



Olympe de Gouges versus Rousseau: Happiness, Primitive Societies, and the Theater*

ABSTRACT: *In Le Bonheur Primitif (1789), Olympe de Gouges takes on Rousseau's account of the evolution of human society in his first two Discourses, and she argues that primitive human beings were not only happy, but also capable of virtue. I argue that in that text, Gouges offers a contribution to the eighteenth-century debate on human progress that is distinct from Rousseau's in that it takes seriously the contribution of women and families to human happiness and progress. I show how the concept of emulation plays an important role in Gouges's analysis, both in her account of primitive societies and of the theater, and argue that she uses it to bridge the gap between primitive happiness and future progress.*

KEYWORDS: human happiness, Gouges, Rousseau, primitive societies, theater

Olympe de Gouges, who is now mostly known for her 1791 tract, *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, was well known to her contemporaries as a prolific playwright and political philosopher who worked tirelessly to defend the rights of the oppressed, proposing endless reforms under the old and new regimes, some of which were adopted and many of which taken very seriously. Unfortunately, her work is no longer easily accessible,¹ and despite her having been a significant actor in political philosophy around the time Mary Wollstonecraft was, de Gouges is now largely unknown to the philosophical community (for a thorough and reliable biography, see Blanc 2014).

The scope of Gouges's work was social and political ranging from a critique of marriage, slavery, and religious vows to concrete arguments for reducing poverty and improving education. Her writings were influential in shaping some of the reforms of the French Revolution with several of her proposals adopted and put into practice. While she is best known (if at all) for her plays and short pieces, she

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¹ One useful site offering translations by Clarissa Palmer of several of de Gouges's tracts, prefaces, and plays is: <http://www.olympedegouges.eu/>.

There are very few modern editions or translations of Olympe de Gouges's writings although all or most of her work is available as facsimiles on websites such as Gallica, Google, Gutenberg, etc. Where possible I have referred to recent editions of her work such as Gouges, *Femme reveille-toi!* (2014). Unless indicated otherwise, the page numbers are to the original editions found online and listed in the bibliography.

also wrote a 150-page philosophical treatise, which was printed in 1789 in Amsterdam and sold in Paris. Very few philosophers recognize Gouges as one of their own, and when they do, they tend to focus on her plays and pamphlet work, especially *Zamore and Mirza* (an antislavery play) and her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*.

The plays and tracts are definitely of philosophical interest—working on them contributes to philosophical discussions of rights, equality, gender, and race²—but *Le Bonheur Primitif* arguably constitutes Gouges's more general contribution to political philosophy. This text is both a response and homage to Rousseau's (1997a) first two discourses, *The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. In *Le Bonheur Primitif*, Gouges discusses human nature and the impact that science and education have on the human capacity for happiness and morality. But she goes further, and true to her political self she makes a practical proposal that has the following aim: help her contemporaries recover the happiness of primitive societies. To achieve this aim, she argued, people need to take more seriously the collaboration of men and women in society, starting from the family and reaching as far as the theater. In that sense *Le Bonheur* is also a critique of Rousseau's 'Letter to D'Alembert' in which he argues that the theater can only harm good societies and that this is in great part caused by the participation of women in various aspects of theatrical pursuits.

In this paper I will focus on Gouges's critical response to Rousseau's views on human happiness and the role of the theater in promoting or preventing human happiness. I will argue that Gouges's account of human progress offers a plausible and welcome feminine perspective on Rousseau's discourses. I will show that she does this by tying together two debates that, although they are apparently disparate, help show the role of virtue in human progress. These debates are on the state of nature and the place of the theater in developed societies. And there again I will show how Gouges engages with Rousseau's own arguments and reaches conclusions that are perhaps more satisfying than Rousseau's own, namely, that human progress is not only possible, but that it requires gender equality.

1. The State of Nature and Human Progress: A New Voice from the Late Eighteenth Century

Philosophers of the eighteenth century were deeply concerned with the possibility of human progress, and—at least in the second half of the century—this was closely meshed with the hope that a revolution and a new form of government would help this progress along. The possibility of progress was weighed against what was

² Joan Scott in her *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (1997) discusses Gouges as a feminist writer and concentrates on her various arguments for giving women rights of citizenship against a backdrop of Revolutionary sexism. Trouille in her *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment* (1997) writes about Gouges as a reader of Rousseau, but she focuses on Gouges's reaction to Rousseau's views on women in his *Emile* and 'Letter to D'Alembert'. Green, in her *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700–1800* (2015), discusses the apparent contradiction between Gouges's feminism and her perceived monarchism. Azoulay (2009), in 'The Absent Philosopher Prince', does focus on issues other than feminism and looks at Gouges's disagreement with Rousseau on a particular point of the social contract, namely, the supposed right of a sovereign to take a subject's life. None of these pieces discuss *Le Bonheur Primitif*, nor, to my knowledge at least, do any others.

understood of human nature and how it was enhanced or diminished by social and political interventions. A major figure in that debate was, of course, Rousseau, whose three *Discourses* and *Social Contract* (Rousseau 1997a, 1997b) rely on various accounts of the development of human beings within and outside of society. Another important contributor to that debate, who is perhaps less well known to Anglophone readers was the Marquis de Condorcet, whose last published work consisted of an introduction to an encyclopedic (and unfinished) project on the progress of humanity from prehistory to the French Revolution. A third, and even less known, contributor was Olympe de Gouges, whose arguments about human progress are the focus of this paper.

