

ADRESSE
AU DON QUICHOTTE
DU NORD.

An Address to the Don Quixote of the North.¹

FREDERICK,

I had always imagined that philosophy and wit were more natural in your household than the vain arbitrary power of kings: I also believed the reports saying that the heir of the Solomon of the North, of the man of letters, friend of the arts, would not have embraced the parricidal party of ungrateful children who seek to tear the bosom of their motherland, nor formed an extravagant project to subjugate a great people who, sovereign master of their laws, wanted to regenerate their government.² The only idols they now want are *liberty* and *equality*, without anyone having the right to oppose them. I admit that I believed you incapable of such an attempt, as incredible as it is unfeasible. And if Dumouriez had not confirmed your propositions, your threats, I would treat as myth all that is circulated about you. So now you are vanquished, perfidious potentate, sad slayer of giants, tiny kinglet of a usurped land! Bear the epigram, if you are strong enough; listen to reason, if you can become wise. I am not General Dumouriez, to treat you as a great king, or rather, to mock you royally. Dumouriez is too clever to believe that you are a magnanimous hero given your mad enterprise, so I leave this General to give chase to you. I will teach you who I am; an extraordinary animal, if you will, but of sound mind; one of those beings bowed down for centuries under the yoke of tyrannical male prejudices; suffice it to say I

¹ The date of this work is quite hard to establish, it was probably written a few months earlier than its date of publication which de Gouges's biographer, Olivier Blanc, gives as the end of December 1792. It was attached to another pamphlet written in September 1792, *La Fierté de l'innocence*. My feeling is that the two texts were written within weeks of each other. De Gouges was very exercised by both internal and external affairs and there are similarities between them especially her concerns that foreign influences are undermining French politics. Early September had seen appalling civilian massacres in Paris which she herself had not witnessed being away from the capital but which she condemned on her return a few days later in *La Fierté de l'innocence*. At the same time Prussian advances had threatened the capital and although the enemy troops were defeated on 20 September at Valmy they did not finally retreat from French soil until the end of the month. This text which attempts to persuade Frederick-William II of Prussia to cease interfering in France's affairs and to return home is a response to his invasion but also mentions his defeat. It was probably written in the last weeks of September, or early October. In publishing the two pieces at the end of December to coincide with Louis XVI's trial de Gouges may have hoped to influence public opinion away from the death penalty (whether king or commoner de Gouges abhorred capital punishment and believed the proceedings were nothing but a show trial). Perhaps she hoped that Louis would be seen as a hapless puppet caught between home grown dictators and foreign usurpers, and not worthy of being made a martyr by his death. Whatever her intentions the texts had no effect and despite her best efforts to prove her republican sympathies, along with her ability to talk plainly to royalty, she was still accused of being a monarchist, something that would endanger her life.

Throughout the text de Gouges uses the familiar first person singular 'tu' when addressing her royal addressee.

The author's use of Don Quixote to poke fun at Frederick depends on seeing only the self-aggrandizing and delusional aspects of the fictional character, and not his simplicity and goodness of heart. By making a connection between herself and Cervantes in the title de Gouges is alerting readers to the satirical intent of her work while also demonstrating her familiarity with a wide range of literature.

² Solomon refers to Frederick the Great, Frederick-William's wise uncle from whom he inherited the throne in 1786: the parricidal party are French counter-revolutionary émigrés, several thousand of whom joined with the Prussians and Austrians to attack their homeland.

am a woman, but of those women who equal our great men in virtue and courage and, if you had received these advantages, I would call you my equal. You are a king, in consequence you are small and mediocre: nonetheless I am prepared to talk to you as to a man.

Tell me, if the heavens had created you a citizen, what eye would you cast on the crimes of kings? Do you base your illusory power on the ignorance of men, which has chained them to the chariots of tyrants for so many centuries? Stupidity has disappeared; blessed philosophy has succeeded it. You are nothing more than an empty ghost. Believe me, become a philosopher.

Was it due to the incalculable miseries of peoples that you left your empire, planning to restore a throne collapsed under the weight of its own perfidious crimes, just to satisfy the depravity of courtiers? If you feel in your soul some virtue that is unfamiliar to potentates then yield to the advice of a woman who has never known constraint or imposture: know too that she had the courage to defend her king amidst the perils that threatened him, so long as she believed him to be faithful to his oaths based on the guarantee of his most cherished interests. Do not dismiss the council of a fair and sentient being, a good enough observer to have for a long while prophesied major events. What I would tell you directly would only repeat what is being echoed all around, namely that your people complain of this ill-considered war, of this enormous expense that will crush them through taxation. I fear that this Don Quixoterie will teach you your duty too late: to find clear proof of this, read some of my productions that I have joined to this address.³ Learn that a king has lost his power already once his people complain.

