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A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki  
Dana Professor of Theater, Bates College

# The Revolutionists

By Lauren Gunderson

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# *The Revolutionists*

By Lauren Gunderson

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**THE AUTHOR.** Lauren Gunderson writes the following about herself online:

Lauren M. Gunderson is the most produced living playwright in America of 2016, the winner of the Lanford Wilson Award and the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award, a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and John Gassner Award for Playwriting, and a recipient of the Mellon Foundation's 3-Year Residency with Marin Theatre Company. She studied Southern Literature and Drama at Emory University, and Dramatic Writing at NYU's Tisch School where she was a Reynolds Fellow in Social Entrepreneurship. Her work has been commissioned, produced and developed at companies across the US including South Coast Rep (*Emilie, Silent Sky*), The Kennedy Center (*The Amazing Adventures of Dr. Wonderful And Her Dog!*), The O'Neill, The Denver Center, San Francisco Playhouse, Marin Theatre, Synchronicity, Olney Theatre, Berkeley Rep, Shotgun Players, TheatreWorks, Crowded Fire and more. She co-authored *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* with Margot Melcon. Her work is published at Playscripts (*I and You, Exit Pursued By A Bear, The Taming, and Toil And Trouble*), Dramatists (*Silent Sky, Bauer, Miss Bennet*) and Samuel French (*Emilie*).

**THE SETTING.** The play takes place in the mind of its main character, Olympe de Gouges. This enables it to move fluidly, like thoughts, between private and public spaces—from Olympe's study, to a Parisian courtroom, to the Place de la Revolution, where Olympe was guillotined in November, 1793.

These spaces capture the essence of the play's historical environment: the months just before and during the period of the French Revolution known as The Reign of Terror. This was a time, the author tells us, "*of unrest in Paris—crisis—danger—threat.*" A time when private life was constantly menaced by the furies of the public world.

Three of the characters in the play—real-life historical personages—were guillotined during that epidemic of political violence. Charlotte Corday was executed in July, 1793 for the murder of radical propagandist, Jean-Paul Marat; Marie Antoinette, the widow of beheaded King Louis XVI, was put to death in October 1793, essentially for having been queen, and thus, by definition, an enemy of the

Revolution; and Olympe de Gouges was sent to the guillotine in large part because of her vehement opposition to the Revolution's turn to terror.

The bloodletting would continue until July, 1794, when The Terror's most zealous proponent, Maximilien Robespierre, was himself beheaded, a victim of his own revolutionary extremism. During The Terror's eleven violent months, some 17,000 enemies of the Revolution were executed, and several thousands more were summarily put to death while being held as prisoners of the state.

Although the play visits the courtroom and the Place de la Revolution several times, it is in the private setting—Olympe's study—that most of the action occurs. The characters of the drama, as Olympe imagines them, are drawn to this nursery of artistic creativity and moral sanity, seeking in her—a dramatist and pamphleteer—someone who will give voice to their social, political, and personal beliefs. Olympe's study provides a shelter from the madness of Paris during The Terror, but it fails ultimately as a place of refuge, since all the historical characters drawn to it die on the guillotine.

**THE PLOT.** The play begins in the dark. The audience hears the “*hum of*” a song that will recur throughout the performance, accompanied by “*The sound of a scared breath. . . . It's our breath—we are trying to steady our breath.*” Then a sharp white light reveals “*the engorging shadow of. . . A Guillotine, its blade rising to the top. A gasp.*” And with that sound of fear, we are suddenly in Olympe's study, where she stands at her desk, talking to herself about a new play she is beginning to write.

“Well that's not a way to start a comedy,” she says, referring to the guillotine that has just been looming over the stage. Instead of dwelling on the violence dominating the political arena, she wants her play to be “the voice of this revolution, but not the hyperbolic, angry-yelly kind. I will write the wise and witty kind that . . . says to the held breath of a rapt audience . . . ‘Justice, equality, true freedom? That's our future. If we make it for ourselves.’”

At this point Marianne, described by the author as a “badass black woman,” enters. She is the only one of the play's four main characters who is not based on a real historical figure. Instead, “Marianne” is the name the French have given to an imaginary female who personifies the nation, the symbol of France itself—something like America's Uncle Sam, or England's John Bull.