All those engaged in the debate on progress made some assumptions about primitive societies and about what life before the state and what they regarded as civilization must have been like. Rousseau, in particular, followed Hobbes in asserting that human beings could not live together peacefully unless they had some form of political organization to prevent them from harming each other. Rousseau differed from Hobbes in that he believed in a first primitive state where human beings lived as individuals and were happy and peaceful. But in a second phase of their primitive existence—when they gather into primitive societies—humans ‘grew bloodthirsty and cruel’ (Rousseau 1997a: 166) toward each other so that the prestate existence of human beings is just as unpleasant in Rousseau as it is in Hobbes, at least once human beings have gathered into groups. (It should be noted, parenthetically, that philosopher Karl Widerquist and anthropologist Grant S. McCall in their joint work *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy* (2017) argue that this negative assessment of primitive societies is implausible.)

Very few eighteenth-century philosophers questioned the idea that the state of nature was always the worse place to be. However, there were a few exceptions, including Olympe de Gouges, who argued that we had every reason to suspect that human beings in the state of nature were not only happy, but fully capable of virtue and socialization. In her 1789 short treatise *Le Bonheur Primitif, ou Rêveries Patriotiques* she takes on Rousseau and offers a new approach to the question of how human progress is helped or impeded by the advances of civilization.³ Unlike Rousseau, Hobbes, and others, she argues that early human beings lived happily in primitive societies and that by working together they were able to progress toward modernity. She agrees with Rousseau that science and the arts are not always a help to human progress and that in the late eighteenth century, the rich are spending time and money on the arts, becoming useless degenerates (Gouges 1789: 57), and the poor are placing too much trust in scientific learning, forgetting in the process useful skills that would benefit them and society (Gouges 1789: 52). Ultimately, Gouges believes that going back to the collaborative model of primitive society is the way to move toward a better existence.

Like many of her contemporaries, Gouges was a great admirer of Rousseau. And like many of them, she did not simply embrace his views and recycle them, but

³ Mary Astell (1704: xxxv) had previously criticized Hobbes’ s account, noting that in his state of nature, men sprung like mushrooms, fully formed. But Olympe de Gouges is the first woman philosopher to offer her own account of the state of nature.

engaged with them and noted when his misogyny led him to develop lopsided arguments. In particular, Gouges does for state of nature theory and the role of theatrical arts in human progress what Wollstonecraft (2014) did for the education of women. Rousseau's argument that primitive human societies must be violent is derived at least in part from his not taking women (and families) into account. His wholly negative view of the place of the theater in human progress is mostly due to his prejudices against women actors. This is a reflection of Rousseau's views on women's negative influence on society in general (see Pateman 1980). Gouges's rethinking of primitive societies on the one hand and of the theater on the other takes women's place in human societies as a starting point. That is, she looks at primitive societies as groups of families, rather than as gatherings of (male) individuals, and as groups that rely on collaboration for survival of their offspring. And she diagnoses the troubles facing the arts and especially the dramatic arts as caused at least in part by the exclusion of women and considers the creation of a theater led by women as a cure for society's ills.

Gouges's text is divided in five chapters followed by two unnumbered sections and the discussion of the author's correspondence with the editors of the *Journal de Paris* following their refusal to publish her and following her success with the *Journal General de France*. This is perhaps best interpreted as following the previous part: 'Vengeance, useful and humane', that is, the second of the two unnumbered chapters. I am reading the first of these two chapters, 'The Project for a Second French Theatre', as concluding the argument of the treatise as a whole. Two more chapters follow the 'Project', and they are perhaps best read as an afterword.

The first five chapters engage with Rousseau's first two treatises and discuss whether primitive human societies were happy and how that happiness has been lost. Like Rousseau in his first *Discourse* (1997a), Gouges displays a certain amount of skepticism as to whether education, culture, and science and the arts in general contribute to human happiness. But perhaps we should not go as far as Erica Harth (1992:222) who reads Gouges as an anti-intellectualist. What Gouges mostly objects to, both in this text and others, is the sort of education that is performed for the sake of social advancement rather than for the sake of happiness:

Learned men and lovers of the sciences feel sorry, they say, for these ignorant men who feared no danger, and who were ignorant of humanity itself. One should therefore suppose that nature had refused them everything, and drove them to the centuries of voracious ambition and unimpeded depravation in order to teach them how to be happy and enlightened. Ah! I must beg to differ and presume that man has too far extended his knowledge. He is now at the last period and by seeking too much, he has moved away from the truth, and only finds the kind of ignorance that tires his judgment and in the end mislays his reason. (Gouges 1789: 19–20)

Gouges spends some time explaining how it is the personal ambition of a few individuals who fall out of society and want to reintegrate with an advantage that

causes the loss of happiness. But unlike Rousseau, Gouges does not believe that artistic expression inevitably leads to such unhealthy competition. Primitive arts, for Gouges, are a necessary part of happiness. It is only when they are perverted by unhealthy social relations that they become problematic:

The arts, I know, enrich a kingdom; but when they are pushed to the last degree, they indubitably bring with them luxury, and luxury, sluggishness; thus luxury destroys all Nations. I appeal to those wise men to whom I submit these Dreams. (Gouges 1789: 57–58)

The part entitled ‘Project for a Second Theatre’ aims to show that it is in fact through the arts that primitive happiness is to be regained, by setting up a theater dedicated to artistic expression and not to pandering to the rich and powerful.

