

LE BONS SENS FRANÇAIS
OU
L'APOLOGIE DES VRAIS NOBLES,
DÉDIÉE AUX JACOBINS.

French Common sense or the Vindication of True Nobles, dedicated to the Jacobins.¹

Fiat lux. Stupete gentes.²

The King of Sweden has been assassinated, there is insurrection everywhere, the standard of liberty is flying in all parts; a God seems to be leading this great movement and simultaneously knocking down all the Potentates of the universe, all peoples are rising up: tyrants, tremble!³

People, recognise your rights but do not abuse them; conserve your strength for the heavens are lending you their support, comply with this kindness! Distance yourselves from intrigue and corruption, and you, the French, who were the first to hoist the banner of independence and defend universal happiness, let your gentle laws spread out over the Universe.⁴

My decided metamorphosis has been inspired by common sense; sometimes fearful and fickle like the French spirit, I have at times strayed from my design, but now is the moment to be purposeful. Can I say that it led me on despite my better judgement? No, it was fractious yet I faced it bravely and I can hear, hissing in my ears, the disapproving cries of malevolent people who cannot bear the approaching resurrection of virtue.

To please the mass of feeble mankind would be to achieve more than God, for each one blames Him for his fate or his existence (all men claim to define Him yet none can understand Him). Can I do anything, weak and feeble Author that I am, to unite them? To imitate them, such is my lot; to seek to improve the short, rapid, passing of a stormy life, that is what common sense dictates though I have not fully grasped it. I will admit that I found common sense very hard to understand; it appeared foreign in France yet it wanted, apparently, to become familiar with the language of the inhabitants. After long hours of research, it presented itself to me as a guiding angel that God appeared to have placed in the hands of nature to watch over the heritage of mankind and to distribute its gifts without distinction.

It took me about ten minutes to uncover the French wit and two hours to get it to the printers [*L'Esprit français*]; hardly was it distributed than those who disparage these principles travestied its good intentions. I attacked headlong the hydra of despotism, I

1 In this pamphlet, written in April 1792, de Gouges replies to some of the comments her previous text *L'Esprit français* had elicited; with her usual prescience she warns her fellow citizens that the revolution is in danger of becoming mired in corruption and violence. Her ever present yearning for equality and freedom yet again presses her to address the pitiful gains made by women under the new regime. This pamphlet was sent to the Legislative Assembly on 15 April 1792 with an accompanying letter; the latter, read aloud, was scorned by the gentlemen of the Assembly who passed on to other matters, pamphlet unread.

2 'Let there be light', from the book of Genesis, Old Testament, Christian Bible; 'Nations be amazed', is the first line of a famous hymn by Jean de Santeul (1630 - 1697) that became a catch phrase for any astonishing pronouncement.

3 Gustave III (1746 – 1792) died on 29 March of septicaemia after being shot at a masked ball two weeks earlier. The nobles who plotted his assassination were angry at his reforms that diminished their powers. He was both an enlightened reformer and a king who believed in absolute monarchy. A close friend of the future Louis XVIII, he supported the French monarchy in its crisis by creating a coalition of foreign powers against the revolutionaries.

4 The original text is 'become the boulevard of universal happiness'; in the 18th century a boulevard was a rampart, later many ramparts were converted into promenades and the usage evolved to mean a leafy place to stroll.

attacked the vices of the new regime, I exposed the danger, I made useful suggestions for the good; I have not yet succeeded but I will not be discouraged (having served my ungrateful motherland I will defend her though she be unfair).

I will present common sense. Common sense, what kind of beast is that, ask certain people of note. Well, Gentlemen, your guess is as good as mine but I will admit that I have been seeking to make its acquaintance for a long time; backs are turned on me so I seek no further, I run to the bachelors, to the old doctors of the Sorbonne, to those in parliament, to the erstwhile nobility, in a word, to the journalists; everywhere I find that French wit reproaches me for my audacity.....Alas! I beg your pardon, I tell it, for believing you to be the cause of all our problems; however, as you are the greatest and you sanction a thousand different parties, I recognise, if it suits you, that you are the Mentor of the French, the master of the Universe, of the Heavens and of the Earth.

Thwarted by not finding that which I was seeking and more engaged in my quest than those maniacs who have chased after the philosopher's stone since time immemorial, I grew tired awaiting the arrival of common sense. Until now I had only known its name, then two unexpected letters arrived; they were from two men whose great merit I knew well, but I did not know that they appreciated useful criticism especially when both were mentioned in said criticism: such men still exist.

