

DIALOGUE ALLÉGORIQUE

ENTRE

LA FRANCE ET LA VÉRITÉ,

DÉDIÉ

AUX ÉTATS GÉNÉRAUX.

An Allegorical Dialogue Between France and Truth.¹

Dedicated to the Estates-General.

Lords and Gentlemen,

Are there any projects or ideas left to impart to you? As you proceed in your work you will be besieged by an abundance of ideas and projects emanating from the greatest to the smallest literary circles. I had made a promise to myself that I would keep quiet in these circumstances, convinced that you had no need of outside ideas to enlighten your work.

Ardent Author, in the past I have written that which I have deemed necessary for the good of my Motherland. Personal advancement has never motivated me; a public spirit is all that has guided my pen. If I have erred at times let my own blunders be my excuse. May the assembled Nation applaud my views! Suffer, Gentlemen, that an unknown woman, one who wishes to remain so, uses the emblems of France and of Truth to offer you the fruits of her contemplations. The symbolism of this homage must please you and, though you may refute certain hasty or misconstrued ideas, you will no doubt welcome it, seeing only its good intent: this hope already gladdens its writer. It is with such patriotic and respectful sentiments that the Author is,

LORDS AND GENTLEMEN

*the most ardent and zealous
defender of the public worth
of your august Assembly.*

[New page.]

ALLEGORICAL DIALOGUE

BETWEEN

FRANCE AND TRUTH

(France is depicted by a symbol of a superb woman and Truth by the symbol of a naked woman.)

¹ Writing in April 1789 de Gouges uses the rhetorical device of a dramatic scene to highlight her pacifist anti-corruption message.

(France is on the edge of a precipice precariously balanced on a ledge, ready to fall into the abyss that is opening at her feet.)

[Both characters use the familiar 'tu' not the formal 'vous'.]

FRANCE (*crying out,*)
Who will save me?
(Suddenly a well-intentioned hand holds her back.)

TRUTH
Truth: know my voice.

FRANCE
What a happy omen! I can breathe again!

TRUTH
Fear not: the Nation is flying to your aid; I will preside over her august Assembly.

FRANCE
I feel my strength return. So! Truth has finally braved all the lies to snatch me from the peril that menaced my Kingdom for so long.

TRUTH
However extreme the situation, when I am sought I expose the bad, indicate the good and save men from their own rage.

FRANCE
From now on, then, I can have faith in your generous actions and soon observe confidence and self-esteem returning to my subjects and see them all uphold my name and my glory.

TRUTH
The Estates-General manifest themselves only through me and they will soon return you to your original glory.

FRANCE
Alas! I first saw the light of day in the bosom of barbarism. My cradle was besieged by error and ignorance. Fanaticism ruled my infancy and my adolescence was perturbed by civil war. My springtime was beautiful and serene; my summer was troubled from the first by storms and tempests.

TRUTH
This storm, this tempest, is already dispersed, the lightening is now at your feet and, in future, it will only strike again to crush your enemies. O France! You whose resources are envied by the known world, how your fate moves me! What, despite my support, you lower your eyes and would fall back into anxiety?

FRANCE
Caught between fear and hope my soul is suffering too cruelly.

TRUTH

Why doubt your triumph? I reached you ahead of the Nation; see how at her approach the precipice disappears.

FRANCE

Yes: I see the Estates-General, I see the union of the Three Orders, the satisfaction of the Monarch and the happiness of the people. But why do I not see C...or N...come together and unite their talent and wisdom for the good of my State.²

TRUTH

If they could be persuaded to agree the Kingdom would be saved.

FRANCE

August and terrible Truth, tell me what you think of these two Ministers? Both have captivated my reason and my feelings. I would like to unite them and see the two of them placed at the head of the Council. One is banned the other is all-powerful.

TRUTH

I fear that in expressing an opinion concerning them I may be mistaken but you can ask the hagiographers, they leave little to the imagination. All these sad Panegyrist are hardly disinterested souls; they criticize and praise this way or that depending on which way the wind is blowing. The Ministers are like a flotilla broken up by a hurricane, the stricken ships run into each other, crash together and if they reach the port there is always a leader to blame, at least so it is believed. If a good Minister for one moment takes his eye off the tiller he is lost; envy clings on to his wreckage and the paid hacks try and sink him to the bottom. There are no longer any Jean-Jacques among our Men of letters.³ He never courted a pension and no one rushed to offer him one; if he had not met a true gentleman at the end of his career, one who offered him hospitality, this great man would have ended his days in abject poverty surrounded by the great and wealthy in this abyss where vice abounds and virtue rarely triumphs. To the end of his life I nourished his strength and his courage and in my arms he sighed his last whilst still contemplating nature.