Le Bonheur Primitif thus starts with a discussion of the state of nature and primitive societies but ends with a proposal for theatrical reform. A strong connection between the beginning and the end is achieved through Gouges’s use of the concept of emulation. Gouges argues that what leads human progress is not, as others suggested before her, jealousy or competition, but emulation, a concept that has its roots in ancient virtue ethics and in particular in mimesis, the process of learning through imitation, which one finds in ancient accounts of politics, education, but also of music and tragedy. Through the latter, it is only natural that a link to the theatrical arts be drawn—especially as Gouges was herself a playwright. This is how Gouges proposes, at the end of her discourse, that real or beneficial human progress should be rekindled via theatrical reform.

2. Primitive Societies and Human Progress: Rousseau’s *Discourses* and Gouges’s *Le Bonheur Primitif*

In the introduction to *Le Bonheur Primitif* (Gouges 1789: 4), Gouges notes that she can see no evidence that human beings were ever bereft of intelligence, justice or humanity, even at the beginning. Human beings as we know them, she continues, are to some extent corrupt, but one can still see in them the original creation, or the original virtue of primitive human beings. She contrasts this view to Rousseau’s who states in his discourse *On the Origins of Inequality* (Rousseau 1997a) that the current state of human civilizations, though far from ideal, is the result of centuries of human suffering, that is, before arriving at its current state of civilization, life for human beings was much worse (Gouges 1789: 6). This is a surprising claim to make about a philosopher who is known for his love of ‘natural man’ and for his belief that so-called civilization is corrupting. And Gouges notes this contradiction. Rousseau, she says, sometimes reviles, sometimes praises natural man (Gouges 1789: 6).

In fact, in the second *Discourse*, Rousseau makes it quite clear that human happiness was lost with the first attempts at civilization:

As soon as men had begun to appreciate one another and the idea of consideration had taken shape in their mind, everyone claimed a right

to it, and one could no longer deprive anyone of it with impunity. . . . Vengeances became terrible and men blood-thirsty and cruel. This is precisely the stage reached by most of the Savage Peoples known to us; and it is for want of drawing adequate distinctions between ideas and noticing how far these Peoples already were from the first state of nature that so many hastened to conclude that man is naturally cruel and needs political order in order to be made gentle, whereas nothing is as gentle as he in his primitive state. (Rousseau 1997a: 166)

The reason for the apparent ambiguity in his treatment of ‘natural man’ is that Rousseau discusses two stages of the state of nature. The first is one where human beings live as solitary creatures, peacefully, and merely seeing to their simple needs in a world of plenty. In the second stage human beings meet and gather into primitive societies. These societies turn out to be as unpleasant as Hobbes’s state of nature. They are dominated by what Rousseau sees as the human drive to compete for glory, which leads men to fight each other and unable to collaborate toward a peaceful and happy life (the use of ‘men’ here is not archaic: women in both Hobbes and Rousseau are mostly left out of the discussion except when mating and reproduction are considered).

The idea that primitive human beings were either loners or that they turned violent when forced to live with one another was a not terribly plausible myth. (And indeed anthropologists have argued that it had no basis in fact but that primitive human beings were able to live quite peacefully in each other’s society [Widerquist and McCall 2017: 131–38].) Yet, there have been very few critics of this view of the origins of human nature, and most of those, such as Thomas Paine who claimed that not all were better off in civil societies than they would be in a state of nature, were ignored (Widerquist and McCall 2017: 4). What I want to argue here is that another view that ran counter to Rousseau’s (and Hobbes’s) was ignored, that of Olympe de Gouges, who argued that primitive societies were peaceful and happy. Not only is it noteworthy that such a view did exist amidst the more common ‘negative’ ones, but Gouges’s method for arriving at her conclusion is of itself interesting. She uses observations drawn from her own experience as well as from her perspective as a woman as a corrective to Rousseau’s male-centered perspective on the origins of humanity.

Rousseau’s state of nature, that is, the original state he proposes comes before the existence of primitive societies, suggests that original human nature was thoroughly individualistic. As Frederick Neuhouser points out, that Rousseau postulates a first, individualistic state of human nature does not mean that he regards human nature as fundamentally asocial—this is a postulate designed to isolate the ‘building blocks’ of human psychology (Neuhouser 2014: 52). But this postulate does influence the direction of inquiry by determining which way his second postulated state of development is going to go, that is, it will be a state in which inequality and unhappiness take hold of us. As a tool that leads eventually to a diagnosis of social ills, the inquiry is highly biased. Starting with a different origin story means that we can develop both a different account of human nature and a different program for social and political development.

Neuhouser suggests that a critique of Rousseau's individualistic view of primitive human beings is wrongheaded because it assumes that Rousseau is offering a historical account, and he is not doing that. But Neuhouser's response can be turned around. Seeking to isolate presocial human characteristics *is* wrong-headed. By doing so, Rousseau is making certain assumptions about the essence of humanity that he wants to discover. And one can criticize these assumptions by talking about the likelihood or unlikelihood of the pseudo-history Rousseau presents. One could, for instance, address his view that primitive human beings got together only briefly in order to reproduce and that the process of rearing children was short and minimal, and one could find that this view is plainly and evidently wrong. Human children are simply not physically capable of fending for themselves until they are several years old, and this is a sufficiently long period that bonds will be created between a child and a parent, especially if they live in isolation from other human beings and in an environment that is sufficiently congenial so that they have no pressing business to attend to. Moreover, unless their sexual encounters are very few and far between, it is likely that the female of the species will find herself with young children to look after through most of her adult life. Rousseau, it seems, is failing to imagine what primitive women and children's lives would be like in his first state of nature, drawing his conclusions only from the adult male of the species.

