

Joan B. Landes

Visualizing the nation: Gender, representation, and revolution in eighteenth-century France

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Reviewed by Wendy Gunther-Canada

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This book is a wonderful addition to a sibling set of texts including Lynn Hunt's *Family Romance of the French Revolution* (1992), and Madelyn Gutwirth's *Twilight of the Goddesses* (1992). It also contributes important ideas to the feminist analysis of the enduring appeal of fraternity in political thought and the masculine mythologies of nationalism.

In his 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1985), Edmund Burke provides a fundamental insight into the passion of patriotism: "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (1985, 68). He laments that the revolutionaries' attack on the royal family that came to be known as the October Days, and especially the assault on Marie Antoinette, had destroyed the bonds of loyal affection between the monarch and the French people (1987, 62). For Burke, the abstractions of the philosophers of the rights of man could not create a sentimental attachment to the nation by softening the hearts of the citizenry: "On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order" (1987, 67). It is Joan Landes's provocative thesis that the proliferation of images of woman in revolutionary France, whether as an allegorical goddess of Liberty or as a caricature of the bestial nature of the Ancien Regime, were of critical importance in forming the Republic. In *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (2001), Landes discusses the efforts of revolutionary leaders to substitute Maryann for Marie Antoinette and thus to provide a new visual economy for a republican body politic in love with its own image.

The focus of Landes's argument is the paradox that while the image of woman was ever-present in the visual culture of revolutionary France, running the ideological spectrum from goddesses to grotesques, women themselves were further absented from the political life of the nation. She contends that the purpose of these representations of woman was to encourage male citizens to embrace *la patrie* as represented as a universal anonymous female. The female body was a necessary visual trope in the new sentimental order because as a symbolic substitute for the body of the king, it fostered an image of fraternity rather than patriarchy, equality instead of hierarchy. Most significantly, the embodiment of the fatherland in a female form served to remind patriots of their duty to regenerate the Republic. The allure of these images of a young, chaste, "female" France worked on both rational and emotional levels to reconstitute the body politic by encouraging men to become fathers and by reinforcing the maternal role of women. We might wonder, as does Landes, how women as either republican mothers or amazons were served by these images. She repeatedly refers to the "compensations" that the volume and variety of female images provided women (2001, 132), but these seem small indeed in a political system where women had patriotic duties without substantive political rights.

As a case in point, while French women were defining new identities for themselves as warriors, authors, club members, and public speakers, the national image of woman defied these eloquent attempts at self-determination and citizenship by substituting a mute object for the speaking subject. When the radical Jacobin party ousted the moderate Girondin faction that had supported the expansion of women's civic activity, the public roles of women were greatly proscribed. Ironically, Landes notes that this exclusion of women from the public sphere gave artists greater freedom to use the image of woman: "Indeed, the political circumstances that followed from women's imposed banishment from public life at the height of the radical Revolution, along with the subsequent legislative efforts to contain women's civic and political rights, may have helped to grant artists greater license to use the female body as a metaphor for a whole series of constantly contested political meanings. That is, the more women were deprived of an individual presence in the public arena, the more likely those faceless women could stand in for a range of political values or positions. At the same time, the visual presence of women—that is, female figures—in these images served to remind men of the horrors associated with women's too active involvement in public life" (2001, 126–27).

A central theme within Landes's text is the "give and take" of the images under discussion. That is, how did these images console women for their expulsion from the public sphere and at the same time seduce men into sacrificing their lives to protect the private sphere? The author convincingly argues that the visual culture of revolutionary France both contested and reaffirmed traditional notions of gender roles and the separation of the public and private spheres. However, readers who hope to learn more about how French women themselves responded to these powerful representations of their nation and their sex are likely to share Landes's frustration with "the paucity of evidence concerning women's relations to the image—not just as creators but as spectators" (2001, 173).

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One of the strongest sections of the text is Landes's discussion of the pedagogical role of the images in educating a new generation of citizens. Here she introduces the significance of the visual culture in women's education at a time when political leaders such as Honore Gabriel Riqueti Mirabeau were arguing that females should not be taught to read. Landes has constructed an elegant analysis that consistently draws upon the best archival materials and secondary sources, thus aiding her readers in developing a visual vocabulary of their own. However, a

serious drawback of the subjugation of visual media to print culture that Landes criticizes is that the images under discussion are so reduced in scale that it is sometimes difficult to note the characteristics that are described in the accompanying text. Nevertheless the volume is a remarkable addition to the literature on gender politics that explores the erotic dimensions of patriotism and highlights the multiple roles of the female image in constituting the contours of the nation. In *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (2001), Joan B. Landes has compellingly illustrated the tensions between virtue and vice in image and text in the political imagination of revolutionary France.

Wendy Gunther-Canada is Associate Professor of Government and Public Service at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She is the author of *Rebel Writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Politics* (2001) and (with Nancy McGlen, Karen O'Connor, and Laura van Assendelft) *Women, Politics, and American Society, Third Edition* (2002). Currently she is working on a book entitled *The Female Patriot: Catharine Macaulay and Revolutionary Politics*.