# Table of Contents

- **How to Use This Education Guide** 3
- **Content Warnings** 3
- **About the Revolutionists** 4
- **Breakdown of Scenes** 5
- **Meet the Playwright, Lauren Gunderson** 7
- **Meet the Director, Dr. Valerie Joyce** 8
- **An Interview with Dr. Valerie Joyce** 9
- **The French Revolution** 10
- **Who Were the Real Revolutionists** 13
- **Women's Presence in the French Revolution** 16
- **For Fun/Additional Source** 18
How to use this Education Guide

This Education Guide is intended to help guide and inspire conversation, reflection and further research connected to Villanova Theatre’s production of The Revolutionists, by Lauren Gunderson. The goal of the guide is to enhance the theatre experience for students, and there are materials that can be utilized before and after seeing the performance. It contains a series of Prompts and Extensions organized around the work itself, Villanova Theatre’s production concept, and broader themes. They are designed to be used in any order, and can be approached as singular topics for reflection or in combination with one another to support a more nuanced conversation about The French Revolution, gender roles, and identity.

Content Warnings

Content warnings are "verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content." Content warnings differ from spoilers because they don’t explain plot or context. Similarly to a rating on a movie or TV show, content warnings give the audience a heads up about potentially triggering topics in the performance. We hope that providing the following content warnings will equip our audiences with the tools they need to engage with the performance in a meaningful and fulfilling way.

Like all good art, The Revolutionists asks audiences to engage with universal questions on a personal, sometimes challenging level.

At the same time, please do note that there is a difference between trauma and discomfort. Without the latter, we can narrow and limit our experiences in ways detrimental to ourselves as individuals and as members of this community. Please use your best judgment and exercise self-care as needed.

The Revolutionists by Lauren Gunderson engages with the following: sexism, misogyny, murder, violence, death, microaggressions, and mentions of sexual violence.
In the shadow of an overworked guillotine, four badass women collide and collude in Paris during the Reign of Terror: fugitive queen Marie Antoinette, idealist assassin Charlotte Corday, Caribbean spy Marianne Angelle, and beleaguered playwright Olympe de Gouges (who just wants to make the plot work out). Lauren Gunderson's breakneck comedy of ideas is a fiercely funny fever dream as well as a timely rumination on the role of violence in the quest for change, a "sassy, hold-on-to-your-seats theatrical adventure" (Cincinnati Enquirer).

Set against the backdrop of the French Revolution, the play details the events and lives of four women and their battle for justice. These women grapple with the search for the right words and actions to ensure their impact on a world packed full of tumultuous conflict. The Revolutionists is a story about morality, feminism, and how to define a legacy.

**A note from Lauren Gunderson on The Revolutionists:**
The play is mostly a comedy. The play is based on real women, real transcripts, and real executions. But remember it's a comedy. The play runs with a seamlessness that necessitates less-realistic sets. FRATERNITÉ is an almost commedia presence, a stock character of a bad guy, masked. In the end, the entire play is in Olympe's mind as she walks up the stairs onto the scaffold, and to her death.
Act 1, Scene 1: Olympe’s study. Marianne and Olympe discuss Olympe’s writers block and Marianne’s activism for the abolishment of slavery in the Caribbean. Charlotte arrives in search of final words, and Queen Marie Antoinette arrives determined to change her story. Olympe writes a declaration for all women, and Charlotte leaves to murder Marat.

Act 1, Scene 2: Charlotte murders Marat, Olympe gives her declaration of the National Assembly, and Marianne writes a letter to her husband, Marie contemplates revolution alone.

Act 1, Scene 3: Olympe’s study. Marianne fears that her husband is dead. The three women visit Charlotte in jail.

Act 1, Scene 4: Charlotte’s jail cell. Marianne and Charlotte discuss the murder. Charlotte’s fear of death sets in, and Marianne promises her that her friends will be there to support her.

Act 2, Scene 1: Olympe’s study. The revolution has turned violent, and Olympe has decided to write about Marie in an attempt to reduce the violence of the revolution.

Act 2, Scene 2: The guillotine. Olympe and Marianne go to the execution of Charlotte.