Diogenes only looked for one, and I, a woman, in these troublesome times when partisan spirits upset everything, have found two; I will speak with them and with the common sense that imbues their letters.⁵

These unpretentious letters merit seeing the light of day for they offer an opportunity to consider the immense wealth of individual good intentions when they all work towards the same goal; really virtuous men always understand this but, a moment please, Gentlemen critics, read, I pray, the letters that follow and I am sure that you will agree with me; then I will offer my justification.

Paris, 28 March 1792

'I am very grateful to you, Madame, for the items that you were kind enough to send me. I have read your pamphlet with interest, it is written with warmth and energy and there are passages that gave me great pleasure; the part on page 27 that starts with the words: "will men never be wise enough etc." is very beautiful and full of wise philosophy.

I cannot totally agree with you and I believe that you do not always see our position from its true point of view; you seem to believe that the machine cannot work, that the cogs are poorly engaged and prevented from functioning well. This opinion, though widely believed is, in my view, a mistake; men adapt only too easily to all types of government. You only have to observe the vast numbers of governments that control the fate of poor humankind, their diversity is a fine and great subject of study; some are bizarre, some absurd and so contrary to all the principles of nature and reason that their very existence is inconceivable.

Nonetheless men get used to them, what I mean to say is they idolise them, beliefs and prejudice preserve them and support them. If the constitution is undergoing difficulties, and there are impediments to its working, the cause is not to be found in the constitution itself. With all the regard that is due to an estimable author, I am your fellow citizen.'

Signed, PÉTION.⁶

⁵ Diogenes is alleged to have gone about in broad daylight with a lighted lamp, when asked why he would reply that he was looking for an honest man. One of the founders of Cynicism he believed that people strayed away from the good they were capable of; by living as a simple outcast, shunning wealth and comfort for simple virtue, he challenged society to reconsider its values.

⁶ Jérôme Pétion (1756 – 1794), a constitutional monarchist (he was part of the delegation sent by the National Assembly to bring back Louis XVI and his family from Varennes in June 1791) and Robespierre's

MUNICIPALITY OF PARIS
PROCURATOR OF THE TOWN

'A Procurator of the Town has no spare time to offer, either to the graces or to the muses, but he owes some to a good citizeness who has served the Motherland with her heart and mind.

Madame de Gouges does not envisage the revolution quite like the patriots but her intentions are similar. Several paths lead to liberty, she would have liked one that was strewn only with flowers, such is the taste of her sex.

Madame de Gouges also wanted to work towards the redemption of the blacks, she might find slaves who do not wish to be set free.

I trust she will accept the homage and thanks of P. MANUEL.¹⁷

From the Town Hall, this 28 March 1792, Year 4.

Mr. Manuel, you have written to me like a French philosopher. This hint of gallantry can harm neither public security nor the salutary effects of the revolution, but let us speak, speak of it [the revolution] alone, and leave aside the prerogatives of my sex that I abandoned a long time ago for such a fine cause that engages my heart and soul entirely. If, like the author of the august Social Contract, I wished the revolution to be undertaken without an effusion of blood it is because I feared, like him, that one drop shed would lead to a flowing torrent. You must believe, as I do, that it is not blood that cements revolutions; I am quite convinced that the French could go from insurrection to insurrection like the English who after 50 years of civil war still have no constitution. Poland, which followed our example and regenerated itself, offers in its turn a model of wisdom and prudence that should guide all peoples if each one did not have a different idea of government. I appreciate that this pacific revolution [in Poland] is not to everyone's liking, it displeases me in certain areas for the extension of absurd feudal principles offends my reason.

In France we have to combat these prejudices as well as greater concerns. Not only do we have to draw together senseless opinions but also formidable parties that sow discord and who, with differing statements, attempt to re-establish oppression. France, now the mother of all peoples, should destroy all the tyrants of the world, if she can husband the resources that are left to her for this enterprise but if she wastes these resources she will endanger her best interests and throw the Universe back into slavery.