Gouges in *Le Bonheur Primitif* is to a large extent much in agreement with Rousseau as to both the original goodness of human beings and the negative effects of the progress of science on humanity. But unlike Rousseau, Gouges does not believe that primitive human societies were either unhappy or had already been corrupted away from their natural goodness. In the first two chapters of *Le Bonheur Primitif*, Gouges paints a picture of humanity capable of happiness and of a life that remains free from domination as long as it is a simple life in which everyone seeks to be useful to others. From the middle of chapter 3, however, she demonstrates the fragility of such happiness and its vulnerability to so-called progress in the sciences and the arts and to what passes for education, that is, 'learning', or the passing on of information without any goal other than of filling the heads of students and giving them (false) grounds for thinking themselves superior to others (Gouges uses the French '*instruction*'). This kind of education brings about luxury and feebleness of the kind that, Gouges says, caused the fall of ancient civilizations (1789: 57). Learning, she argues, undermines the division of labor necessary to the well-being of society and the expertise that goes with specialization, while at the same time creating a false sense of equality—the poor may fancy themselves equal to the rich when they have received a similar education, but the rich know to keep their advantage: 'We want to be equal, but with superiority, will say the richest, and the reformers of laws' (1789: 64).

As a playwright herself and as a woman sufficiently interested in the progress of science to attend Condorcet and La Harpe's lectures at the Lyceum, Gouges does not repudiate science and the arts. She merely cautions us that their pursuit does not always lead to happiness: 'I do not scorn the sciences, even though the oddity that is my star made me ignorant. It is abuse I condemn' (1789: 22).

Gouges's plea is not that we should go back to a primitive lifestyle, abandoning any cultural or scientific progress we may have made, but that we should not blindly trust in the ability of such progress to see to our natural needs. The lesson Gouges wishes to draw from her reflections is that rather than instruction, which for Gouges is a solitary pursuit to improve oneself by ingesting other people's formulas, it is emulation—a collaborative type of learning—that enriches human life and culture.

Gouges's argument in chapter 5 of *Le Bonheur* is that the way to regain the possibility of a form of happiness similar to that of primitive human beings is through a reform of the theatrical arts and of education. Her argument also contains a strong feminist element: this reform can only happen, she says, by giving women a greater role in the theaters.

Gouges's first step toward the conclusion that happiness can be regained is to show that there was such a thing as primitive happiness and that learning, as her contemporaries understood it, takes us away from it. Her second step (which I will turn to in the next section) is to show that we should look to the principle of emulation in order to help bring up children to be successful human beings. Step one and two together lead to her conclusion—which goes counter to Rousseau—that her contemporaries may hope to regain primitive happiness by putting in place a new theatrical program run by women.

Gouges claims that human beings, such as they are, without any sort of institutional background, whether social, legal, or religious, are capable of happiness. This is what she argued in the first two chapters of *Le Bonheur Primitif* and what sets her apart from Rousseau who thinks that primitive men and women in the state of nature are only peaceful because they live in isolation from each other and moreover are not quite human yet and therefore not capable of happiness as we understand it. For Gouges, the capacity to live and work together, which is the prerequisite of human happiness, is present in human beings from the beginning and is not the result of socialization.

Second, Gouges argues that learning, more often than not, presents an obstacle to happiness because it encourages luxury and discourages natural development. Educated peasants, she says, leave their villages to go to the city and not only deplete the countryside but end up living demeaning lives as lowly servants and thieves. Artisans who wish their sons to be educated like lords, she says, not only lose their fortune paying for it, but ensure that their sons lack the specialization that would naturally have enabled them to take up the family trade. Ultimately, they end up in a competition with those who are wealthier, a competition they cannot win (1789: 64).

How does Gouges argue for these two claims? In both cases, Gouges appeals to her own experience in order to support her point, in particular, to her experience as an uneducated woman and as a child brought up in the simplest possible way, without the pomp and circumstance of city life or the constant assistance of servants and responsible adults.

Discussions of the state of nature and primitive human societies do not depend in the same way on observable fact. But they depend on such facts partly, and in particular they depend on claims about facts that could not be verified by

eighteenth-century philosophers but that can be studied now by archaeologists. Rousseau's claims, for instance, depend partly on observable fact because some of his claims are about contemporary societies, that is, the 'Savage Peoples known to us' (Rousseau 1997a: 166). This is hardly, however, what one might call evidence-based reasoning. Rousseau has no firsthand knowledge of the tribes he talks about (and indeed, no name or geographical location!), and if he had had such experience, it would no doubt be biased by the then common assumption that any society different from one's own was necessarily inferior (Widerquist and McCall 2017: 131).

Although Rousseau had not travelled to meet the 'primitive' people he assumed to be savages, he was well-read in travel literature—and indeed discusses it in note 10 of the *Second Discourse* (1997a: 204–11)—and arguably, even when more became known about people who lived differently, this did not give European writers much more objectivity. More was known about the peoples of the world by the time Gouges wrote *Le Bonheur Primitif* than when Rousseau wrote his *Second Discourse*. Bougainville, in his *Voyage Autour de Monde* (1771) offered a utopian account of the people of Tahiti, which led to popular opinion embracing the idea that life outside 'civilization' was happier than within, and at the same time it offered those who wondered what it was like to live in this way a more solid account to build their reflections on.

Given this lack of evidence and the impossibility for Gouges to appeal to firsthand experience or personal observation when attempting to refute Rousseau, in what sense can she claim a privileged perspective? There are two answers to this question. First, Gouges can claim to have better insight into what primitive life might have been like because her own early life had much in common with what was unanimously supposed by eighteenth-century writers to have been true for primitive society, that is, relative ignorance and a life led mostly outdoors and focused on fulfilling basic needs, such as getting food and shelter. Gouges spends time explaining the limits of her own ignorance and gives us some detail of what her upbringing was like before she sets herself up as an advocate for primitive societies.