Act 2, Scene 3: Olympe’s study. Marie is sent to trial, but brings Olympe’s play about her with her. Olympe arrives and fights with Marianne about leaving Charlotte’s execution.

Act 2, Scene 4: A courtroom, the trial of Marie Antoinette.

Act 2, Scene 5: Olympe’s study. Olympe and Marianne reconcile, and Olympe gets called to trial for her play about Marie.

Act 2, Scene 6: The trial of Olympe.

Act 2, Scene 7: Jail, and execution hall. Olympe is visited by the ghosts of Marie and Charlotte. Marianne enters to speak to Olympe, and they discuss Olympe’s fears of her life ending. Olympe is taken to the scaffold where she delivers a final speech and the blade of the guillotine falls down on her neck.
Meet the Playwright: Lauren Gunderson

Lauren Gunderson has been one of the most produced playwrights in America since 2015 topping the list twice including 2019/20. She is a two-time winner of the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award for I and You and The Book of Will, the winner of the Lanford Wilson Award and the Otis Guernsey New Voices Award, a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and John Gassner Award for Playwriting, and a recipient of the Mellon Foundation’s 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. She co-authored the Miss Bennet plays with Margot Melcon, and her play The Half-Life of Marie Curie is available on Audible.com. Her work is published at Playscripts (I and You; Exit Pursued By A Bear; The Taming and Toil And Trouble), Dramatists Play Service (The Revolutionists; The Book of Will; Silent Sky; Bauer, Natural Shocks, The Wickhams and Miss Bennet) and Samuel French (Emilie). Her picture book Dr Wonderful: Blast Off to the Moon is available from Two Lions/Amazon. She is currently developing musicals with Ari Afsar, Dave Stewart and Joss Stone.
Meet the Director: Dr. Valerie Joyce

Dr. Valerie Joyce, Theatre Department Chair, has been directing, designing or performing on stage at Villanova Theatre for almost 30 years. Her Villanova directing credits include: The Revolutionists, The Importance of Being Earnest, Intimate Apparel, Little Women: The Musical, Translations, and more. She also directed Merrily We Roll Along, the last show in Vasey Theatre, which only got to tech and then was closed due to the pandemic in 2020. The brightest spot in the 2020-2021 year was the opportunity to conceive and direct the film Slaphappy: A Covid Era Commedia, a hilariously devised collaboration with students and faculty. Her Villanova costume design credits include: Twelve Dreams, Dancing at Lughnasa, Bus Stop, and Speed the Plow.

Valerie also wrote and directed a one-woman show with Villanova alumna Kimberly S. Fairbanks (MA ’11) that dramatizes the lost stories of pre-emancipation African American women entitled I Will Speak for Myself. They have performed this show in New York City at 59E59, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Beacon Theatre in Philadelphia, Rock Hall, Maryland, and in Eugene O’Neill’s Tao House in San Francisco, CA. Other directing credits include: The Meat Opera and Up Your Ante for the New York and Philadelphia International Fringe Festivals and Thank You for Sharing with Amaryllis Theatre Company.

She also designed costumes for regional productions including A Persistent Memory and Six Story Building (Off Broadway), The Real Thing (Arden Theatre Company), Moon for the Misbegotten (Venture Theatre), True West and Waiting for Godot (Lantern Theatre Company), Billy and Zelda (Opera Delaware), and The Comedy of Errors (Princeton Repertory). is a board member of the American Theatre and Drama Society and is affiliated with the Music/Theatre Dance and Women and Theatre focus groups of ATHE. She has presented her research at the national conferences of ASTR and ATHE and internationally at the Society of Early Americanists, Society for the Study of American Women Writers, and the Staging America conference in Madrid, Spain.
An Interview With Dr. Joyce on The Revolutionists

This interview was conducted via Zoom by Kenzie Bradley, Education Dramaturg.

Kenzie Bradley: What drew you to The Revolutionists initially? What was your first encounter with it?

Dr. Valerie Joyce: My first encounter was a production at Theatre Horizon here in Norristown. It was an excellently produced production with Villanova alumni [Jessica Bedford as Marie Antoinette], and Janus Stefanowicz [Villanova’s costume designer and shop manager] was the costume designer. That was the first time that I encountered it, and I think what drew me to it afterwards was the focus on women and the fact that it’s a female writer. I love any show that utilizes period costumes as well, so it had a lot going for it the first time I saw it. Plus, it’s funny. The comedy in the play might probably be the number one reason.

