

TRANSLATING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: REWRITING POLITICAL EXPERIENCE IN OLYMPE DE GOUGES'S THEATRE

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Olympe de Gouges's revolutionary theatre (1790–1793) as a site of historical translation, demonstrating how theatrical performance mediates and transforms political experience. Drawing on recent work in historiography (White, Munslow), translation studies (Vidal Claramonte, Zethsen), and performance theory (Fischer-Lichte), the article argues that de Gouges actively translated revolutionary events into dramatic forms that reshaped their meaning for contemporary and future audiences. The analysis of four plays, *Les démocrates et les aristocrates* (1790), *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791), *La France sauvée* (1792), and *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1793), reveals distinct modes of translation: spatial-social, allegorical-memorial, ideological, and affective-mythopoeic. Each work demonstrates how theatre performs intralingual translation, converting political discourse into accessible dramatic form whilst mediating collective emotions and the construction of revolutionary memory. The article contributes to understanding 'history as translation' beyond strictly interlingual frameworks, positioning de Gouges's dramaturgy as both historiographical intervention and emotional translation of revolutionary experience.

KEYWORDS: Olympe de Gouges; French Revolution; History as Translation; Revolutionary Theatre; Affective Translation.

1. Introduction

When Olympe de Gouges composed her revolutionary plays, she was not merely documenting contemporary developments. She was actively translating the unfolding Revolution into dramatic form, transforming political chaos into legible theatrical narrative. Her theatre illustrates what recent historiographical theory has identified as the fundamentally translational nature of historical representation. White (1990) and Munslow (1997, 2012) have demonstrated that history is not a transparent record but an interpretative transformation, requiring the conversion of experience into narrative, evidence into meaning, and temporal distance into intelligibility. Vidal Claramonte (2018) extends this insight, arguing that historical writing constitutes intralingual translation, a continuous reframing of reality across shifting ideological and temporal coordinates.

Theatre, as an embodied and performative medium, offers particularly rich terrain for examining these translational processes. It converts events into action, abstraction into emotion, and political rupture into collective experience. Studies of eighteenth-century dramaturgy have long emphasised the centrality of visual composition and affective intensity in theatrical meaning, foregrounding theatre's capacity to channel collective experience through sensorial and emotional forms (Frantz, 1998). Friedland's analysis of revolutionary theatricality further underscores that political events did not simply unfold but were actively staged, rendered intelligible through representational forms. This insight

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resonates with recent approaches in Translation Studies which conceptualise history itself as a process of translation rather than transmission (Friedland, 2002).

Drawing on recent debates in translation studies that move beyond a strictly interlingual understanding of translation to examine history itself as a translational process (Vidal Claramonte, 2018; Savchenkova, 2024), this article approaches history as translation, examining how theatrical performance mediates and transforms revolutionary experience. In this context, the French playwright and political activist Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) offers an illuminating case study. Born Marie Gouze in Montauban, she moved to Paris where she adopted the name Olympe de Gouges and began her literary career as a playwright. Between 1784 and her execution by guillotine on 3 November 1793, she composed over twenty plays, many engaging directly with the revolutionary present, sometimes responding within weeks of the events they dramatised (Lucet, 2021). Though today she is widely celebrated for her 1791 *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, this political manifesto belongs to a different register than her primary vocation: theatre. As Blanc (2022) shows, both her theatrical and political interventions were deeply shaped by her marginal social position as a woman writer and by the pressures of the revolutionary public sphere.

This marginal position distinguishes her dramaturgy from that of other practitioners of patriotic theatre (Bourdin, 2017): unlike male playwrights who operated within established theatrical institutions, de Gouges wrote from the periphery of both the literary and political fields, producing translations of revolutionary experience that foregrounded affective and gendered dimensions systematically absent from dominant theatrical production.

De Gouges's theatrical vocation emerged from multiple factors. Whether it served to reaffirm her purported connection to the dramatist Lefranc de Pompignan or resulted from the theatre mania of her Parisian social circles, theatre became the space where she deployed her ideas and struggles, inventing a political voice through dramatic form (Lucet, 2021). Her dramaturgy interprets the Revolution rather than merely depicting it. She reinterprets political conflict as theatrical action, recasts ideological tensions in embodied dialogue, and renders the moment's instability legible through character, speech and scene. This theatrical translation operates on multiple levels: linguistic (converting political discourse into dramatic dialogue), temporal (transforming recent events into narratable plots), spatial (transposing public spaces onto the stage), and affective (translating collective experience through theatre's capacity for emotional catharsis).

Despite this prolific output, she never achieved recognition as a major literary or political figure during her lifetime. Following her execution, she was almost entirely forgotten for nearly two centuries (Ritz, 2021). The contrast between this long eclipse and her current celebrity is striking. Her theatrical works, many unpublished during her lifetime or never performed, exemplify what has been termed an 'archival erasure' (Lucet, 2021). This silencing was shaped not only by her execution but also by persistent misogyny that characterised nineteenth-century historiography. Contemporary critics dismissed her as a

mediocre writer, reducing her contributions to theatrical failures and personal eccentricity rather than acknowledging her literary and political significance (Lucet, 2021).