Ironically, Marianne—the emblem of France—is presented as a foreigner, a native of San Domingue, a French colony in the Caribbean that would gain its independence in 1804 and rename itself “Haiti.” As a further irony, Marianne is in Paris as a spy, working on behalf of an ongoing rebellion in her country against French-imposed slavery, an uprising that would end successfully in 1793, the year of the play's action.

She has come to visit Olympe to check up on the playwright's progress on her new work. She prods and teases Olympe, luring her into grandiose declarations about how her writing will “make a better world for everyone” by creating “hope for a new nation of freedom and peace.” Her play, Olympe declares, might be “about *women* showing the boys how revolutions are done,” a “passionate sociopolitical comedy about women's rights,” as a result of which, “we shall all gather as one community, to experience our collective stories. . . .”

After listening for a while, Marianne chides Olympe for having “too many ideas, too much in your head.” She advises her, instead, to, “Calm down. Listen to yourself. What does your heart need to say?” For her part, Marianne wants to lay aside the “grand dramas” and focus instead “on the intimate ones that matter.” Which brings her to what’s most important: “Women’s agency over their own lives.”

Maybe, Marianne suggests, “you don’t need to dress your ideas in drama. . . . Why don’t you write a manifesto.” Olympe is struck by the notion, and imagines producing something like Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. (As a matter of fact, the real-life Olympe de Gouges composed “The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen” in 1791, a document closely modeled on “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” which was the source of many of the ideas of the French Revolution.)

As Olympe ponders this possibility, there is a loud knocking on her door, followed by the entrance of Charlotte Corday. She is looking for a writer who can supply her with the appropriate words to accompany the dramatic deed she is about to commit: murder.

Olympe, however, informs Charlotte that she is no longer in the drama business, but has now decided to write declarations instead. However, when she learns the identity of Corday’s intended victim— Jean-Paul Marat, partisan of extreme terror—her interest in theater immediately returns, and she decides she needs to write a play about Charlotte. The impatient assassin declares that she has no time for full-length literary works. She needs a single, murder-worthy line and she needs it now.

There develops a dispute among Marianne, Charlotte, and Olympe about the relationship between art and revolution. Charlotte denounces art as fakery that is “*useless to real human beings trying to fix the goddamn world.*” Fictional, yes, Olympe responds, but “not fake. The beating hearts in front of you are real. The gathering of people, the time spent is real.”

But this cuts no ice with Charlotte, who dismisses the moral relevance of those beating hearts as long as “THE REIGN OF TERROR TAKES OUR HEADS. . . . The revolution is not for the people any more, it’s for the zealots. They are taking over, and they are cruel, and you want to tell me a story?”

Marianne intervenes in defense of Olympe: “She is risking everything for her art. . . . She holds fiction like you hold that blade and I bet her weapon is sharper.”

A moment later, another fugitive from The Terror, enters: Marie Antoinette, “*looking lovely and startled.*” She announces, “Marie enters,” showing us that playing the role of queen has accustomed her to being “on stage.”

Seeing her life as a kind of extended play, she emphatically dislikes the turn the plot has taken. “We used to like me,” she laments, “the whole country would celebrate my birthday. How did it all turn into this rudeness and . . . murder.” So, she has come to Olympe for “a rewrite.”

Initially she meets with little sympathy, Marianne being especially harsh on the baffled queen. She reminds Marie of the oppressive conditions the French have created in San Domingue, where slaves are dying in “the sticky heat of your greed,” while harvesting sugar for French desserts.

Marie doesn’t dispute the truthfulness of Marianne’s indictment; she merely pleads helplessness in the face of all the injustice. “No one listens to me,” she explains, “unless I say something stupid.”

In the middle of this political wrangle, Olympe has another dramatic inspiration. “WAIT. Wait. I’ve got it. This is it. This is *it*. THE QUEEN CAN BE IN THE PLAY.”

This provokes a cascade of objections. Marianne ratchets up her denunciations of the French monarchy, while Charlotte expresses her aversion to sharing space in *her* play with someone as politically disreputable as Marie. But Olympe persists, arguing that “our voices deserve the stage. . . . We’re all of us more alike than we are different. . . . This is our time to be known, and heard. . . .”

Charlotte interrupts Olympe’s effusions by reminding herself that she has to go off and kill a man. When Marie learns that that man is Marat, she enthusiastically endorses the project, and the excited discussion of the act and its probable consequence—execution—leads to a collective contemplation of the way the guillotine not only kills but also degrades its victims.

