

LES COMÉDIENS
DÉMASQUÉS,
OU
MADAME DE GOUGES
RUINÉE
PAR LA COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE
POUR SE FAIRE JOUER.

The *Comédiens* Unmasked or Madame de Gouges Ruined by the *Comédie Française*.¹

'In a society that is licentious, do not hope to find sensitivity.' MOLÉ²

PARIS,

From the Printers of the Comédie Française.

1790

ADDRESS
TO THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE NATION.

GENTLEMEN,

Men of letters have recently brought to your attention a cause that is truly worthy of such an august and respectable assembly; the defence of talent, the defence of genius: I dare add to it the defence of humanity.³

1 This fifty page pamphlet, with three pages of extracts from other works, was published in 1790 and principally refers to the performance history of *Esclavage des Noirs* which was first read at the Comédie Française on 28 June 1785 and unanimously accepted with corrections on 8 July. De Gouges had to then wait for her turn to be performed in the 'queue' of accepted plays until her performance date arrived (the play was first performed on 28 December 1789).

The Comédie Française had a stranglehold on serious theatre in France and generally only accepted plays from established authors. Once a play was accepted it could be shelved for years while remaining the property of the theatre and banned from performance or publication elsewhere unless specifically authorised by the Comédiens; this almost never happened. Such was the theatre's reputation that authors would often forego their rights in order to see a play performed. In the second half of the 18th century playwrights became more outspoken against the system and with the Revolution authors' rights were taken more seriously. Women playwrights were almost never accepted and certainly not expected to do battle with the illustrious actors and their court sponsors.

I have chosen to use the French term 'Comédiens' to distinguish the members of the Comédie Française from other theatrical professionals. De Gouges rarely used capital letters for the theatre's name.

2 Francois-Rene Molet aka Molé (1734 - 1802) was a famous actor who made his debut at the Comédie Française at the age of twenty; he was a warm and intelligent performer with a more natural style than his predecessors and appealed to female audiences; he was nonetheless sent to the provinces for four years to learn his craft. He became a star in 1778 when the deaths of two older actors gave him the chance to become a leading man; he was better suited to comedy than tragedy.

Encouraged by the noble example of the French *littérateurs*, a woman who has risked, falteringly, to follow their path, courageously advances towards your honest and imposing tribunal, persuaded that her sex, and the cause she espouses, will find zealous supporters among the representatives of a nation that will always be a model of honour and loyalty.

Should I thus fear that, in this time of equity and enlightenment, the despotism of the actors and the inhumanity of the Colonists would continue to humiliate me through an enforced dependency? And can it still be said to be impolitic to continue performing a work approved by the censor of both regimes: and, when I have on my side the ancient and the modern law, can appallingly anarchic opinions, that can only produce vague and confused ideas against this creation, determine the course of the French nation's decision?

Would it be possible for *L'Esclavage des Noirs* [*Black Slavery*], which I thought so useful to the interests of the Colonies, to be perceived as dangerous and, because disturbances in the Colonies do exist, will it be claimed that my drama would tend to encourage them?

At the time when the King of the French, the best of Kings, appeared to be threatened with the loss of his crown by a criminal populace *Charles IX* was performed, a play that shows Kings to be odious when they are unjust; this could have produced a destructive party during those moments of disturbance and fermentation. This tragedy, I say, was not stopped; the ideals that it encapsulated showed the enormous difference between Kings who are tyrants and Kings who are paternal towards their people.⁴ I am not suggesting that my talent is equal to M. Chenier's; it is possible his pride would not forgive me but he will allow me to say that my drama encloses, as advantageously as his tragedy, a moral design. The author of *Charles IX* is a great man for he alone has dared rebuff the *comédiens'* oppression: he encourages us all and the shade of Dubelloi [sic] is finally avenged.⁵ Already in his day the *comédiens*, whose existence and glory depended solely on the works of these celebrated geniuses, tyrannically reaped the fields of literature barely allowing the authors a chance to glean: until now the *comédie française* has

3 In late 1789 public establishments came under governmental control and the Parisian assembly set up a committee chaired by Jean-Louis Brousse des Foucherets (1742 - 1808), a deputy mayor and writer of theatrical comedies, to reassess the management of theatres and other venues. In August 1790 Jean-François de la Harpe (1739 - 1803) the literary critic, journalist and playwright protégé of Voltaire, petitioned the National Assembly on behalf of writers insisting that without enlightened authors the revolution would not have taken shape; for the sake of public good, and not individual glory, playwrights should be accorded rights and enabled to support themselves in order to share their patriotism with a wider audience. In January 1791 a decree was passed that freed up theatrical management and gave rights to authors. De Gouges who had fought long and hard for this outcome did not benefit from the new regulations; women were still as marginalized as before. In December 1791 Beaumarchais and others petitioned the National Assembly insisting that theatres were not observing the new agreements and continuing to deny authors' their rights: this was hotly contested by the other side.

4 [Original footnote.] M. Chenier alone can justify the *comédiens*; he complains yet they have behaved laudably towards him: it is my impartiality that allows me to comment and if my enemy were worthy of my vote then, were he blameless, I could not refuse it.

When Marie-Joseph Chenier's *Charles IX* was first proposed to the Comédie Française, after the lifting of censorship, the actors refused to take it on despite its support among the political classes; the internal strife was deep, reflecting the divisions between royalist and revolutionary performers. Several months of intense conflict followed – the same months that saw de Gouges's renewed struggle with the actors – before *Charles IX* was performed. Employing the historical Saint-Barthélémy massacres as cover the play was a contemporary attack on royalty and was performed to huge success in November 1789.

Marie-Joseph Chenier (1764 - 1811) poet, dramatist and politician was a prominent Jacobin who, despited voting the death of the king, attempted without much success to moderate the club's violent tendencies. André Chenier was his brother.

5 Pierre-Laurent Buirette de Belloy (1727 - 1775) was a French dramatist and actor whose play *Le Siège de Calais* was a huge success momentarily making him a 'national poet'. This acclamation led to his, contentiously (for being a mere actor), gaining a seat in the Académie française in 1771. Despite writing several more plays success eluded him and it was said that he died of the disappointment.

successively added links to this long chain of iniquities, of vexations and opprobriums with which it overwhelms those who write.

It would not occur to me to count myself among those that France honours but whatever my right to public esteem, my ambition to be useful while garnering a few laurels has cruelly exposed me to the outrageousness of those tyrants of the stage. Eight years of persecution, that was the bitter fruit they forced me to devour. I was glad enough to have escaped the dungeons of the Bastille into which they wished to throw me!⁶

It is to you, the public's tribunal, that I denounce these attacks: my memoir offers an honest account of them.

I am worthy, I dare suggest, of some attention. My legitimate allegations will convince the national assembly whose wise decrees seem to have been anticipated by my patriotism.

As a citizen, full of gratitude and admiration for its legislators who have given back dignity and rights to mankind, I await its justice with confidence.

MÉMOIRE POUR Madame DE GOUGES, CONTRE la COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE.

Memoir on Behalf of Madame de Gouges Against the *Comédie Française*.

Of all the organizations born of a mania for exclusive rights, the comic Areopagus is perhaps the one that enshrines the most odiously unjust and tyrannical characteristics.⁷

Long before the revolution the well-intentioned rose up against the despotism exercised by the actors of the *Comédie Française* on that most glorious of arts. From Corneille's time to our own sublime authors, mediocre authors, all have had to complain of their caprice even if they had no cause to be indignant at their oppression.

What axe will chop the heads off this hydra that will forever tear at the bosom of its patrons. Our literary Herculeses have just aimed the first blows. Messrs de la Harpe, Marmontel, le Mierre, Cailhava, Sédaine, among others, have begun the battle against this monster as greedy as it is ridiculous. Does it hope to resist? Will the senate, in sock and buskin, preserve its intensely feudal regime?⁸ Will the filth of its rulings soil the edifice of the regeneration of the Empire? Will glory, fortune and authority still be the exclusive lot of the actors of the *comédie française*? And will the share of their nurturing fathers [the authors] forever be no more than oblivion, slavery and humiliation?

Ah! It is undoubtedly time to break the sceptre that has audaciously enslaved members of the republic of letters. Citizens from all classes, who already enjoy the fruits of liberty, remember the debt you owe to the patriotic geniuses who enlightened you regarding your rights; understand that freedom of the arts is civil liberty's strongest support. And you, brave architects of French regeneration, will you keep the structure of

6 In September 1785 the dispute between de Gouges and the comédiens resulted in the latter attempting to get the former incarcerated, secretly, in the Bastille having successfully been awarded a *lettre de cachet* against the playwright, signed by the duc de Duras, first gentlemen of the king's bedchamber and ultimate overseer of the Comédie Française. This appalling example of tyranny was only stopped at the last possible moment probably thanks to other strings being pulled in equally high places.