Second, it is because she is a woman that Gouges believes the perspective from which she infers knowledge about primitive societies is somewhat privileged. While eighteenth-century state of nature theorists focus on the warmongering aspects of their fictional subjects and look upon the primitive man as exactly that, a man, with women being thrown in for good measure and to satisfy reproductive needs, Gouges imagines what everyday life in a primitive society might have been. And women's experience, she is right to surmise, constituted a large part (half!) of that. Thus, what she is doing by positioning herself as a female investigator of primitive society is not so much claiming a privileged standpoint as it is redressing an epistemic bias. (The epistemic bias in question is by now well documented, most famously by archaeologists Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector who argue in their 'Archaeology and the Study of Gender' that the 'presentist' tendency to project our ideologies into the past we study includes gender ideology [Conkey and Spector 1984].)

In what follows I will show how Gouges uses her own experience as an uneducated woman to make guesses about primitive societies that turn out to be quite different from Rousseau's own.

In *Le Bonheur Primitif*, Gouges emphasizes her own lack of formal learning and uses it as evidence that one can be a useful and influential member of society without having received such an education. Whereas reports of her illiteracy were almost certainly exaggerated, it is true that she had received only a basic education as a girl; that is, she could read, add, and sew (and presumably had some skill in butchery, the family trade) (Blanc 2014: 26). Of course, she was, to some extent educated—she had spent ten years in Paris, attending the theater and salons so that she was both cultured and conversant with the intellectual debates of her time. One fact frequently brought forward in support of her illiteracy (both by her contemporaries and historians) was that she had to dictate her pieces to a secretary.⁴ While she did find the physical task of writing difficult, as she had not been taught well, we know, for instance, that she corrected her own proofs.⁵

Despite or perhaps because of the publicity surrounding her lack of learning, in her writings, Gouges made a great deal of this, claiming that her authority came from nature, not learning. One such piece is the preface, addressed to women, of the first volume of her collected works (printed at her own expense in 1788). This preface, together with parts of the first text in the volume, the disguised autobiographical novel *Madame de Valmont*, and the preface to her play the *Unexpected Marriage of Cherubino*, encourage women to speak out despite their inferior education and show that natural eloquence is often superior to one born out of years of study.

Perhaps one day I will receive, without any effort on my part, the respect that is granted to works arisen from the hands of Nature. I can call myself one of its rare creations—everything I have comes from her; I have had no other tutor: and all my philosophical reflections cannot undo the strongly rooted imperfections that came with such an education.

...

I know no other constraint than the weaknesses of nature that humanity can only vanquish through effort. And she whose pride can tame her passions can properly call herself a Strong Woman (*Femme Forte*).
(Gouges 1788: 7–8)

What transpires from those extracts, in addition to a sense that Gouges is consciously building up her reputation as someone who is, if not illiterate, at least poorly educated, is a particular take on education. Gouges believed that a good

⁴ Blanc (2014: 76) relates the following anecdote. Travelling to Paris from Passy, Gouges overheard two men talking about her and saying that she could not write. She asked whether they knew the author in question well, and one said he did, adding that he knew for a fact that she did not even dictate her own words, but learned those of others by heart.

⁵ In an afterword to her *Déclaration des droits de la femme* Gouges describes a morning trip to Paris to her printer's on the Rue Christine to work on her proofs, (2014:22). In any case, employing a secretary was no more a mark of illiteracy then than it is now. Many writers in the late eighteenth century, including Condorcet, employed secretaries. The need for a quick publication—crucial in times of political change—meant that a clean copy had to be produced immediately, and only trained writers could do that easily.

education requires, more than ‘instruction’, the building of one’s character, in particular, the strengthening of it through mastery of the passions. The image of herself she is putting forward is not that of an ‘unspoiled’ or ‘undeveloped’ child of nature, such as perhaps Rousseau’s savages were, but that of a strong woman, whose efforts to construct and strengthen her abilities have not been hampered by the prejudices of a fashionable education.⁶

One of Rousseau’s strong points, as far as Gouges was concerned, was his belief in the superiority of the ‘man of nature’ over the ‘man of learning’ (Gouges 1789: 2). Rousseau indeed believed that nature was the best tutor and had argued for this in his widely popular *Emile*. Negative education, such as Rousseau promoted, allows a child to develop at his or her own rhythm, following the natural development of his or her capacities and interests, and allowing the child to be in charge of his or her own education. This belief is very much also Gouges’s view:

Young people should only be instructed when they have begun to develop their understanding, their taste, their inclinations: those born to become great men would become it without exhausting their organs or their teachers. I dare to believe that at all times, men have gotten lost when they strayed too far from nature. (1789: 56)

Rousseau’s skepticism as to the benefits of formal education is matched in Gouges’s case by the experience of the noneducated life. What Gouges brings to the debate by discussing her own experience is the proposition that as an uneducated woman, she is perhaps in a better position than Rousseau was to guess at what the lives of primitive human beings might have been.