Nonetheless, Charlotte is determined to carry on—even without a final line from the pen of Olympe. As the assassin exits, headed for her fateful interview with Marat, Marianne decides to accompany her, if only to be able to write about the event in one of her letters to her husband back home in San Domingue.

Left alone with Marie, Olympe has another change of heart, and drops her idea for a new play, deciding that she will work on her declaration of women’s rights instead, not only writing it but also proclaiming it personally before the National Assembly. Marie advises against this plan, seeing trouble ahead should Olympe actually carry it out.

This leads to a change of focus on stage, with Charlotte and Olympe each spotlighted, the former about to murder Marat, the latter addressing the National Assembly. Marianne then steps forward, reading a letter to her absent husband. Meanwhile, Marie ponders the meaning of the word “revolution” which literally means, “the turning about of an object on a central axis thereby landing its journeyman in the same exact spot whereon they started.” Isn’t that just a “waste of *everyone’s* time,” she wonders.

Another transition leads us to a scene between Marie and Marianne. Despite the latter’s reluctance, she finds herself becoming friends with the deposed queen, who seems to grow in wit and insight during the conversation, becoming “*oddly profound*.” “I fear,” she says, “we shall not know the rightness of our revolutions nor the heroes of our stories for generations to come.”

As Marie plays with her ribbons—reminders of the elegant life she no longer lives—they pass to an exchange of personal information, discussing husbands and children. As they disclose family details, the queen continues to grow more human and likeable in the revolutionary’s eyes. Marianne reveals that she and her husband have each written a “final letter” to the other, to be sent when they meet death. Moved by this revelation of the threat of disaster hanging over Marianne’s life, Marie gives the only gift she can: some of the ribbons she cherishes.

At this point Olympe returns from her “little solo show” before the National Assembly, where “*hundreds of men booed me as I spoke*.” She is demoralized by their reaction, declaring that changing the world itself would be easier than altering the attitudes towards women of her supposedly revolutionary countrymen.

Marie changes the subject, revealing that Marianne is worried for the safety of her husband. But Olympe dismisses her concern, assuring her that he must be safe, since he has not sent his “final letter.”

Instead, she considers the possibility of following Charlotte's example by killing her own adversaries. This leads Marianne to suggest they visit Charlotte in prison, in part because she needs Olympe to tell her story. But Olympe, spooked by the violent reaction to her declaration in the National Assembly, rejects the idea, preferring to write about Corday from the safety of her home. She writes a few words for Charlotte on a piece of paper, which she gives to Marianne, who exits with a taunt: "for a dramatist you seem awfully scared of drama."

The next scene takes place in prison, with Marianne visiting Charlotte. They discuss Olympe's appearance at the National Assembly, the murder of Marat, Charlotte's reputation as the "Angel of Assassins," and whether her deed will have any positive results. Marianne promises to attend Charlotte's trial, and gives her the paper bearing Olympe's words. We hear the sound of "*approaching men unblocking steel doors. They're coming for her.*" As the play's first act draws to a close, we see each of its four characters facing a menacing future. Charlotte prepares to be led to trial; Olympe holds her pen, "*trying to tame her ideas;*" Marianne holds her final letter to her husband; and Marie "*caresses her ribbons.*"

The second act begins shortly after the end of the first. Olympe is "*in a rush, writing in her study with furious inspiration.*" She is convinced that revolutionary terror is going to increase "really fast now," following the death of Marat. Because reality is so frightening and unpredictable, she has decided to return to fiction, resuming work on the previously abandoned play featuring Marie Antoinette as one of its main characters. "It's a very serious epic historical political drama . . . that will tell the story of the women of our age." In other words, the play will be a dramatization of her controversial declaration. Marie begs Olympe to create a plot that will spare her from death, as though art could dictate the terms of reality.

For a moment, Olympe seems to share this belief, declaring that the "*play could save us*

*both. . . . By showing you learning a goddamn lesson. . . . By showing people that revolutions needn't be so bloody. . . . This play. Will be. Important.*" In it, Marie—the reactionary queen—will be won over to the goals of the Revolution. To the slogan, "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" will be added the feminist supplement, "SororitÉ," with the country being "saved by its women." As Olympe tells the story of her new play, Marianne enters, announcing that Charlotte is on her way to the guillotine, "right now."