I accept that I have, in my turn, been the Don Quixote of the king of the French; that my days have been threatened several times for having defended him with all the energy at my disposal. I will not condemn him because he is unfortunate; but he misled me, I and half the nation: he only followed the advice of perfidious men, people without scruples whom he employed to dig his own abyss. As for his wife, I will not mention her: a miraculous clemency alone can save her. What then is your intention? To precipitate her torment if you approach the capital? Be convinced: only the flight of the foreigner can save her. That is the only treaty that the French will contract with you and your companions in misfortune: the republic will only pardon them once you have abandoned its States and your allies have fled from the French territory. Believe me, Frederick, if there is still time, be the first to set this example of prudence; secure your unsteady crown; learn from the school of Louis XVI to be a good king, a friend to your people rather than to your courtiers. I will quote these verses of Voltaire that offer you a great opportunity for meditation and instruction:

“The first to be king, was a happy soldier”.⁴

This verse teaches you that fortune and luck, which once made kings, do not make the imprescriptible rights of the sovereign mass of humankind, and when this imposing mass has pronounced, it is the turn of kings to obey. You must agree with me that it is absurd that a single man can ravage society’s treasures and the weight of taxes solely in order to satisfy his deregulated passions? What do you hope will be the fruits of your feeble efforts? Consider for a moment, I beg you. Descend from you pride filled balloon; come down from it carefully, it has lost its direction. If you do not believe me, believe in the

³ *La Fierté de l’innocence* was an attached text, perhaps there were others.

⁴ These lines, ‘Le premier qui fut roi, fut un soldat heurerux’, come from Voltaire’s play *Méropé* (Act 1, scene 3) of 1743. In the play they are spoken by the soldier Polyphonte who adds ‘he who serves his country well has no need of ancestors’. Perceived as powerful meritocratic statements the lines became popular revolutionary slogans though Voltaire’s own message is somewhat more ambiguous given that Polyphante, an unpleasant tyrant, is no hero.

reliable history of the Universe; pause for a moment on the chapter about revolutions. To what deplorable ineptitude are kings thus condemned? They are taught history, but a parasitic and mendacious history, such as corrupt teachers invent, ever diligent in distancing their pupils from the glorious path that the virtuous Fénelon traced for the children of kings; they rock them with a supposed supreme authority that plunges them into a deep sleep: it is only on awaking that the disillusioned kings learn to recognise the causes of revolutions.⁵

Frederick, if you are wise, you will swiftly evacuate our territory and if the offer made by a general no less skilful than courageous, rekindles your ambition to flatten your born enemy, then your own defeat will become a victory in the eyes of your people; but if, like the incomparable Don Quixote of la Mancha, you fight real giants, then I fear that you will not even have a windmill left to retreat to. Your similars had promised you a straight flush in this royal lottery: you will not gain the slightest thing.

You may think that terror is dictating these words to me? You would be maligning me. Assassins and agitators who fill timorous souls with fear do not believe I am that feeble. I defended Louis XVI as long as I believed him to be virtuous but I abhor those citizens who, from other perspectives, want to imitate him and benefit from his remains.

A crowned tyrant, a citizen tyrant are, in my eyes, the ruin of society: however diverse their ambitions, their crimes are equal. Frederick, you will learn to know me better. You know that the sword is still raised over the head of the innocent, as it is over the head of the guilty. Well! You will see me pursue these same assassins, as I pursued the intrigues of the court. I did not want a bloody insurrection; I wanted Louis XVI reduced by the nation in order to regenerate his household: he would still be on his throne: but the master of all things had no doubt decided he was no longer worthy of it; this blessed insurrection of the 10 August cut the Gordian knot that held all good citizens in a state of indecision.⁶ After the tempest, everyone recognised each other, we acknowledged each other and the ideas of 1769 [sic] rallied good souls to the motherland. Louis XVI and his wife were unmasked, why were they not chased away?⁷ And still we have in our society *enemies of public quietude*, monsters who have neither the physique nor the morality of mankind; these monsters are influential; they abuse the public's trust, but the public is just: once disabused it will recognise these perfidious men. These ill-intentioned people strive for dictatorship. Dictatorship! Good God! The dregs of mankind, the dread of humanity!⁸ In the shadows criminality, united and for once in agreement, is preparing troubles that the French Senate will no doubt prevent. Ah! If only a decree could emanate from this modern Areopagus that would unite the family of Louis XVI with these disruptors of society! What a

5 François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon (1651-1715) was a famously erudite bishop and author. Being a sickly intelligent child he took to books and obtained a degree in rhetoric and philosophy aged twelve, preaching his first sermon aged fifteen having decided to enter the Church. During his long and varied career he wrote on the education of girls and was appointed tutor to Louis XVI's grandsons, the eldest of whom was due to become king of France, given that his father had died young. By misfortune this grandson also predeceased Louis XIV who was eventually succeeded by his great-grandson Louis XV.

