

ACTION HÉROÏQUE
D'UNE FRANÇAISE,
OU
LA FRANCE
SAUVÉE PAR LES FEMMES.¹

Heroic action by a French woman or France saved by women.

There is more than one way to serve the Motherland.

I became the butt of all satire last year after I presented my project for a Patriotic Purse to my fellow Citizens. My recommendations were far from being approved; rather I received only insults or perfidious praise. This reception from a Public always severe towards me should really have cured me of that itch to write that has spread so much bitterness in my life. I had indeed taken the firm decision to no longer give rise to the malignity of my enemies; I was going to take an eternal vow of silence: however I found the situation the State was in so overwhelming that my sensitive heart forced me to take up my pen again. Today I am addressing my sex. Maybe I will be better received? However it is not praise that I am looking for. No, my only desire is to be useful to my Motherland. Vain and ridiculous men who assume the right to despotically rule over a literary empire, you will always find fault with my style, perhaps even my way of life will not be spared. It matters not. Once again, it is not for you that I write. I despise, in equal measure, both your applause and your criticism. Virtuous women, female citizens who are enflamed by the saintly zeal of patriotism, it is to you that I address the feeble fruits of my talent. No doubt, at this moment, you lament the fact that you can only wish for the happiness of France, whilst your fathers, husbands and brothers can work for the regeneration of this Empire: you would love to assist them in this great work. There is one noble and efficacious method that I dare ask you to bring to mind: I can find none so apt to restore plenty and the national credit than the one the Roman Matrons used in a similar moment of distress. Rome, the seat of glory and virtue, if indeed they had such a place on earth, Rome, I say, weakened by costly wars was coming to its end. Public funds had run out; no resource or method was left to repulse the enemy about to swoop down upon her. It was women, then, who saved this City that men despaired of defending much longer. Generously ridding themselves of all useless and luxurious ornaments, they carried their jewellery to the public treasury; soon, thanks to this unexpected assistance, there was no shortage of arms or Soldiers. From that moment on victory was determined and the free Romans only thought to thank the Gods for having given them such virtuous mothers and wives.

This example has not been followed since, in any Nation of the Universe, because never has the Motherland spoken so strongly as in Rome. Therefore today, my fellow women citizens, may her voice be heard amongst us. Can you resist it? Will you imitate the selfishness of those calculating capitalists who refuse to open their treasure chests? Ah! Make them blush at their sordid avarice, show yourselves, by your generous conduct, to be more than worthy of the praise that truth dragged out of the Citizen of Geneva. Despite the sarcasm that he threw at us, he was obliged to admit that *it is women alone who preserve in Paris the little bit of humanity that still exists there and that without them one would see greedy and insatiable men devour each other like wolves.*²

¹ In her twelfth pamphlet, written in early September 1789, de Gouges praises the women who had recently brought their patriotic gifts to help the state (she herself donated a quarter of her income) and seeks to encourage others to do the same. Mirabeau, to whom she had sent a copy, congratulated her on her ideas, her energy and her purpose.

² De Gouges admired Rousseau, was influenced by him, but was never blind to his misogynistic moments.

Let those vile creatures that bring shame on our sex have the sad advantage of displaying their brazen ornaments bought with their honour, which do nothing to enhance their natural beauty. With a more modest and simple finery you will be all the more entitled to praise and admiration from the public; your names will be remembered by the furthestmost posterity, they will have a place in History alongside famous men, those tutelary geniuses whose efforts to drag France out of slavery would nevertheless have been useless without your assistance. Hasten then to fulfil this most beautiful sacrifice. One of you, alone, in the Capital, will be example enough to encourage an immediate following in all the Provinces. Take no notice of these non-citizens who will suggest that such a project will never succeed in the midst of a Nation whose most distinguished Members hold dear to the principles of the most decided Aristocracy. On the contrary, I maintain that it is the only method to render Aristocrats useful to the public cause because, not being in the majority, they fear the danger of being infamously pointed out, and in some way targeted by the indignation of real citizens; this will be, for them, a greater incentive [to donate] than the State's appalling crisis is for you.

By Madame de G***

THE END