Marianne drags Olympe to the Place de la Revolution to witness the execution, insisting that if she doesn't "write this down. . . . They will. And that's how they win." But Olympe can't bring herself to watch the terrifying spectacle, and runs away.

Back in Olympe's study, Marie holds an unopened letter—the last letter from Marianne's husband. Meanwhile, trumpets sound in the distance, an indication that "they" are coming for Marie. So, we see revolutionary violence engulfing two more of the play's characters. When Marianne learns of her husband's death, she collapses, and Marie "*cradles*" her, the former adversaries now clinging to each other like fast friends.

A loud knocking on the door indicates that the agents of The Terror have arrived, and Marie exits, headed for her rendezvous with the guillotine.

Olympe enters, looking for the manuscript of her new play, and fretting that Marie may have taken it with her. If that's the case, it will fall into the hands of the fanatics, who will not take kindly to a drama

dealing sympathetically with the deposed queen. Suddenly, Olympe becomes a candidate for liquidation. To avoid that fate, she decides to burn all her writings.

Marianne has no patience with Olympe's concerns. Having just learned of her husband's death, she is angered by Olympe's fear, by her running away from Charlotte's execution, by her failure to stand up for the principles she has enunciated from the safety of her study. She berates Olympe for withdrawing into the make-believe world of literature, while real people are suffering and dying. As their quarrel intensifies, Marianne slaps Olympe, and exits, leaving Olympe "*alone . . . really alone now.*"

We next see Marie, defending herself before The Revolutionary Tribunal. Marianne arrives to observe this event, while a character named "Fraternite" (Charlotte, wearing a mask) presides. Fraternite recites a list of charges against Marie, ranging from being queen to committing incest with her son, and promptly moves to judgment: guilty as charged. She will die by the guillotine. Immediately.

The scene then moves to the Place de la Revolution, and the execution. Olympe "*finally shows up. . . terrified to be there, to witness.*"

Marie ascends to the guillotine saying, "Marie enters"—the same words she used to announce her first appearance, again showing her awareness of life as a kind of play, especially at this moment when she is the lead actor in a historic spectacle. She continues, assessing her performance, "Is she late? Or lost? . . . Was it her? . . . Or is she being her again? It's a confusing time. Hello. Marie."

As she approaches the chopping block, she accidentally steps on the executioner's foot. When asked if she has any last words, all she manages to say is, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to." This was in fact Marie Antoinette's actual final utterance, confirming her sense of herself as a performer, eager to atone for any awkward moments on stage.

Following Marie's death, we move back to Olympe's study, where she is joined by Marianne, who retracts her previous condemnation of the uselessness of literature. Instead, she urges Olympe to continue to write, if only to provide some form of witness to the political horrors all around them. "Your words are braver than you are," she asserts. "Let them loose and they'll outlast you."

But just as she takes pen in hand to do as Marianne urges, there is a knocking at her door: the enforcers of The Terror have come for her.

The scene shifts to Olympe's trial, where she is charged with treason for having written a play sympathetic to Marie Antoinette. The "Fraternite" character of Charlotte's trial is now joined by a twin (Marie in a mask), and both declare her guilty and sentence her to death.

There is a, "*Swift transition as the world around her empties,*" leaving Olympe alone on stage. She begins desperately to tell the story of her life as she wishes it would turn out: "all the politicians and revolutionaries and theatre critics think she's great, and she will live a long time. . . ."

But she can't narrate her way out of her actual future. The ghosts of Charlotte and Marie, reminders of her fate, join her on stage. Marianne also arrives, and declares that Olympe's end can in fact be a kind of beginning—the first step in a revolutionary story that will become a shared inspiration for the audience that hears it. And that audience, we understand, is us—sitting in the theater and witnessing the play.

But before that transformation can happen, Olympe must meet the guillotine. Marianne narrates the event: “Olympe De Gouges walks up the wooden steps on to the sturdy stage. Yes, she thinks, a stage.” So, in Olympe’s mind, the moment of her death becomes her greatest drama. Marianne also tells us that Olympe thinks of her predecessors on that stage, Charlotte and Marie, and she also remembers “a woman she passed in the streets a few weeks ago. . . . who looked like the symbol of freedom.” In other words, *La Marianne*.

Then Marianne reveals something that changes our perspective on the whole play: “She never actually met these women, but in that moment. . . . She writes what she wants.” Which is to say that everything in the preceding two acts of *The Revolutionists* has been a figment of Olympe’s imagination.

