

DISCOURS

DE L'AVEUGLE

AUX FRANÇAIS.

Par Madame de GOUGES.

*The Blind Man's Speech to the French. By Madame de Gouges.*¹

Fate has deprived me of deep knowledge; I have sought the truth by feeling my way. In this memorable era I believed it necessary to place it once again under the eyes of the French.

My *Letter to the People* was my first attempt and became, in time, a master stroke; it calmed minds; it filled French hearts with the love and respect they have always felt for their prince, all citizens will soon cite it.² It is certainly not my profound learning, nor my skilled writing, that attract attention; simple patriotism is the only merit of this text.

The *Patriotic Observations*, that I publicised, were no less successful but *The Primitive Happiness of Man* that closely followed my second production, was beset by a mass of criticism.³ Envy had attached itself to my body of work like a leech to the skin of humans. Deciding to write on a philosophical subject, which is the preserve of wise men and philosophers alone, exposed me to the most bitter criticism; whatever the criticism, whatever the weakness of my sex, one cannot deny that within *Primitive Happiness* one can find great truths that are, perhaps, only too relevant to the misfortune of France.

This *Primitive Happiness* offers lessons to all men but they believe themselves to be too wise, they think they have nothing left to learn, especially from a woman who knows nothing definitively.

If the sciences improved men and made them more coherent I would regret not having been instructed, but since my ignorance arouses within me every virtue, I congratulate myself on having never been enlightened by men.

Therefore let me be considered as a blind man that nature has always taken care to guide; with this good mother I will speak to the French on this matter for the seventh and last time.

I preach righteousness to a famous people; I will again speak in favour of my motherland, and may my zeal and love for it, return the French to a fraternal union.

1 From early May 1789 when the deputies of the Estates General were presented to the king to June 27 1789 when they were officially constituted as the National Assembly every moment was marked by disagreement and tactical rivalry. In this piece, written in June just days before the creation of the National Assembly, de Gouges is yet again begging the men in power to abandon their personal prejudices and unite as a group for the benefit of their country and the welfare of its citizens. Personal interests have no place in these debates, the problems to consider are too urgent. It is interesting to see how she fears, at this stage, the involvement of women in the process. Given that they will be, by and large, from Versailles's Court circles she assumes that they will encourage a similar atmosphere of frivolity and incite the men to swagger rather than attend to serious matters with clear heads. At this stage she supports the monarchy, as most people did, believing that the plight of citizens struggling in a harsh financial climate was more pressing than constitutional change.

2 *Lettre aux peuple, ou projet d'une caisse patriotique* is de Gouges's earliest political pamphlet written in November 1788. She was the first to suggest that citizens offer voluntary donations to ease the state's financial burdens. This communal act would bring cohesion to a fractured nation. It was implemented later without de Gouges being credited for her insight.

3 In *Remarques patriotiques* of December 1788 de Gouges proposes sensible social and agrarian reforms, as well as suggesting a wealth tax a century before it was implemented. In early 1789 she published *Le Bonheur primitif de l'homme*, a long essay that presents a creation myth and compares this original utopian world and its decline to her own times.

I have previously attacked their frivolity; I have waged war on the depravation of manners; I have not spared women.

When wickedness demands prompt and efficacious remedies the good physician goes to the heart of the matter and does not scramble his prescription with ambiguous and unctuous phrases; an eagerness to heal his patient guides his pen.

The desire to unite minds and turn them towards the public good has always been my rule; calumny and deceit have never been able to discourage me. Nothing can tear me from the path I have cleared for myself. That is my excuse; these are my defects, more powerful than any reasoning since they come from a source prior to my reason. This zeal and this patriotism, in this circumstance, are not out of place, at least so I believe.

FIRST PART.

For six weeks the nation has done nothing useful; it has used this precious time in debates, in strange or generalised arguments; the Chamber of Commons has at last made a dash; may this dashing approach save France from the danger that threatens it!⁴ The nobility, who is no less determined to defend its rights than the third estate is to have its own validated, and the Chamber of Commons have both reciprocally decided to withdraw from the heart of the meeting: to vote by order or by head, that is the great question.