7 Playwrights referred to the Comédie Française as 'l'aréopage comique' the Areopagus of the theatre i.e. the best.

8 'Sock and buskin' (cothurne et brodequin) is a phrase used to describe comedy and tragedy based on the Ancient Greek shoes and boots that were traditionally worn by the performers of such pieces.

this gothic fortress intact where persecution was rife and where ideas and talent were in chains? I will give you another, novel, example of the humiliations heaped upon authors.

FACTS.

The arts have no gender. Sévigné, Deshoulières and other women, famous for their masterpieces, have proved that we can risk careers in the world of talent.⁹

My sensitivity had been affected by tales of cruelty perpetrated by ferocious masters against unfortunate Africans. I imposed upon myself the duty to solicit public opinion on their behalf and to awaken goodwill for these deplorable victims of cupidity. A tender drama seemed to me to be a fitting way to fulfil my aims. In consequence I conceived the plan for my play entitled: *L'Esclavage des Noirs [Black Slavery]*. I was writing the dialogue: M. Suard thought it held enough dramatic interest to propose it, anonymously in 1783, to the *comédie française* who indicated that they would read it next.¹⁰ Soon it was known that I was responsible for this text: then the reading took an age; I took steps, I solicited, and finally I was given the date of 17 April 1784.

I appeared before the comic tribunal. Momus had shaken his rattle over the Areopagists: when I appeared mocking laughter flitted across the faces; caustic whispers and flippant witticisms prefaced the reading: no one deigned to protect my feelings: I saw, I heard quite distinctly all that could humiliate.¹¹ This reading, said one, will be comical: I have been an insomniac for two weeks, replies another, I'll take a good dose of opium.

I savoured in silence this outrageous cruelty. *What was I doing in this hellhole*, I said to myself, fighting back tears that were about flow. In the end, my guardian angel, Mister Molé unrolled the fatal manuscript which was greeted by the meeting with a puff of irony. Nevertheless silence was achieved: Molé reads, hearts warm, interest deepens, handkerchiefs are pulled, the tears of the meeting stop my own and the meeting unanimously votes to receive my drama: a few corrections are suggested and I rush to amend the text.

I am congratulated: Mister Molé overwhelms, principally, with the most flattering compliments. I see in him nothing but a warm and ardent protector. At his home I am told, with an air of mystery, that he is setting up a turn for me, that he is even prepared to buy it. I was totally unaware that turns were paid for. What a precious man to have on my side is Mister Molé! How will I repay him; with what gratitude?

One day, in my presence, the divine madame Raymond says, 'Molé every year you used to give me an orange tree; now you owe me two.' I grasp this snippet of information

9 Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné (1626 - 1696) was the most famous letter writer in France in her lifetime. Her epistles, primarily written to her daughter, provide a commentary on the ideas and events of her times and reflect the intellectual debates of seventeenth century salon culture. They soon took on a life of their own when they were copied and read by a wider public before being officially published following her death leading to their establishment in the canon of French literary works. Antoinette Des Houlières (1633? - 1694) was the first woman to be elected academician in France. She was a free spirit principally famed for her poetry although her reputation died with her and she was, until recently, either forgotten or, according to the literary critic Sainte-Beuve (1804 - 1869), consigned to the fate of someone who wrote only about ribbons and flowers; he was one of the few people to appreciate the talent and depth of much of her work.

10 Jean Baptiste Antoine Suard (1732 - 1817) writer, journalist and literary critic much followed in his time but not greatly considered since was from 1774 to 1790 the official censor of plays in which capacity he at first refused *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Charles IX*. A friend of the *philosophes* and a constitutional monarchist he survived the revolution by keeping a low profile during the terror. J

11 Momus, in Greek mythology, personified mockery and satire but also represented unfair censure; he was exiled from Olympus for his tiresome criticism and mockery of the other gods. De Gouges describes the tribunal as 'comique': this may simply refer to the Comédie Française, or mean comical, or that it belongs to a comedy (which has a wider, less farcical, connotation than in English). I believe de Gouges intended to be ironic, given what follows, but it would be quite legitimate to translate 'tribunal comique' as 'the theatre's tribunal'; in the French the double entendre is evident.

and fly to the most famous florist; there I seek the two most beautiful orange trees and they are soon with the deity of the god of comedy. They delight, but the flowers will fade; what a pity they are so short lived! Rest assured queen who rules the thoughts of the theatrical hero; I am your provider: two new orange trees covered in fragrant buds will join the earlier ones and jasmine and roses will successively supplant the bushes whose flowers have ceded to the ravages of time.

But winter approaches, Flora flees. Until that time I have been delightful, divine: how can I sustain my brilliant reputation? I crave the honour of being the best. Flora abandons me so I will turn to Comus.¹² I come from a region of France where those gods of the gourmands profess the skill of preparing turkey with truffles, sausages and goose thighs: my protector's table must not be allowed to go without. 'Ah!' he tells me one day, placing a mysterious finger on his lips as he carved up a turkey, 'I am not an ingrate, Madame de Gouges, I know what I must do.' Good, I thought to myself, trembling with joy in my chair, now my turn will come.

We leave the table and go into the drawing-room. Molé points out to his guests the elegance of two candlesticks, adding, 'They were a gift from an author for whom I arranged a turn. They are so honest, so grateful, these poor authors.' Then, casting his eyes on a console table, by way of a distraction he adds, 'I have asked twenty times for a visit from the decorator to consider what I could put on it.' The console looks like an expectant plinth. The assembled company wears itself out trying to find an answer: one suggests a clock, another a snuff-box. 'Oh fie,' replies our genial host, 'what bourgeois ideas, my salon is full of these drugs.' My imagination catches fire, 'Yes,' I reply, 'M. Molé is right. I want to see a biscuit-ware parnassus on that table with Apollo, the muses and their favourites agreeably grouped.'¹³ Everyone exclaims, my idea is ingenious: '*Bravissima*' echo madame Raymond and all the guests. 'No' replies mister Molé, 'it would be too costly; the piece would have to be commissioned.' Oh, the excellent man, I said to myself, who is, *incognito*, arranging a turn for me. And I leave. I fly to all the manufacturers of porcelain, I ferret about, I ask around and I find this precious piece. 'If you had to order it new, a hundred *louis* wouldn't get it', affirms the salesman, 'but it is here by chance, though it's as good as new, so you can have it for six hundred *livres*.'¹⁴ I only had four hundred *livres* on me; I was impatient to procure for my protector the joy of owning the desired object; the difficulties were ironed out and the elegant object arrived, *incognito*, on the console that awaited it.

To read our innermost secrets, to grasp our most mysterious actions, is an attribute that belongs to the gods. I was discovered, applauded, and recompensed; the excellent man promised me that I would have a turn in three months.

Three months, six months, a year goes by: be patient, I repeated endlessly to myself, the god Molé has his eye on you. I must just be careful not to wear him out with my entreaties so in order to distract myself let me present a one-act piece to the *comédie italienne*.¹⁵

12 In Greek mythology Comus, the son of Bacchus and Circe, was the god of festivity and revelry.

13 In 1777 the Sèvres porcelain works created a centrepiece in biscuit-ware called Le Parnasse de Russie, sculpted by Boizot, as part of a 774 piece service for Catherine II of Russia (1729 - 1796). Catherine the Great was depicted as Minerva surrounded by the Arts, Sciences and Letters. The manufactory belonged to the kings of France and was bankrupt at the revolution given that many of its clients failed to pay; the payment for this monumental Russian commission was finally made in 1793 and ensured the future of the business.

14 Olivier Blanc, in his biography of de Gouges, writes that she spent a vast sum on Molé, equal to a year's rental of a small Parisian flat.

15 In 1780 the Comédie Italienne, the second theatre in Paris that had previously only been allowed to perform comic opera in Italian, was entitled to perform plays in French for the first time. It became a serious rival to the Comédie Française, a friend to authors rebuffed by the latter and keener to put on new plays than its rival. The Comédie Française might put on 5 or 6 new plays per year compared to between 35 - 40 at the Comédie Italienne; the older house however retained its cachet of being the premier theatre in France, sole

I had written *Lucinde et Cardenio*, or *He Who is Maddened by Love*. M. Granger advised me to lengthen the work.¹⁶ It was but one act, I should make it into three.¹⁷ My steps paid off; Mister Molé found out: he obligingly reproached me for my infidelity, recalled the rights of the *comédie française* with regard to an author they had so warmly received, and was sure that they would accept my play as I had first conceived it, in one act. In all confidence, I ceded: my play was read to the committee. But, calamity! I had forgotten to pay a visit, in advance, to the gods in the wings or to prostrate myself at the feet of the goddesses; I was unanimously turned away without being spared sarcasms and brickbats. Sent away from the 'french', no longer able to present myself to the 'italians' who were angered by my action: the self-congratulatory pleasure of having prejudiced me on both sides was doubled. Incensed by both the procedure, and the ridicule, my heart bled. M. le chevalier de Cubieres [sic], beloved author of the *comédie française*, witnessed my bitter laments.¹⁸ Did he cause the checkmate? I cannot tell but my complaints were faithfully reported to the committee. The day after the explosion, he, the chevalier de Cubieres and I met, coming out of the *comédie*, the illustrious Florence accompanied by the pack of hounds of which he is the sovereign lord.¹⁹ He confronts me with the ferocious look of a confidant of the Neros of the stage. 'The *comédie française*' this famous personage tells me, 'is aware of the insinuations that you have the audacity to express concerning it: it has decided to never again accept any of your plays and to never perform those it has accepted. As for myself, *quos ego....*'

"Par bonheur il n'acheva pas,
Car il avait l'ame trop bonne."²⁰

'As for myself' continued the irate friend of the prince, while gesticulating grotesquely, 'if you were not a woman...'. 'You would not speak to me thus', I responded briskly. I continued on my way, shrugging my shoulders and stupidly admiring the sang-froid of my chevalier guide, that this appalling meeting had probably petrified.