KB: There have been some script edits/revisions done in the rehearsal room. Can you speak to these changes, and why they are necessary?

VJ: I contacted Lauren Gunderson to ask if we could make the script edits that we made which were driven by the pronouns that one of our performers use. I wrote to Lauren and I asked if it would be acceptable to change some of the she/her pronouns to they/them pronouns. That was the primary motivation for that change.

KB: What about Revolutionists made it feel like the right choice to include in Villanova’s season after such a difficult year with the pandemic?

VJ: The motivation for choosing Revolutionists was completely driven by student enthusiasm. Each year we generate a “season selection wish list” with students and the most important items were “joy” and “female driven.” I often follow the lead of the students when I’m selecting what it is I wish to direct. I look for what will really fit with our current cohort of students and what plays have a lot of energy around them, and I had really enjoyed the production that I had seen before. I think Revolutionists is wildly engaging. With that, this play holds a lot of joy. Since it's a period piece, it's going to be really stunning: both the costumes and the set are not period in an “old fashioned” or “stuffy” way, but a really exciting, vibrant, bring-the-past-into-the-present kind of way. It's a good time, it's a lot of laughter, and all four characters are extremely engaging. It's a very even handed play where you get to enjoy the performances of four strong performers.
KB: What do you hope our audiences will take from their experience with the play?

VJ: I’m fascinated by history: a lot of my research really delves deeply both into historical women, and how women have been portrayed through time, how they were portrayed in their own time, and how we received them now. This play does a really nice job, in a lot of ways, of bringing women into that lens. I didn’t know who Charlotte Corday or Olympe de Gouges was before this process. Though everybody knows who Marie Antoinette is, Revolutionists does such a nice job of humanizing that iconic figure. Women taking charge of their life and their circumstances and rising above what is expected or or demanded of them to do things that are important to them, to make differences in their communities… that will make differences to the future. I’m excited for both my daughters to see it, and the women who are undergraduates here, and the graduates here. So I think it has a ton to offer. The character of Marianne Angelle is a composite figure of many women who did exist, and of course they’re not written into the history anywhere. The attempt to bring recognition that there were women like this, that they did exist, that they made choices and they made really interesting, daring, brave, and courageous choices that are not documented anywhere… bringing the awareness to an audience that these women were there is an important step forward.

KB: Why this play, now?

VJ: Revolutionists is the navigation of comedy and life and death stakes. In the rehearsal room, we have been working to figure out Gunderson’s choices on comedy in particular moments. This play has women making jokes about Les Mis and Cats while they’re literally standing on trial and being condemned to death. Those two things just do not go together and it’s very difficult to navigate that kind of chaos. It speaks, broadly, to our moment in time. I think that kind of chaos speaks to our world. The swift and bizarre shift in the justice that’s happening outside our doors, or, the lack of justice, that’s happening outside our doors, is something that people can tap into fairly easily. I have found lots of moments in the rehearsal process where I’ve said, “Well, in that moment when you saw something that was going wrong, did you get up and do something? Or did you say, ‘I’m glad that’s not me.’” Olympe decides she is going to avoid it until she can’t anymore, and watching her stand there and admit she wrote the play to condemn her to death is no small matter.
The French Revolution

The French Revolution, which took place from May 1789 to November 1799, is widely considered one of the largest and bloodiest upheavals in European history. In the span of a decade, the citizens of France demolished and restructured the country’s political and social framework, eliminating the absolute monarchy and feudal system that had controlled the population for hundreds of years.

The causes of the French Revolution extend themselves far before the 1790s. During the majority of the 18th century, France was involved in several foreign wars that left them bankrupt. Due to the frequent changes in the French government, the financial management of the country was poorly handled and by the 1780s, the country had no money at all. France was also suffering from several famines, poor harvests, and extreme inflation of food prices that left 98% of the country suffering. All of the taxes they paid went towards the luxury of the wealthy and the church. Resentment and desperation filled the country, and started a series of riots and work strikes.

King Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette ascended to the throne in the 1770s. Initially, he attempted to improve the government and alleviate poverty, but his nobles as well as the church resisted his efforts. Louis XVI’s financial manager suggested creating a new land tax that would tax land owned by the aristocrats. This act received extremely negative responses from the nobility. In hopes to avoid a complete revolt, he summoned a meeting with the General Assembly (the representatives of the nobles, clergy, and commoners) that had not been assembled in over a century. Because the commoners held the large majority of the people, they were able to mobilize and demand a new constitution that would allow for the commoners to have equal representation as well as eliminating the royal veto system. They re-named the General Assembly to be the National Assembly, and swore they would not disband until a new constitution was drafted. Louis and the nobility were forced to comply.

While the National Assembly began to draft the constitution, the changes made resulted in extreme violence in Paris. A rumor began that the military would be sent in, and this fear led to the common people storming the Bastille fortress to take gunpowder and other weapons to defend themselves. This moment is typically marked as the beginning of the Revolution.
The storming of the Bastille started the wave of revolutionary spirit that rocked the country. Peasants rooted against their landlords and burned down any homes recognized to be a part of the elite. This moment, often referred to as “The Great Fear”, forced nobles and aristocrats to hide in other European countries for safety. Around 1789, the National Assembly was able to successfully remove the unfair taxations and made all taxes equal. Over the following years, the assembly reorganized the government completely: nationalizing all property of the church, abolished slavery (in the country, not in the colonies), and formed a new declaration.

In 1791, the National Assembly adopted a new constitution. Though it was certainly revolutionary, the document itself wasn’t enough for the Jacobins (a radical group of French people) who rejected the constitution completely, as they wanted the monarchy erased in the place of a republican form of government. The Jacobins incited the country further, demanding the trials of Louis XVI and Marie. This moment also led to the National Assembly declaring war on two neighboring countries of France. The Jacobins were able to arrest Louis XVI, and he and Marie were imprisoned for months. Louis XVI was sentenced to death and executed on January 21, 1793. This act was so radical that the revolution received condemnations from countries around the world.

Following the execution of the king, France entered what is known to be the darkest and most dangerous era of the revolution: The Reign of Terror. The Jacobins completely took control of the government and sent several of the more moderate government leaders to death. The Jacobins, under the rule of Maximilien de Robespierre, sought to murder anyone who was not in support of the Revolution. They murdered over 17,000 people.

The French people rose up against the Jacobin faction, and Robespierre met his own end on the other half of a guillotine. After his death, the French people began to take the moderate position as they did with the initial constitution, and in 1795, a new constitution was adopted. Royalist and Jacobin opposition was put down by the new French army, led by Napoleon Bonaparte. Though the new government had a strong foundation, the country itself was rife with political corruption: the systems became chaotic and insufficient, inflation continued, and change was once again demanded by the people. In 1799, Napoleon staged a further coup to declare himself France’s ‘first consul’. This act finished the French Revolution, and was superseded by the rule of Napoleon.
What parallels can you discover between the government portrayed in The Revolutionists and the real 1780s National Assembly? Why do you believe Gunderson made the changes that she did?

Compare the French constitution proposed by the Girondists in 1791 to the French constitution eventually adopted by French after the Reign of Terror in 1795. What do you notice between them? What changes were made in the four years?

What was the purpose of declarations, pamphlets, and decrees made during the Revolution? Why do you believe Olympe’s declaration of the Rights for All Women didn’t make as big of an impact?

Put yourself in the shoes of Lauren Gunderson. With hundreds of instances of sociopolitical and cultural revolutions to choose from, why do you think Lauran Gunderson chose this one? If you were the playwright, what historical moment would you chose?

Resources for Further Conversation

Chronology of the French Revolution. UCL Art Museum.
Olympe de Gouges was a figure in the French Revolution who wrote novels, pamphlets, and plays on social and political issues during the revolution. As the revolution continued, she became increasingly more politically engaged. Her most significant document was “Declaration on the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen”, written in 1791, in which she wrote about the absence of rights for women and the continuing practices of male authority. Over the course of her life, she published over 68 pamphlets. She was ultimately executed by guillotine for attacking the government and her association with the revolutionist group, the Girondists.

