

## PRÉFACE

POUR LES DAMES,

*Ou le Portrait des Femmes.*

Preface for the Ladies, or the Portrait of Women.<sup>1</sup>

MY DEAREST SISTERS, it is to you that I dedicate all the failings that teem within my works. May I flatter myself that you will have the generosity or the prudence to defend them, or should I fear from you more rigour, more severity, than from the most austere of our Savants, who wish to invade everything and only allow us the right to please. Men insist that we are fit only to manage a household: women who are perceptive and aspire to take up Literature are Beings that society cannot tolerate: having no function within it, they inspire only tedium. I accept there is some basis for these differing principles but my belief is that women can unite the benefit of wit with household duties, even with the virtues of soulfulness, and the qualities of love: join to these beauty and a sweet nature and there, I accept, you would have a rare example. But who can aspire to perfection? We have no Pygmalion, unlike the Greeks, so therefore no Galatea either.<sup>2</sup> In consequence, my dearest Sisters, we must be more indulgent amongst ourselves regarding our failings, hide them mutually and aim to become more favourable towards our sex. Is it surprising that men oppress it, and is it not our fault? Few women think like men, but there are a some; sadly the greater number pitilessly join with the strongest party, without perceiving that they are themselves destroying the charms of their rule. How much we should regret the passing of that ancient Chivalry which our superficial men deem fantastical for it made women, at one and the same time, respectable and interesting! What pleasure delicate women must derive from the belief in the existence of this noble Chivalry, whilst now they are forced to blush at being born in a century when men seem to enjoy displaying towards women the opposite of these sentiments, so refined and respectful, that ennobled those happy days. Alas! who should one accuse: is it not always our imprudence, and indiscretions, my dearest Sisters? If I imitate you, on this occasion, by revealing our faults, it is only to try and correct them. We all have them, our vagaries and our qualities. Men are organised in more or less the same way but they are more reasoned: they do not share in this rivalry of looks, wit, character, deportment, dress, that divides us and provides their amusement, their education, concerning us. Women in general are all together too full of aspirations, those who are the most advantaged are usually the most insatiable. If one praises just one gift, just one quality, in another woman straightaway their ridiculous ambition makes them discover, in the woman in question, a hundred defects, and even vices if the defects are not powerful enough to destroy the said eulogy. Ah! my Sisters, my dearest Sisters, is this what we reciprocally owe to ourselves. Men certainly tarnish each other a little, but not nearly as much as we do, and that is what establishes their superiority, and maintains all

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<sup>1</sup> This preface appears in the first volume of de Gouges's *Oeuvres* published in 1788: two volumes were available in February, a third in May.

<sup>2</sup> In this early Greek myth, narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the sculptor Pygmalion, finding the women he meets unattractive, creates the perfect female statue. He bestows gifts, and love, on his creation as though she were alive. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, impressed by his devotion and the offerings he brings to her temple, brings the statue (Galatea) to life. The couple marry and are happy forever more.

our inanities. Is it impossible for us to please without deriding our equals? For I make no distinction between the wife of an Artisan who knows how to be respected and the wife of Quality who forgets herself, and who has no more consideration for her own reputation than anyone else's. In whatever circle of women one finds oneself, I wonder if the erroneous ideas are not everywhere the same? The women at Court are the pattern for all the copies in the inferior classes: they are the ones who set the tone for airs, graces and fashions; even up to the Procurator's wife, they all want to imitate these particular airs; epigram and satire can be added to the mix, no doubt with less style and politics than the women at Court, but in one class or the other, they never spare each other the slightest defect. As for the women of the Theatre, ah! I dare not continue, this is where I falter; I would have too many details to develop if I took up the subject. They are universally inexorable towards their sex, that is to say in general, since there is no rule without an exception, but those who take advantage of fortune and reputation, rarely foreseeing appalling misfortune, are intractable from whatever point of view one approaches them: blind regarding their triumph they appoint themselves as Sovereigns and imagine that all other women are just made to be their slaves, to cringe at their feet. As for the Devout women, Oh Good God! I tremble to explain myself; I can feel my hair stand on end; at every moment of the day they profane, by their excess, our saintly laws which are imbued with harmony, goodness and clemency alone. Fanaticism renders womankind even more inhumane: if she could give free rein to her fury she would produce, according to her capability, all the horrors of that cruel day, remembered forever by the French Nation.<sup>3</sup> Oh Women, Women, whatever type, state or rank you belong to, become simpler, more modest, and more generous one to the other. Already I can see you, in my mind, united around me like so many furies pursuing my unfortunate being and making me pay dearly for having the audacity to offer you advice. But I am affected by it so please believe that by giving you the guidance that I doubtlessly need myself, I am also taking my share. I do not endeavour to exercise my knowledge of the human race by exempting only myself: more imperfect than anyone, I know my faults and wage war against them and by obliging myself to destroy them I deliver them up to public judgement. I have no vices to hide, only faults to display. Eh! Where is the one, man or woman, who can withhold from me the compassion that such avowals deserve? All men do not see things in the same way; some approve what others reproach, but in general truth carries the day and the man who shows himself as he is, with no sign of disgrace or viciousness, is always seen in a favourable light. Perhaps one day, without preconception on my part, I will be considered with the esteem that is given to works that are created by the hand of Nature. I can claim to be one of these rare creations; all I have comes from her; I have had no other Preceptor and all my philosophical thoughts cannot root out the imperfections established too strongly by her education. Also, I have often been reproached for not knowing how to compose myself in society; that the impulsiveness of my character shows me at a disadvantage; that otherwise I could be one of those adorable women, if I did not abandon myself so. I have often replied to this verbiage that I abandon myself no more than I compose myself; that I

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1788 two volume bound edition of Madame de Gouges's *Oeuvres* (viewed in both the British Library and the Bibliothèque de Paris) this sentence starts with the words 'Le fanatisme' followed by five lines of dots, the text recommencing at 'O Femmes, Femmes'. It is unclear why this section was deemed unsuitable, or who decided to excise it. The version I have used is in the BNF in Paris and may be from an earlier print run. I have been unable to discover the significance of 'that cruel day'.

only know one kind of constraint, the weaknesses of Nature that humanity can only overcome through effort: and she who tames passion through self-esteem can justifiably call herself, the Forceful Woman.