Marianne, Charlotte, and Marie never came to her study, never spoke any of the lines assigned to them. The entire drama has unfolded in Olympe’s mind in the moments before her death, when she was free to write “what she wants. . . . She tells herself a story as she looks out on the masses of people.”

As she stands waiting to die, imagining her unwritten play, the stage directions inform us that, “*We become the mob.*” However, the whole gruesome scene turns into a vindication of Olympe, as she sees the crowd of onlookers mutate into a wildly applauding audience, providing the “curtain call she’d always wanted.” As she waits for the blade to fall, a song begins to run through her head, a kind of anthem sung aloud by all the members of the cast:

*Who are we, without a story?*

*Where’s the pearl, without the sand.*

*We survive the roughness of glory*

*By passing the beat*

*Of the beat of the heart*

*From hand to hand.*

And with this song, the play ends.

**THE CHARACTERS.** Characters in a play define themselves through the objectives they pursue. We learn who they are by discovering what they want and what they’re willing to do to get it.

In most plays, characters are the direct product of the playwright’s imagination. In *The Revolutionists*, however, the relationship between the author and the characters in her play is indirect. That is, Lauren Gunderson creates the character, Olympe, who in turn creates the characters Marianne, Charlotte, and Marie. We might term the latter three “meta characters”—characters created by a character. They pursue objectives imputed to them by Olympe, who needs them to behave in ways that will sharpen her self-understanding, and advance her goals as a playwright. Of course, ultimately, they are all the products of Lauren Gunderson’s imagination, but the three meta-characters are mediated for us by the imagination of Olympe.

**Olympe** tells us what she wants in her first speech: “to write a play that is the voice of this revolution.” But it can’t be “about terror and death, it has to be about. . . grace and power in the face of it.”

Unfortunately, terror and death are precisely what the revolution is about at the moment Olympe decides to write her play, i.e., the moment when she stands on the stage of the guillotine about to die. So, in effect she sets herself a task she can’t possibly carry out.

What we see throughout the course of *The Revolutionists* is Olympe failing to write that play; or rather, we watch Olympe constantly revising her vision of the play in response to the events produced by The Terror. Each time the violent political situation drives one of its victims to her study—or, rather, each time she imagines one of them arriving—she adds another character and devises another plot twist. In a sense, The Terror is her evil co-author—a writing partner that subverts the entire project.

Even though, at the play’s end, Olympe says she feels free to “write” what she wants, she is still constrained by The Terror. Everything she imagines at the moment of her death is shaped by that seismic political force. And how could it not be, since it’s killing her? So, there’s a paradox at the center of Olympe’s character: she feels free to write anything she chooses because there can be no further evil consequences for her. And yet her imagination can’t free itself from the grip of The Terror.

As she begins thinking about the play, the plot seems nebulous. It will provide “hope for a new nation of freedom and peace!” It will be about women, “Fighting for their rights to life, liberty and. . . divorce.” It will be “comical yet quite profound.” Possibly it will be a musical and will feature puppets.

In other words, Olympe doesn’t actually know what her play will be about until Marianne makes an impassioned denunciation of French revolutionary hypocrisy—*liberate* at home; slavery in the Caribbean. At that moment Olympe finds her focus. “*Oh my god I can write about you!*”

But she soon drops that idea, and allows herself to be talked into writing a manifesto rather than a play as a way of helping “a lot of people... without leaving my office.” She wants the benefits of revolution without confronting any of its dangers—as we see when she flees from the site of Charlotte’s execution. Thus, Olympe recognizes her own flaws as she awaits death.

Then Olympe imagines Charlotte Corday bursting into her study, and her plans change again. “Now I *have* to write a play about her,” she announces when she learns that Charlotte is going to murder Marat. And shortly after that, Olympe imagines Marie Antoinette’s arrival, which gives her an idea for another radical revision of her still-unwritten script: “WAIT. Wait. I’ve got it. This is it. This is *it*. THE QUEEN CAN BE IN THE PLAY.”

But even before she puts a single word of that play on paper, she changes course yet again, returning to her previous idea of writing a declaration about the rights of women, but with a twist. She will not only write the declaration, she will actually declare it before the National Assembly.

