solidified her as a feminist figure for the remainder of her life” (Mussett). The time in which she lived also happened to be the time to prioritize women’s rights, and she made that clear throughout the rest of her life.

De Beauvoir's greatest feminist sentiment lay in her questioning of the formation of "woman" both biologically and metaphorically. She opens the first section of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, titled "Biological Data," by stating that "those who like simple answers" define "woman" as "a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her." She then follows by questioning "the very meaning" of gender outside of "reproduction," and declares this separation into male and female as unclear (De Beauvoir 41). Immediately, de Beauvoir attacks the root of the feminist problem: anatomical constraints. I maintain that by portraying these constraints as arbitrary and ambiguous, de Beauvoir demonstrates the primitiveness of male superiority. It appears that she is subtly stating that the complexity of women can only be properly comprehended by advanced minds. Thus, misogynists are simply too dim to understand the many capabilities and nuances of a woman. De Beauvoir's timelessness as a feminist emerges from the implications of her new interpretation of gender. If gender comes from within, then its role is defined by the individual, not society. As a result, gender is "understood to be both choice and acculturation" (Butler 37). I believe that this progressive understanding of female and male remains applicable today in the discussion of LGBTQ rights. Just as de Beauvoir's theories allowed women to define "woman" for themselves, her theories also permit those questioning their gender to piece together masculinity and femininity in a way which best suits their mind and body. Therefore, de Beauvoir collapsed the anatomical barriers that prevented women from being viewed as independent from the conventional, societal role of their sex.

In the fifth chapter of *Le Deuxième sexe*, de Beauvoir examines the deficiency of the French Revolution in granting equality to French women and demonstrates the length

and depth of the struggle for women's rights in France. Echoing the sentiments of Olympe de Gouges, de Beauvoir writes that following the Revolution, "bourgeois women were too integrated into the family to find concrete grounds for solidarity with each other" and "did not constitute a separate caste capable of forcing their demands" (158). Continuing my discussion from Chapter Three, I attest that the lack of female comradery and unification prevented women from accomplishing feminist goals on a national scale. I believe de Beauvoir affirms this theory through her claim that the lack of female mobilization during the revolutionary era prevented substantial women's rights from being established. Of course, this lack of mobilization resulted from the "bourgeois revolution" being "waged almost exclusively by men" (de Beauvoir 157). De Beauvoir even mentions de Gouges in *Le Deuxième sexe* as a solitary feminist voice who "[demanded] that all masculine privileges be abolished" (158). I maintain that the importance in this literary relationship between de Beauvoir and de Gouges emerges from the cross-generational solidarity the two authors share. Although existing in different periods in French history, the two are bonded by their struggle against the male hierarchy. In my opinion, their voices, though separate, represent the chorus of feminist figures who fought to establish themselves in misogynistic eras. Thus, the fight to secure French women's rights proved to be a movement years in the making.

Le Mouvement de libération des femmes

The trials and dedication of French feminists and unconventional women like de Beauvoir, Gouges, Jeanne d'Arc, and my grandmother culminated in the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* in the 1970's. Finally, French women, riding on the fervent coattails of the late 60's protests, united in the pursuit of gender equality. The MLF, as it

came to be known, consisted of “many small women’s groups” who found commonality in their “belief that the movement must be completely independent of men” and their “general goal of women’s liberation” (Kauffman-McCall 283). I believe the beauty in this sudden and vibrant mobilization stems from the diversity within its myriad participants. Just like the colorful and unique background of the women discussed in this work, the MLF itself encompassed a spectrum of women seeking rights not just for themselves, but for other women as well. I maintain that this attitude of inclusivity differentiated the MLF from the other easily dissolved feminist efforts of French history. The MLF women often came together with “no particular agenda at their meetings,” instead converging “to revel in the jumble of people, cigarette smoke, and ideas” (Greenwald). According to philosopher Michèle Le Coeuff, these meetings allowed her and other feminists to “gradually [learn]” how she could give “a name to what was hurting [her], through the discovery that [she] was not the only one being hurt” (Greenwald 130). I find this period in French history mirrors a time of enlightenment, with real changes being made by those with a utopian image of a future, egalitarian France. The expansiveness and multiformity of the MLF allowed it to reflect the desires of all women and have a greater influence than any efforts made before its time, especially given that the contributions of women throughout history had already laid a strong foundation for the changes of the 1970’s.