Marianne Angelle/La Marianne

Marianne Angelle is not based on a singular woman in history. The term “Marianne” has been the national personification of the French Republic, and is considered a personification of French liberty, equality, fraternity, and reason (something Marianne Angelle frequently references throughout the play). Initially, the name was negatively associated with the peasantry, however its connotation shifted during the French Revolution to that of an ideal representation of liberty and the Republic. While Marianne herself may not be a real figure, the cause she and her husband Vincent fight for certainly was. The freedom of enslaved Caribbean people was not ensured until 1794 after uprisings resulting from the French Revolution.
Charlotte Corday
Pronounced: shar-lut core-day
Charlotte Corday spent most of her life in a convent and raised by nuns, as her mother died when she was young. She was deeply inspired by the leaders of the Enlightenment period which turned her from being a monarchist to a republican, and she believed that the French government should enact a representative democracy. Charlotte planned and executed the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, a very powerful political leader, by stabbing him several times in the chest. She was very quickly taken by officials and brought to trial, where she was killed by guillotine less than a week later. Shocked that a woman "would commit such a gruesome act of violence," the Jacobins subjected Charlotte to a post-mortem "virginity test" (there is no such accurate and ethical medical testing). The autopsy revealed that Corday was, in fact, "still a virgin" at the time of her death, disproving the sexist and misogynistic revolutionary beliefs that women were incapable of violence because of their alleged sexual promiscuity.

Queen Marie Antoinette
Pronounced: mar-ee ant-won-ette
Marie Antoinette was betrothed to King Louis XVI at the age of 15 in an effort to solidify the alliance between Austria and France. Marie took the throne in 1774 and had two children with Louis. Despite this, France never truly accepted her as a mother figure as she was frequently struggling with infidelity and rumors of infidelity. She was disliked by the royal nobility and the public because she was Austrian as well as carrying an extremely extravagant lifestyle. This dislike permeates into our modern portrayals of her today, as history frequently depicts her as an arrogant woman despite later proof that she was a complex and intelligent woman who loved and adored her husband and children. She was executed several months after her husband in October 1793.
Prompts

- One of the most famous quotes allegedly attributed to Marie Antoinette is the phrase, “Let them eat cake”. However, further research proves that it is unclear if she actually said those words. Why do you think Marie Antoinette is frequently portrayed as a one-sided, shallow figure? Why do you think Lauren Gunderson decided to change that view?

- Read the following article about the beliefs of Jean-Paul Marat. What parts of his political agenda do you think Charlotte Corday may have disagreed with? Do you think Charlotte was justified in what she did?

- Why do you think Lauren Gunderson chose these four women in particular? What about their backstories and characters seemed to fit for this story, and what about them brings them together?

- After reading/seeing the play, it is clear that there are some differences between the characters portrayed onstage and the actual people themselves. Which changes did you notice? Why do you think Gunderson made those changes?

Resources for Further Conversation

Charlotte Corday’s Assassination of the French Revolutionist Jean-Paul Marat. This Day in History, 2017.
Outside of the women who shaped Lauren Gunderson’s The Revolutionists, women were also involved in virtually every aspect of the French Revolution. When the French Revolution began and male revolutionists began to fight for their rights, women also began to insist for their own rights: particularly the right to receive education. Several writers in the French Enlightenment viewed women to be biologically inferior to men and held that they were destined to remain inside the home. However, some writers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, took a more radical approach. Rousseau, in his book Emile, wrote about his vision for an ideal education system for women. Though he still argued that women’s primary place should be in the house, he believed that they should still take active positions outside the home. He advocated for greater autonomy of women over their children, but argued that women did not need a serious intellectual education. While women tried to take their pleas for education to the press, their efforts primarily failed due to the lack of interest by men.