I went home and wrote to the *comédie*.

home of the French classical repertoire, and the stage on which to be performed if one wanted to be taken seriously.

16 Antoine Granger (1744 - 1824) an actor who made his debut at the Comédie Française in 1763 but switched to the Comédie Italienne in 1782; he ended his acting career running the theatre in Rouen from 1801 -1818 and returned to Paris to teach declamation. He was married to the actress Mlle Doligny, de Gouges's friend.

17 Generally speaking plays were categorised according to genres with tragedy being in five acts, comedies in three and one act plays seen as curtain raisers to the other two. Changing a play's category/act length could change its position in the waiting list, depending on what had gone before, and certainly changed the way in which it would be judged. *Lucinde et Cardenio* was read and refused on 28 August 1785, it was never published.

18 Michel de Cubières (1750 - 1820) aka chevalier de Cubières, Dorat-Cubières or Cubières-Palmézeaux was destined for the church until a book of poetry by Dorat changed his vocation (and his name). He gained a place at court thanks to his older brother but spent all his time in Paris writing plays (several of which were performed at the Comédie Française) and sensual poetry. A free thinker who helped found a famously intellectually liberal masonic lodge he was opposed to the marital state and other social conventions. His literary talent, along with his political persuasion, was somewhat facile. This allied to his attitudes made him unappealing to a more prudish 19th century and destroyed any reputation he might have had. He was almost certainly de Gouges's lover at one time, wrote a poem in her honour, but was unable to save her from the guillotine despite being in an influential position: it is probable that he never received the letter she wrote to him from her prison cell.

19 [[Original footnote.] Mister Florence is well known for having had a complete hunt equipage. Nicolas-Joseph Billot de la Ferrière aka Florence (1749 - 1816) was a not very talented actor who joined the Comédie Française in 1778 having played there anonymously a year earlier; he devoted himself to running the theatre.

20 Thankfully he stopped right there/for he was a kindly soul.

'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

I do not know how I have wronged you for you to blacken my name; I have done nothing to attract your animosity and lose your goodwill towards my plays. One of your members insulted me in the name of the *comédie*; he compromised its rectitude and its honesty; I demand satisfaction for it and for myself. This member is M. Florence: he told me, in front of M. de Cubieres, that you had determined to no longer accept any of my plays and even never to perform those that you have already accepted. I cannot believe this of you. Allow me to quote a well-known *bon mot*: "a bad horse can stumble but not an entire stable."

You, M. le duc de Noailles, from whom I borrowed this *bon mot*, uttered before your king to the president of the Toulouse parliament, you could not have known how deadly it would become for me.²¹

"Comme avec irrévérence
Parle des Dieux ce maraud,
Notre bras saura bientôt
Châtier cette insolence."²²

cried out the comic Areopagus on receipt of my letter. Straight away the campaign started; the heroes of the stage intrigued; the heroines gave themselves up to quarrels; a terrible punishment is the only way to expiate such a criminal attack. I am given a taste of this in advance through this reply:

'MADAME,

The *comédie*, along with the gentlemen of the bedchamber present at the deliberation, asked for the registers to be brought to them, then cancelled and put a line through the *Heureux naufrage* [*The Fortunate Shipwreck*] on its admittance list and denies you the takings that you had been promised for your drama.

Signed, LA PORTE, permanent secretary of the *comédie française*.'

This minor nastiness was not cutting enough. The interest of the gentlemen of the bedchamber had to be elicited and M. de Breteuil, of tyrannical repute, promised to send me an invitation, in the form of a *lettre-de-cachet*, to come to the Bastille, suitably escorted, until it pleased his lordship to let me out.²³ I was going to take your places, I was

21 I am assuming that it is Anne-Jules de Noailles (1650 - 1708) field marshal at 23, then lieutenant general, courtier and aide de camp to Louis XIV who became governor of Roussillon in 1678 and of Languedoc in 1682; he was made a marshall of France in 1693. There were many de Noailles in the public realm in the 18th century but this ancestor was the one with strong connections to Toulouse and de Gouges, coming from the neighbouring Montauban, would have been familiar with his deeds. The quotation was deadly because it led to the attempt to place de Gouges in the Bastille, the comédiens being outraged that she referred to their theatre as a stable i.e. a dirty place full of donkeys.

22 A quotation from Molière's *Amphitryon* Act 1, scene 2: Just as this rascal speaks irreverently of the gods, so my arm will soon know to punish this insolence.

23 The actors were servants of the king so they were supervised by the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber (responsible for both royal entertainment and royal health) in their management of the theatre. Louis Auguste Le Tonnelier de Breteuil (1730 - 1807) was a diplomat and politician who opposed the convocation of the Estates General and suggested repressive measures to quell the unrest of 1789: writing in 1790 de Gouges, with hindsight, could accuse de Breteuil of tyranny. In 1785 he was the Secretary of State to Louis XVI and, acting as a Minister of the Interior, was responsible for authorising the 'lettre de cachet' on the king's behalf. 'Lettres de cachet' usually authorised an individual's imprisonment without trial: influence in high places was often abused to issue them against creditors, unsuitable suitors, family black sheep and personal enemies.

going to join you, Latude, Linguet, Delorge, and a thousand others as monstrously guilty!²⁴ They were so artfully in league with each other that a dungeon was going to swallow me up. Another mere formality and I would descend, alive as could be, into this grave. Unfortunately, M. de Crosne judged that my peccadillo was quite excusable; he refused to intervene in the execution of the *lettre-de-cachet*.²⁵ In vain the illustrious master of the privy purse, the redoubtable duc de Duras, placed himself at the head of a deputation from the comic den; in vain the chief perorated, thundered, insisted in vain to the magistrate, he remained inflexible.

Close to the storm, on the point of being crushed, I rejoiced in a false calm. An anonymous letter opened my eyes to the grave danger I was in: I went to the magistrate who reassured me but it was not enough.²⁶ Pushed to my limits I wanted reparation: I demanded it. The strength of my laments appalled my persecutors. The wily Molé agreed to appease me. He knew my tender feelings for *L'Esclavage des Nègres [Black Slavery]*: the hope of a turn had lured me so delightfully; this seductive bait should solve everything. Indeed, the Sycophant presents me with it: I relish the hope of a premier, an immediate performance. The *comédie* writes me a letter, to all appearances obliging: my takings will be restituted along with all my rights. All will be forgotten, at least on my part.²⁷

Two further years pass; my turn never comes. I resolve to have my play printed but in order not to clash with the elevated claims of the *comédie* I ask for its permission.

'GENTLEMEN,

Women who, before my time, were courageous enough to have their works performed in your theatre, give me a terrifying example of the dangers incurred by my sex pursuing a career in drama. Men's frequent lack of success is easily excused but a woman is not even welcome to expose herself to failure. This is the question I would like to address; I hope that you will not disapprove of it. Before performing my play, which you were happy to accept, and exposing yourselves to its lack of success, I would like to assess the public's taste by having it printed and offering it up to the journalists for criticism. If my play is appreciated as a text it must surely be well received on stage and you will perform it in accordance with the sentiment that allowed you to receive it: if, on the other hand, it is judged to be poor I will not increase the claims made against my sex that my feeble talent might perhaps have justified.'

I received this reply:

'MADAME.

24 Jean Henri aka Latude (1725 - 1805) was a notorious jailbird and repeat absconder who in 1784, following his reprieve, published a best-selling memoir of his time in prison. Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet (1736 - 1794) was a lawyer turned journalist who spent two years in jail (1780 - 82) as a result of his writings; he also published a popular memoir of his time in the Bastille. Jean-Louis Carra published a 3 volume work in 1789 on the history of the Bastille with a chapter on the Comte de Lorges who was allegedly incarcerated for thirty-two years in the Bastille and released on the 14 July 1789; Mme Tussaud made a famous wax model of De Lorges that was seen by Dickens and inspired him when writing *A Tale of Two Cities*.

25 Louis Thiroux de Crosne (1736 - 1794) was a magistrate and the Chief of Police in Paris from 1785 to 1789; his position made him ultimately responsible for the censorship of dramatic works.