But she gets booed by the men of the Assembly, so, as the second act begins, Olympe is back to playwriting. She even has a title—*The Revolutionists*— and is halfway through the story, but she is having trouble finding an ending. Marie begs that the play not end with her death, but just keep going on and on. “A play that doesn’t end,” says Olympe, “If I’m writing what I really want? That’d be it.”

The same instinct that leads her to make repeated radical changes in the plot of her play inclines her to prefer an endless drama: she wants the story to go on and on, changing as necessary to accommodate the always unpredictable developments in the world. "Story," she asserts early in the play, "is the heartbeat of humanity." By that logic, the story must go on and on, since if the heartbeat stops human life ends as well. Even as she imagines herself speaking that line, Olympe's story is about to end.

She returns to this thought later in the play, as she is facing the guillotine: "I'm scared of . . . of ending. The ending, my ending, this ending." And again, she imagines a "play that doesn't end."

So what Olympe wants is fundamentally impossible: a work of art that encompasses everything and that goes on forever. What she actually ends up with is an imaginary play cut short by sudden violent death. She has wanted to influence history through her work; instead, she becomes history's victim.

**Marianne** is pulled in two directions. As imagined by Olympe she has come to France "to demand full and recognized civil and political equality. We want slavery abolished across the entire French Empire." So Olympe gives her a clear political goal, in the service of which she and her husband have become active revolutionaries, he helping to lead the movement in San Domingue, she serving as a spy for the cause in Paris.

But Olympe also gives her a deeply skeptical view of politics, which she defines as "what's happening *around* everyone's real lives." In fact, politics, which is devouring so many lives everywhere in France, is a distraction from what's truly important. "Most people," Marianne says, "don't have time for the grand dramas, it's the intimate ones that matter. . . . For most people, it's not about being righteous, it's about being real."

But Marianne is constantly oscillating between righteousness and reality. For example, she castigates Olympe for failing to realize that "art and honor require sacrifice and selflessness or else they don't work. . . . The world you say you want to change, is too much to bear and you run. You run." Through Marianne, Olympe is chastising herself for being insufficiently committed. Marianne and her husband are laying their lives on the line for their political goals, while Olympe is "cowering in the shadows, abandoning" her friends.

But rivaling this revolutionary fervor is the emotional intensity of Marianne's personal life. Her marriage to Vincent stands at the center of her existence: "Even when we're apart for a day. I miss him." She speaks ardently and longingly about his looks and personality:

He's strong, and tall, with these eyes that just make you tell him every little thing. . . . He courted me for months, but the truth is I thought he was too handsome. . . . But I just wasn't sure I *really* knew him. Until. He let loose this *laugh*. . . . And out comes this rumbly, and loud, and big-old-stupid laugh. . . . And that's when I agreed to marry him.

So, his physical appeal is important, but his sense of humor clinches the deal. Vincent is the real thing around which politics happens. Paradoxically, however, he is also immersed in politics, and this costs him his life.

We do not hear about it in the play, but Marianne's goal of abolishing slavery in her native country is successful. So, Marianne, like France itself—of which she is the symbol—pays a terrible personal price in exchange for the social transformations brought about by revolution.

Olympe imagines **Charlotte** coming to her in search of “a line. . . . some dialogue.” Corday is planning a momentous historical act, one that will “be talked about for centuries” and she doesn't “want to sound like a dingbat.” She wants something that “will sink into their memories for all time.” “So. Playwright. Write,” she commands.

This is the Olympe's opportunity to become the voice of the revolution, with Corday as her mouthpiece. But, as we recall, Olympe wanted that voice to be wise and witty rather than terrifying and murderous, so perhaps it will not be so easy for the playwright to write.

Beyond seeking the line that will frame her action in exalted language for centuries to come, Charlotte is pursuing her own political agenda. She wants to kill Marat because he is a “sick, fundamentalist, political *pundit* who has caused the deaths of thousands of innocent people with no tool as brave as a sword, no, he uses *words*.”

Like the Revolution itself, Charlotte is pursuing political justice through murder. “Stabstab” is a kind of mantra she repeats several times in the play, a concise summary of her intentions.

**Marie**, Olympe imagines, is another character seeking the redemptive power of the word. Derided as “Madame Deficit” because of her lavish spending habits, suspected of treason because of her ties to her native Austria, and deposed as queen by the abolition of the monarchy in 1792, Marie's life and reputation are in a shambles. It's also clear that the bloodlust growing in France will soon focus on her as one of its next victims.