This article examines four plays (1790-1793), each illuminating a distinct dimension of history as translation. *Les démocrates et les aristocrates* (Gouges, 1790) illustrates spatial and social translation, showing how the Champ de Mars is transformed into a theatrical microcosm that translates revolutionary sociability and class tensions into a dramatic encounter. *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (Gouges, 1791) exemplifies allegorical and memorial translation, demonstrating how contested political memory is negotiated through mythological frameworks, translating the unstable reputation of a revolutionary hero into philosophical inquiry. *La France sauvée* (Gouges, 1792) reveals crisis translation and ideological emplotment, showing how chaotic insurrectionary violence is restructured into coherent moral narrative, translating political rupture into republican pedagogy. Finally, *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (Gouges, 1793) exemplifies affective and mythopoeic translation, demonstrating how military triumph is converted into civic ritual and founding myth, translating contingent victory into timeless republican virtue. These works were selected for their direct engagement with revolutionary circumstances, their chronological distribution across the Revolution's intense phase (1790-1793), and their exemplification of complementary theatrical strategies that, taken together, demonstrate the multifaceted nature of theatre as historical translation.

Existing scholarship on de Gouges's revolutionary theatre has examined her works primarily through the lens of political thought and nationalism (Arguelles-Ling, 2007; Le Hir, 2014; Nielsen, 2002) or has compared her ideas with those of Rousseau on the social function of theatre (Bergès, 2018). While these approaches have yielded valuable insights, none has examined her plays through the framework of translation studies. This article addresses that gap, arguing that a translational perspective reveals dimensions of her dramaturgy that other approaches have not fully explored.

By situating de Gouges within the framework of 'history as translation', this article demonstrates that her dramaturgy epitomizes the interpretative, affective and transformative dimensions through which theatre, like history, engages the past, giving shape to its meanings and future possibilities.

2. Theoretical framework: history as translation

To fully understand this translational practice, it is necessary to examine the theoretical foundations. The idea that history is a form of translation has become central to contemporary historiographical theory, challenging assumptions about historical narrative as transparent record. White describes historical writing as "translating knowing into telling" (1990, p. 1), whilst Munslow emphasises that historiography entails "translating evidence into facts" (1997, p. 6). This transformation is conditioned by sources, conceptual tools, ideological commitments and narrative expectations. For both theorists, the past must be organised, emplotted and rhetorically shaped before becoming legible as 'history'. This inherently selective process means that historical accounts are always situated

narratives rather than neutral representations (Munslow, 2012, p. 150). This conception aligns with what Simon (1996) identifies as the 'politics of transmission', whereby translators and, by extension, historical mediators necessarily engage in acts of cultural interpretation that perpetuate or contest dominant values.

Vidal Claramonte (2018) expands these claims, proposing that historical writing constitutes intralingual translation. She argues that this involves rewriting 'reality' within the same language but across shifting ideological, temporal and affective coordinates. She posits that history comprises multiple texts continuously rewriting past developments within evolving cultural frameworks, destabilising historical objectivity and highlighting narrative multiplicity (2018, p. 2). Her emphasis on rewriting is particularly relevant for artistic forms, where the past is performed, adapted and recoded through semiotic systems.

Building on this conceptual foundation, Koring Zethsen (2009, pp. 296-297) has systematized the study of intralingual translation, identifying multiple types. These include diachronic translation (across time), expert-to-layperson translation, and translation between style levels or registers. Zethsen argues that intralingual translation "serves communicative functions in society by bridging gaps between groups of language users of the same language" (2009, pp. 296-299). Applied to de Gouges's revolutionary theatre, this framework reveals how her plays perform multiple forms of intralingual translation simultaneously. They convert specialized political discourse into accessible theatrical form, transform recent events into narratable theatrical plots, and mediate between elite political culture and popular theatrical audiences.

De Gouges's theatre exemplifies the complexity of intralingual translation in revolutionary contexts, where language itself was undergoing radical transformation. As Darnton (2023) illustrates, revolutionary France witnessed an explosion of new political vocabularies, with terms like *citoyen*, *patrie*, and *république* acquiring unprecedented semantic density and affective charge. These theatrical translations navigate multiple registers simultaneously. They move from the specialised discourse of political assemblies (with its legalistic terminology, constitutional debates, and parliamentary rhetoric) to the accessible, emotionally charged language of popular theatre. This is not merely simplification but fundamental reframing, what Jakobson (1959) terms 'rewording' or 'intralingual translation'. Here, meaning is reconstituted through different linguistic resources within the same language system.

Consider the translation of political pamphlets and assembly speeches into theatrical dialogue. Revolutionary pamphlets employed dense argumentation, classical allusions, and sophisticated rhetorical structures addressed to literate, politically engaged readers. De Gouges transforms this register into dramatic exchanges characterised by heightened emotional immediacy: exclamations, rhetorical questions and moral pronouncements replace abstract argumentation; concrete imagery and interpersonal conflict give embodied form to ideological opposition; rhythmic, declamatory speech replaces the dense prose of political pamphlets. When a character in *La France sauvée* denounces monarchical conspiracy, she translates complex constitutional arguments about sovereignty and

representation into visceral accusations of betrayal, rendering political theory as embodied moral drama. This intralingual translation makes revolutionary ideas accessible to diverse audiences, including the illiterate who could attend performances but not read pamphlets. Simultaneously, it reshapes their meaning through affective intensification.

Zethsen's taxonomy helps us recognise that de Gouges enacts multiple types of intralingual translation simultaneously. First, there is register translation: converting the formal prose of political discourse into the more colloquial, emotionally direct language of theatrical dialogue. Second, there is diachronic translation: bridging the temporal gap between recent developments and their dramatic representation. This process requires not only narrative restructuring but linguistic updating as political vocabularies evolved rapidly during these years. Third, there is expert-to-layperson translation: mediating between elite political culture (deputies, journalists, political theorists) and popular audiences who may lack specialised knowledge of constitutional debates or military strategy but access political meaning through affective experience (Zethsen, 2009).