26 [Original footnote.] A relatively pleasant judgement that appeared at the time, in the secret memoranda, apprised me of all the clandestine activities of the gentlemen of the chamber and the actors with regard to the minister. I complained to M. de Crosne. He replied, 'Madame, you must forget this offence, the claims of your adversaries were as unjust as they were ridiculous so I did my duty and did not dwell on them.' If any decent soul could doubt that the actors had had the audacity to manipulate things in order to have me imprisoned, I offer as proof MM. Cochy and Puissant, chief clerks at the police, who are too truthful to deny a fact in order to glorify the magistrate, their superior.

27 [Original footnote.] 'What will you do?' asked Molé, 'Will you quarrel with the *comédie*. Have you considered that it is the premier theatre in Europe; that you have been offered your inaugural debut there; that most of our greatest authors have not begun as you have?' This fantasy was effective: I left him in charge of arrangements and was weak enough to sign a letter in which I acknowledged the desire to take up my rights again, this was promptly agreed and my play was restored to its position.

Several examples prove to the *comédie française* the obvious danger that your sex incurs pursuing a career in drama. It can only applaud your caution and your disinterest. It charges me, madame, with the honour of assuring you, on its behalf, that it consents to the publication of your work according to the conditions that you propose in your letter.'

Signed, DE LA PORTE.
18 February 1787.'

I immediately took advantage of this permission: the plates were prepared; the copies were about to be printed.

Meanwhile the committee had changed its mind. It was the beginning of the summer; Mister Molé, Mademoiselle Comtat [sic] and other thespians were leaving for the country.²⁸ 'What will you do?' asked Mister Molé of the remaining understudies, 'no author wants to be performed at the wrong time of year. You have twenty turns for one to offer. Give one of them to poor madame de Gouges. If her play is printed, and is a success, we will be ridiculed for having delayed its performance.'

The motion was passed. I destroyed the plates at the printer's, to whom I had paid five to six *louis* in composition fees. Copying the parts at the *comédie française*, as in other playhouses, is covered by the theatre but I was so enthusiastic at the thought of a turn that, as can be imagined, I took charge of this affair at my own expense; I consolidated it by giving twenty *écus* to the prompter. Finally, the roles were distributed. Another disaster, that on this occasion was real and overwhelmed art lovers. Mademoiselle Olivier fell ill, and died.²⁹ In truth this accident did not close the theatre doors. Madame Petit took on the roles played by mademoiselle Olivier. Except that her role in *L'Esclavage des Noirs* was overlooked. New plays were performed that should have been put on after mine. I complained; no one responded. Winter approached bringing the lead actors back to the capital. Unsatisfied by the influence of mister Molé I addressed mademoiselle Comtat and wrote her the following letter:

'MADEMOISELLE,

I had always flattered myself that when my play was rehearsed you would have been pleased to choose the role that would have appeared to you to best reflect your talents. When the *comédie* appeared to be favouring me with its gifts by favouring me with an author's turn, you were leaving for the country: I was so proud of these benefits, despite the hateful season and being deprived of yourself, and equally of M. Molé, that I respectfully viewed the *comédie's* proceedings as one of the greatest favours it had offered me. The best time of year for entertainments arrives; Paris, mademoiselle, receives you with renewed pleasure and your return is blamed for the impossibility of fulfilling the promises that had been made to me by the *comédie* before your departure. From what I know of your disposition and your impartiality, I dare to hope that you will not mind using your influence for such a legitimate, and long awaited, right; one accorded in the dead season, when my turn would not be long in coming. By allowing *La Maison de Molière* to

28 Louise Contat (1760 - 1813) made her debut at Comédie Française in 1776 aged 16. Known for her pretty looks La Harpe alleged she had little talent and no voice. She was kept by Maupeou's son which allegedly explained her rapid rise in the theatre. She bore him two children and lived in great style; she had a two week fling with comte d'Artois (the king's brother) and a son by him. She was given a handsome pension and the royal attention proved good for her career. Her theatrical reputation really took off when she brilliantly created the role of Suzanne in the *Marriage of Figaro* by Beaumarchais.

29 De Gouges was not over fond of Mlle. Olivier who, with her colleague, Mlle. Joly, had spread a rumour that de Gouges had acquired theatrical favours thanks to her physical charms and that Molé was her intimate: this de Gouges vigorously contested in a letter that, when passed around among the troupe, did little to further her cause.

go first, even though it was received a year after my play, it [the theatre] has subverted its own rulings.³⁰ You are my only hope, mademoiselle and if you are not able to persuade the *comédie* to keep its promises then it will have committed the most flagrant act of injustice towards me.'

Here is her reply.

'MADAME,

I beg your pardon a thousand times but I must refuse what you demand of me. I never embroil myself in the affairs of the *comédie*; I have always found it to be punctilious in its promises and its proceedings; I even believe that it has proved this to you by drawing a blank over some of the excesses that you inflicted upon it; its rulings are not arbitrary, and you can consult them and challenge them if feel you are in the right. It may have thought that the name of Molière would vouch for it and could not have guessed that the respect that is its due would incite any muttering. I would become a laughing stock if I took it upon myself to reprimand it and to prescribe its laws. Please be kind enough, Madame, to accept my esteemed respect, and the good wishes with which I have the honour of being, etc.'

I had to give an answer, I gave an answer.

'MADEMOISELLE,

I beg a million pardons for disturbing you but the necessity of ridding myself of an inculpation unworthy of me forces me into it. No one, apart from ridiculous people of no repute, could believe me capable of degrading the name of Molière. Mademoiselle, you have misconstrued the object of my letter or, more likely, a stupid calumniator has interpreted it badly for your benefit. Can it be believed that by demanding a turn, one I had been offered six months ago, I was muttering against the founding father of good theatre? And so that you can be in no doubt how far I was from believing that Molière's name influenced your rulings, I was actually surprised that this play was not performed as soon as it was received. Given that it has been awaiting its turn for four years, I could believe that your judgements overruled your gratitude and love for this great man, allowing me to perceive it rather late in the day. You have more wit than I, mademoiselle; I will leave you to reflect on all these abuses but, unfortunately, my best reasoning will not be capable of making you understand equity and justice. I have the honour of being, etc.'

I did not become discouraged; I aimed at my target; I searched the hierarchical theatrical ladder and this time, I addressed myself to madame Bellecourt.³¹

'MADAME,

Six months ago I distributed the roles of my play confident that I would be performed any day. The theatrical high season resumed. Two cherished actors arrived and I had no turn left. Nothing, I imagine, in a similar circumstance, could prevent the *comédie*

30 In 1787 Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740 - 1814), de Gouges's close friend, adapted a play by Goldoni - *La Maison de Molière* (a name often used to describe the Comédie-Française which had been formed from Molière's troupe of actors after his death) - that was accepted by the Comédie and performed with particular attention to detail on 20 October of that same year.

31 Rose-perrine le Roy de la Corbinaye aka Mlle Beauménard then Mme Bellecour (1730 - 1799) left home at 13 to follow an actor whose name and profession she adopted. As a pretty and flirtatious Mlle Beauménard she met with instant success both on and off the stage making her debut at the Comédie Française in 1749. She retired in 1756 returning in 1761 as the wife of the actor Jean-Claude-Gilles Colson aka Bellecour (1725 - 1778). Her career remained successful until her retirement in 1790 but the revolution left her penniless and she died in poverty.

from fulfilling its obligations. I ask you to be the judge, madame: no man would be as cruelly trifled with as I have been. I dare hope that you might espouse my just and well-founded cause. How happy I would be, madame, if you, and the act of justice that the *comédie* owes me, were responsible for my tranquility. It is in expectation of this that I have the honour of being, etc.'

Much time passed before I was answered in a fashion that would still astonish me if I had not learnt that it was dictated by the committee: it has not altered my opinion of madame Bellecourt's rectitude and honesty in the least.

'MADAME,

Please forgive the tardiness of my reply: sick, and unable to leave my bed save to perform at the theatre, I was not able to avail myself of the honour of answering you sooner; equally I wanted to find out what reasons you had to believe that your right was so unquestionable at this time; I knew, like all my comrades, that the absence of the gentlemen la Rive and Molé, and that of mademoiselle Comtat, had forestalled plays whose turn it was, and that it was resolved that your play would be put on during this interval. This plan could not be executed due to the appalling case of the illness and death of mademoiselle Olivier. You will agree, madame, that this disaster, which destroys your hopes, cannot be imputed as a lack of faith on our part, and that it is quite right that the delayed authors should take up their due place: when the authors that were needed returned, it cannot have been wrong for the *comédie* to perform their works before yours.

I was assured at the meeting that nothing else took place; therefore, madame, I can only repeat what mademoiselle Comtat wrote in the reply she gave you, and that she read to us following the receipt of your letter. I will not enter into a discussion on the merits of the plays we receive; I would even agree with you that there are times when we are rather indulgent. As for *La Maison de Molière*, even if it were as bad as you seem to think, it does carry a name sacred to all the French: I will say more, to all of Europe; believe me, madame, that from the most erudite littérateurs to the most ignorant scribblers, no one, other than you, finds our homage to this immortal man unusual. I am vexed, madame, that my sentiments are so little in tune with your own; vivacity does not exclude reflection; if you have the goodness to reflect awhile you will see that the excessive warmth of your expressions can only be excused in support of obvious rights and not the chimeras of an exalted imagination. Please forgive my forthrightness and the ardour with which I defend Molière. I have the honour, etc.'

