

LE CRI DU SAGE,
Par une Femme.

The Call of the Wise One, *by a Woman.*¹

It is time to cry out; common sense and wisdom can no longer remain silent; finally it is time to tell the Nation that it must decide, without delay, to do just one thing, otherwise it will too easily drag the Kingdom to its downfall, it will forever destroy any security and the damage will be incurable.

The French of old only sinned through an excess of ignorance; the modern ones spoil everything by having learnt too much.

By dint of having so many enlightened ideas they find themselves, at present, appallingly confused.

The Motherland, waiting patiently to be saved by their wisdom and initiative, is painfully aware that they cannot come to an agreement and that they are close to that fatal moment when they will become the derisory myth of Europe.

Yes, Gentlemen, your discord will not only set ablaze the four corners of France, but it will also provoke our enemies and encourage them to attack us; your failing will lead to our downfall. May you read with close attention the *Letter to the People*, the *Patriotic Observations* and, especially, the *Primitive Happiness of Man*, and follow the Chapters with as much speed as I reached the Reign of Louis XVI, and take note that despite this haste, one can stop and consider those passages that offer observations that are as useful as they are salutary.²

I have long been an observer of men; I have had to admit that most of them have desiccated hearts, abject souls, are weak spirited and embody the spirit of evil.

Can one, these days, without blushing, declare oneself to be a man and believe oneself superior to our wise ancestors; those noble French Knights who defended both the Motherland and its Damsels?

Oh happy times, now considered to have been mythical eras, if only you could return among us and give the French the vigour that they lack to make them once again a formidable people respected by all!

I want to find the root of this vice without betraying, if possible, either my sex or my character. The effort is painful; and whatever it may cost me to uncover the sex that has unmasked itself, I will betray it at this point in time in order to serve it better one day.

Oh Women! What have you done? What have you created? Did you imagine that by throwing yourselves at men you would maintain your influence; it is gone, and your natural grace has gone too, along with that noble modesty that made women of old so touching and so dear to men's eyes.

You have abandoned the control of your households, you have cast your children away from your maternal breasts; given up to the care of corrupt servants they have learnt to hate you, to despise you.

Oh sex both seductive and perfidious! O sex both feeble and all-powerful. Oh sex, in the end, betrayer and betrayed! Oh you, who led astray the men who punish you today for this betrayal by scorning your charms, your attacks and your renewed

1 The Estates-General officially met for the first time since 1614 on 5 May 1789; de Gouges participated in this historic moment as an onlooker. The pamphlet, like a modern-day blog, was her immediate response to this momentous event in French history.

2 De Gouges is referring to three of her works that predate this one.

efforts! Where is your steadfastness now? Men have been educated by the example of your deviousness, your craftiness, your irrelevance; and now they have finally become women themselves.

Can one witness without pity the impertinence of our young men, the superficial attitude of our old men to major events or the extravagance of men of the age of reason without crying out against this century and against these conventions.

There is still talk of virtue and patriotism; if either one or the other existed, they would have made themselves felt at the Estates-General; all the *cahiers* would be combined, and the three Orders, together, reunited could only speak for the common good.³

But if in this Assembly the partisan spirit takes the lead over decency, reason and justice, then these Estates-General that we have yearned for, for so long, will only be reunited in order to spread discord. [But no, the partisan spirit will lead astray decency, reason and justice; and these Estates-General that we have yearned for, for so long, will only be reunited to spread discord.]⁴

I predicted this; may my prediction be wrong and expose me as a bad prophet; but, on the other hand, I would gain the title of good citizen.

Gentlemen, you must reassure the impatient public.

What can restore calm if not your union? What can finally establish a sense of security and allow commerce to flower again if not the harmony of your Assemblies; in order to be of one accord you must sling out your particular affectations, convince the Third-Estate that they are not entitled to create new laws on their own and show the Clergy that they must rid themselves of both their extravagantly high positions and the major part of their prerogatives.

Persuade the Nobility that it is an injustice, a flagrant vexation, to refuse to sit with the Third Estate as though there were invincible barriers between these two Orders.

Not a day goes by without a penniless Noble soliciting the hand of a young lady of the Third Estate. There are few young ladies of illustrious blood who have not mixed this blood with that of the Third Estate; and in this moment of distress, in this moment of calamity, Gentlemen, you fear mixing your ideas with men who may well be your equals.

May honour speak to you, may the good of the motherland be your guide; without the loss of your titles and positions, you can still be the equal of your brothers, their superiors in modesty, for you will renounce at the moment of union your rank and those rights that belong to it and that should be sacred at all other times but that are unjust and out of place in this revolution.

There, Gentlemen, is what needed to be said to the three Orders.

I dare say that these observations will not displease you given the good intentions that inspired me.

I see that panic has again taken hold of peoples' minds, that confidence is losing ground every day and that all is becoming desperate.

Let us hope, meanwhile, that an auspicious crisis will take place before too long among the Estates-General; I cannot deny it, my fear that the Nation will be lost and will drag down my Motherland has taken me out of myself. I cry out, I throw myself forward, and my zeal will pierce through any prejudice.

Women may be excluded from all National Assemblies, but my well-meaning spirit carries me forth into the centre of this Assembly and will tell it firmly that the great

³ The 'cahiers' were presented by the Third Estate to express their particular disaffection. Thousands were collected from all over France, in general they were reasonably moderate with a consensus for the abolishment of feudal systems, equality of taxation and a fairer justice system.

⁴ Two versions of this pamphlet exist. This paragraph and the end of the piece are slightly different: alternative or extra text given in square brackets.

honour of the first French Lords was founded on the good of the Motherland and that in leaving aside these noble principles it [the Assembly] is moving away from the heart of the Nation.

If reason gives way to self-regard, then no doubt, Gentlemen, you will condemn this work; but the author has too high an opinion of your noble conduct not to hope that your true sentiments will overwhelm this self-regard, and if, in this instance, the imperious style is a reflection of the writer's sex, it is because it was felt that great projects must be presented to remedy great problems. If the writer's patriotic zeal has been excessive be assured that the respect and the esteem that are your due, Gentlemen, ensures the author's return to the guiding principle that makes modesty essential ⁵ [one version ends here].

One of two parties must give way, in all likelihood the Clergy will follow the impulse of the Nobility.

Should the Third-Estate abandon its path? Should the Nobility let go of its prejudicial opinions; are these opinions not the glory and support of the French Monarchy?

One cannot deny that the '*cahiers*' of the third Order must have revolted the Nobility, but in the end, everything can be returned to decency, and the first to cede, Nobility or Third-Estate, will always remain the patriotic party to whom France will owe her salvation.

⁵ In this sentence de Gouges uses the masculine pronoun 'il' throughout as it refers back to the 'author' and does not in any way signify the gender of the actual writer. It is not possible to do this in English so I have, clumsily, rephrased the sentence to make it neutral given that de Gouges enjoyed the ambiguity that French affords. A more accurate translation would be: At the same time be assured, Gentlemen, that if his patriotic zeal has carried him too far, the respect and esteem that are your due restore to him his guiding principles and he recognizes that modesty must be central to his nature.