FRANCE

The Estates-General will no doubt put a stop to the vice that has slithered into my constitution, safeguard the Ministers for they deserve it and instruct them on their true duties, protect the Parliaments, establish authority, stamp out abuse and disorder, encourage commerce, consolidate the law and eventually make my Kingdom the most flourishing on earth. But to maintain good order I need irreproachable men who, regardless of the Estates-General, could parry the troubles that might arise. Is it conceivable that the Administration could be good if there are no men of genius, no great politicians and no decent financiers to lead it? So, what should the assembled Nation do to consolidate my Kingdom?

TRUTH

They will make fewer changes than one thinks. The happiest States have been those that respected the laws established by their fathers where each is assured of their property rights and, thanks to the wisdom of these helpful and humane laws, appropriation is prevented as are the riots that lead to despotism or Anarchy. No doubt under another Monarch the French would be incapable of uniting. Yet nothing can affect the goodness

² De Gouges is referring to Charles Alexandre Calonne (1734 – 1802) and Jacques Necker (1732 – 1804). Both men were separately called upon by Louis XVI to be the kingdom's Controller of Finance, both men attempted reforms which failed due to the nation's huge debts and the impasse trying to raise revenue through taxation, both were sacked.

³ The writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who died in 1778.

and clemency of a King who is a man altogether fair, generous and humane. It is not thanks to the enlightenment of his subjects, it is not thanks to his Ministers that the Estates-General have appeared at his Court without harm or civil war but thanks to his great regard for the common good and for the welfare of his people that we owe him the peace and well-being of all Citizens.

FRANCE

What excessive claims are these from the futile law-reformers who fail to see the difficulties that destruction and renewal can bring? By undermining the foundations of the old constitution they are undermining public order and the general good. They want to subjugate everything: they want to confound everything: is this the remedy that will bring about my restoration? They exhaust me and irritate me without understanding my malaise and without seeking the right means to restore my health. I've waited, I've languished, I've weakened for so long. Finally the Estates-General will bring me comfort and restore me to my former splendour.

TRUTH

I hope so but after this excellent work you will have to watch over your Ministers. Before taking up their positions they are full of genius and virtue but hardly have they begun their work than their noble maxims disappear to make way for intrigue and favours.

FRANCE

How will the National debt be paid? By borrowing from my people who are already ruined?

TRUTH

No, fear not, your people will be let off. I see only two taxes that will not crush anyone, the territorial tax and the voluntary tax. If the first had been adopted doubtless all would now be prosperous: indecision lasted too long. Confidence has been lost but all will be renewed.

FRANCE

Or all will be lost. My Kingdom is in equilibrium yet powers are overthrown; the Nation is assembled but I fear that at the heart of the union there will be division.

TRUTH

What an appalling prognosis. Have more faith in the French elite.

FRANCE

I am allowed to fear for my last moments. It is my own children who assassinate me.

TRUTH

Not all are ungrateful or unnatural and even among the wicked there are those that will defend you to their last drop of blood.

FRANCE

Whatever blood is spilt in order to save me it is, nonetheless, the very blood that flows through my veins and by spilling the blood of my children you are laying waste to mine. I will die with them if the majority does not contribute to my felicity.

TRUTH

In the past the Estates-General were only convened to inform all Citizens of their particular interests but now any Citizen presumes to instruct the Nation on all that may be achieved or undertaken. Out of this storm of chaotic and bizarre ideas the thoughts of one woman can be seen arising. These can be read without fear for they will not increase the revulsion for all that has gone before.

FRANCE

What can be done if a woman is not as esteemed as a politician in this frivolous and egotistical century? A truly patriotic heart will find virtuous projects and make felicitous discoveries. The histories of all countries prove well enough that women are not always ineffective.

TRUTH

There are no women like men; they don't devote themselves to the Motherland because they have to make too many sacrifices. In this matter, whether it's strength of character or oddity of gender, it makes no difference.

FRANCE

This sex, forever subordinated, has always sought to do battle with the one that constantly sought to dominate. It seems that it is only allowed to make itself heard at times of crisis. It is unjust of men to refuse admittance to women into the affairs of state and to refuse to give up some of their powers when women would be more than able to use them wisely.