Crucially, de Gouges's intralingual translations are never neutral. As Hermans (2014) argues, all translation involves 'positioning': the translator's stance towards source material, target audience, and the cultural field itself. De Gouges translates revolutionary discourse through the lens of her Girondin politics, feminist commitments, and theatrical expertise. She produces versions that amplify certain voices (moderate republicans, virtuous citizens) whilst marginalising others (radical Montagnards, sans-culotte militants). Her translations thus participate actively in the Revolution's ideological contestation, demonstrating that intralingual translation, like interlingual translation, is fundamentally a political practice. It is a site where cultural power is exercised, contested, and reconfigured (Álvarez and Vidal Claramonte, 1996; Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002).

Beyond textual translation, scholarship on emotions and memory highlights the affective dimensions of historical meaning-making. Savchenkova's (2024) concept of 'emotional translation of history' and Reddy's (2004) account of emotions as cultural practices both demonstrate that affect functions as a translational force: it shapes what is remembered, which voices gain visibility, and how contemporaries make sense of unprecedented change.

The cultural turn in translation studies (Bassnett, 2002, pp. 1-6) has emphasised translation as intercultural mediation shaped by power relations and ideological commitments. As Simon (1996, p. ix) argues, "translators are necessarily involved in a politics of transmission, in perpetuating or contesting the values which sustain our literary culture". Lefevere's foundational account of translation as rewriting establishes that such mediating operations actively manipulate and reorganise cultural memory according to dominant ideological frameworks (1992).

These developments converge in performance studies, which extends the translational framework beyond the verbal dimension. If Translation Studies reveals how texts are transformed across registers, ideologies and temporal distances, performance studies shows how these transformations operate through embodied, spatial and affective

semiotic systems that exceed purely linguistic analysis. Lüsebrink (1989, p. 341) shows how revolutionary circumstances like the taking of the Bastille were rapidly dramatised, establishing theatre as a primary medium for translating political rupture into collective memory through performance and emotions. As Burke (2005, p. 3) observes, if “the past is a foreign country”, those mediating it, such as historians, translators, and playwrights, function as cultural intermediaries bridging temporal distance. Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008) illuminates how theatrical events generate cognitive and affective frameworks through the ‘autopoietic feedback loop’. This is the continuous circulation of impulses between actors and spectators (2008, pp. 7-9) that reshapes perception and produces new forms of communal experience. Theatre thus becomes a site where historical events undergo multiple translation layers: narrative, visual, spatial, affective and ideological (Gentzler, 2017).

Within this framework, ‘history as translation’ provides a productive lens for examining Olympe de Gouges's revolutionary dramaturgy. Written when the Revolution's outcome remained uncertain, her plays translate unfolding events into dramatic forms that render political crises legible, recast ideological divisions as interpersonal conflicts, and articulate future-oriented visions of republican virtue. In doing so, her theatre demonstrates how the stage functions as a powerful medium for mediating and transforming the present-as-history.

The methodology adopted in this article draws on close reading of the dramatic texts as primary sources, analysing how each play's structural, linguistic, spatial and affective dimensions enact the translational operations identified in the theoretical framework. Each play has been selected because it exemplifies a specific mode of historical translation whilst collectively covering the Revolution's most turbulent years (1790–1793). The analytical procedure consists in identifying, within each dramatic text, the mechanisms through which political events are transformed into theatrical form: how discourse is reregistered, how temporality is restructured, how space is reorganised, and how collective emotion is shaped and directed (Susam-Sarajeva, 2009).

3. Olympe de Gouges as a translator of the Revolution

Building on the theoretical framework established above, this section examines de Gouges's position as a cultural mediator and translator of the Revolution, identifying the specific modes of historical translation that her dramaturgy enacts and that will be analysed in the four case studies of the next section. Olympe de Gouges occupies a singular position within the French Revolution's cultural landscape. Operating in what Darnton (2023) characterises as Paris' ‘early information society’, she participated in the formation of collective political consciousness through theatrical performance. Throughout the revolutionary period, the dramatist operated as a theatrical chronicler of unfolding political upheaval. Her sustained engagement with contemporary events, producing dramatic responses with extraordinary rapidity, positioned her dramaturgy as urgent political intervention rather than retrospective commentary (Blanc, 2022). This proximity

determines her dramaturgy's nature: a mode of real-time mediation reframing the Revolution for the stage as its outcome remains uncertain. De Gouges acts as translator of her time, mediating and transforming events so they become intelligible as drama, ideology and collective experience. This apparent paradox, that translation can operate in real time, is resolved when we recognise that mediation does not require temporal distance. De Gouges's theatre demonstrates that translational operations of selection, reframing and emplotment can be performed simultaneously with the events they translate, shaping their meaning as they unfold rather than retrospectively.

Blanc (2022) underscores that this mediating position was inseparable from her political activism, which brought her into direct conflict with revolutionary authorities. Similarly, Sherman (2013) characterises this positioning as one of 'engaged marginality', allowing de Gouges to critique revolutionary orthodoxies whilst remaining committed to revolutionary principles. Kadish and Massardier-Kenney (1994, pp. 1-5) identify de Gouges as "an especially salient illustration of women's role as linguistic, cultural, and political mediator during the French Revolution". Translation, as Bassnett (2002, p. 18) notes, involves "a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures" mediated by the translator's position. Although not a translator in the conventional sense, de Gouges embodied the mediating position between cultural and linguistic groups that characterises translation practice (Kadish & Massardier-Kenney, 1994): as a native speaker of Occitan writing in French, she negotiated between regional and national linguistic registers at a moment when language itself was a site of political contestation.