The voices of feminists in French history, though, are not without fault. In the Second Wave feminist movement and into the present, the trouble for feminist leaders and students is reconciling contemporary goals of women’s liberation with the often inadequate objectives of past feminists. Modern women find “ecstasy in discovering”

Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* yet are dissatisfied when her "attitudes sometimes fall short" (Felstiner 247). It is my belief that progress is not necessarily found in the exact terms of past feminists like de Gouges and de Beauvoir, but in their shared sentiment and adherence to a cause undefined by their peers. I maintain that the role of the women's movements from the 1970's onward rests in their ability to sift through these past feminist interpretations and create a grander vision for the future of French women. De Beauvoir did not perfectly prescribe the feminist problem, but she "attempted the most comprehensive theory and description of women's condition that we have" (Felstiner 248). She operated with meager background knowledge on how an enduring feminist vision should be created. Because of this, she and other historical feminists should be revered for the totality of their work, not scolded for the defects in their philosophies. The writings of feminists like de Beauvoir serve as a prompt for future generations to discover for themselves the meaning in their own femininity. De Beauvoir believed women and men "should be encouraged to define him or herself and take on the individual responsibility that comes with freedom" (Mussett). In my opinion, her legacy is an (imperfect) invitation for the individual to do just that. Thus, the flaws of historical feminists present modern feminists with the challenge to fill the spaces they left empty and mold their message into a powerful platform for current women's movements.

The diversification of the MLF resulted in the emergence of a variety of women's rights groups operating with their own agendas and ideologies. One of these groups called themselves "*Psychanalyse et politique*," and part of "its influence was due to its creation of a publishing house, magazine and bookshops" (Allwood et. al. 178). The movement, founded by Antionette Fouque, consisted of a "research group that informed

the cultural and intellectual heart of French feminism” (Goux). I assert that the biological and scientific approach to gender spearheaded by de Beauvoir shaped the manner in which future feminists like Fouque would later approach the women’s rights movement. De Beauvoir spent her life proving herself as a philosopher and as an academic, and it is fitting that intellect, reason, and science became the essence of the MLF. “Radical feminists” formed “the most active” MLF group of the 70s, “and were responsible for the highly visible actions which brought feminism into the public eye” (Allwood et. al. 177). The “*Ligue du droit des femmes*” developed from this crusade and eventually outlived the MLF (Allwood et. al. 177). De Beauvoir became president of the *Ligue du droit des femmes* in 1974 (Kritzman 41). In my opinion, the myriad ways in which she committed herself to the feminist cause throughout her life cemented her permanence within feminist history in France and the world. De Beauvoir’s “influence on feminist thought and action remains boundless” and “later feminists have often positioned themselves in relation to her” (Kritzman 41). I maintain that every action of past feminists builds upon the future of the women’s rights movement. In each group of the MLF it is possible to find de Beauvoir’s voice and her search for deeper, philosophical reasons behind gender division. Thus, the work of past feminists contributes endlessly to the future of feminism, and de Beauvoir served as a guiding light for the groups and leaders who would define later-twentieth century women’s rights movements.

Les Feministes d’aujourd’hui

Today, French feminist groups maintain a unique outlook and continue to fight patriarchal oppression in new and daring ways. One extreme group, Femen, engages in topless protests in order to achieve their goal of “complete victory over patriarchy”

(Femen). On the organization's website, they state that the "feeling of joy" that comes from having a "woman's body" is destroyed when societal "injustice" makes a woman "hostage" to her body. They call themselves "the special force of feminism" and "its spearhead militant unit" (Femen). Members of La Barbe, a French feminist group founded in 2008, appeared at high-level meetings wearing beards "to draw attention to the lack of women in decision-making positions" (Nathanson). Though perhaps not as bold as Femen, La Barbe is another example of the creativity and spunk of modern French feminist groups. I believe the approach to feminism in France offers a unique and vibrant perspective on feminism as a result of the women who used their lives as templates for what it means to be a modern woman. Figures like Jeanne d'Arc, Olympe de Gouges, and Simone de Beauvoir provide French women with bold role models to emulate. I maintain that it is impossible to separate the past from the present and our predecessors from who we are today. French women witnessed their mothers and grandmothers participate in Resistance efforts in World War II and face unbelievable threats to their families and homes. It is my belief that these women, fearless and spirited, inspired following generations to continue the fight for women's rights at all costs. Modern feminist groups in France owe their distinct character and resolve to those who came before them.

This thesis cannot be complete without examining the current state of feminist action in French government. According to the World Bank, the number of seats held by women in the French national parliament increased dramatically from 2016 to 2018. In 2016, the French parliament included only 26.2 percent women, whereas in 2018 the value rose to almost 40 percent. Compared to 2000, a year in which only 10.9 percent of

parliament consisted of women, the incline is staggering (World Bank). I believe that the drastic boost of women representatives stems from the presence of the internet and social media. Advances in technology permit women across France to interact freely and easily with one another and build connections despite being geographically disparate. The challenge of solidarity is no longer an issue, as feminists are able to quickly mobilize around meaningful causes and take action both online and in person. De Beauvoir understood that “liberation must be women’s work” and should be viewed as “a matter of women discovering their solidarity” (Burke). Social media may be viewed both as a tool to allow women to consolidate as well as a means by which to push for greater female representation in government. As a result, women elect women into office, and the elected women enact policy decisions which support goals of gender equality.