Let us gloss over the seriousness of an illness that prohibits responding but does not prohibit performing; let us gloss over the chimeras of my imagination, the scribblers, the warmth of defending Molière, whom I was not attacking, the sweetness and kindness of this inconceivable reply, to view my reply.

'I am quite stunned, madame, by your answer; I cannot thread my penetrating mind through it to guess at its meaning, unless it is to perceive within in a particularly futile argument. As for *La Maison de Molière*, who told you, madame, that I think the play is so bad, and who could have encouraged you in such foolishness? I like the piece and I admire its author and the applause with which I greeted its performance was quite unequivocal, as is my opinion. I show myself, madame, as I am and fear neither attacks from the mean-spirited nor calumny from fools; my innocence will confound them all. No doubt, madame, in seeking to instruct me you have allowed yourself to be prejudiced unfairly without having paid attention to the meaning of my letters, which have all merely sought to ask that my turn, awarded six months ago, be implemented. You will at least agree, madame, that this is true. As for the name of Molière, no one, except the *comédie*, could believe that I am so shallow as to not be able to revere him at least like everyone else, even if I lack the talent to appreciate him in a special way. And as for your biting

comments, that may be out of place in my regard, I will leave it to the public to judge for I am powerless to respond to them. I am ignorant and I scribble on paper as you would say, or worse still, you may believe: it would be no less true to state that your charge against me is ridiculous and that my conduct, my procedures and my writings contradict it on every level. If, in all my letters, I made a point of stating that *La Maison de Molière* was shown before me it is obvious that my complaint is against the rules wrongly applied to me in this instance. Eh! Who can understand it any other way? This note alone unveils the tricks prepared against me, and now I am convinced that I will have to endure the greatest vexation in order to be performed, even in my turn, despite it coming up five or six times already: so, madame, I will hold the *comédie* to the authorization it has given me to print my play and to perform it when the public will have judged it anew. I will add to it my innocence, my compliance and my honesty that the *comédie*, together, could not destroy; I trust, madame, that by and by you will be less unfair towards me. It is with such sentiments, that I have the honour of being, etc.'

The quarrel became this heated, but I love peace; I would even prefer it to the effects of indignation: I thought that I could rely on the intervention of the father of theatre; I wrote my play *Molière chez Ninon ou du siècle des grands hommes*, and I proposed it to the theatre in the following letter.

'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Without being able to fathom the cause of your manifest enmity towards me I have nonetheless sought, for six years, every means possible to extinguish it; yet, I have only succeeded in rekindling it. Molière came to me in a dream; my name alone, he told me, should forever reconcile you to the *comédie française*. Here is my project for you: make me appear at the incomparable Ninon's; transport me, along with her amiable company, and put us on the stage in your time. Follow this plan, he said to me, and I promise that the *comédie* will reconsider your situation in gratitude for the renewed effort that you are making in order to please it. People consumed with literature assured me that this work was good but it had yet to obtain your vote so one can cast doubt on its success therefore I will limit myself to obtaining an imminent reading as a favour to the name that it bears.

I obtained a reading. It had been determined that I should be made to eat humble pie; I was not spared.

It had been said that the *comédiens* would hasten to welcome all works that bore the name of Molière. But the *comédiens français* never forgive those they have overwhelmed with injustice: here is the proof. My reading was announced ten times, I came to the *comédie* ten times, and there were never enough actors for the reading. Finally, tired of my steadfastness and moderation, the clever Desessarts said in his dulcet tones, 'What are all these libertines doing that they are never present at one o'clock for a reading that has long been announced? What the devil! This must cease,' he added in a sneering tone. 'Dear friend, dear friend,' took up a theatrical princess, 'you know full well that one arrives late when one has performed at court.' 'Oh! Oh! It's past two o'clock; maybe they are up now' replied that Epicurean hog. 'Send all the theatre valets to them.' The messengers from the olympic stage reported back, all together, that the goddesses and gods had been in town since five in the morning. This uniform disappearance was too obvious for me not to be already convinced of the fate that awaited me but I wanted to see it through to the end. I was then definitely fixed for the following Wednesday; I wrote to the *comédie's* permanent *semainier*:³²

32 A 'semainier' was an actor who, for a week, would be responsible for all aspects of every play being performed in the given week, clearly a member of the troop performed a similar role in a permanent capacity:

I beg you, sir, to remind your companions that my play will be read on Wednesday. I trust that in the name of Molière all the *comédie* will be willing to attend; that this work merits the presence of all the *comédiens*; that if it is not received, I wish to see it refused with full military honours, to convince me that my judges are impartial.'

They made an effort to come one after the other; the reading was already over before the full complement had arrived. There are thirty actors and I only had the benefit of thirteen. Each judged according to the part they had heard without the benefit of the play's exposition for only four of them attended the reading from the start and, to top it all, a damned back door, constantly used by the actors, could never be properly closed. Each and everyone kept taking turns to get up and try and close it again. Finally, my play's reading ended with the damned locking of the door; they would never have put it out of action, it was their bolt hole.

The decent Grammon, crowning the decency of the committee, said: 'I am quite angry that this door should have been closed so late; it prevented me from grasping the full merit of this work: that did not prevent him from asking me for a role and he assured me that the little he had heard of it had given him a perfect idea of the rest. The august assembly surrounded me, each vying to lavish the most praise on this work. In good faith I admit my stupidity on this occasion; I thought I had swayed my judges and their frank and loyal tone was perfect for fooling those cleverer than me. Among others, the prodigious Dessessarts made the committee laugh so wholeheartedly that I had no doubts that my play would be well received.'³³

He asked me if I was designating the role of Désiveteau to him.³⁴ I was naive enough to reply that, as he was asking me for it, I could see none other than him fit to take on the caricature that suited Corydon, the shepherd. Everyone laughed a great deal and I could not help myself from laughing too, in good faith. Everyone seemed to aspire to the sole moment when he would be seen in a shepherd's costume; if the *comédiens* were able, for one moment, to admit the truth, I bet that they would say it was with regret that they sacrificed their votes against this play in favour of the comical, which they did at least seize, and no doubt M. Dessessarts could not bear to use his talent to play an aged man, mad enough to make all of Paris run and laugh again and again. Tiring of us laughing at his expense, impatient to take his revenge on me, he called to the prompter in a monstrous voice: 'Come, sir, read the bulletins.'

This is the second time I have had them printed; they certainly merit a new edition.

FIRST BULLETIN.

'This work is charming; it honours the heart, the soul and the mind of the author: I accept it.'

Auspicious start.

BULLETIN II.

'This work is full of merit, but there are dull parts that need cutting. I accept it if corrected.'

No reason to give up hope yet.

I know of no English equivalent.

³³ Denis Deschanet (1738 - 1793) aka Dessessarts was an actor renown for his prodigious girth. In his memoirs Fleury mentions that despite being a fine actor his size too often obliged him to play comic roles. He excelled in certain Molière plays but found it hard to be taken seriously in the more intimate 'boudoir' settings of contemporary works. Fleury insists that he was generous hearted and highly intelligent; de Gouges clearly saw him in another light.

³⁴ Nicolas Vauquelin Desiveteaux (1567 - 1649) was a libertarian poet who abandoned his life at court to live a bucolic epicurean existence in Saint-Germain allegedly dressing as a shepherd. He had been preceptor to the Dauphin, later Louis XIII, until the queen refused to employ a man whose habits flew in the face of religious conformity. He is better known for his unconventional lifestyle than his poetry.

BULLETIN III.

'There is a great deal of talent in this work. I accept it if corrected.'
There is hope left.

BULLETIN IV.

I like pretty women; I like them even more when they are fun-loving but I only like to see them in their homes and not in the theatre. I refuse this play.'

Aargh!Aargh!.....This smells of Dugazon. But soft, my dear friend; you must learn to understand the aim of the theatre. The Courtisans, the Corrected Coquette, do they not have a moral purpose? And my Ninon, is she not as decent as the latter?

BULLETIN V.

'This play is merely made up of poorly constructed episodes; there is not a single character in this work; the second act is totally lacking in taste and the madness of Egypt is unbearable; it is neither within the rules of the theatre nor those of decency. I refuse this work for author's sake.'

Ah! Shepherd Corydon [Dessessarts]! Just as you have recognised the intentions of the author, so you are recognizable by the elegance of your size allied to the charm of your character; you were right to refuse it, you would, in effect, have been too funny in the role; I even admit that your rotundity would have outweighed it, it could not have been considered. Let us imagine you dressed as a shepherd, a hat over one ear carelessly held by a pink ribbon under the chin, and a multi-coloured pom-pom falling on to your immense shoulders, a haversack slung at your side and a crook in your hand! Tell me there is nothing to see more comical than this costume. And you feared it! Yet the public never hates a true comic, and you cast it away! Too bad.