6 Gordian comes from the legend that Alexander the Great used his sword to slice through a complex knot created by Gordian, king of Gordium, who had prophesied that anyone capable of untying the knot would become the next ruler of Asia. Modern usage implies that a complex problem has been resolved through forceful, immediate, means rather than through deliberation. Olympe de Gouges is being pragmatic about the events of the 10 August which, though brutal and therefore unappealing to her, did mark a watershed moment in the progress of the revolution by ending Louis XVI's reign.

7 1789 is more likely, probably a typesetting error.

8 In the original this sentence ends with a question mark; I think this is another typesetting error.

torment for the wicked, to see themselves reunited.⁹ Let them be banished from our shores so that we may say:

The tide that carried them off ebbs back in horror!¹⁰

That is the only revenge I believe worthy of the French people.

Ah! Frederick, if only I could see this menagerie driven by the ferocious Algonquin Marat, armed with the bleeding whip of the Eumenides!¹¹ Then we could name that land the *Island of Tyrants*. Louis XVI dead, Louis XVI alive, importunes me on the soil reddened by the blood of citizens. His most desperate enemies want to redden it again: I would like to unite them for their pains and save my motherland from their perversity. Do you still believe in my terror? If Jupiter came with his thunder to subdue us, I would say to him: "I defy your thunder, tyrant, and will be buried under the ruins of my country."

I loved the constitution's monarchic government; I believed it to be proper to the national spirit; but, for my own soul, I loved the republican one: learn therefore, according to my lights, to respect this government.

Frederick, this is how a republican woman exhorts her fellow citizens to resist oppression. Should ambition continue to divide us you, along with other tyrants, will be able to dream of defeating us one day. But, if we are united, what will become of you, wandering troops of crowned fantasists? Your arial thrones, your glass sceptres, your titles that resemble the *bons billets de la Châtre*, and all your lunatic hopes are reduced to a *what if*.¹² I will agree with you, philosophically, that our happiness also depends on a *what if*: believe me, in giving you a lesson my aim, if I can, is to frighten the peoples who inhabit the school of tyrants. Summon your reason: stop believing in lying reveries: prudently

9 The Areopagus was a powerful non-elected council of ancient Athens. De Gouges often uses the expression to imply wisdom and integrity of the highest order.

10 This quotation is a splendid example of de Gouges's ability to subvert famous lines to her own ends. The original French words, from Racine's play *Phèdre* (Act V scene 6) are 'Le flot, qui l'apporta, recule épouvanté.' and translates as 'The tide, that brought it in, ebbs back in horror.' The line, spoken by Thérémène in a famous monologue recounting the death of Hippolyte to his father Thésée, refers to an avenging monster sent by Neptune at Thésée's request to kill his own son. De Gouges alters it to reverse the situation (i.e. the monsters are being carried offshore) while encouraging her readership to make the connection between their own time and an extremely well known text that emphasises the dangers of blind fury while also exalting courage in the face of supreme danger. The monster in Racine's play is the catalyst for a tragic end; by suggesting that the present monsters be sent away de Gouges is implying that tragedies can be avoided if considered steps are taken. She is suggesting, as she so often does, that those seeking to disrupt society (irrespective of which party or group they belong to) should be removed from any form of power. She rejoices in the idea of ultra-royalists being sent far away from France along with criminals and firebrands, leaving true citizens to create a better society.

11 The Algonquin are an indigenous people of Eastern Canada. In the 17th and 18th centuries they were in contact with French fur traders and missionaries so the name would have been known to French readers. De Gouges may have used their name as an example of ferocity since they were famed warriors who fought alongside the French to protect Quebec from the English. Eumenides is another name for the Furies of Greek myth, deities of vengeance.

12 'Ah le bon billet qu'a la Châtre' was allegedly said by Ninon de Lenclos on taking up a new lover soon after her previous lover, the marquis de la Châtre, had been sent away to rejoin his regiment; the unfortunate soldier had pressured her to proclaim in writing that she would stay faithful to him. It soon became a phrase expressing lack of faith in an unlikely promise.

leave the French territory. I wish you a good journey. I am, with all the frankness of equality, MARIE-OLIMPE DEGOUGES.