Theatre, for de Gouges, is an active instrument of political intervention and historiographical interpretation. Verdier (2001) reveals how de Gouges challenged theatrical conventions and social norms (Verdier, 1994), recasting the Revolution's shifting dynamics into embodied conflict. This translation operates through selective dramatisation. It isolates emblematic situations, condenses political tensions into character relations, and amplifies moral stakes through heightened emotional registers. She produces dramatic language conveying the moment's complexity whilst guiding spectator interpretation. The stage reorganises the Revolution into meaningful forms, actively constructing historical meaning.

De Gouges enacts crisis translation, turning developments such as the Bastille's fall or Mirabeau's death into compact theatrical structures with clear dramatic arcs. These structures impose coherence, causality and rhythm upon historical material experienced as unstable and unpredictable. Where contemporaries confronted bewildering crisis succession, de Gouges's dramaturgy offers interpretative frameworks that retrospectively organise experience into legible plots.

Through allegorical-memorial translation, she elevates contested political figures and events into philosophical allegory, translating unstable revolutionary memory into enduring moral exempla transmitted to future generations. By displacing action to mythological or afterlife spaces, as in her treatment of Mirabeau, she creates critical distance from partisan

controversy whilst simultaneously consecrating revolutionary heroes through dialogue with canonical thinkers.

She performs ideological translation, filtering developments through political commitments: Girondin republicanism, critique of absolutist authority, abolitionist stance against slavery, and early feminist insistence. Her plays articulate citizenship visions grounded in rational deliberation and ethical responsibility, rejecting both monarchical tyranny and revolutionary excess. This positioning becomes precarious. By 1793, de Gouges's moderate vision opposes Montagnard dominance (Hunt, 2004). Martin (2009) illustrates how this positioning placed her within a moderate republican framework, challenging both monarchical authority and revolutionary orthodoxies.

De Gouges undertakes affective-mythopoeic translation, recognising emotion as political cognition. Her dramaturgy positions emotional responses as constitutive elements of political understanding, foregrounding enthusiasm, indignation, compassion, grief, and patriotic fervour. By staging collective feeling, she creates an affective public experiencing the Revolution as shared emotional and ethical horizon. This aligns with Savchenkova and Reddy's perspectives on emotions as mediating structures through which historical meaning is produced and naturalised. As Perazzolo (2023) establishes, the author's theatrical practice translated political terror into affective spectacles designed to shape civic consciousness through emotional engagement. This mediating function extended beyond textual production to de Gouges's position within the cultural field itself. As Kadish and Massardier-Kenney (1994, p. 39) observe, de Gouges sought to bridge these disparate cultural domains, straddling:

the high culture of theater as practiced at the Comédie-Française on the one hand, a cultural domain from which women writers were typically excluded, and the popular culture of pamphlets, speeches, and melodrama on the other hand.

Her dramaturgy executes spatial-social translation, transposing events from dispersed revolutionary sites onto the stage's concentrated space. This spatial reorganisation constitutes an interpretative act bringing together what was historically scattered and creating visual and symbolic proximities that reshape understanding. The theatrical space becomes a microcosm compressing the Revolution's geographical and social diversity into a unified representational field. This enables spectators to grasp the totality of revolutionary experience through concentrated dramatic action.

These operations confirm that de Gouges's dramaturgy exemplifies historical translation's multifaceted nature. Her plays do not simply convert events into theatre: they project interpretations back onto the historical field, shaping how contemporaries understood their present and establishing the stage as a powerful apparatus for constituting historical meaning.

4. Dramatic case studies: translating events into theatre (1790–1793)

Between 1790 and 1793, de Gouges produced plays responding to political events with remarkable immediacy, often composing within weeks of the developments they dramatised. Far from offering detached reflections or retrospective interpretations, these works translate contemporary developments into theatrical structures that actively mediate their meaning for spectators, shaping how audiences understand and emotionally process the revolutionary present. Each play enacts a distinct mode of historical translation: spatial-social, allegorical-memorial, crisis, affective-mythopoeic, illustrating the multiplicity of ways in which theatre can intervene in, interpret and reframe the present as it unfolds. Connors (2025, p. 56) emphasises how such revolutionary event-based theatre sought to create collective knowledge and emotional bonds through dramatic reenactments of recent military and political events, transforming spectators into active participants. De Gouges's theatrical works exemplify what Simon (1996, p. 8) describes as “translation as a mode of engagement with literature, as a kind of literary activism” through which cultural mediators “contribute to cultural debates and create new lines of cultural communication”.

Drawing on insights from dramaturgical approaches to political theatre, notably articulated by Ubersfeld (1989), four plays form a representative constellation: *Les démocrates et les aristocrates, ou le curieux du Champ de Mars* (1790) engages the Fête de la Fédération; *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791) addresses his death and public mourning; *La France sauvée, ou le tyran détrôné* (1792) responds to the incarceration of the monarchy; and *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles, ou les vivandiers* (1793) celebrates French military victories. This chronological progression reveals how de Gouges adapts her dramatic tools to the Revolution's shifting tempo and increasingly violent trajectory, responding to changing political climate with varying modes of narrative, emotional and ideological reframing. As Bourdin (2017) shows, these works participate in the broader phenomenon of ‘patriotic theatre’, which sought to forge revolutionary consciousness through theatrical representation.

Reading these plays as ‘history as translation’ foregrounds mechanisms through which the playwright transforms events into drama: temporal condensation, character translation, moralisation, affective modulation, and construction of civic exemplarity. Read through the lens of multimodal and intermedial retranslation (Spoturno, 2020), these works demonstrate how theatrical performance operates not only on the verbal level but through the interaction of spatial, visual, and affective semiotic codes, revealing theatre as a space where translation is not a secondary operation applied to a fixed past, but a constitutive practice through which the present is rendered intelligible as history.