Jean-Jacques was too enlightened for his genius not to take him too far, and it may be that which prevented him from grasping the true character of man in primitive times. But I, because I feel this first ignorance, and I am both in and out of place in this enlightened century, may well have truer opinions than his. (1789: 6)

More specifically, Gouges brings her lack of formal education to play in her dialogue with Rousseau by describing her experience of a simple, free, and outdoor upbringing. In *Le Bonheur Primitif*, she appeals to elements in her own experience as a child in Provence to speculate on the daily lives of the people Rousseau calls ‘savages’. She surmises, for example, that the way in which the first breads were made may have been similar to how she was making bread as a child, laying the dough on hot ashes, and she remembers how pleasant that experience was (1789: 19). This, she claims, gives her an insight into the lived experience of primitive people. And the fact that, unlike her better-off contemporaries, she did not receive much of an education as a child strikes her as putting her own

⁶ See Green (2014: 227) on the influence of Rousseau’s educational writings on Gouges’s own work. But Gouges does not portray herself as a female *Emile*, and indeed she does not mention this or any of his work on education.

experience of moral and intellectual development on a par with that of primitive human beings. The point of appealing to her own experience is then to suggest that Rousseau is wrong in his belief that primitive human beings were not moral or social beings.

Reliance on personal experience is not perhaps the best argument. (Rousseau, of course, does rely on such evidence, in his *Confessions* [2000] and in *Emile* [2009], drawing conclusions about human nature from his own personal observation of isolated cases. This is perhaps an example of how our perception of what count as sound and unsound philosophical tools is gendered.) Gouges, however, was not content with the anecdotal nature of such evidence. She recommended that a (rather dubious) scientific experiment be conducted that would prove that human beings can develop morally and intellectually simply by following their nature. She suggested that a fertile and pleasant space should be walled off from the rest of the country and populated by mute men and women who would be in charge of bringing up orphaned babies. This would reproduce, she says, the ‘emulation’ of the first human beings and demonstrate her thesis that these were in fact not ‘savages’ but capable of normal human behavior. (A similar experiment was conducted by King James IV of Scotland in 1493. The aim of the experiment, which saw two babies sent to live on a island with a mute woman, was to show that left to their own devices, human beings would learn the pre-Babel God-given language.)

What Gouges objected to in Rousseau’s account is not so much his lack of personal experience as the conclusions he draws about the nature of primitive human beings. In his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (Rousseau 1997a), Rousseau in turns glorifies and sometimes vilifies the natural man: ‘Rousseau does not distinguish, for several centuries, those men from animals’ (Gouges 1789: 31). For Rousseau, no matter how ‘noble’ they are primitive men are ‘savages’ until they are socialized. But for Gouges, they are not: they are capable of virtue, language, social living, monogamous and family love, and even religion.

Can we refuse to admit that this carefree childhood is the very image of the Happiness of the first men? Learned men and lovers of the sciences feel sorry, they say, for these ignorant men who feared no danger, and who were ignorant of humanity itself. One should therefore suppose that nature had refused them everything, and drove them to the centuries of voracious ambition and unimpeded depravation in order to teach them how to be happy and enlightened. Ah! I must beg to differ and presume that man has too far extended his knowledge. He is now at the last period and by seeking too much, he has moved away from the truth, and only finds the kind of ignorance that tires his judgment and in the end mislays his reason. (Gouges 1789: 19–20)

By emphasizing this experience, Gouges reminds the reader that primitive human beings had to engage in the sort of social interactions needed for survival and that these interactions required peacefulness and might even have involved a certain degree of enjoyment. Cooking bread takes time and effort. It is not the sort of activity that can be done furtively while running from an enemy, nor is it the sort

of thing that is best done alone or just for oneself—at the very least children must be fed! Thus, the picture that her commonsense remarks drawn from her own experience present is one of a peaceful society, people working together in comparative happiness to satisfy their needs.

3. Competition versus Emulation: And Why the Theater Matters

Like Hobbes, Rousseau blamed what he perceived as the violence inherent in early human societies on competition. But whereas for Hobbes competition is at least in part the result of the scarcity of resources, for Rousseau, it arises as soon as human beings come into contact with each other and are in a position to compare each other's abilities. This manifests itself, in particular, in the performing arts:

Singing and dancing, the true offspring of love and leisure, became the amusement, or rather the occupation, of men and women thus assembled together with nothing else to do. Each one began to consider the rest, and to wish to be considered in turn; and thus a value came to be attached to public esteem. Whoever sang or danced best, whoever was the handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous, or the most eloquent, came to be of most consideration; and this was the first step towards inequality, and at the same time towards vice. (1997a: 166)

Later on in his 'Letter to D'Alembert', in which he responds to the latter's *Encyclopaedia* (1757) entry on Geneva that it would be a good thing for Geneva to have a national theater, Rousseau again argues that the performing arts are a source of showing off and of competition. Actors themselves, especially women, he says, are little more than prostitutes, advertising their wares to the paying public. Although he agrees that for a thoroughly depraved people (such as the Parisians) the theater can act as a palliative (it entertains people and keeps them from committing worse crimes), in a virtuous city it can only bring harm. If Plato banned Homer from his Republic, Rousseau exclaims, why should Genevans welcome Molière in theirs (Rousseau 1968: 116)?

We saw that Gouges rejects Rousseau's claim that primitive human beings were not moral and social beings. At the very least, they must have had the beginnings of a moral character, one that could be developed through continued socializing and later hindered by too much knowledge. But what does she make of his account of the role of competition in early societies? Emulation rather than competition is for Gouges the source of progress and human development. It is the desire to do as well as or better than others but without necessarily a desire to outdo the other. Emulation in that sense means competition but not rivalry—the two are clearly distinguished in Abbé Roubaud's 1786 *Dictionary of Synonyms* (85–89).