This lack of interest changed upon the beginning of the Revolution. When the violence began, some women saw this as an opportunity to take matters into their own hands and sent several petitions to the National Assembly to express their concerns. They also joined in to riot and demonstrate for their rights. After the Bastille was stormed, women were also inspired to attend the political clubs of men, and some of these political groups began to advocate for the rights of women. It led some aristocrats and other leading figures such as Marie-Jean Caritat and Marquis de Condorcet to release pamphlets advocating for women’s rights. By 1790, a campaign for women’s rights were launched that argued for changes to divorce laws and inheritance laws. Some women created their own political clubs, such as the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, established in 1793. The pamphlet released by Olympe de Gouges, titled the Declaration of the Rights of Woman, inspired several other groups to advocate for women’s rights despite the declaration failing to gain much mainstream political traction.

In general, most male revolutionaries rejected every call for women’s equal rights. However, their responses in pamphlets and in speeches suggested that none of them had a solid understanding of what they wanted women’s role to be, and these faults allowed for certain laws allowing women to sue for divorce to be established. When Olympe de Gouges was put to death, several city officials denounced all political activity by women, and several female revolutionaries were put to death.
Despite the fight for women’s rights continuing to increase and decline, women slowly began to be recognized as symbols of the revolutionary values: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Though the male revolutionaries refused to grant women political rights and suppressed their actions, they loved to put pictures of women on all coins, bills, letterheads, swords, and playing cards. Women began to be associated with the values that the revolutionaries embodied, hence why a huge majority of the revolutionary art contains women.

Though large strides for women’s rights were not achieved during the Revolution, they certainly made their presence known. They demonstrated and rioted at crucial political moments, supported the war effort, and wrote all manners of documents supporting revolutionary ideas.

**Prompts**

- Put yourself in the shoes of the women revolutionaries. What would you have done to advocate for the rights of French women? What tactics would you have chosen?
- Read some of the text of Olympe de Gouges’ Declaration for the Rights of Women. Why do you think the piece did not gain traction at the time? How relevant is the text to this day?
- Read the following article from Vox about the waves of feminism throughout history. How do you think feminism has changed over the centuries? Have women been fighting for the same things, or have they changed? What groups of marginalized people have not been included? Why do you think they haven’t been?
- What role does legacy play in the fight for women’s rights? What does it mean to define a legacy? What does “having a legacy” mean to you?

**Resources for Further Conversation**

- The Many Roles of Women in the French Revolution. ThoughtCo.
- Exploration of the Status of Women in Revolutionary France. Sonali Gupta.
Villanova Theatre
Villanova Departmental Website
Autumn Blalock’s Production Dramaturgy Website

On Campus Resources

**University Counseling Center:** (610) 519-4050

**Center for Access, Success and Achievement (CASA):** casa@villanova.edu

**Villanova Public Safety:** 610-519-4444

**Residence Life: Your R.A. / 610-519-4154**

**Villanova EthicsPoint**
EthicsPoint is an anonymous reporting tool for wrongdoing on campus and is available online or via phone: 855-236-1443

**VU Pride and OASIS**
LGBTQ+ ally groups on campus where all are welcome. OASIS is a confidential group for the LBGTQ+ student community: vupride@villanova.edu and oasis@villanova.edu

**Villanova Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**
Phone: (610) 519-5719, Email: diversity@villanova.edu

Off-Campus Resources

**The Attic Youth Center**
255 South 16th Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102
Provides opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth to develop into healthy, independent, civic-minded adults within a safe and supportive community.

**PFLAG**
The first and largest organization for LGBTQ+ people, their parents, families and allies.

**Black Brain Campaign**
A digital nonprofit focused on making mental health education, resources, and advocacy more accessible for Philly's Black community.

**National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTCN)**
A healing justice organization committed to transforming mental health for queer and trans people of color (QTPoC).
The Revolutionists

Across
3. What does Marie Antoinette give Marianne Angelle before she leaves?
6. The military facility full of weapons that was stormed by Parisians.
8. Who is Marianne Angelle fighting for the rights of?
9. What is Charlotte’s weapon of choice?
10. The name of Marianne Angelle’s husband

Down
1. The last name of the man killed by Charlotte Corday.
2. What is the name of the device used to execute people? (Hint: It is onstage at all times!)
4. What type of document does Olympe bring to the National Assembly?
5. The name of Marie Antionette’s husband.
7. Who does Olympe end up writing her play about?
“Sometimes, a revolution needs a woman’s touch.”

Marie Antoinette, The Revolutionists