What, then, was my aim in attacking the failings of the French spirit? Mr. Manuel, you understood it without difficulty; I wanted to show all my fellow citizens that, given the degree of enlightenment afforded the French, it was easy to make a constitution worthy of all mankind if everyone was reasonable and virtuous, but if it must work with the

friend, was the Mayor of Paris from November 1791 to October 1792. President of the Jacobins in September 1792 he veered towards the Girondins and lost the support of Robespierre; as the latter's star rose Pétion's fell. He was proscribed in June 1793, lived in hiding for a year, and committed suicide in June 1794, days before Robespierre's fall from power. His body was found in a field partially eaten by wild animals.

¹⁷ Louis Pierre Manuel (1751 – 1793), a writer and preceptor elected to the new municipality of Paris with responsibility for the police, became a state prosecutor in December 1791. He lost his post at the same time as Pétion six months later but, supported by Robespierre and the Jacobins, he was reinstated a few weeks later. Controversy exists over his activities during the September massacres, some claiming he did nothing others that he saved lives. Elected to the Convention he condemned the massacres and voted against the king's death penalty. Unpopular, he retired; narrowly escaping an assassination attempt in the spring of 1793 he was later arrested, tried and guillotined about ten days after Olympe de Gouges.

incapacities of one and the vices of the other, this constitution, as I have written for a long time, will always be very difficult to execute.

I accept that we are in a period of convalescence and that after this total change of regime and principles only time can put things in their proper place, however if all citizens, by their reunion, do not help it, if the law does not make itself heard, if the *Départements* are not in agreement with the Municipalities on the correct interpretation of the laws and do not use them as a moral compass for all, then I shudder to pronounce....The fruits of this revolution will be a source of discord and lead to the complete ruin of the kingdom: these are my fears, they are doubly correct because they are supported by recognised authorities; all citizens must take note of them in order to ward off the storm that is menacing us.

Neither the feeble efforts of the ultramontane hydra, nor the credulity of a few men misled by the desperate cries of a priestly rabble, rejected by reason and nature, need concern us. The Supreme Being, tired at last of the crimes that soiled altars, seems to have guided the revolution to confound hypocrisy and purify religion. The cowardly plots of a few Municipalities, poisoned by the aristocracy, need not concern us; they must be broken and new ones created, the constitution must be made to work surrounded by cannons, bayonets and even pikes if it is absolutely necessary: this is what I will say to M. Pétion.

Tell me now, incorruptible man, that Mme de Gouges would have wanted the Revolution to be strewn with flowers; yes, I would have wished it and I do not deny that I still wish it; I sincerely pray that the destructive Parties will see reason enough and may recognise that their true interests lie in uniting all minds for the good of the Citizens and the prosperity of the Motherland.

Blameless Legislator, flawless Magistrate, friend of the People, upholder of the Law, I owe you a justification; I owe you even more, I owe you a sincere avowal, a rare thing and maybe very useful in the circumstances if everyone, following my example, had no desire other than the glory of their country.

The diversity of Governments, as you point out, is indeed a fine and great subject for study: before I meditated on politics, why did I not consider, philosophically, this bizarre assemblage, these State maxims that clash, these prejudices that damage reason and nature, while enslaving men and glorifying their credulity?

If these mistakes are absurd, and harm the functioning of a wise Government, what then of this monstrous mix of exalted ideas belonging to those who only see, in public good, hate, revenge, crime, revolt, a violation of the Law and an approbation of disobedience that wants to leave to future generations the scattered remnants of a new Government founded on immutable principles.

It is therefore not the work itself that I meant to attack: you know better than anyone that my Writings have echoed the praises of that august Social Contract; if I thought its progress would be hard, it was because I feared the ineptness of some and the selfishness of others, but even more the malpractice of Leaders who, deaf to the Law, only listen to the instigators of Court schemes or the popular caprices of the day.

But, to put it more clearly, these two parties, divided by their interests, tend towards the destruction of the constitutional Powers in equal measure, arriving at the same end by different means. One works to reproduce the St. Bartholomew's day massacres, the other do renew the theatre of Cromwell. Thanks to these two factions the progress of the Constitution is halted and the Motherland, on the edge of a precipice, is about to plunge over in order to save it; possibly nothing is left but the feeble efforts of those who have never had any other interests than those of the Constitution. Who are the disinterested citizens that strengthen these two parties? It is certain Journalists whose fortunes have accrued at the expense of reputations and social order. Who leads minds astray, who excites the masses? Once again it is these Journalists. Who violates the Law? Who