Gouges first introduces the concept in her description of the first people's lives, which she makes via the speech of an elder about to die:

There are a hundred of you. In less than a century, there will be a thousand. The earth is large enough to fulfill your needs; but you must

carefully help Nature. You must cultivate the earth, and as you make discoveries, you will see emulation spreading among you. Let your goods be held in common, your portions be equal, your clothes and houses the same, your habits simple and sweet. . . . All men must contribute to the public good without distinction, without any exemption whatsoever except infirmity or sickness. Nursing women will be exempt from public works. (1789: 13–14)

Emulation will lead to the acquisition and perfection of skills, to the development of new techniques, and more important, to collaboration toward a common goal. When Gouges proposed that her theories be proved through an experiment in which mute adults would bring up orphaned children in complete isolation from the rest of the world, she assumed that this would demonstrate the process through which emulation helps societies develop. She claimed that the children's discovery that they have a voice and can use it to communicate whereas their carers cannot would replicate the sense of progress that the invention of language gave primitive people. This, she says, would set in motion progress through emulation:

I am persuaded that as soon as fifteen years have passed, we will begin to make discoveries about those people, living apart from civilized society; very useful discoveries, I say. We would have to let them be free in their inclinations as well as in their emulation, leaving nature to act entirely, and able to recognize what she would create nowadays. (1789: 33)

For Gouges it seems emulation, more than competition, means working together toward the same goal, developing one's own capacities to help others, and specializing according to one's particular talents. Earlier she remarks that her period's mania for the sciences has made it so that everyone, whether lackey or greengrocer, wants to be a philosopher: Everyone, she says, has adopted the same end, the same specialization, without any thought as to how they might best benefit others (1789: 22). Emulation is not that, for Gouges. It is not to compete with others so as to become better at what is currently more desirable for whatever reason, but it is to follow the example of others in an effort to better oneself in a way that will be beneficial for the whole community.

Emulation in late eighteenth-century France was a popular and contested concept. Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre, a disciple of Rousseau who believed in the ultimate goodness of human nature, thought that emulation was always harmful because it was in fact a sort of a competition that engendered jealousy and all sorts of other social ills (Bernardin de St Pierre 1789: 199, 204). But others disagreed and believed, following Cicero, that emulation was nothing more than the imitation of virtue.⁷

⁷ 'Emulation is used in two senses, and denotes both a merit and a fault. For the imitation of virtue is called "emulation" (with this we have no concern, it being praiseworthy), and the name is also given to the grief felt by the one who has failed to obtain what he had desired and another possesses' (Cicero 1927: IV, 17). For accounts drawn from Cicero, see Roubaud (1786: 85–89) and Marmontel (1823: 99).

Given Cicero's propensity to recycle Aristotle, we might surmise that he takes 'emulation' here to mean the same thing as 'mimesis', which is the word Aristotle uses when he talks about the way one learns to be virtuous by imitating others. Mimesis for Aristotle (2013) is an essential part of moral development and of learning in general. Children take the first steps toward virtuous habituation by engaging in mimesis, which comes naturally to them. Artists, in turn, perform a sort of mimesis in reverse, using their own already formed character to produce a model that may guide the mimetic process of the audience (for Aristotle's discussion of mimesis, see *Poetics* [2013: ch. 4, 14 48b4-10]; see also Fosshem [2006: 112]).

Whereas Gouges's account of emulation and its place in the theater and in the acquisition of virtue has sound credentials, Rousseau's use of the same concepts is more irreverent. We saw already that for him competition is not emulation; it is not tied to the desire to improve one's own virtues, but instead to the desire to be seen as better than everyone else. But his distance from ancient moral psychology is even more striking with respect to his account of the theater. Although Rousseau recognizes the place of mimesis in the theater, he is highly skeptical of its powers beyond entertainment: 'Let no one then attribute to the theatre the power to change sentiments or morals [manners] which it can only follow or embellish. An author who would brave the general taste would soon write for himself alone' (1968: 19).

Theater can imitate, but only superficially, only what it sees, and if it wants to be successful, it should imitate only the traits that the public admires in itself. This means, according to Rousseau, that the theater can play no pedagogical or improving role. (One should note the incongruity of Rousseau believing this, given that his immense popularity was grounded at least in part in his propensity to show off his readers' bad habits.) This is captured by Victor Gourevitch, who summarizes Rousseau's stance on the theater thus:

We leave [the theatre] having wept at the sham suffering of imaginary characters, satisfied with ourselves at this proof of our humanity, and purged, if at all, of any urge to alleviate the real suffering around us. (Gourevitch 1972: 744)

Gourevitch's take really does highlight Rousseau's disdain for the then fashionable reading of Aristotle's concept of catharsis in the *Poetics* (2013) as a method for the moral education of citizens. This was Racine's interpretation, and through her biological father, who was a close friend and collaborator of Racine's son, it was apparently also Gouges's interpretation. Le Franc Pompignan, Gouges's supposed father, was convinced that good theater had to be improving at the same time as it entertained (see his 'Lettre à M. Racine' [1751] in which he discusses the ways in which the theater can fail or succeed in supporting public morality through the choice of plot, language, and the character of the actors). Gouges, it seems, chose an Aristotelian reading of the theater, which allowed her to develop an account of the role of theater in human progress through emulation, or mimesis, that is, in its proper sense as the imitation of virtue for the purpose of

improvement. Rousseau, on the other hand, chose a rather crude Platonic approach to theatrical mimesis: what the arts imitate can only be superficial, and the theater has therefore no educational value and can even be harmful to a public that is not already thoroughly depraved. This distrust of imitation carries through to his account of human relations as it is by observing dancing that human beings first develop the spirit of competition that, according to him, leads to the inability to live peacefully in society.

