

ÉPÎTRE DÉDICATOIRE A SA MAJESTÉ LOUIS XVI.

Dedicatory Epistle to His Majesty Louis XVI.¹

Sire,

The name of a great King should not appear at the head of a mediocre work: if a chef-d'oeuvre has been ornamented in this way Your Majesty has always accepted its homage; but, until this moment Sire no woman has dared to present you with her feeble works on a subject that often confounds the most informed minds.

If my zeal and my patriotic efforts had been supported by a knowledge of the law, doubtless I would have caused more of a sensation and made speedier progress; but perhaps greater knowledge would have led me astray, as it has led astray so many others.

My observation will seem fair if Your Majesty is willing to consider that the twelve hundred men upon whose enlightenment and prudence your Highness was entitled to count are conducting themselves with less wisdom than simple villagers, who would have brought to the Nation's Tribunal nothing but patriotism and love for their King and the public good.²

It is recognised, however, that the majority of Deputies combine their abilities with the simplicity and uprightness of those who are the closest to nature.

I admit to Your Majesty that my works transgress, not only by their lack of knowledge and method, but also by their absence of charm, which is no slight thing these days. But, Sire, are you not as frank and naïve as the good Henry IV when he said: 'my High Constable can't read, and my friend Crillon can't write, but I'll nonetheless win the battle.'³ You will say the same about me; you will add: this woman knew neither one nor the other, if only all my

1 Written in the July 1789 this pamphlet expresses de Gouges's frustration at Louis XVI's inactivity in supporting the creation of a constitution. One can see the author's attachment both to her king, and to the ideal of a constitutional monarchy. Opinions like these were held against de Gouges at a later date when she was accused of being a monarchist. In 1793 such charges often led to imprisonment and death; they also have posthumous implications when historians assess the political affiliations of their subjects. It is not often remembered that Marat, whose republican credentials are never in doubt, wrote in 1788, 'Blessed be the best of Kings!' stating that only the enemies of the state would wish to 'overthrow the monarchy' (quoted in Conner, *Jean Paul Marat Tribune of the French Revolution*, Pluto Press, 2012). Like de Gouges, and so many others, Marat feared that anarchy would ensue if the monarchy were to be overthrown; reform within the realm not revolution was still considered the better outcome.

2 The National Assembly consisted of twelve hundred deputies. It was a huge number in comparison to other similar institutions at the time i.e. just over fifty deputies in America and just over five hundred members of the British House of Commons. Roll calls could take several hours, only those with stentorian voices could make themselves heard, and before committees were established decision making was extremely unwieldy.

3 Henri I, duc de Montmorency, sieur de Damville (1534 – 1614) was Connétable to Henri IV from 1593, and was allegedly illiterate. Louis des Balbes de Berton de Crillon (c1541-1615) a soldier who fought for, and was the friend of, Henri IV, known as 'le Brave Crillon' due to his aptitude and courage.

subjects could show me such ignorance, such fidelity and patriotism; with these favourable means I would soon be enabled to relieve my people and save my kingdom!

Nothing could discourage me; the bitterest critics attacked my writings; some attested they were paid for; others found them talented enough and stated therefore that I had not written them; the most fair insisted that I was wasting my time trying to inspire concord and a love of public good, that I had better follow the flow rather than lose myself in a patriotism that has dried up in France.

No, Sire, it is not dried up, it is not extinguished, it is smouldering in the ashes. Your constant goodness will soon reignite it; you will see, Sire, that one day your good subjects will confound the enemies of the motherland.

If in a dream I thought I saw Your Majesty in the midst of the National Assembly; if I thought I saw Your Highness tired and indignant at the lack of concord that reigns among your subjects; Sire, it was to show them that they should fear reducing you to this extremity. Several good citizens have been alarmed by this fiction whose reality they feared. I know the true French too well to not be persuaded that they will make the greatest efforts to turn you from this resolution, should the distress of the times drive you to it: they love their King too much to be indifferent to this loss.

And you, Sire, who cherish your people, who sacrifice all your advantages to their happiness, how could you not be adored! Paris and the provinces recognise now that you have no other desire than to see the Nation at peace, busy remedying the abuses of the past; but the Nation seems to wish to destroy itself. We are threatened by this lethal moment; the incident would be terrible; all good citizens tremble at the prospect! Be reassured, Sire, you are adored; all the true French support your rights and your throne. The storm is above our heads; perhaps the bomb is ready to explode! These explosions will prove deadly to the seditious and the enemies of the state; your reign will start again, with greater glory, on the wreckage of the factions.

This, Sire, is our calamity. Peace, confidence and the Kingdom's fortune can not come out of this terrible epoch except through the centre of the storm.

But Kings have always been conquerors in France, and good citizens always take their side; convinced that only the Sovereign's party can make them happy, and bring back order and tranquility; still convinced that the yoke of despotism is a thousand times more favourable to men than the troubles and perpetual tyrannies of a terrifying anarchy.

Ah! Sire, what a painful moment for your paternal heart! The public is impatient, seeing that the National Assembly finishes nothing. Meanwhile if it

The cult of Henri IV 'the good king' was given a great boost in the 18th century by the *philosophes* and the physiocrats amongst others: Voltaire and Rousseau each praising the first Bourbon king of France. His own propaganda (Henri IV had been an able creator of a personal myth, understanding the power of distributing his image in prints around the country, more often than not as a new Hercules) was used to reinvent him as a tolerant monarch, beloved of the people and capable of creating unity where discord had existed. He was a potent symbol of kingship for an era that was losing faith in its own Bourbon monarchs and was soon enshrined in the popular culture of the time. If, in these times of crises, Louis XVI could take on the mantle of his ancestor all might yet be well.

were to reflect, it could not but agree that the Assembly cannot, nor ought not to, rush a precious task; a task that must, for all time, create the happiness of all citizens. But the Nation has not started as it should. It is not for me, Sire, to reproach it for its in consequence; everyone knows that it occupied itself with the least important articles and neglected the most urgent; this proves that when aspiring for the good of the public alone, the greatest men and the most virtuous can be wrong, can be lead astray, and can move away from the right paths.

Ah! Sire, only your presence can persuade it to address seriously the objects that are of the greatest importance. It can yet cause discord to disappear, and all other projects dangerous to France. Only a love of public good and of the state can unite minds. And who can take charge of this negotiation better than you, Sire, when all good citizens expect it of your tenderness, in the name of that paternal love that you swore to them for evermore!

I am, with the deepest respect.

SIRE,

YOUR MAJESTY'S

Most humble, most obedient servant and subject.

DE GOUGES.