speaks of war, of illegal powers? Once again it is these Journalists. In general I blame them all so as not to attack any in particular; this generality will probably lead them to unite in attacking me. *Esprit de corps* can be phenomenally effective. Heavens! Save me from the lightning that threatens. I will offer to make amends for my diatribe against them; if they are generous enough to sacrifice the fruits of their mutual invectives in favour of the Motherland then I will say, Gentlemen, I find your pure civic duty edifying for it teaches me that, far from propagating the actions that damaged the Revolution in order to enlarge your readership and foment disorder in all the kingdom, you parted company in favour of the Motherland, you intended to unite people through your own quarrels, you strengthened public opinion and you helped to liquidate the debts of the State: then I would say much more, but I do not want to name anyone or point out those whose sordid interests allowed them to degenerate into an appalling *mêlée* of rights and claims.

Let everyone be able to say like me: 'I have ruined myself for my country', then I will accept their criticism; but none will reply, or their reply will be stamped by the die of imposture and calumny. I have no desire to court anyone; may I only inspire in them a few good thoughts and encourage them to prefer the general good to their personal interests! Let each person go down into the depth of their conscience and let them shudder at the misery they have prepared for their country.

All that is left is for me to attack the sect that I compare to that of medical doctors: both are responsible for the physical and moral destruction of humankind. I am convinced that if neither doctors nor journalists existed then men would be more robust and less foolish; doctors wear down the body and journalists alienate the mind.

The truth of these reflections, stripped of metaphysics, is easily proven by an examination of times past, and in particular, of revolutions. Undoubtedly Asclepius's sect is less powerful in times of revolutions than that of the scribblers; there is no time to be ill when body and mind are active.⁸ Therefore I would like them [the doctors] to work at curing their colleagues [the journalists] by finding a sufficient quantity of hellebore in order to affect a cure.⁹ But I am wandering off the point of this new text; my plan was to discuss French common sense or the vindication of true nobles but, sometimes, French wit leads me astray despite my best intentions. Let me take up the thread I had lost: I am still addressing M. Pétion and I am convinced that I will rediscover common sense with him.

Whatever kind of government the French adopt, as long as it is wise and advantageous for all citizens, I approve of it in advance, even if it were to be a republican government, but it is time to extricate ourselves from this cruel indecision, from the painful place in which we have buried ourselves. It is time to give an impetus to the Constitution that I consider to be a superb vessel built by able artists to resist tempests and contend with the most dangerous reefs. At last, launched in the port, it only awaits good weather to deploy its sails and navigate the vast ocean; the sky is clear, the sea is calm, the impatient voyagers lift the anchor but a brawl breaks out amongst the pilots and the sailors as to the direction the ship should take, some talk of setting sail others of an embargo. The dispute takes hold, it becomes serious, the vessel languishes and the most precious cargo perishes. Some want to head for the west, some for the east; time is wasted on empty discussions, the horizon clouds over, the tempest, lightning and thunder rumble all around, the waves rise and that most solid vessel is about to sink in the port.

Here is the truest portrait of the Constitution.

I repeat, it is not in fact the majestic edifice that I have attacked but those to whom its direction was entrusted; those who through secret schemes, perverse and cunning insinuations, sought to undermine its, as yet, shaky foundations. This is how I see the situation at the moment and it has to be acknowledged that it cannot remain in this state;

⁸ Asclepius (Aesculapius) was the Greek god of medicine.

⁹ The hellebore plant was considered to be a cure for madness in classical times and Hippocrates is believed to have used it as a purgative; it has many unpleasant side effects leading to death if wrongly administered.

gangrene is taking hold of the entire Kingdom and the operation may have terrible consequences. I can envisage a method that I believe to be infallible but that others may find senseless; let it at least be considered as an old wives' remedy that has no other aim, when administered, than to halt the onset of the disease and serve humanity.

It is well known that if these remedies fail to cure at least they do no harm, but before proposing them I need to prepare the wound to receive this bizarre topical remedy.

Let us return to the opinions and prejudices of the men who alternate between forming and destroying Empires; these habitual prejudices and opinions are self-perpetuating and resonate even when they no longer exist: for forty years, or maybe even more, the revolution had taken hold of hearts and minds and without the height of tyranny certainly these habits would have delayed it even longer.