4.1. *Les démocrates et les aristocrates* (1790)

Les démocrates et les aristocrates, premiered in late 1790 (Gouges, 1790), constitutes Gouges's experiment translating revolutionary dynamics into drama. Composed after the Fête de la Fédération (14 July 1790) (Ozouf, 2013; Thiele-Knobloch, 1991), the play responds to a moment of optimism when the Revolution still appeared reconcilable with

constitutional monarchy. The work unfolds at the Champ de Mars during preparations for this festivity celebrating national unity and the reconciliation between the king and the people. Rather than focusing on spectacular events, the play stages everyday sociability, capturing the affective texture of early revolutionary culture through a succession of fortuitous encounters among characters from diverse classes, professions and ideological positions.

The play's structure is deliberately anti-narrative. Organised as successive scenes articulated around M. de Bélisle, an impartial National Guard officer, it presents not a closed story but a radiographic snapshot of French society. Characters representing the *ancien régime* (aristocrats, genealogists), encounter proponents of the new democratic order (doctors, sentinels, democratic servants) in a light, humorous tone that masks profound social critique. The cast includes the Marquise de la Branche du Blason (aristocrat), the doctor M. Séné (democrat), the genealogist M. de l'Écusson, the blind Père Ambroise and his dog Jacob (both aristocrats), alongside servants like La Fleur (democrat) and La Jeunesse (aristocrat). Unlike conventional patriotic theatre, which resolved ideological conflict through heroic narrative and civic triumph, de Gouges deliberately withholds resolution: the characters' disputes remain unsettled at the curtain, a formal choice enabled by her distance from the celebratory imperatives of mainstream revolutionary dramaturgy. This structure exemplifies what might be termed spatial-social translation: the transformation of public revolutionary space into theatrical representation and of diffuse social conflict into concentrated dramatic encounter. This spatial-social translation operates primarily as register translation in Zethsen's terms, converting the specialised discourse of revolutionary politics into the accessible emotional language of popular comedy. Set at the Champ de Mars, the play translates the festivity's performative politics into drama that both reproduces and interrogates its staged unity, condensing geographic, temporal and social multiplicity into a legible theatrical form. In doing so, it demonstrates how theatre renders collective experience intelligible through processes of selection, condensation and reframing.

Les démocrates et les aristocrates also enacts affective translation shaping how the Revolution is emotionally experienced. Rather than presenting revolution as terror or instability, de Gouges foregrounds moral renewal and future possibilities. She highlights patriotic enthusiasm, optimism and communal affection, constructing an affective atmosphere that legitimises the revolutionary process. She translates political disagreement into a comedy of reconciliation, suggesting the new order can be built through dialogue and civic virtue rather than coercion or violence. This affective framework reflects 1790's optimism before the radicalisation of 1792-1793.

Finally, the play performs a distinctly moral and pedagogical translation of revolutionary change. By presenting the Revolution as a test of individual character, de Gouges aligns political transformation with ethical self-reform. The aristocrats' moral trajectory, from self-interested privilege to patriotic sacrifice, serves as an exemplary model of the broader social reconfiguration demanded by revolutionary ideology. This trajectory

is encapsulated in the figure of the genealogist M. de l'Écusson, who boasts of having fabricated over two hundred marquises and six hundred counts (Gouges, 1790, Act I, scene ultima), inadvertently exposing the artificial nature of aristocratic hierarchy. When he laments that his genealogical tree has become worthless, the democratic National Guard officer M. de Bélisle responds: "You can take your tree elsewhere; it won't take root here. I suggest you turn it into firewood and use it to keep warm"¹ (Gouges, 1790, Act I, scene XI), brutally summarising the historical rupture the Revolution represents. This pedagogical dimension extends beyond individual characters to the audience itself, inviting spectators to witness and internalise the moral lessons it dramatises, translating abstract revolutionary principles into affective experiences that shape political subjectivity.

4.2. *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791)

With *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (Gouges, 1791), de Gouges employs allegorical displacement to mediate Mirabeau's legacy in the immediate aftermath of his death in April 1791. The orator's sudden demise produced unprecedented communal emotion, manifested through elaborate ceremonies, commemorative pamphlets, poems and prints. As the character Fortuné recounts: "Never has public gratitude exploded in such a solemn or touching manner [...] our actual legislators, [...] fought with the citizen soldiers for the honour of carrying you"² (Gouges, 1791, Act I, scene VII). This theatrical testimony captures the collective grief that transformed Mirabeau into the Revolution's first secular saint. He was pantheonised immediately upon death, becoming the inaugural occupant of the newly secularised monument to revolutionary virtue.

Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées illustrates allegorical translation and the construction of revolutionary memory at its moment of formation. The play presents Mirabeau newly deceased, encountering historical figures in the afterlife including Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and Henri IV, among others. Together they discuss France's future, liberty, and the dangers threatening the Revolution. Where *Les démocrates* translated contemporary space, this play translates recent history into philosophical allegory, elevating Mirabeau from political figure to philosophical interlocutor.

The composition of this afterlife assembly is itself analytically significant. The inclusion of Henri IV alongside Enlightenment philosophers suggests a vision of French patriotism that transcends revolutionary rupture, implying continuity between monarchical and republican traditions. As Le Hir (2014, pp. 54-56) notes, this reflects the originality of de Gouges's ideas on patriotism, which resist simple alignment with either revolutionary orthodoxy or royalist nostalgia. Equally notable is the presence of female figures among the inhabitants of Elysium, whose inclusion contests the masculine exclusivity of the revolutionary pantheon (Verdier, 1994, p. 206). This strategy enables de Gouges to

¹ « Vous pouvez porter votre arbre ailleurs, il ne prendra pas racine ici. Je vous conseille d'en faire du bois pour vous chauffer ». All translations from French into English are the author's own.