BULLETIN VI.

Oh reader! Oh reader! I beg you to be patient and hear this with composure.

'I am indignant to see that the author has been so remiss as to make Molière the confidant of Ninon's amours: I have some advice to give, the author must give up this play and never show it to anyone. For I refuse it.'

I could not find out who this was written by unless the committee made it all up. Molière would be so shocked and humiliated, if he could come back amongst us, to see to what ends his spirit and his memory are used! He who was the confidant and friend of Ninon, as were all the great men of the kingdom, as well as the most virtuous women. Who in the world would not have felt covered in glory when they were honoured to be admitted into the circle of Ninon de l'Enclos.³⁵ This woman, shown in her true colours, could only have made women greater, even given their imperfections. But a fine character is foreign to the *comédie française*.

BULLETIN VII.

'I have the highest regard for the author, and like her too much to expose her to failure. I refuse.'

This one is handsome and cannot make me angry.

BULLETIN VIII.

'Nothing interests me in this play other than the fifth act; the recognition scene between Ninon and her son is quite affecting and lends itself to a moral purpose: Ninon's circle, and a few facts here and there cannot create a five act comedy; if the author were to believe me then it would be reduced to one act, but as I foresee that nothing will be done I refuse it.'

Good judgements.

³⁵ Ninon de l'Enclos (1620 – 1705) was a 17th century woman of letters who refused to marry, lived off her own income, had high-born lovers and insisted on maintaining her independence. She was famed for her wit, beauty and the ability to maintain friendships among her lovers, to the point of ensuring that everyone remained on good terms and regularly attended her salon. Her lifestyle and outspoken disregard for organised religion led to a brief imprisonment during which she received a visit from Queen Christina of Sweden on a visit to Paris.

BULLETIN IX.

'Ninon's valets are unbearable in this work for they play on delicacy and spirit: I refuse it.'

BULLETIN X.

'It is pleasing to remember the reign of Louis XIV but in this play it is unbearable: I believe I am doing the author a favour by refusing it.'

Patience, reader, the end is nigh.

During the reading of these famous bulletins I scrutinised all the faces, but everyone sought to avoid my gaze; only Dessessarts's expression stayed the same; his head was fit for a portrait, his cheek leaning on his walking stick and his mouth wide open, with a tongue half out that expressed the joy he felt as each bulletin was read and my embarrassment redoubled.

If the famous Greuse ever sought to paint a committee, which he would render no less sublimely, here was the very subject fit to add variety to his genre.³⁶

I got up and said to them, in a modest tone: Ladies, and gentlemen, I am sorry that you have refused my play, this cannot surprise you. I see that I have been misled but I am consoled by the fact that MM. Palissot, Mercier, Lemièrre and twenty-four other respected people were misled like me and that they were even more in the wrong for having encouraged me to present you with a poor work.

I have the honour of saluting you, and I left their cave as tall as they were small.

I immediately had this play printed alongside my *Esclavage des Nègres*. These two works were perfectly well received in print much to the embarrassment of the *comédiens*: they attempted yet again to prevent the public distribution of the volume by promising to receive *Molière chez Ninon*. Everyone agreed that this work had merit, and that with just a few alterations it would be liable to succeed to a great extent. This time I paid them no attention and their lures lost their power. I released my volume into the public sphere. Look at the newspapers of the day. Fate made one fall into my hands. In order to prove the injustice of the *comédiens* I am obliged to quote an extract from it, as an instructive part of this memoir.

EXTRACT FROM THE ENCYCLOPÉDIE JOURNAL.

August, 1788.

'When an author has a scheme, he creates it according to his strengths; he tacitly consults the resources of his imagination. Minds whose powers of invention are feeble create feeble schemes; those that are made for the dramatic arts do not fear the abundance of a scheme, such is the case of madame de Gouges who had no fear of enclosing in hers several characters from Louis XIV's time, notably le grand Condé, Molière and Queen Christina. One had to be very sure of one's brush to take on such diverse portraits and paint, all together, Désiveteaux and Scarron.

The point at which they meet is Ninon's circle. By never straying from this method, at one and the same time both simple and natural, madame de Gouges has allowed us to participate in the conversations between these great men of the last century: she has gathered these characters in a manner that does not create a constant plot; meanwhile one does exist but it is hidden: she [Ninon] marries her son to the daughter of M. de Châteauroux.

³⁶ Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725 - 1805) was a French painter famous for his genre scenes in second half of the 18th century; he also painted several well-known portraits e.g. Benjamin Franklin, Denis Diderot and a very young Mozart.

The major circumstances of Christina's life are inserted with skill in this drama that resembles one of those old master paintings where they had the courage to group a large number of people and bring them to life one next to the other.

It required a very flexible imagination to make Scarron and Christina speak to each other, or Désyveteaux and le grand Condé; Molière's speeches are always worthy of him, full of his wisdom and gravity combined with some philosophical pleasantries.

Désyveteaux is drawn so truthfully that one feels as though one is hearing the man himself with his bagpipe and his haversack. There are strong attributes alongside subtle ones.

It is from Ninon's circle that Molière drew his *Tartuffe*, the most perfect play that exists in any theatre, and that combines sublime expression with moral purpose. This fact occupies the fifteenth scene and offers a lesson to all comic poets: learn how to draw from life rather than from books, or from the narrow confines of mannered jargon. It was hard to put Scarron on stage because he awakens a notion of burlesque that is proscribed in our century. Madame de Gouges has understood how to make Scarron speak by ennobling his spirit whilst maintaining his character: thus a competent painter does not copy from a bizarre head all of its characteristics but enough, only, to make it recognizable.³⁷

Madame Scarron, who has since become so famous, was worthy of having her attitude shown alongside her comportment so that one could glimpse something of her character that made such an impact.

The moment when le grand Condé, throwing aside his hat, takes pity on Scarron who could no longer walk, to put him in a sedan chair is a most touching one; when Scarron, feeling humiliated says: 'MY PRINCE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?' Le grand Condé replies: 'I TESTING MY STRENGTH TO MAKE SURE I HAVE NOT LOST IT.'³⁸ This reply is at one and the same time simple, kind and unaffected. There is a great variety of colour in this work. We would have like to cut the moment when an officer in charge comes to tell Ninon, AT THE KING'S COMMAND, that she is ordered to go and join the reformed girls. But the author wanted to preserve the characters and the grand Condé's exclamation against this unjust and misplaced order: making of him Ninon's protector with regard to the king, greatly restores this scene and lends this momentary storm added piquancy.

The role of madame Scarron offers, in a discreet fashion, some of her personality and leaves room for conjecture.

The denouement is of great interest: it is Ninon recognizing her son but the circumstances that accompany this recognition persuade Ninon to retire. All her friends are overwhelmed at the thought and Scarron has himself placed across the door to bar her way at the moment of her departure. As this play is episodic one can sense that it could not have been written in any other form; what we call plot can sit easily in one dramatic work but spoil another, for example this one. The author's aim was to display the great characters of the last century; it would not have been possible to reunite them in a way that was more piquant or conformed more to the times? This play approaches the deepest verisimilitude and has no sense of artifice; it is the product of a natural talent that paints with sincerity.

37 Paul Scarron (1610 - 1660) the author started to write at 28 when he suffered from paralysis that left his body twisted and disabled for life. Aged 42 he married a poor young orphan who, following the death of the queen in 1683, later became Madame de Maintenon the future morganatic wife of Louis XIV. Scarron wrote burlesque comedies and a satirical novel. His company was much sought after; he held court in his house in the Marais, Paris.

38 Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Condé, duc d'Enghiem (1621 - 1686) was known as le Grand Condé thanks to his fearless glittering military career. A well-read, unorthodox, man who claimed to be an atheist while remaining true to his Jesuit upbringing he knew both highs and lows as his arrogance allied to his brilliance often led him to challenge the king's and the state's authority. He supported many of the free-thinkers and writers of his time.

In a Preface, and in a Postface, the author expresses her disaffection that the committee of the *comédie française* refused her play with ill-considered, barely decent, bulletins. The committee was wrong and did not attend to its own needs: a comedy that presents the personalities who continually pepper our conversations would have satisfied everyone and would not have damaged the takings.'

Let us swiftly pass over the three years of poor proceedings, of traps, of injustices on the part of the *comédiens*. Finally I come to a period where I am definitely assured that my drama will be played. The news was brought to me, on behalf of the tragicomic Areopagus, by M. Desentelles, the controller of the Menus: it was in October, 1788.

Time passed and, in the midst of all these quarrels, a patriotic magnet drew me towards Versailles. The time was nigh when the national assembly would cast its stern eye over all abuses, and re-establish mankind's self-respect and rights. What a magnificent subject for an ardent and civic-minded soul! I yearned to throw myself into a career of projects useful to the nation and leave aside the committee, the intrigues, the roles, the plays, actors and actresses; I saw only plans and the public good. The memory of those six vexatious years echoes in my heart for the last time. That excellent man, the great Molé, came to mind once again and I took my leave of him in these terms:

'The 6th November 1788.