The ancien régime was like a clever flirt who hid, with artistry, the ravages of time; she saw the Universe at her feet and flattered herself that she would never age; unfair, despotic and full of vice, nonetheless her worshippers remained her devoted subjects. An eighty-year-old Ninon still conquered admirers; she was remembered as once having been pretty and it was impossible to deny that she was forever amiable.¹⁰ What a difference between the flirt of the ancien régime and the philosopher Ninon de l'Enclos; one truly reigned over men until her last sigh, the other only reigned over their prejudices.

French by birth I admit that I have long been subjugated by the prejudices that favour our Kings; are there any French who can claim otherwise? These prejudices stifled the republican dispositions that characterise all my actions and, at times, my writings, but I was careful not to manifest them publicly as I thought they were a danger to my country; it is possible that I was wrong. Sceptres fall just like republics, all passes. This simple observation will convince the foolish that it is not so easy to subdue men once they have shaken off the yoke. By the same token it is therefore difficult to uproot the prejudices of nobility and fanaticism however great the efforts of sacred philosophy!

The self-styled nobles and the recusants [*réfractaires*] will not fail to exclaim against these observations and in particular my insufficiency in politics; I admit that I have never studied it, and that I discuss it mechanically and even with disgust, that my pure patriotism has carried me beyond my abilities and beyond my repugnance for this subject; but if I have not succeeded as I would have wished, or as was required, at least I had pure and praiseworthy intentions, at least I offered advantageous projects, and I recovered from the check I put on my theatrical reputation by abandoning it for such a great cause. The critics cannot deny it, even the seditious ones from diverse parties; at least I fulfilled my task and made myself useful: may I do even more and become indispensable!

A diamond found in the desert, is it any less precious, or less valuable?

An old-wives' remedy.

It concerns rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's; I will prove, geometrically, that true nobles are those that the nobility call plebeian: the man who abandons his origins is no doubt the villain of society, all is a botched in this lowly world, I want to try and create something new.

The noble farmer, who has seen his fortune grow as he feeds mankind is no doubt nobler and greater than the son who inherits and demeans himself by abandoning the traditions and virtues of his ancestors in order to shine in idleness, and whose only desire

¹⁰ 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. De Gouges thought that Ninon de l'Enclos was a perfect role model and portrayed her in two of her plays: *Molière chez Ninon* (1788) and *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791).

is to be created count or marquis. The descendants of this anti-philosopher greedily calculate the period that distances them from their ancestors; nature, reason, all is disregarded in this atrocious feudalism, the most recent inheritor cannot bear to mention the original serf to whom he owes his ennoblement. Just as unusual are the self-styled gentlemen who pre-date the authors of their extravagance.

I may be wrong but I believe true nobles to be those who never abandon reason, nature or the social good; that the most ancient families, whose august efforts go back to the times of the first men, are those who nobly till the soil; there, it seems to me, is the true and good nobility that we should establish and if it were possible to destroy the presumptuousness of a usurped power, without spilling the blood of citizens, I would suggest that the oldest family of farmers, derived from earliest man, should be placed on the throne. Mérope's verses may be used against me;

'Je mettrais en vos mains, sa mère et son état,
Et le bandeau des rois sur le front d'un soldat,
Le premier qui fut roi, fut un soldat heureux,
Qui sert bien son pays, n'as pas besoin d'aïeux.'¹¹

These maxims merely show us that it is not justice or manners that have founded empires but good fortune, skill or crime. Peoples consented to the subjugation of tyrants' yokes; sovereign masters, they can choose, when auspicious, to remove a power entrusted to those who have administered it poorly: this is what common sense demonstrates.

What, then, would become of the nobility, the potentates of Europe, if men were to follow this lesson, if the majority were to decide on their fate entirely, if without anger they wanted to make reason and justice triumphant, if they finally accepted that poor humanity, adaptable and rich in invention, were still to need the prejudices that direct them; centuries of enlightenment must at least have rendered them less absurd, reflection is the preamble to the remedy that I believe indispensable in the circumstance.

A common intent is needed to pronounce in favour of kings or of people, or parties won over by reason or armed means; if France is to be the Areopagus that pronounces on this vital subject then she must give the Universe an example of impartiality and freedom of expression, so that the fate of kings can be decided by the greatest number of votes.¹²

Every citizen is master of his own will and it is only the will of the majority that can establish laws: this decree is necessary everywhere and none can contest it. How wonderful it would be if all men could subscribe to it and only through the strength of reason, without the use of arms. Oh! My motherland. Oh my fellow citizens, if only I could penetrate you with the heroism that enflames my soul at this moment, if only I could electrify you with the pure civic duty that guides all my actions, then you would lay aside all passion, hatred and vengeance in order to restore the motherland and your only ambition would be the glory of serving your country and immortalising your work!