² « Jamais la reconnaissance publique n'éclata d'une manière plus solennelle, et plus touchante [...] nos législateurs mêmes [...] disputaient aux soldats citoyens l'honneur de te porter ».

participate in the Revolution's active construction of its own pantheon, using theatre to shape how revolutionary heroism would be remembered and transmitted. Where other patriotic plays of the period presented revolutionary heroes through uncritical hagiography, de Gouges's allegorical displacement creates space for philosophical interrogation, a nuance enabled by her position outside the dominant theatrical institutions that celebrated revolutionary orthodoxy.

The central operation is allegorical elevation. This allegorical-memorial translation exemplifies diachronic translation, bridging the temporal gap between Mirabeau's recent death and its transformation into enduring philosophical legacy. By displacing action to the Champs-Élysées (the classical underworld reimaged as enlightened judgement space), she transfers Mirabeau from the mortal realm of political compromise into the eternal sphere of philosophical principle. This spatial translation performs a double function. It creates critical distance enabling engagement with questions about the Revolution's direction without explicit partisan positioning. Simultaneously, it consecrates Mirabeau by placing him in conversation with Enlightenment luminaries Montesquieu and Rousseau. The play thereby translates Mirabeau's political career into philosophical legacy, suggesting his ideas merit the same enduring consideration as those of canonical thinkers.

Such allegorical framing enables particularly sophisticated translation of revolutionary mourning into political pedagogy. Rather than staging grief as emotional spectacle, the author reframes it into rational dialogue about the Revolution's future. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and the other historic figures function not merely as judges but as philosophical frameworks through which to interpret Mirabeau's significance. Their presence structures the play's central question: not whether Mirabeau was virtuous, but what his example teaches about revolutionary possibility and peril. The play thus participates in what Nora (1996-1998) identifies as the active construction of sites of memory, spaces where collective values are articulated and transmitted.

The play also performs profound translation of political discourse across registers. Mirabeau's oratory, delivered in the contentious space of the National Assembly, is reframed as philosophical dialogue conducted in the timeless realm of ideas. This translation elevates revolutionary rhetoric from circumstantial argument to universal principle, suggesting that the Revolution's debates concern fundamental human questions rather than merely contingent political conflicts. Olympe de Gouges thereby transposes the Revolution's immediate struggles into philosophical territory, claiming for it the dignity and permanence of Enlightenment thought.

Ozouf (2013) reveals how revolutionary funerals transformed death into civic pedagogy, staging republican virtue through theatrical commemoration. Hunt (2004) likewise demonstrates how such commemorations created new secular rituals channeling grief into political solidarity. De Gouges's play exemplifies both processes, translating mourning into philosophical instruction and collective emotion into republican virtue. The affective register oscillates between reverence and inquiry, celebration and interrogation, creating emotional complexity that prevents simple hagiography. This sophisticated

affective translation reflects the Revolution's own unstable relationship to its emerging heroes, simultaneously needing and fearing the charismatic authority they embodied.

Most significantly, *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* foregrounds the performative construction of revolutionary memory at its origin. By staging posthumous judgement whilst collective memory remains fluid, de Gouges exposes how the Revolution actively shaped its own historiography. Memory emerges not as passive record but as active translation, a process of selecting, elevating and consecrating certain figures whilst the revolutionary present remains uncertain. The play thereby establishes that historical memory is always translational, never merely transmissive. It requires converting lived experience into legible narrative, political complexity into moral exemplum, and temporal chaos into meaningful sequence.

4.3. *La France sauvée, ou le tyran détrôné* (1792)

La France sauvée, completed in August 1792 (Gouges, 1792), marks de Gouges's most ambitious and precarious attempt to translate an ongoing political crisis into dramatic form whilst that crisis remained unresolved. This unfinished work is set in the Tuileries Palace on the night of 9-10 August 1792, hours before the royal family's imprisonment in the Temple tower (Thiele-Knobloch, 1993). The temporal specificity is crucial: de Gouges writes not retrospectively but in real time, attempting to impose narrative coherence on events whose meaning remains radically uncertain. By August 1792, the monarchy had lost legitimacy through Louis XVI's flight to Varennes (June 1791), suspected foreign correspondence and resistance to revolutionary legislation. Tackett (2015) has shown how the period following the king's suspension witnessed intensifying factional violence. Revolutionary theatre at this moment functioned as contested public space where competing narratives were performed and policed (Walton, 2009).

La France sauvée exemplifies crisis translation and ideological emplotment, the transformation of chaotic, fragmented political rupture into coherent moral narrative. Written during the August 10th insurrection that would definitively end the monarchy, the play performs urgent translational work: converting bewildering violence into legible story, translating conspiracy rumours into dramatic evidence, and transforming political crisis into republican pedagogy. The play reveals how theatrical translation can function as direct political intervention, projecting interpretative frameworks designed to shape collective understanding in real time. Where *Mirabeau* translated memory and heritage through allegorical distance and *Les démocrates* translated festive sociability, *La France sauvée* translates the immediate present, demonstrating theatre's capacity for real-time historical mediation.