Before executing what is left to me to do, sir, my honesty bids me warn you: the *comédie* behaved appallingly towards me; I have obvious proof of this; my means are strong and my rights incontestable. I used the most honest means, the most noble and the most generous, all were unfruitful. You, yourself, sir, you promised to get me a turn; you are still busy with your promise. The *comédie* gave me a turn; it unjustly took it away; my turn comes, I am unjustly supplanted.

I am about to print a memoir of all these facts; I will attach this letter to it if I cannot obtain from you an act of justice: I could not be more indebted to you for all that you have done. Yet if I could have envisaged the result, how much hardship, how many torments, how many sacrifices I would have spared myself, let alone the fruitless costs that I could have better spent elsewhere, helping the unfortunate who at least would have blessed me for it.

I have the honour of being etc.,'

Now we come to the most curious incident of this comic affair. Let us read the reply from this excellent man.

'MADAME,

I was about to leave for Versailles when I received the latest letter that you did me the honour of writing: I could not reply to it straight away; I begged the person who brought it to me to tell you that I would pass it on to M. Florence, to share it with our assembly. You stress to me, madame, that you intend to print this letter; I suppose that you will use my reply in the same way, so here it is:

You are aware that I did not have the honour of being acquainted with you when you came to find me to engage me to second your first dramatic endeavours; you know how much effort I put in to it: I only ceased once your play was received. I have no idea, madame, what passed through your mind to recognise, through a gift, this zeal that I have devoted for so long, with so much pleasure, to the gentlemen, men of letters; you have no example to follow but your sex has charms and rights that must be respected. You spoke of presenting me with the gift of a piece of porcelain, I begged you to do nothing about it

yet, notwithstanding, the piece was brought to me. I was embarrassed by this and caught between the embarrassment of receiving the gift and the rudeness of returning the item you had insistently pressed upon me, I kept it. Your ardour to be performed at the *comédie*, madame, led you to be somewhat peevish towards them; if our assembly were only composed of men, this would probably have had little effect but as women are competent judges of women, my zeal, it appeared, could no longer be masterful enough to pacify the situation on your behalf, as I would have wished. The state of things being pretty desperate my goodwill needed the help of my friend Florence whom you treated very badly and who was noble enough to pursue a course of action that would second my desire to see you re-established in a way that you would find agreeable. We composed a letter for the assembly, you and I, madame, that you signed: it was honest; it was well received, and all was forgotten. Since then, madame, your peremptoriness has yet again spoilt everything, and has made it quite impossible for me to assist you: however my concern for you does not stretch to being worried with regard to the fate of your play; I know how fair the *comédie* is towards its authors, even those who have given it cause for complaint; I repeatedly said so suggesting that you calm yourself, become less defiant, make less gratuitous accusations, allow the time to pass that alone can bring forth the hour of a performance for one who has not been chosen by the gentlemen of the bedchamber to appear at court.

You continued, madame, to harry time in such a way as to extinguish the *comédie's* goodwill so that nothing more could be done for you; in the end, you turned your sights on me. You accuse me of betraying your interests, and you add: "I could not be more indebted to you for all that you have done. Yet if I could have envisaged the result, how much hardship, how many torments, how many sacrifices I would have spared myself, let alone the fruitless costs that I could have better spent elsewhere, helping the unfortunate who at least would have blessed me for it." We are both in total agreement on this subject, madame. Yes, the costs that you incurred on my behalf were absolutely superfluous, and would have been better spent helping the unfortunate. Your intentions are too honourable to be betrayed and it is in my heart to second them. I established the price of your gift; it comes from the Angoulême workshop, rue de Bondi and cost you 400 *livres* as a reject, according to the terms of the shopkeeper: I have sent to the priest at Saint-Sulpice 600 *livres* and I discharged the sum in these terms: "I have received from M. Molé, king's pensioner, the sum of six hundred *livres*, to be used in charitable works according to the intentions of madame de Gouges, with the request from M. Molé that madame de Gouges be considered the benefactor." And the priest added: "I beg M. Molé, and likewise madame de Gouges, to accept my thanks. Paris, this twelfth November seventeen eighty-eight. Signed, *Meigneaud de Parcimont*, priest of Saint-Sulpice". This means of re-investing money, uselessly misspent, for the benefit of unfortunates seems to me to be totally equitable and may it please heaven, madame, that all disagreements could thus be turned to their advantage.

I had not promised you a turn to have your play performed; I could not have promised you something that does not depend on me; I only promised that I would *solicit a turn for you*: I sincerely regret, madame, that you put me in a position where it was impossible for me to be of service to you. I cannot inflict, at the *comédie*, your menacing threats upon my friends; I would rather have imposed upon you, for your own good, an orderly graciousness. That was rather the subject of my zeal, and not a present that I should not have been obliged to take, or about which one should have had the delicacy to remain silent. As for your play, I will follow the example laid down by my society; if it approves its performance, and if my talents can be of use to you, I will offer them zealously to the author of *Mirza*; if they do not perform it, I will regret that you placed an obstacle in the path of a work that I had brought to the fore, with all the pleasure that obliging a person of your sex entering the authorial career affords.

I am, etc. Signed MOLÉ.³⁹
This 12 November 1788.'

I go to Versailles, where patriotism alone fills my every moment; I once again publish works that have since been enshrined by the decrees of the national assembly; I propose my patriotic tax and in due course it is adopted; I rush to volunteer my offering, and to join to it the tribute that will be produced by my author's rights from *L'Esclavage des Nègres*; the newspapers make mention of it. The *comédiens* imagine that I could disclose to the national assembly the turpitude of their proceedings; the thought of performing my play is taken seriously; it is added to the repertoire; on discovering this I run, present myself, am welcomed, feted: how charmed you must be, I was told, by all the miseries and vexations that your play drew to you! It will be performed at the best possible time, just when there is an explosion of compassionate feeling in favour of negroes. I, a good soul, I, a simple soul, I, a credulous one, I fell for all this toadying and there I was again, convinced of the *comédie's* candour and virtue. Yet the fate of my play concerns me; the great day of the performance looms; will it bear scrutiny? Tomorrow all illusions will cease, tomorrow...! And then I learn that the Colonists have been intriguing; suppers have been given; that there has probably been a redoubtable amalgamation of gold and pleasures, that a terrible cabal has been formed against my drama. The curtain rises, the cabal launches itself: the excellent man! Molé, the great Molé, exhausts himself in his effort to be bad and, in reality, he becomes detestable.⁴⁰ Yet the purpose of my drama powerfully fights in my favour; the action is passionate and strongly sustained. In the end the battle field is mine and I triumph.

Oh! thrice excellent man! It was not due to you. Through all the hubbub, the yelling, the cries for peace, I had noticed some felicitous alterations to be made: I will work on them and the second performance will be suspended. No; the excellent man has made his calculations: I will only make a few cuts in a rush and with no reflection; poor days will be chosen; my drama will be played three times in the same week with makeshift cuts; it will be played alongside the most worn out things the repertoire has to offer. The days chosen will be those when the audiences will abandon the shows, those that were the last of Favras: and as a result of these benign precautions my drama will fall within what the *comédie* calls its rules; that is to say that it will belong to it because the takings will not have reached the due amount.⁴¹

I wanted to get the better of this manoeuvre; I oppose the third performance that is advertised on the poster; I demand my manuscript; the excellent man presents himself

39 [Original footnote.] The reader must not lose from sight that I never reproached Molé for the gifts that he received from me; that my discretion and my generosity ensured my silence, despite my resentments, and that the public would still know nothing of them if it were not for the indiscretion of mister Molé.

Frenchmen, the King's *Comédiens ordinaires* have come down from on high on a cloud, and unlike the rest of us, have not been grown on the earth like mushrooms. The master of the gods, with his divine power, sent them among us.

"Et fils de Jupiter, ils vont lancer la foudre." [And sons of Jupiter, they will hurl down lightning.]

As eternal as the Supreme Being, the revolution cannot reach up to them. Free people, respectfully submit yourselves to your masters. The wealth of the clergy belongs to the nation, enduring theatrical monuments do not belong to the nation but are the sacred property of the *comédie française*: it is true that this property was not acquired freely, like the clergy, but with the rights of tyrants, through usurpation. It might have acquired a few plays as forfeits but the greatest number has become their property through the most shameful routes. My drama is a compelling example of this. However I must admit that I owe a debt of gratitude to two members of the *comédie française*, M. Saint-Fal and Mlle. Lange: I am too honest to not make this clear.

40 *L'Esclavage des Nègres, ou l'Heureux naufrage [L'Esclavage des Noirs]* was first performed on 28 December 1789.

