

ARRET DE MORT

*Que présente OLYMPE DE GOUGES,
contre LOUIS CAPET.*

Decree of Death against Louis Capet, presented by Olympe de Gouges.¹

AND I, also, legislators, vote for the death of the tyrant. I vote in a way that is different to the one you pronounced and that I believe to be inevitable. I will not torment my wit to write sentences that will surprise you with their elaborate phrases for in these perilous moments it is facts that are needed; here they are:

Louis Capet as a conspirator, responsible for the victims' blood that flowed to defend the motherland and that reddened foreign soils, no doubt deserves a thousand deaths. I have abandoned the title of his official defender to take up the title of a good citizen which suits me better.

When I offered to defend louis [sic] he had no support, no defence; I imposed on myself this noble task for, looking deep into my soul, I felt that this dignified homage to humanity could only bring peace to my country. I did it to show the factious that I was not writing for the sake of a good deed or daggers.

Legislators, you are familiar with my opinions and I dare say that you have never found them suspect.

I have not left the French senate since the majority pronounced in favour of the death penalty for Capet.² I wanted to hear Brissot and Pétion; I found their speeches surprising. Do their blameless souls (for I like to believe that these two legislators, like the majority of the people's representatives, are without stain) fear that the death or exile of the tyrant will lead to inevitable harm, such as the world has never seen? Republicans, place yourselves above dread and suspicion and then you will save the common good. What! The salvation of the country would depend on Paris! What! The obsequious followers of the foreign powers, in coalition with our common enemies, would await Louis' execution before making themselves known. Can they confront us with such cruel alternatives? What! This long awaited happiness, this republican government that has cost us so much gold, so much blood, this government so anticipated, I say, would fade in an instant only leaving behind bloody rags that would offer nothing for philosophy to say other than that the French were born to live in irons. What! The salvation of the Motherland would depend on the despotism of Paris! Oh! Legislators! Let Paris observe itself, for a terrible responsibility rests on its shoulders; if it does anything to damage your deliberations, propriety or people, it will die.

Legislators, do not be ashamed to imitate a woman whose only fears have been those induced by the dangers facing the Motherland: I rise up against tyranny, can you rise up likewise and inform posterity that all *départements*, all republican armies, all the people of the universe are there to judge Paris as you have judged the tyrant.

¹ This poster placarded around the Tuileries gardens and the Convention buildings on 18 January 1793 was an overnight response to the vote taken by the Convention in a long and dramatic sitting of the days before (10 a.m. on the 16th to 10 p.m. on the 17th January) when a small majority carried the motion for Louis XVI's death sentence.

² The Convention, at that time, sat in a long, narrow, rectangular building that had once served as a riding school. The public were allowed to attend debates and were seated at each extremity of the hall. The ceiling height was considerable which, along with the configuration of the space, made the acoustics impossible except for the most theatrical of orators. It has been said that this favoured the brash speakers for only the loudest could make themselves heard. Attending debates was a popular pastime and huge queues would form as entry was strictly on a first come first served basis; in a republic it was not acceptable to allow entry based on wealth or favouritism. Enterprising people sought to earn a few pennies by standing in line on behalf of others; this was deemed elitist and anti-republican and the ire of those genuinely queuing soon made in unacceptable. De Gouges attended out of political commitment but many of her fellow audience members were only there for the spectacle, picnicking and paying scant attention to the proceedings.

Here now is the death penalty that I will propose for Louis Capet and all his family. I feel that great problems require great remedies. Returning to my role of his willing defender I believe that since Louis incurred the death penalty as a king the sword of justice can no longer strike him as a man. But you have judged him and I will respect my Nation's decree. Now you will discuss a stay of execution. Eh! It would be better to discuss a treaty with the enemy powers and buy, with this culpable head, a peace that favours us and that will spare the blood of all peoples...Can you waver and prefer a fair vengeance, no, French senators, none of you can choose it at such a price. Once the culpable head has fallen it will serve no purpose; this head cost us too much for us to gain no real advantage from it. The European tyrants justify themselves to their people by saying that we are murdering each other, and declaring war on them, in order to usurp their states and their wealth, and that we are dragging our virtuous king to his death. While he lives he can influence their proceedings; once he is dead there will be no brake on their ambition or vengeance. Offer to pardon this criminal on condition that he recognises, in a solemn proceeding, the independent French republic.

By this startling action you will disarm people and confound tyrants. Legislators you dissimulate in vain for the wretchedness of our troops, your lack of finances, the strength of our enemies and all that can show us a terrifying future obliges us to conclude a peace that is shameful for the tyrants, not for us, for they will be only too glad to buy the pardon of one of their own, at the price of a revolution that will cost them dear. Yes, legislators, I am totally convinced that this manifesto, translated from all the languages of the French people into those of Europe, only declares war on kings and will result in a universal insurrection.³ Louis dead will still enslave the Universe. Louis alive will break the chains of the Universe by smashing the sceptres of his equals. If they resist? Well! Let a noble despair immortalise us. It has been said, with reason, that our situation is neither like that of the English nor the Romans. I have a great example to offer posterity; here it is:

Louis' son is innocent, but he could be a pretender to the crown and I would like to deny him all *pretension*. Therefore I would like Louis, his wife, his children and all his family to be chained in a carriage and driven into the heart of our armies, between the enemy fire and our own artillery. If the crowned brigands persist in their crimes and refuse to recognise the independence of the French republic I will sue for the pleasure of being the first to light the cannon's fuse that will save us from this homicidal and tyrannical family. Louis' death will be so glorious it will be worthy of a free people; then it will no longer be said, when speaking of the French, that they were shameful assassins, rather that they were generous men.

³ De Gouges, born in Montauban, came from an area where Occitan was the local language; French, which she probably did not speak regularly until her marriage, was her second language. Although pilloried by some for the poverty of her language skills she was, in fact, quite capable of reading and writing an accomplished French. The oral tradition of her early years imbues her texts with their sense of immediacy. In June 1794 (18 months after the publication of this text) Abbé Grégoire presented a report to the Convention nationale in which he asked for the suppression of all patois across France in favour of one common language. He found thirty active dialects and felt that these represented a feudal system which, though overturned, still shackled the patois speakers by limiting their access to any centralized education, legal system or public life.