The central mechanism is crisis translation. This crisis translation operates as expert-to-layperson translation, converting the complex constitutional and factional disputes of August 1792 into morally legible dramatic narrative accessible to popular audiences. De Gouges transforms complex, fragmented events (rumours of treason, contested testimonies, conflicting accounts, chaotic insurrectionary violence) into structured dramatic

narrative attributing coherence, causality and moral clarity to crisis. This exemplifies White's emplotment: converting chronicle into story through event selection and arrangement according to recognisable patterns. Yet whilst patriotic productions typically presented the monarchy's fall as necessary justice, de Gouges's play offers more complex translation. The deposed king and queen appear not as villains but as tragic figures whose fate tests the Revolution's moral character. This reframing works to translate constitutional crisis from partisan triumph into ethical dilemma, attempting to preserve space for clemency even as violence becomes inevitable. This ethical complexity distinguishes de Gouges's translation from that of her contemporaries: where patriotic dramatists typically emplotted the monarchy's fall as necessary justice, her marginal position allowed her to stage moral ambiguity without institutional censure, foregrounding the human cost of revolutionary violence rather than its political necessity.

La France sauvée performs profound ethical and ideological translation. De Gouges positions her drama as republican critique, exposing monarchy's systemic failures (corruption, despotism, betrayal) and articulating political virtue grounded in transparency, justice and popular sovereignty. Marie-Antoinette becomes a dramatic conduit for anxieties about betrayal, conspiracy and national vulnerability. Rather than crude caricature, de Gouges translates her into complex symbol of institutional decay, positioning her downfall as historically necessary step toward France's moral regeneration. Yet the Queen's speeches also claim agency typically denied to women in revolutionary discourse, translating gendered victimhood into political argument (Scott, 1999; Poggi, 2021). When Olympe de Gouges, the character, confronts the Princess of Lamballe in the Tuileries, she declares:

I abhor tyrants but I do not want assassins' weapons used to destroy them. I do not want my nation to be sullied by the blood, even of the guilty³ (Gouges, 1792, Act I, scene VII).

This ethical framing exposes how revolutionary discourse instrumentalised femininity as political scapegoat whilst simultaneously contesting the gendered structures underlying ostensibly universal political language. The play thus transforms political judgement into theatrical pedagogy, offering moral lessons about power, accountability and civic virtue that participate in revolutionary citizenship's ethical education.

La France sauvée ultimately reveals the performative dimensions of historical translation under conditions of extreme urgency. By insisting on ethical nuance in depicting figures typically reduced to caricature, and by foregrounding women's voices within masculine political discourse, de Gouges demonstrates that theatrical mediation can interrogate revolutionary narratives even as it participates in their construction. The work positions theatre not as mirror of political transformation but as active site where competing interpretations of crisis are negotiated, tested, and projected onto the revolutionary public sphere.

³ « J'abhorre les tyrans mais pour les détruire je ne veux pas qu'on emploie le fer des assassins. Je ne veux point que ma nation se souille du sang même des coupables ».

4.4. *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles, ou les vivandiers (1793)*

L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles, written in late 1792 or early 1793 (Gouges, 1793), represents de Gouges's most direct engagement with Revolutionary Wars and the emotional politics of national triumph. When the embattled Revolution desperately needed military success to consolidate legitimacy, the play dramatises General Dumouriez's celebrated entry into Brussels (14 November 1792) following the decisive victory at Jemappes (6 November 1792) (Thiele-Knobloch, 1991). This turning point, after months of setbacks and invasion fears, carried French armies beyond national borders into the Austrian Netherlands, transforming defensive war into revolutionary liberation. The play features a diverse cast including General Dumouriez himself, the Belgian magistrate Balza, the French sans-culotte Charlot and his wife and daughter Charlotte, the Ferning sisters (two young women who fought at Jemappes), an Austrian archduke, a resourceful spy called Tape-à-l'oeil, and various Belgian and French citizens. As the character Balza proclaims in the play's climactic moment:

See what sovereign is right now at our gates: a free people who fight against all tyrants to defend the cause of the people, and who give back to nations their rights⁴ (Gouges, 1793, Act I, scene V).

L'Entrée de Dumouriez illustrates affective and mythopoeic translation, the conversion of military victory into civic ritual and foundational myth. Where previous plays translated social tensions, contested memory, and political crisis, this work translates collective joy and triumph, demonstrating that historical translation encompasses the full affective spectrum of revolutionary experience. This affective-mythopoeic translation combines register and diachronic translation, converting military reportage into civic ritual whilst simultaneously projecting contingent victory into timeless republican myth. The play transforms specific military events (the battle of Jemappes, Dumouriez's entry into Brussels) into timeless celebration of republican virtue, translating tactical success into moral demonstration and contingent victory into founding moment. This mythopoeic operation, creating foundational narratives that transcend historical particularity, reveals theatre's capacity to generate the affective communities necessary for revolutionary consolidation.

De Gouges translates this pivotal event into theatrical spectacle of civic unity, patriotic exaltation and cross-national fraternity, revealing how theatre mediates not only crisis or mourning but also collective enthusiasm and triumphant celebration, affective dimensions often marginalised in scholarship privileging conflict and violence. This affective translation participates in broader revolutionary practices of mobilising public sentiment through performance. Bourdin (2017) examines how patriotic theatre mobilised support for revolutionary wars, transforming victories into celebrations of national heroism. Similarly,

⁴ « Voyez actuellement quel est le souverain qui se présente à nos portes : un peuple libre, qui combat seul contre tous les tyrans, pour défendre la cause des peuples, et qui rend aux nations leurs droits ».