41 Thomas de Mahy, marquis de Favras (1744 – 1790) was implicated in a plot in 1789 to save the royal family. Arrested on 24 December 1789 and tried, with little evidence, he was the first noble to be executed by hanging, no distinction being made between him and a commoner. He became something of a Royalist hero for going to his death without implicating the king's brother, the comte de Provence, who probably instigated the plot.

again, he becomes the orator of the committee: "the *comédie* is fair; it knows that you have the right to withdraw your play up until the alterations have been learnt but it sees itself compromised with regard to the audience: what will it say this evening if we do not perform your drama? Allow it to be performed and the *comédie* will have the greatest regard for this sacrifice. I promise you, on its behalf, twenty further performances alongside plays that draw a full house: I guarantee this promise, on my word of honour."

I believed the word of honour of the excellent man... oh! La Chatre indeed has a worthy note.⁴²

The third performance takes place: the fourth is announced; it is announced again, and again, and then it is forgotten. The audience thinks of it, requests it, but the request of an audience for a performance not consolidated by a cabal is itself soon forgotten.

Thus my drama is buried in the irregularities of the *comédie* and becomes its property. I complain anew; enjoin the excellent man to remember his word of honour but deaf ears abound. I have recourse to the Mayor; he has been forewarned. I go to the public authorities: there I oblige my honest despots to agree that they have wilfully made me fall within what they term their regulations; that they owe me two performances, and that they should have already given them to me without the opposition of the planters threatening the *comédie* with giving up the forty boxes that they rent by the year. Despite pointing out that renting boxes by the year is itself an attack on the public and that the caprice of forty colonists could not balance the general will or my property rights; that it punishes the aristocracy of the rich as much as the Bastille punishes that of despotism, my efforts to return men to the principles of justice from which they have decided to stray were in vain. My drama is objectionable because it is incendiary and could cause an insurrection in the Colonies. What! Gentlemen, we are in Paris; my play will not be performed in front of Negros: I would point out to you that, on the contrary, it would encourage submission; that it exudes propriety and the rule of law. How is it that this drama, accepted eight years ago, censured when despotism ruled, how is it that today it is incendiary? Is this how men reason who have been enhanced by the influence of liberty? What! The cabal of a few colonists and histrionic tyranny count for more than the public good, than the most luminous equity. And year one of liberty will be soiled by an injustice which neither the ignorance nor the barbarity of the feudal regime would have produced!

As I had lost my case before appearing before my judges, the second totally failed.

Now that I have seen, dear reader, the smile of indignation furrow your brows, what do you think of the excellent man and his illustrious *sociétaires*? Ah! No doubt you will say, as I do, that it is time these canny filibusters stopped wreaking havoc, with impunity, on the high seas of literature; it is time that the most enlightened class of society ceases to fall prey to these cruel and devouring wolves; it is time to free it from the humiliations in which it is drenched, from the enslavement in which it is held by a horde of corsairs.⁴³ It is time to establish boundaries between the unnatural children and their nurturing fathers so horribly despoiled, so tyrannically persecuted; it is time to annihilate this privilege that is iniquitously excluding, it is time to return freedom to the most beautiful of the arts, one that can be of the most useful, that can allow, encourage, emulation through theatrical rivalry; it is time that the works of art of dead authors become the patriotism of all and not the sole property of one theatre company; it is time that the work of a living author be ranked as

42 'Ah le bon billet qu'a la Châtre' was allegedly said by Ninon de Lenclos on taking up a new lover soon after her previous lover, the marquis de la Châtre, had been sent away to rejoin his regiment; the unfortunate soldier had pressured her to proclaim in writing that she would stay faithful to him. It soon became a phrase expressing lack of faith in an unlikely promise.

43 Filibuster entered the English language in the late eighteenth century from the French 'flibustier' and generally referred to pirates who pillaged colonies in the Caribbean; the obstructive meaning prevalent today dates from the mid 19th century. De Gouges continues the oceanic metaphor by using 'parages' a navigational expression meaning waters or seas which is a play on words as 'parage' also means 'ornament' or 'breeding'.

one of the most inviolable properties; it is time to shake up the rubbish that rules the *comédie française* and to efface all traces of it.⁴⁴

And if my personal concerns, if the injustices, the persecutions that I have been prey to, can be considered worthy in this chain of infamy exercised by the *comédie française* against the most distinguished men of letters, then I ask that my wishes be adhered to, that my drama be returned to the repertoire and that authors' rights be faithfully paid into the fund for patriotic donations.⁴⁵

Extracts from several Works by madame de Gouges.

MY LETTER TO THE PEOPLE, or the patriotic purse project of 1788.

'As for princes, lords and rich individuals, all will participate in the voluntary tax but in order to embody it better, it must be given a suitable name:

I would like it to be called the patriotic tax.'

PATRIOTIC OBSERVATIONS, of November 1788 that produced such good in the capital.

(Page 6.) 'It is up to you wise, great, good, citizens to deflect the problems that I fear will assail my motherland; it is probable that my troubled heart has become over anxious and that its fear has allowed me to perceive an obvious danger.'

(Page 9.) 'And you, unhappy citizens, unfortunate people, see how courageously I reveal myself in order to place under the eyes of the Monarch the terrifying images of my [Typo or ironic change? It is 'your' in the original text.] sad situation. Yes, I dare hope that he will be moved by them, and that he will be enlightened with regard to your future by the pains his mistaken beliefs have created.'

(Page 12.) 'All-powerful Queen! And you King of the French, you have been given a feeble account of the ills of your People. Their pains, their sufferings, their miseries have been painted in favourable colours; people avoid burdening you yet, in order to ease the suffering of your subjects, we [typo - 'you' in the original text.] must be burdened by their troubles.'

(Page 13.) Since the onset of winter manifested itself so rigorously a month ago all work has ceased. The unfortunate labourers lack work and bread for their children; most of them can only shelter in appalling attics. Without fire, without help, what do they become? Unintentional outlaws that nature and destitution have forced into a life of crime. This tragic spectacle is on show at every moment of the day. There is another type of destitution; old age. Ah! How the fate of the elderly touches me! I would like there to be more charitable houses for sexagenarians of both sexes: in the harsh seasons I would like workshops for unemployed labourers to be attached to these establishments and in these workshops all sorts of enterprises could be undertaken at a cost well below that of our manufacturers.'

(Page 15.) 'Oh Queen! Oh honourable monarch! May my narrative of suffering humanity influence you in favour of the unfortunate individuals whose deplorable fate I have outlined. The widows of labourers who lose their husbands abruptly would find prompt assistance in this shelter for themselves and their children.'

(Page 29.) 'I have encountered, in big cities, so many idle men who do nothing but encourage weakness and vice: why not use this mass of men to work barren land, given that they are unproductive in the cities? Let the Government give all the Kingdom's uncultivated land to societies or individuals in parcels that they can farm; it is the best way

44 I originally thought that patriotism in 'the works of art of dead authors become the patriotism of all' was a misprint for 'patrimony'; I now doubt that judgement so prefer to leave it as patriotism although clearly patrimony is inferred.

45 [Original note.] NOTA. A good maxim tells us that time counts for nothing so long as one is pleasing; therefore, it would be pointless to justify the mass of mistakes that has found its way into this memoir, given the little time I devoted to it. But I cannot refrain from warning the reader for, despite this precaution, it will be difficult to forgive the author.[]

to rid society of a mass of useless men who, through weakness and poverty, become beggars. Most of this land would be devoted to rearing the livestock that has been lacking in France for several years.'

In December 1788 I published *THE PRIMITIVE FELICITY OF MAN*.

(Page 51.) 'How much strong and sinewy manpower has servitude torn from the land! And the number of valets is so considerable that masters are actually ill-served. It must be noted however that the wisdom of government has yet to cast its eyes on this subject and that if it wished to deepen its understanding it would notice its very dangerous disadvantages. It must also be recognised that the lords, the wealthy, do not live sufficiently in the countryside. Their vassals do not spread welfare: they have never sought to render the existence of peasants happy or peaceful. Meanwhile it is the labourers' hands that bring forth all the treasures of the land, and all the profits of the great and the rich. Which well-meaning souls soften the rigour of their fate? What generous heart offers them succour in their infirmity? They feed mankind but lack bread for themselves! An educated villager, as soon as he is aware, abandons the labour and the place of his birth; he goes in search of laziness in the capital: he adopts the noble employment of a lackey or porter. Once his body and soul are enervated and debauched and it is too late, he misses his thatched hut. A fear of the militia chases him from his peaceful home and it is in the bosom of the city that he will meet a cruel end.'

How many citations I could add if I wished to read through all my patriotic writings. All of them exude nothing but public good and prosperity for the state yet however useful my feeble works anonymity has taught me that preconception nearly always guides the opinion of men.

The Voluntary Tax Project [Patriotic Purse], the Patriotic Observations and Primitive Felicity of Man met with the greatest success when anonymous.

All the projects that were contained within them were executed; now all that I need to see executed are the taxes on carriages, horses, valets and on the gaming houses. What an efficacious way to prevent and arrest the dangers of these houses!