The linking of human progress to aesthetics and to tragedy in particular is clearly not accidental in Gouges's work, but the result of a conscious realization that the same concept is at work in human development and the arts. This is made clear in the penultimate chapter of her *Bonheur Primitif* concerning the implementation of healthy emulation, that is, the kind of emulation that moved primitive people into modern life through theatrical reform. This is the topic of the next section.

4. Happiness Regained: A Project for Theatrical Reform

Perhaps the main reason for Rousseau's distrust of the theater, alongside his belief that plays can imitate only superficially and lack the capacity to effect any deep or lasting improvement in the spectator, is the part that women play in the theater. Carole Pateman (1980) offered the following analysis of the interplay between Rousseau's views on the theater and his extreme sexism. Acting in a play or going to see a play give free rein to the 'disorder of women', that is, to their tendency to let their sexual passions go unchecked. Women, for Rousseau, are to a much greater extent than men determined by their biology, and a large part of that, for Rousseau, is that natural woman is permanently 'in heat' and has to exercise very strict control over herself in order to be fit for life in civil society. The theater is a way of letting go of this control: women act out or see acted out their worst passions, and they turn into sexual predators that men have no control over (Pateman 1980: 25).

The participation of women is what makes the theater truly dangerous in Rousseau's view. Gouges's approach is almost diametrically opposed to this: What is wrong with the theater, she argues, is that women do not play a strong enough role in it. And to the extent that they do participate, as actresses or spectators, their actions are determined by the male expectation that actresses should be loose women, not by their own moral decisions.

In the preceding two sections, we saw that Gouges defended both the claim that education can actually have a negative effect on human happiness and that this goes too far for the sciences and the arts when they are part of such an educational framework. From this, Gouges draws her first conclusion. There is an excess of luxury, both in the dispensation of education, with no emphasis being placed on useful skills and too much on ornamental ones, and in entertainment, with the rich occupying large chunks of their times in games, prostitution, and going to the theater where they are concerned more with the good looks of the actors and actresses than with the quality of the plays staged (1789: 68).

Gouges then notes an apparently unrelated problem: Women, she says, are underutilized. They have a potential to be useful for society that is not taken into

account so that instead of aiding the progress of society, they slow it down. (This may read as presaging Wollstonecraft's comment in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [2014], written three years after *Le Bonheur Primitif*: 'Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue' [2014: 22]. Note, however, that Gouges does not blame women's lack of education, but their lack of participation.) At the same time, she says, this constitutes an injustice against women:

Should not women, for example, . . . receive some marks of encouragement, when by their merit and honor they elevate their sex? Don't women make up half of society? And unfortunately their lack of emulation contributes to the ruin of the other half. (1789: 68)

But women, she says, can be useful, and one way in which she knows, from her own experience, that they can be so is through writing plays that are artistically valuable and suitable in terms of content, that is, unlikely to lead spectators to further deprivation.

Thus, she concludes, not only should the theatrical arts be reformed, but women writers ought to be a large part of the solution. What she proposes then is a new, state-funded theatrical group called 'The National Theater, or the Women's Theater', a proposal she submits to the king of France and his ministers for their approval (1789: 71).

This project, she assures us, will not only make France a more peaceful, better ordered nation, but it will also help women to be freed from injustice and to become useful:

A great number of well-born women are ruined because men, who have seized everything for themselves have prevented women from elevating themselves, and obtaining for themselves useful and lasting resources. Why should my sex not one day be rescued from this thoughtlessness to which their lack of emulation exposes them? Women have always written. They have been allowed to contend with men in the theatrical profession. But they would need proof of greater encouragement. Such is my plan. (1789: 72)

What follows this pronouncement is a practical proposal for the creation of the new theater, with a school for actors attached to it and a team of women playwrights producing suitable works. The proposal is based on a number of social observations. First, the French theater, such as it is in 1789, is clearly a problem. The French people presenting the *doléances* to the king at the meeting of the Estates are agreed that the propensity of the rich to spend their time going to see plays and the kinds of entertainment available are not liable to nurture virtue in citizens (Gouges 1789: 67–68). Those entertainments are frivolous, empty of content, and sometimes downright immoral. They also encourage prejudice. This is for the following reason. For a play to be performed it has to be accepted by the

all-powerful company of actors who then decides when, how often, and in what way it will be performed. In order to persuade actors to take on a play, many authors, Gouges tells us, have to compromise their artistic and moral integrity. Those authors who refuse to give in to the actors' capricious demands do not have their plays staged. Some of these authors, Gouges says, are women, and all would benefit from a theatrical outlet that was not dominated by actors and that produced plays of a better quality.

Gouges's second observation is that of the existence of a social class that both values education and generally aims to provide its children with a good education but often cannot afford to do so. Gouges proposes that from among the children of this class twelve five-year-olds of each sex should be accepted in the theater every year and be educated in all the arts for ten years. After that, they should be free to choose a career in the theater or elsewhere. Those who choose to stay in the theater will then act for ten years; then they will retire with a pension that will enable them to take up a respectable place in society and contribute usefully to the well-being of that society (1789: 75).

Because she believes that emulation enables human progress through the arts and sciences, Gouges clearly disagrees with Rousseau's *First Discourse* (1997a). And in her belief that human nature, independent of socialization, is inherently capable of happiness and moral development, she disagrees with the *Second Discourse* (1997a). But more importantly, it is her concrete proposal for the reform of society through theater and the promotion of women writers that distinguishes her work from Rousseau's own reflections on primitive societies and human progress. For her, human progress is eminently possible, and it requires gender equality.

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