

**OLYMPE DE GOUGES**  
*AU*  
TRIBUNAL REVOLUTIONNAIRE.

Olympe de Gouges to the Revolutionary Tribunal.<sup>1</sup>

FORMIDABLE TRIBUNAL that fills both crime and innocence with trepidation, I invoke your rigour if I am guilty but first, hear the truth:

Ignorance and bad faith have finally succeeded in bringing me before you: I never sought such splendour. Happy to serve the people's cause in obscurity, with pride and modesty, I awaited the dignified crown that only posterity can rightly award to those who have earned the recognition of their motherland. No doubt in order to obtain this glittering crown I would have had to be exposed to the darkest persecutions; it needed even more, it needed me to fight calumny and envy and to triumph over ingratitude. A pure and imperturbable conscience; there is my defence.

Blanch, vile informers; your reign will pass like that of the Tyrants. Apostles of a massacring anarchy, I denounced you in the eyes of humanity long ago, that is what you cannot forgive.

Past slaves to the prejudices of the *ancien régime*, forfeited valets of the court, day-old republicans, it ill becomes you to accuse a woman born with strength of character and a truly republican soul; you oblige me to take pride in these advantages, the gifts of nature, of my private life and of my patriotic writings.

Your blood alone can wash away the stains that you have imprinted on the French nation; the law will soon make it flow on the scaffold. By throwing me into the cells you sought to rid yourselves of an observer who damages your plots. Shudder, modern Tyrants! My voice will be heard from the depths of my tomb. My audacity makes you behave worse; it is with courage and the weapons of probity that I ask you to account for the tyranny that you exercise against the true upholders of the motherland.

And you, Magistrates who are going to judge me, get to know me! An enemy of intrigue, far removed from any scheming or from the parties that have divided a France shaken by passion, I have cleared a new path for myself, I have observed through my eyes alone, I have served my country only according to my lights, I have defied the foolish, I have censured the wicked and I have sacrificed my entire fortune to the revolution.

What motive has driven the men who have implicated me in a criminal affair? Hatred and fraud.

Robespierre has always seemed to me to be an ambitious man, with no talent, no soul. He seemed to me ever ready to sacrifice the entire nation to gain his dictatorship; I could not bear this mad and sanguinary ambition and I pursued him as I pursued all tyrants. The hatred of this cowardly enemy has long hidden in the shadows while he and his adherents waited avidly for a favourable moment to sacrifice me to his vengeance.

The French no doubt remember all that I have done that was worthy and useful to the motherland; long ago I saw the imminent peril that now threatens her and, through renewed effort, I hoped to serve her. The project of

<sup>1</sup> This text was written in prison (September 1793) and smuggled out by a visitor to be printed as a poster. Extraordinarily bold and courageous, given that de Gouges was already incarcerated when she produced it; fellow prisoners felt that the poster attacking those in power would lead its writer straight to the guillotine.

the three urns, developed as a poster, seemed to me the only way of saving her; this project has served as a pretext for my detention.

The republican laws promised us that no illegal authority would strike the citizenship; nevertheless an arbitrary act, such as inquisitors of even the *ancien régime* would have blushed to impose on the works of the human spirit, has robbed me of my liberty at the heart of a free people.

Does Article 7 of the constitution not bless the freedom of expression, and of the press, as the most precious heritage of man? These rights, this heritage, this actual constitution, are they only vague phrases with illusory meanings? Alas! That is my sad experience: republicans, pay attention to my words, right to the end.

I have been in irons for a month; I was judged before I was sent to the revolutionary Tribunal by Robespierre's sanhedrin who had decided that I should be guillotined in a week.<sup>2</sup> No doubt my innocence, my energy and the atrociousness of my incarceration have given this secretive council of blood pause for thought; it has understood that it is not so easy to accuse one such as I and that it would be difficult to wash away such an outrage; instead it was only natural to pass me off as mad. Mad or reasonable, I have never ceased to work for the good of my country; you will never be able to efface this virtue and despite yourselves, your own tyranny will diffuse it, indelibly, to the most distant people, but it is your arbitrary acts and cynical atrocities that must be denounced to humanity and posterity. Your modification of my death warrant will, one day, provide an interesting subject for a drama. I will go on pursuing you [to your] infernal cavern where the furies vomit oceans of the poisonous discord that demons will sow throughout the republic, creating the total dissolution of France if true republicans fail to rally around the statue of liberty.<sup>3</sup> A fettered Rome had only one Nero but a free France has a hundred.

Citizens, open your eyes and do not lose sight of what follows:

I myself brought my poster to the neighbourhood bill poster who asked to read it; his wife, who at the time I compared to Molière's servant, smiled during the reading and made signs that she approved; she said it was good and that she would put it up the next morning.<sup>4</sup>

What a surprise I had the next morning! There was no sign of my poster; I went to the aforementioned woman to ask her why there was a problem. Her tone and her grotesque answer surprised me even more: she said that I had misled her and that my poster was singing a different tune today to the one it sang yesterday.

This, I said to myself, is how the wicked manage to corrupt the sane judgement of nature; but, only desiring the good of my country, I persuaded myself to say to this woman that I would myself burn my poster in an autodafé if someone in a position to judge it had told her that it would be damaging to the public good. This event, having allowed me to reflect on the happy circumstances that enabled the *départements* to unite, prevented me from publishing this poster. I passed it on to the committee of public safety to ask for their advice and awaited their counsel as to how to proceed.

<sup>2</sup> The Sanhedrin was the supreme rabbinical council and court of law in Ancient Israel.