Mason (2014) shows how popular songs, theatre, and festivities served to mobilise public support, rendering military conflict as communal celebration of civic virtue and national identity. Such performances, including de Gouges's dramatisation of Dumouriez's triumph, worked to construct the emotional frameworks through which revolutionary publics understood and endorsed military action. Yet de Gouges's translation of military victory differs from that of her contemporaries: where patriotic theatre typically celebrated French triumph in nationalist terms, her cosmopolitan vision frames military expansion as universal liberation, a perspective shaped by her feminist and abolitionist commitments that cut across the nationalist imperatives of dominant theatrical production.

De Gouges reframes the military campaign not as tactical narrative but as foundational moment constructing transnational republican community united by shared values rather than dynastic allegiance. The play's structure builds toward a grand finale featuring the planting of the liberty tree, a military parade accompanied by the song "*Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille?*", a civic marriage ceremony performed by Dumouriez himself, and the triumphal coronation of the general by the allegorical figure of Fame descending with a genie. Through such ceremonial spectacle, de Gouges elevates military victory into civic ritual, converting contingent action into enduring myth that embodies timeless revolutionary principles (Frantz, 1992). As Duvignaud (1965) demonstrates, theatrical performance functions as collective ritual that constructs and reinforces social solidarity through shared symbolic action, revealing the structural affinities between revolutionary ceremony and dramaturgical form.

This mythopoeic translation extends beyond narrow nationalism to articulate cosmopolitan vision of fraternity between liberated peoples. Portraying Brussels inhabitants welcoming French troops as liberators, the play translates military expansion into universalist rhetoric of emancipation and voluntary association. When Dumouriez declares that provincial identities must "disappear forever" so Belgians may "form but one people of brothers under a single appellation" (Gouges, 1793, Act V, scene XIX), the moment reframes conquest as voluntary republican federation, positioning revolution as universalist project transcending borders.

Yet the play's timing reveals translation's contingency. Written when Dumouriez embodied revolutionary triumph, the work could not anticipate his defection to Austria just months later (April 1793). This biographical irony demonstrates that revolutionary memory remained unstable, subject to constant retranslation as political circumstances shifted, exposing how theatrical mythmaking of contemporary events remains perpetually vulnerable to historical reversal.

5. Conclusion

These four plays, spanning 1790 to 1793, reveal the breadth and complexity of theatrical translation across the Revolution's most turbulent years. From the festive optimism of *Les démocrates* to the fragile triumph of *L'Entrée de Dumouriez*, de Gouges's dramaturgy demonstrates that historical translation is never singular but operates simultaneously

across spatial, memorial, ideological, and affective registers. Each work responds to distinct political exigencies whilst collectively illustrating theatre's capacity to mediate revolutionary experience in real time, transforming chaotic events into legible narratives even as their meanings remained radically uncertain. This article has demonstrated that Olympe de Gouges's revolutionary theatre operates as historical translation that is fundamentally performative rather than merely representational. The four plays examined reveal that theatrical mediation does not simply record revolutionary experience but actively constitutes it, transforming political chaos into intelligible narrative, collective emotion into structured affective experience, and contingent events into foundational myths. The spatial-social translation of *Les démocrates*, the allegorical-memorial translation of *Mirabeau*, the crisis translation of *La France sauvée*, and the affective-mythopoeic translation of *L'Entrée de Dumouriez* demonstrate that historical translation encompasses multiple simultaneous operations, each responding to specific political exigencies whilst shaping how revolutionary publics understood their present.

In doing so, this article contributes to translation studies by demonstrating that intralingual translation operates not only between registers or time periods, but also across semiotic, spatial and affective dimensions (Zethsen, 2009; Spoturno, 2020). It also contributes to scholarship on de Gouges by offering the first systematic analysis of her revolutionary plays through a translational framework, complementing existing approaches focused on nationalism and political thought (Arguelles-Ling, 2007; Le Hir, 2014).

The significance of de Gouges's work extends beyond individual achievement to illuminate how marginalised voices mediate historical experience. Her two-century erasure was not incidental but structural, reflecting gendered mechanisms through which certain modes of historical translation are systematically excluded from canonical archives. Yet precisely this marginality enabled distinctive strategies foregrounding affective experience, embodied performance and collective emotion as constitutive elements of historical understanding. Her plays reveal what official chronicles systematically obscure: that revolutionary transformation was lived through grief, joy, fear and hope as much as through ideological conviction, and that theatre provided essential infrastructure for processing these collective emotions. Marginalised voices do not simply add content to existing narratives; they expose fundamentally different modes of historical translation operating beyond dominant archival practices.

This recognition carries profound implications for studying political crisis. If theatre functions as real-time historical translation, then revolutionary culture requires attending not only to what events occurred but to how they were performed, emotionally processed and collectively interpreted as they unfolded. Olympe de Gouges's dramatic production captures this instability, translating political uncertainty into theatrical forms that preserve rather than resolve ambiguity. *La France sauvée's* ethical nuance becomes testament to theatre's capacity to interrogate revolutionary orthodoxies even when translating crisis into pedagogy, whilst *L'Entrée de Dumouriez* demonstrates theatre's capacity to translate military triumph into civic ritual and republican myth. These works reveal translation's

constitutive fragility when historical meaning remains radically unsettled, challenging retrospective methodologies that impose narrative coherence on fundamentally unstable processes.

Olympe de Gouges's execution silenced her voice in 1793, and historiographical misogyny erased her contributions for two centuries. Yet her recovered plays demonstrate that marginalised perspectives can resurface to challenge dominant narratives, exposing what canonical histories obscure. History, her theatre insists, is never settled but remains perpetually open to retranslation by those willing to recover voices that power sought to silence. In this sense, studying de Gouges's revolutionary theatre becomes itself a form of historical translation, one that contests erasure and reaffirms that the past remains available for reinterpretation by those committed to hearing what dominant archives worked to suppress.

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