What matter to the King, what matter to the afflicted citizen, what matter to the unhappy people that one deliberates by head or by order. Eh! Gentlemen, deliberate as you deem fit, as individuals, as a group, or any other way but at least deliberate for the common good and then you can deliberate on your own claims.

But what cannot be revealed without pain, and is the responsibility of men who cannot be inculpated without wounding their sacred character, is the indifference of the clergy, their lack of activity in bringing together the two orders of public good.

What? These fathers of the church, these consolers of the afflicted, these ministers of peace, whose duties consist only of supporting the foundations of religion, see the debates of the nobility and third estate without becoming mediators? Does religion, within the Estates General, excuse them from following its religious principles? But no, religion and the clergy only desire the good of the people and the welfare of the state; let us rather believe that the clergy, in their hearts, are seriously occupying themselves with means to swiftly reunite the two orders. May this gratifying hope dissipate our fears, and may all good citizens arm themselves with renewed courage.

If it [courage] were to fail in its attempts, and the three orders continued to put forward their workings individually, if they did not gather to deliberate on the interests of the people, on the major objects of government, and on the nature of taxes that must be raised to clear the national debt then I predict that the authority of the king, as the premier legislator of the law, would force him to interpose his superior power. What a cruel extremity for the wisest of monarchs! What a harsh necessity for the best of fathers: to save his children he would be lost with them.

SECOND PART.

⁴ The clergy, the nobility and and the Third Estate met on 5 May 1789 as the Estates General. The three orders were due to sit in separate rooms but the next day the Third Estate declared that they would occupy a communal space and that all deputies, irrespective of order, should be verified en masse. They named themselves the Assembly of Commons to indicate their connection to the people. De Gouges uses the term Chamber of Commons (Chambre des Communes) to refer to the Third Estate in this instance and later points out that they are aping the English system to no advantage.

The authoritative act is either their famous meeting on 20 June 1789 in the Jeu de Paume where the deputies swore to remain united until they had created a new constitution (Tennis Court Oath) and/or their response to the King officially refusing to sanction these decisions on 23 June when they proclaimed the inviolability of their Assembly.

The Chamber of Commons has just passed an authoritative act and proposes to forge ahead. They are new pygmies who have just taken giant strides, they will become, in fact, all powerful if they avoid inciting either lightning or a storm, if the nobility and the clergy, without losing their rights and their dignities, contribute to relieve the state, to ease it, to pay like other citizens; but the greater and bolder is the enterprise the more difficulties are placed under the eyes of the wise.

The French monarchy has foundations that one cannot change without bringing down the state, the throne and the citizens' happiness.

Fourteen centuries of work have only improved its good constitution yet there is talk of changing it, and we are assured, in this century of selfishness, that our descendants will congratulate themselves on this revolution. What times! What manners! What spirit! Our successors, then, will be proud of having had us as fathers. We are making shackles for them and the French, weighed down by irons, will be as frivolous as ever so long as they remain French.

When one should be occupied only with pressing interests, why consider those of men in the future who will no doubt behave better than us? Let the nation only work to remedy the wrongs that increase every day. Commerce is annihilated, justice poorly administered, the worker unemployed, the poor with no alms, the rich with no humanity, the shopkeeper a robber or robbed, everyone refusing to pay, bank assets having no more value, prices kept exorbitantly high to weaken solid assets, the kingdom devoid of grain, general disorder and extreme poverty: those, I believe, are more than enough problems to seriously focus the attention of the Estates General.

But should one direct such an important enterprise in the midst of a frivolous public. The Chamber of Commons means to imitate the English without considering that what suits the English makes the French ridiculous. Therefore it must be made aware that its assemblies should be less public except on days when the King and the ministers are attending.

It would be shameful for this order, that includes really wise men, if its tumultuous and confused assemblies prevented them from making their observations.

The women who every day augment this Court have already broken barriers; they will soon reach the deputies' benches; it is said, it is assured and I fear it.

Those who are blessed with eloquence, with a gracious voice, will ceaselessly propose that the public be admitted to their assemblies, especially the ladies. One will often hear a famous orator request to speak, persuaded that the public will listen to him attentively, but at the same time he forgets that if he uses his skills poorly, he will never again be seen as anything but a ridiculous man.