TRUTH

I don't altogether agree with you. Maybe you take more interest in this sex than I do. Its enthusiasm, its projects that are at times ingenious, have been a great resource for your Kingdom. I think it fair to encourage it but one must be wary of letting it participate in vital affairs. While it lacks authority it might create a few miracles. If it were all-powerful it would, at every turn, make mischief.

FRANCE

What? You would reject its projects even though they are beneficial to my State and my People?

TRUTH

No that is not what I mean. It would be unfair to stifle women's discoveries when they only seek to work for the good of the Motherland, and a barbarous cruelty to reject them.

FRANCE

I see! They can only triumph in silence?

TRUTH

Their satisfaction is good enough; a woman who sees the fruits of her valuable labour prosper in the hands of men is suitably rewarded.

FRANCE

What! Not the slightest thanks, no badge of distinction! No shred of a ribbon of merit! Yet so often men obtain honours and nobility by just writing a Eulogy or Comedy. Surely it is right that a woman who works ceaselessly for the good of her country merits not only the esteem of all men but also a few marks of distinction. I know one who, like a Roman matron, would sacrifice herself to save her country.

TRUTH

And your country would do nothing to save her! Glory and patriotism have made intrepid heroes of men but when the same glory and patriotism take hold of a woman's mind no peril, however terrible, can stop her. As long as women devote themselves to the common good their feelings are immutable despite their changeable nature.

FRANCE

Let us go together and preside over the workings of this august Assembly. Let us confound the seditious and create a memorable harmony amongst the three Orders. Let us eradicate their rivalries and allow only love of what is good to dictate status. Let us unite opinions so that, following the Estates-General, the four corners of the Earth will be forced, forever, to admire and respect the French. I depend on your presence for everything, oh noble Truth. I have no other foundation than your virtue. Let us stifle deceit and artifice and banish them forever from my Kingdom.

TRUTH

I alone can render your States and your Government secure, ensuring the rights of the Nobles and the Clergy and the happiness of the Third Order. If the Nation continues to esteem me as it does now I can promise you a steady prosperity; I will depict you on the brink of the precipice from which I have just snatched you; the Nation will see that all the French would fall off it with you. If discord enters into the Nation's debates I hope that it will be moved so that the love of doing good, rather than partisan feelings, brings concord to the least altercation. Yet in order to prevent harm and consolidate the good through indissoluble ties, the Nation needs to declare itself against the Ministers who might, in the future, move away from the public good and the interests of the State. On taking office I want them to closely examine the state of affairs that they encounter and then examine the same when they leave so that the irreparable idiocies of those that went before cannot be seen to impact on the decent administration of those that have succeeded them. If I am heeded your government will once again be the greatest and wisest in Europe. I will leave Necker at the head of the Finances, and it is up to the wisest in the Nation to decide who should be head of the Council; I want the Nation to take charge. I am not political enough to choose the right party.

FRANCE

May your redoubtable voice penetrate the heart, the soul and the spirit of the Estates-General and unite into one body the three Orders. But, alas! If one of them insists on some prejudice or preference at this time of crisis, if the Clergy, Nobility and the Third Estate are not like-minded, I am lost. Judging by this renowned Assembly, I will collapse with no hope of arising anew.

[new page]

A USEFUL AND SALUTARY PROJECT

I have written on behalf of my Motherland, I have written on behalf of the unhappy People.

In harsh seasons and when times are calamitous the quantity of workers who suffer is astonishing. Doubtless it is terrible for the human race if a large number of men who would benefit the State perish, too cruelly, in dire misery: yet it is even more dangerous to offer them too much help.

The unfortunate have to suffer a long time before the altruists offer them their largesse. Why, amongst the French, is everything a matter of indifference, chaotic extremes, fury, enthusiasm or cruelty?

Educated men find it hard to control their impulses once their heads are exalted: how, therefore, can the people in their fury know any bounds? They slit throats, they cruelly commit arson, they laugh as they give themselves up, in these moments of horror, to the greatest excesses of debauchery and in this state of murderous drunkenness, this unbridled populace finds its own cruel end.

The remarks concerning the workers made by Réveillon and the King's saltpetre officer were responsible for this terrible catastrophe; this disastrous event shows, only too well, how hard it is to do good and how all Citizens must fear suggesting it.⁴ The populace is, in general, unjust, ungrateful and ends up rebellious.

The people must be helped in calamitous times but if one gives them too much at other times it only encourages laziness and any resourcefulness is destroyed. These gifts are then a danger.