What she wants from Olympe, therefore, is “a rewrite.” She wants to be the heroine of a new narrative, one that reshapes her life as a romantic comedy with a happy ending. She longs to bask again in her former popularity, to be given “a little credit,” because, as she says, “I care. I care so much about my people and my country.” The solution to her problems is, in her view, straightforward: “I just need better press.” The right words will save her.

Getting a “better press” means projecting a more favorable image of herself to a now-hostile public, finding a role in a script that will make her again a beloved celebrity on the national stage. As noted above, on her first appearance in the play, she immediately reveals herself as a habitual performer, an instinctive actress: “Marie enters,” she says, enunciating her own stage directions.

But, as the play shows, words won't do the trick; they won't save her from the kind of bad press created by Marat and his fellow fanatics—a narrative that ends with the guillotine. Olympe's imagination can't save her from that reality.

Improbably, Marie—the former queen—develops a warm friendship with Marianne, the embodiment of revolutionary egalitarianism. As they spend time together, Marianne discovers that Marie is something other than the royal ogre depicted by the political propagandists. Like wives always and

everywhere, Marie balances loyalty to her husband with an honest appraisal of his shortcomings. She is a protective mother; an empathetic friend who cradles and comforts the grieving Marianne; and a gift-giver who shares her precious ribbons with Marianne's daughter. At least that's how Olympe portrays her.

But neither Olympe's words nor Marie's human virtues can shield her from The Terror. As Marianne might say, Marie is another example of the way politics surrounds and destroys "real life."

**THEMES.** We can think about this play as a secular meditation on the first verse of the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Being human, the capacity for language is in us from "the beginning;" as we develop our abilities to speak and write, we learn to put our ideals into words which help us to be "with God;" and sometimes, as with great authors, our words achieve God-like immortality.

The play takes place in the mind of Olympe De Gouges, an author, a believer in the semi-divine power of language to shape the world. All the characters she imagines come to her because of her command of the word. Tapping into this power, Marianne pursues social change, Charlotte seeks immortality, and Marie longs to redeem her damaged reputation.

Marianne, Charlotte, and Marie want Olympe to use her words to proclaim their ideals, or to give voice to their beliefs, or to rescue them from the merciless forces of politics. They come to Olympe as to a kind of divine oracle, or even a goddess—someone whose language has the capacity to reveal the world's hidden meanings, or even to change the course of history.

At one level, these hopes fail. Olympe, Charlotte, and Marie all die on the guillotine. But at another level, hope survives. Marianne, the embodiment of the humane ideals of The Revolution, of its words about liberty and equality, is still alive at the end of the play.

And the others also survive, as subjects for stories, which, the play tells us, are the heartbeat of humanity. More saliently, they survive in the story told in *The Revolutionists*. "As the blade fell. . . . A story begins," says the script.

At one point Charlotte asks, "is this going to be a play about a play?" And at the end, we find out that the answer to that question is "yes." Just as Charlotte, Marie, and Marianne are "meta-characters," the play itself is an exercise in "meta-theater," that is, theater about theater.

*The Revolutionists* is a play about a playwright imagining herself writing a play called *The Revolutionists*. Olympe asks Marie to, "Think of the power of a play that shows the entwined lives of real women," which is precisely what *The Revolutionists* does, thus describing itself.

The meta-theatrical nature of this play is appropriate because each of its characters thinks of herself as a major performer in the drama of history: Marianne is in fact an imaginary character who personifies France; Charlotte, a tragic actor, will forever be defined by her killing of Marat; and Marie is the embodiment of the courtly melodrama of the monarchy.

The characters also call attention to their identity *as characters* by the way they talk. None of them speaks like a person living in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Instead they constantly use words and turns of phrase

that are conspicuously contemporary. “I need better press,” says Marie, dipping into the lexicon of modern politics. Olympe borrows the language of Madison Avenue when she describes the beheading of Louis XVI as being “a little off brand.” This is the diction of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, and the characters who employ it are flaunting their artificiality, their status as obviously theatricalized versions of historical figures.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. Why does Lauren Gunderson present her play as taking place in the mind of Olympe?
2. Why does Olympe keep changing her mind about her play’s plot?
3. What’s the major difference between Marianne and the other characters?
4. Can you think of other revolutions that made extensive use of terror to achieve their goals?
5. Do you think the use of terror in pursuit of ideals like justice and equality is justified?