Personalities, puns and sarcasm must be forbidden in this assembly. A noble and decent attitude must be consistent with their functions then the Chamber of Commons will obtain, in this circumstance, the title of the world's second Areopagus, from which will come only maxims and concepts that will forever be an example to the universe.⁵ At its head is a man of substance, of merit, who joins to these talents the reputation of being an honest man, and once again attracts the public's attention. He fills his role with an august zeal; his tone is always noble, decent and never out of place despite the difficult circumstance which must add to his glory and the general esteem that M. Bailly has obtained for so long.⁶

5 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.

6 Jean Sylvain Bailly (1736 - 1793) an astronomer and man of science took up politics and was first elected president of the Constituent Assembly, then mayor of Paris. He officially welcomed Louis XVI to Paris on 17 July 1789 after the fall of Bastille; a hero of the early revolution but constantly attacked by Marat and Desmoulins he lacked the authority or popularity to be effective so resigned in 1791 (after the disastrous July Champ de Mars massacre) staying in place until Pétion was elected in November. Preferring to stay in France rather than emigrate to London, he was arrested and brought to Paris to be a witness at the trial of

As for M. M..., whose genius and facility are admired, could one not address him a few observations?⁷ Could he be offended by the suggestions of a woman that only lend themselves to offering him the justice that is his due, and who suffers to see that France's greatest pen, the most eloquent of men, does not always make good use of his qualities that are so rare and precious. No doubt if ever M. M.... were to work on his character, if he were to rid himself of French wit's inconsequentialities and if he finally turns his pen constantly towards the good, one day a statue would be erected in his honour. To tell the unvarnished truth to men who have become redoubtable is to expose oneself and I have done it; but should I attract their resentment, love for the good outweighs fear, and my only goal is to render the French celebrated and useful to their motherland.

Sincerity is not always welcome although it is often very useful to mankind. I have been reproached for speaking too forthrightly of M. Necker.⁸

I know how to respect men who hold positions, but I do not know how to betray them, and to praise their errors is to deceive them.

In general ministers prefer flattery to sincerity; this favour can at times be fatal to honest well-intentioned ministers: M. Necker is learning that unfortunate lesson.

The public changes its opinion from one moment to the next and ends by blaming the one it lauded in its frenzy. Naturally inconstant, once this public is disabused severity takes the place of enthusiasm. It is often this public favour that puts men in position and that similarly brings them down when its favour changes to ingratitude.

When I presumed to bring together M. de Calonne and M. Necker I only considered the good of my country.⁹ For a long time it has widely been desired that the conduct of M. de Calonne and M. Necker be revealed. One of the two, it is said, has lost France, at least that is the opinion of the two opposing parties. I, who belong to no party, I who neither knows directly or indirectly M. de Calonne, nor M. Necker, I believe both of them to be innocent, and furthermore I believe that both of them together, in this circumstance, are fit to repair everything. Could I have wounded the virtue, the probity, of M. Necker by

Marie-Antoinette; accused of being a royalist he was executed a few weeks after de Gouges on November 12.

7 Honoré Gabriel Riquetti comte de Mirabeau (1749 – 1791) was as famous for his scandalous life as he was for his writings. The events of 1789 unleashed his consummate energy and verve into the world politics. An aristocrat voted in as a deputy of the Third Estate, his oratory and imposing (and to some, repugnant) physical presence made him a natural leader. Representing the people, he supported progressive reforms while realising that too much chaotic change could unbalance the entire country. He believed in constitutional monarchy. Did he sell his soul to the monarchy as some have said, or was he trying to lead it to safer ground for the good of the country? Burnt out at forty-two from the excesses of his youth and the exertions of revolutionary life his reputation still divides opinion.

8 Jacques Necker (1732 – 1804) was a wealthy banker and financier who was appointed finance minister to Louis XVI from 1776 to 1781 when he resigned. As a Swiss Protestant his employment in such a politically sensitive role was highly controversial as non-Catholics were not legally entitled to hold such positions. Recalled by the king in 1788 he was dismissed and reinstated within days during the chaos that was the summer of 1789. His French political career finally ended in September 1790 and he left the country to return to Switzerland. His wife Suzanne, née Curchod, had hosted an acclaimed salon in Paris and his only child was the celebrated author Germaine de Staël.