No doubt the Deputies in all the Provinces have set up Establishments or a tax on trade, the fruits of which would be given out to unemployed workers in harsh seasons or at times of scarcity.

I will not expound on this subject; my ideas are good, if I lack anything it is in the method. But the Nation will not provide enough.

If a voluntary tax is taken up I daresay that a National Purse would be created sufficient to receive the deniers devoted to clear the debts of the State. This more or less resembles my project. It warms my heart and it feels most gratifying to have been the first to propose such a venture, even before the creation of the Estates-General.

I will not mention the other taxes that I also proposed in my *Letter to the People* and in my *Patriotic Observations*.⁵ If some of them are considered adequate enough to be put in place the Nation will not fail to implement them whatever the sex of the author.

True wisdom knows neither prejudice nor preconception; only truth itself holds any interest, and general well-being is its only guide. It is therefore to this wisdom that I submit the fruits of my reflections. I urge it to glide over the mistakes that fill these works but to stay a moment with the noble maxims that embellish it and that characterise the aims of the author. It is to be hoped that the Nation will find food for thought in these three patriotic works for which the creator expects no reward other than the realization of a project founded on humanity. As for the one concerning the patriotic theatre that is to be found in the last chapter of *The Primitive Happiness of Mankind*, it is up to the Nation to decide if it is suitable.⁶

All good Citizens agree that for France to return to her rightful constitution it is vital to start re-instating decent social manners.

It should be possible to find a method not devoid of interest, and what can be more salutary for mankind than the pursuit of pleasure? Where are the theatres nowadays that provide a moral education? All of them merely flatter and encourage vice. These terrible 'boards' are the downfall of the people. A workman will go without a crust, abandon his work, his wife and his children to run to Nicolet's, Audinot's, the Variety, the Beaujolais, the

4 Réveillon was in charge of the royal wallpaper manufacture. In April 1789 he suggested lowering the wages of his workforce. The ensuing riot led to a confrontation between the royal troops and the workers in the faubourg Saint-Antoine and surrounding areas resulting in considerable bloodshed. During the Ancien Régime the salpêtrier du roi was a court official responsible for collecting saltpetre throughout the kingdom. His officers were authorised to enter houses and scrape down any walls covered in this substance vital to the munitions industry. The salpêtrier du roi, who was well rewarded, was both feared and envied for his position.

5 Two pamphlets by de Gouges that predate this one.

6 De Gouges is referring to her work published in 1789 extolling the virtues of prehistoric society as the source of natural happiness for mankind. She includes within it an essay in which she proposes a new form of theatrical training which would specifically aim to redress the lack of female power and participation within the profession.

effortless comedies and countless others who oppress the people, corrupt morals and damage the State.

The Nation will definitely not neglect this article for it may be the most vital; if the unshakeable foundation of a State's well-being, and that of its people, has always been a decent religion then a theatre with actresses of an unimpeachable character would suit a society of civilised men, would encourage virtue and undermine libertines. It would become obvious in less than ten years that a good play is truly able to educate the world. Everyone knows that Doligny was not alone in being an actress who was as irreproachable in her actions as in her conduct. Also Mademoiselle Doligny was always respected and young men who appreciated her in her roles went home with a decent notion of women and marriage, hoping that one day fate would unite them with a woman as interesting as this actress such was her compassion, her impressive, decent, noble demeanour. Can one deny that if the actresses of a patriotic theatre were to combine their talents with the virtues of Mademoiselle Doligny then their good example would influence all other performances?

I have spent quite enough time discussing frivolous affairs, though maybe today this frivolity is in fact the most important subject. If it is true that Entertainment is useful to States, and that it can be created for the amusement and the instruction of mankind then, no doubt, the Government and the assembled Nation will approve my theatre.

What truly interests me, and is pertinent to all my sex, is a private house, an establishment lacking in France, which would be forever memorable. Alas! Women, too wretched and too weak, have always lacked true protection. Condemned from the cradle to an insipid ignorance, ambition discouraged since childhood, overwhelmed by the innumerable troubles that nature sends, we are too miserable and too unfortunate. It is inevitable that we will hope, one day, that men will come to our rescue.

This lucky day is upon us.

Since the Kingdom is settled and since most people are enthusiastic, this longed for day has brought back tranquillity and all the French are, today, less agitated: one must hope that the assembled Nation is perfectly in accord with the popular good intentions of the Monarch.