<sup>3</sup> The Roman goddess of liberty, Libertas, became a symbol for the American's fighting during the war of independence and was then taken up by the revolutionary French. In 1886 the French nation gifted the Statue of Liberty that stands in New York Harbour to the American people as a sign of friendship.

<sup>4</sup> Molière was in the habit of reading his plays to his maid to ascertain their public appeal.

Two days later I was arrested and dragged to the Town Hall where I found the wise, republican, unfeeling magistrate Marino.<sup>5</sup> All these exceptional qualities, indispensable virtues for a man in such a position, disappeared when I came into view. All I saw was a roaring lion, a frenzied tiger, a furious madman whose feelings had only ever been irritated by philosophical reasoning. Having waited three hours in public for his decree, he said, speaking like an inquisitor to his henchmen: 'Take Madame away in secret and let no one in the world speak to her.'

The day before my arrest I had fallen and injured my left leg; I had a fever and my indignation must have contributed somewhat to make me the most unfortunate of victims. I was shut up in an attic, six foot long by four foot wide, in which was placed a bed; a *gendarme* never left me for a moment, day or night; such indecency was neither evident in the bastille nor in the cells of the inquisition.<sup>6</sup> These excesses prove that the public spirit is quite degenerated and that the French are in sight of their cruel end if the Convention does not expel those men who destroy decrees and totally paralyse the law.

I must however assert that the honesty and respect of these Gendarmes was exemplary; I would even add that my painful situation brought tears to their eyes on several occasions. The fever that raged every night and the swelling of my leg ought to have brought me the well-meaning help of a saintly humanity even had I been a criminal. Ah! My countrymen, I cannot recall this treatment without shedding a tear. You will find it hard to believe that men, these so-called popular magistrates, could have been so ferocious as to refuse, for a week, to call a doctor or to bring me clean linen. My one and only chemise, drenched in sweat, dried on my body over twenty times. A cook from the Town Hall, moved by my predicament, came and gave me one of her chemises. Her goodness was discovered and I heard that the poor girl was bitterly reproached for her humanity.

Some honest administrators were so upset by this treatment that they fixed a time for my interrogation. It is easy to see in these extraordinary interrogations the bad faith and partiality of the judge who questioned me: 'You do not like the Jacobins,' he said, 'and they are not obliged to like you either!' 'Sir', I replied, with the intrepidity of innocence, 'I love the good citizens who make up this society but I do not love those that intrigue.'

I knew in advance that in order to be absolved I must flatter those tigers that are not worthy of being called men; yet the one who has done nothing wrong has nothing to fear. I defied them; they threatened me with the revolutionary tribunal. 'I will wait on you there,' I said to them. My papers had to be sealed. On the ninth day five Commissioners took me to my house. Every paper that fell into their hands was another proof of my patriotism and my love for the most beautiful of all causes. These Commissioners, badly prepared at the outset, were surprised to find so much in my defence and had not the heart to apply the seals; they could not help but agree, in their statement, that all my manuscripts and printed materials exuded patriotism and republicanism. I had to be freed.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Baptiste Marino (1767 – 1794) was a scurrilous orator who used his position as an administrator of the police to seduce female suspects. When put in charge of policing prisons and overseeing public morality he used both situations to enrich himself. He was guillotined on 19 June 1794.

<sup>6</sup> A 'pied' or foot, a French pre-metric unity of length, measured 32.4 centimetres; an English foot measures 30.48 centimetres.

This is where my judges entangled themselves; to retrace their steps and repair a great injustice by begging me to forget my odious treatment is a procedure not fit for abject souls: they preferred to transfer me to the abbey where I have been for three weeks, in one of those rooms where one can see the blood of the victims of the second of September imprinted on the walls, my sensibility is hurt by this painful sight.<sup>7</sup> In vain I avert my eyes but my heart is torn; I die every minute of the day without losing my deplorable life.

This truthful account, so pale compared to the odious treatment I received, will bind the revolutionary tribunal to my cause and put an end to my torments. How surprised they will be, and the majority of the French, when they discover, sadly too late, that my project of *The Three Urns* could save France from the shameful yoke that menaces it; when finally, thanks to one of those grand measures with which providence inspires great souls, I was rousing the honour of a nation and obliging it to rise up in its entirety to destroy the rebels and repulse the foreign enemy. This poster, and my memoir that is too extensive to be placarded, will, by being hand delivered, enlighten the public; yes, my fellow citizens, this height of indignity will serve my country. The price is worth paying so I will no longer complain; I am grateful to the maliciousness that gave me this opportunity.

And you, my son, whose destiny is unknown to me, come as a true Republican and join a mother who honours you, tremble at the iniquitous treatment that she has been made to endure; fear that my enemies will deflect on to you the effects of their calumny. In the newspaper *Observateur de l'Europe* or the *Echo of Liberty* at the *Page of third August* a suborned denunciator's letter, addressed from Tours, states: 'We have here, as our commander, the son of Olympe de Gouges. He was formerly in attendance at Versailles.' It is easy to deny such a gross lie but these machinations are not trying to prove anything they just aim to discredit the reputation of a good soldier. If you have not fallen under enemy action, if fate has preserved you to wipe away my tears, then abandon your rank to those who have no other talents other than calculation or the displacement of men who are useful to the common good; come as a true Republican and demand that the law of an eye for an eye be used against your mother's persecutors.

*Signed, Olympe de Gouges.*

<sup>7</sup> The Abbaye prison, on the left bank of the Seine, was a former military prison; the September massacres were particularly vicious within its walls. The murder of prisoners in Paris by mobs observed, but not prevented, by those in authority started on 2 September 1792 and continued for five days.