9 Charles Alexandre de Calonne (1734 – 1802) was a lawyer and statesman who became Controller General of finance in November 1783. He managed at first to raise loans and therefore did not tax the nobility as they had feared. Once he had uncovered the true extent of the deficit (down-played by Necker in his very popular *Compte rendu* published in 1781) he attempted, for a few years, to rescue France from bankruptcy by trying to reform taxation and impose a levy on the nobility and the church (a form of land tax not dissimilar to those suggested previously by Turgot and Necker). The project failed, undermined by his own weaknesses and by powerful political and landed opponents. Calonne had made public the kingdom's actual deficit, and probably unfairly reaped much of the blame for it. Disliked by a court that had hailed him, and discredited by others, his downfall was inevitable. A talented orator, a good administrator, he did not, in the end, gain the support he needed from the King. Dismissed by Louis XVI in 1787 he left France for England from where he used his considerable talents to support the émigrés and the counterrevolution.

proposing to him the method by which he could be immortalised? Can one deny that if M. Necker asked for M. de Calonne, this beautiful act would crown all his virtues?

It is stated that M. de Calonne ruined the finances but if he proves that he multiplied the spending only relative to the needs of the government, it seems to me he would be justified.

A minister does not command, he only obeys, and he is often very constrained when doing good for the people and the state.

What I find most unjust on the part of the French regarding M. de Calonne is to have judged him like a criminal who flees to the enemy to avoid the punishment being prepared for him. If citizens had enjoyed then, as now, a freedom free from all unpredictability no doubt M. de Calonne would never have expatriated himself. When one has all to fear for one's personal safety, and even more for one's innocence, a great man avoids the dangerous traps and courageously awaits the circumstance that will cast the strongest light on his conduct.

Did M. de Calonne not appear in France as the Estates General drew near, a time when he must have believed the freedom of citizens to be secure, and when he had every reason to fear had he been guilty; he came in person to place himself back in the hands of the nation; a populace full of seditious commotion forced M. de Calonne to return abroad.¹⁰

Let the Estates General ask for him and he will be sacred in the eyes of the people, he will explain his conduct; the nation cannot refuse to judge a man when the man himself demands justice.

Everything was unleashed against him; for a long time I also followed the public impulse but when I was instructed of his conduct, of his capacity and his merit, I believed I could best acknowledge my error by rendering justice to M. de Calonne. Furthermore I recognised that nothing was easier than for envy to overwhelm a man when he is already down: but if he is innocent, if he is the butt of calumny, then offer him the means to re-establish himself so that one can distinguish between imposture and truth. This is what I submit to the judgement of the nation; it could not blame me for defending an exile, a great minister, a true statesman who appears to me to be innocent. I do not intend to justify him; only M. de Calonne can prove his own innocence in the eyes of his nation. If M. Necker were in his place I would, with regard to him, have spoken with the same sincerity. That is my character and I will never be found grovelling to the great and good, nor craving the favour of ministers. I could ask them for benefits that perhaps I am entitled to, but always by any other means than that of protection. If I fail I will not change my maxims, my style nor my character. Nature has put in my system the pride and courage of a valiant man.

Sometimes I am stopped by the public's uproar, but as I like to seek out truth, I often find that the public adopts false impressions that common sense and reason cannot obliterate.

An inventor of appalling felonies, a criminal woman, a monster that hell appears to have vomited onto the earth, writes an absurd novel, fills it full of every nonsense possible; reared in opprobrium, versed in crime, finally evading the hands of the executioner, she escapes the felon's sentence, runs away to the English where she finds refuge.¹¹

¹⁰ Calonne came back to France in early 1789 to seek election to the Estates General but not being selected he returned to London.

¹¹ The criminal is the comtesse de la Motte who escaped from life-imprisonment for her part in the scandalous Diamond Necklace Affair. She published her polemic against Marie-Antoinette in February 1789 in London recounting her version of the 1780s scam, the complexity and ramifications of which are extraordinary and worth looking up. In her memoir *La Motte* portrays the Queen as a calculating, bisexual, intriguer who sought to hand over France to her Austrian brother. Despite a total lack of credibility the affair and the memoir tarnished Marie Antoinette beyond repair and also damaged the King's reputation, casting him as a weak emasculated man. A strangely naive Calonne, scammed and incriminated by the la Motte husband and wife team when they were all living in London, was rumoured to have helped with the publication of the work.