I would argue that social media, despite its benefits to the feminist movement, also has its downfalls. According to Kate Ott, the “construction of many” social media “platforms is not egalitarian,” meaning “users bring hierarchical statuses with them” (94). I believe women must find a way to avoid being trapped by the same inequalities which prevented them from interacting in de Gouges’ era. In the current world, French feminists must not leave behind the many women whose voices remain stifled by class structure and access to resources. True feminism needs, and always requires, solidarity from women of all backgrounds and statuses and recognition that this solidarity remains incomplete.

Conclusion

To conclude, like the women in the preceding chapters, Simone de Beauvoir lived a life that defied the expectations for her gender, and through her lifestyle demonstrated why women deserved equal rights. She inhabited a space controlled completely by men yet rose above all of them in proving herself as both a striking intellectual and genius philosopher. Her most influential feminist text, *Le Deuxième sexe*, demonstrated that women should not be defined by their gender and biology, but by their achievements as a human being. De Beauvoir showed that the feminist fight needed to be waged by women uniting in solidarity in order to be successful, and she lived to witness and be a part of the emergence of the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* following the progressive protests of May 1968. The MLF provided women of all backgrounds with an organized means to express their grievances and protest the limits placed on women by the patriarchal French society. The diverse groups of the MLF grew into a variety of movements, ranging from tame to radical, and exemplified the complexity of the female populace as a whole. De Beauvoir stated that stupidity allowed society to reduce women to their gender, and the MLF illustrated, in mass form, the intricacy of femininity. As a result of the beliefs of feminists throughout history, the French women's rights movement remains bold and unique in its character today. New movements emerge regularly that push convention to its limits and flout centuries of male oppression. Today, the French national parliament consists of more female representatives than ever before in its history, yet there is still work to be done to fully integrate and teach all French women about their rights and the female figures of their past. The use of social media as a force of solidarity can either help the cause or exclude less privileged women from the fight. Therefore, the role of

future feminist movements is to be as inclusive as possible in order to support the myriad women who comprise half of the population of the diverse and beautiful country of France.

CONCLUSION

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir writes that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283). In this work, I discuss this process both for women as a collective and woman as the individual. Over hundreds of years of French history, women such as those described in the previous chapters demonstrate how the female identity has grown and redefined itself. As we articulate for ourselves what it means to become a woman, we also reshape this identity collectively for future women. My hope is that this work demonstrated that process by examining the women who helped build a foundation for future generations of French feminists.

In this work, I illustrate the gravity of commemorating the women who risked their lives and reputations to make progress in the feminist tradition. The women I discuss in each chapter, though they lived disparate lives, also shared incredible commonality. They each sacrificed their wellbeing for a cause greater than themselves and did so with spirit and determination. Joan of Arc, Olympe de Gouges, Simone de Beauvoir, and my grandmother fought valourously for a better future for France, whether doing so for the country itself or for its female inhabitants. Their differences demonstrate the complex network of women who form the fabric of femininity which stretches across France and the world. As a result, I prove that perfect congruity between the beliefs of one feminist and another only reduces the depth and beauty of the women’s rights movement. No two feminists are exactly alike, but each woman’s contributions build upon those of her predecessors and strengthen the cause as a whole. For this reason, I

argue that the distinctions between feminist and proto feminist ought to be limited, and each woman's contribution examined through the lens of her own experiences.

The character of each woman I study in this thesis reflects the spunk and charisma of current French women's rights movements. Joan of Arc cut her hair and commanded an army, and Olympe de Gouges refused anonymity and published fervently until her execution. Simone de Beauvoir questioned misogyny at the biological level, and my grandmother completed covert tasks for the Resistance while Nazis roamed the streets of her home village. Through each of their stories, I show that French feminism is as unique and extraordinary as the women who comprise it. This is proven by the continuing fascination with and relevance of the writings of Olympe de Gouges and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as the myriad ways Joan of Arc is used as a cultural icon. Though women like my grandmother may live their entire lives without substantial recognition, their bravery proves inspirational to their female descendants - just as my grandmother inspired me. I continue to be in awe of her fearlessness and seek to embody her resolve and strength. This is the power of telling her story, and the story of other French women who paved the way for our generations.

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