O Citizens! O Monarch! O Nation mine! May my feeble voice resound in the depth of your hearts! May it allow you to recognise the frail destiny of women. Who among you can hear these words without shedding tears? Who among you has not been a father, who among you has not been a husband, who among you has not seen his daughter or his wife in pain or prey to cruel suffering?

How many troubles without end do young women suffer to become nubile? Women have to experience such appalling torments to become mothers. How many of them lose their lives in the process?

There is no skill that can bring them any relief and frequently one sees young women, who have suffered day and night in extreme pain, dying in the arms of their midwives and giving, in death, life to men who, until now, have not shown the slightest inclination to take the problems of this unfortunate sex seriously despite the torments they have caused them.

Men have spared nothing, neglected nothing, in order to provide for themselves some succour. They have founded several Establishments, the Invalides for the Military, the charitable Home for Nobles, and the one for the poor supported by the rich or by the great and the good.

This same humanitarian spirit must now render them generous and protective towards the sex that has pleaded for so long and is, in disastrous circumstances, seen as being equal to the worst of the race. This sex, I believe too wretched and for too long subordinated, begs me, inspires me, touches me and obliges me ask the Nation for a special charitable Home open only to women.

This Home should be exclusively open to soldiers' wives who lack an income, to honest gentlewomen, to traders and artists; in a word all women who have lived an honest and comfortable life but who have been deprived of all help by some reversal of fortune. Misery often leads them to the brink of death or they become so sick that they can no longer be cared for at home. They are taken to the Hôtel-Dieu where a gentlewoman will find herself amongst beggars, with girls of bad character or with a populace in direst condition.⁷ Just the name of the Hôtel-Dieu must terrify them and as their eyes light on this sad picture, they beg for death rather than seek refuge in this place.

A Hospital must be provided for the people and by establishing a charitable Home for gentlewomen the Hôtel-Dieu will be relieved of its overwhelming burden. Can there be a more favourable or humanitarian edifice than this charitable Home to alleviate the sufferings of gentlewomen?

I will describe the dialogue of a Deputy of the Estates-General. In his opinion the town gates were no longer necessary. He was asked what would become of the town walls and superb gatehouses, home to the administrators.

They will fall of their own accord, he answered. What will become of all these stones? Basic Hospitals, so much better for humanity. Palaces erected to protect the rights of individuals which will be no less sacred once each person is aware of what he owes to his Sovereign and to the protection of his motherland.

I request, therefore, a few stones on behalf of the most affecting women in our society. These gentlewomen are not expecting the generosity and the humanity of the Nation to offer them sumptuous apartments or gilded panelling but rather a type of Hospital which will not doubt be given a decent name and will be a simple Home, whose cleanliness will be its own luxury.

This is what true women must expect from the men instructed and chosen by the motherland. Who would not support this establishment? Who would oppose and prove himself to be a bad brother, an ungrateful son and an unnatural father? No, undoubtedly, Lords and Gentlemen, none of you will oppose it, and with a unanimous voice you will applaud this project.

Far from your Homes, your daughters and your spouses, could you possibly disregard nature and forget all that you owe to women? No: they can only be of interest to you. The affairs of State that preoccupy you could, perhaps, prevent you from immediately bringing attention to this Establishment but, once the State is liberated and the constitution well established, you will give to a suffering humanity, and to nature, all that you owe to each one.

Allow me, Sirs, after having pleaded the cause of my sex, to place at the foot of your Tribunal a few important observations that could not displease you.

Remember that you are responsible for the welfare of the Motherland, that all your fellow Citizens have entrusted you with their most cherished concerns, that for too long France has been in a state of deterioration and that you must promptly support it. The answers are in your hearts, but beware, Sirs, of heads that are too exalted, too enterprising, ever supposing that there were such amongst you. To preserve your rights, do not in any way lessen the Royal authority: let each day that you assemble be one of respectable work; establish Laws to assert a productive tranquillity; through constant harmony astonish all the French; and may you, finally grant us, with the wisdom of our fathers, knowledge, instruction and genius; then in the coming centuries your Assembly will be known among all the Peoples of the world, as the marvel of the French Nation.

⁷ The Hôtel-Dieu hospital next to Notre Dame, founded in 651 CE, became a well-known charitable institution in medieval times caring for the poor and dispossessed as well as the sick. It increased its medical care in the 1700s; by 1789 (having been partially destroyed by fire in 1772) it was a byword for overcrowding, discomfort and disease.