She supports her novel with a criminal's audacity, without being able to give it the colour of truth. This all powerful truth that always lays down the law to the greatest villains has not yet been able to tear away the thick blindfold that error has placed over the eyes of a certain number of the French. But, in order to be convinced by means more powerful than any reasoning, read this dreadful and pitiful memoir, and the flame of truth will instantly enlighten the wisdom of all our citizens.

Meanwhile an august princess is devastated by this wrong; she groans to herself at this blindness, she can neither understand nor explain the motives that have allowed her original kindness to be forgotten, a kindness both constant and popular: wife and mother of the French she has always cherished this nation.

Can a light-hearted, vivacious and courteous youthfulness have attracted this change? How has imposture been able to imply that a princess raised by all the principles of the highest virtues and placed on the premier throne of the world would descend from it to expose herself to such opprobrium? With nothing to desire, only able to do good, is it not beyond absurd to have imagined such a thing? It is as if one said the sun would take the place of night, to steal from the earth all the treasures that its presence lavishly offers during the day.

Who can doubt this authentic truth? Who could believe that a tender mother, an adored spouse, would not prefer the welfare of her motherland to that which is now foreign to her?

The wise are convinced of this but the people are in ignorance of it.

They must be educated: at least it is fair to good citizens to teach them that their first duty is to cherish their princes, to respect them and to believe that they only desire the happiness of their people, that they suffer when they lose the people's attachment, that supreme power enslaves them more than the lowliest of their subjects. Unlike others they cannot justify themselves to regain this attachment; often the effects of their great virtue are unknown to the people, who only see the flaws that imposture has created. I have no idea what motivates this imposture; man's genius is so perverse, when it is turned to the bad, that it would not only separate the people from their sovereigns for no reason but also arm and unite, if it could, the four elements against all of nature.

This is how I judge the wicked; this is how I join ranks with the party of justice, innocence and the persecuted. I would hope that my opinion will not be rejected. If I had a single doubt concerning all that I advance I would never have declared myself the author of my works.

I hope the nation will welcome a few of them, that it will allow me to choose, amongst its members, deputies who will not disdain to table motions based on the works of a woman.

The patriotic tax perhaps merits one, in all forms; that one would no doubt excite the eloquence of one of those famous orators. The taxes on luxury, as I indicated in my *Patriotic Remarks*, will interest the wisest within the assembly. Is the patriotic theatre, in the *Primitive Happiness*, not fit to improve morals? I leave that one to the protector of women.

The good of my motherland, the success of these projects, that is where my desires lie; they are grand enough, and significant enough for me to never devise any more.

Here is the third and last part of my discourse; may it give back hearing to the deaf, clarity to those who see poorly and good words to venomous tongues!

I must anticipate indulgence from my nation; I must believe that the stylistic errors will not be dwelt upon; the speed and zeal with which I have publicised these seven works must be seen as my excuse. The *Dialogue Between Truth and France*, the *Cry of the*

Wise, the *Urgent Notice* and this last text all being written on the hoof, and in part at the printers, justify the countless mistakes that must have slipped inside.¹²

Circumstances dictate that I offer proof of the danger to which a just impression can endanger an individual.

It has been spread around the Estates General and in all of Versailles that I pursue M. Necker everywhere, even into the chateau's galleries: I declare here that I have never seen this minister and that I have had no connection with him whatsoever. The responsibility for this story, elaborated by a deranged imagination, must be born by its author, so too the vulgar lies that attempt to discredit the attribution of my texts. This injustice obliges me to bring forth my name from the bosom of obscurity; if an author can lay claim to one idea, one thought, I will instantly declare that I am an unworthy writer. But if everything belongs to me I must therefore have some merit, so surely this glimmer of self-respect is pardonable, having only come into being through the injustice of my calumniators?

¹² Stimulated by the meeting of the Estates General in May 1789, and all the debate that surrounded it, de Gouges wrote *Dialogue allégorique entre la France et la vérité* in April and both *Le Cris du sage* and *Avis pressant, ou réponse à mes calomnieurs* the following May.