The answer is to make the method intelligible to all, I will say more, I wager that all the parties would adopt it and, if it were possible to give it the weight of law, this method, that I convert into a philosophical proposition, will take its place in the rights of man.

¹¹ These slightly misquoted lines come from Voltaire's play *Mérope* (Act 1, scene 3) in which the eponymous widowed queen refuses to marry the soldier Polyphonte in order to safeguard the kingdom for her son. The soldier, a meritocrat, expresses views contrary to hereditary principles. 'Would I place in your hands his mother and his kingdom and put the circlet of kings on the brow of a soldier?', in the play these lines are spoken by the queen, the following lines spoken by the soldier are in answer to her question, 'the first of kings was a fortunate soldier, he who serves his country well has no need of ancestors'. Polyphonte's powerful statements became popular revolutionary slogans although Voltaire's own message was somewhat ambiguous for the soldier is clearly a brutal tyrant whilst the grieving queen is a character written to gain empathy from the audience.

¹² The Areopagus was a powerful non-elected council of ancient Athens.

Man, therefore, is within his rights to express his opinions so long as they do not threaten public order; I would like this wish to be supported by reason and the fairness of the rights of man. The interests of the motherland are to be decided upon; a rational method is needed to resolve which party will save it and I believe that to be a plurality of votes. Would it not be profound and logical to call forth everyone in the kingdom and to add this method to the additional articles of the constitution? Those who are absent should be recalled and a declaration made by solemn decree that they must return to their homes, within a certain time, in order to opine legally and voluntarily on the style of government, or risk losing all their property.

Each *département* would be in charge of an accurate, two-column, register where all the patriots would be inscribed under the new regime and the erstwhile nobles under the old. Personally I will opine in advance that I favour the constitutional principles; if the royalist, aristocratic, party thinks it is equally strong in favours then, it must, at this time of parties, be given its due.

But, fearful patriots will ask me, what if the balance swings in their favour, no, no, we have nothing to fear; but if that were to happen would we not be able to follow the example of great peoples when it comes to deciding on the fate of the state.

This method, this debate, this decree cannot be allowed to threaten the sovereignty of the people, or of the constitution, in any way but it must win over minds; each person must be free to decide on the fate of their country. Our enemies must no longer be able to say, we have not been consulted; arson was committed, our properties were destroyed, while we sought to work for the general good upon which we had every right to pronounce freely, in common accord with all the French. If tyranny and injustice had not opposed it this would have been my motion and, like M. Robespierre, I oppose the use of war to decide this question.¹³

Meanwhile we must always maintain the constitution and surround it with public force, contain the rebels and use all our vigilance to keep a watchful eye on the interior that is suffering in all parts of the realm. This is what common sense dictates to me, perhaps I will not be thought so unreasonable. I did not wait for the criticism of idiots or the praise of sycophants to manifest my opinions; my genius is like my fortune, I have to grab it while I can for if I write when I am indisposed my works suffer for it. I never pause to reflect when I write; I never make corrections; always natural, never methodical, I am often diffuse and mistaken, but sometimes astounding. I believe I am not mistaken and though my writings may be obscure they have produced a focus for enlightenment. I call upon the men who are able to judge of these things and in particular to you, M. Pétion. Forgive this audacity, it is the fruit of injustice, or rather of the grossest ingratitude; my principles have been judged according to the most feeble passages of my works, outrageously they were considered aristocratic while the aristocrats considered them to be demagogic: the latter could amuse me but I do not laugh at the former. Who is better placed than you to vouch for my true principles? As a member of the Constituent Assembly you have received all my projects, all my political and philosophical reflections, in a word I have produced all that would characterise an honest man; under a despotic regime I have spoken the language of truth and liberty; still in its cradle this liberty brought down on me a mass of detractors; the concise almanac of great women proves it.¹⁴ Liberty at the time was only a dream, in its cradle; but what am I saying, it was in the void; I am nonetheless obliged to present some examples of the way in which I wrote in 1788. Today, you have in your hands, M. Pétion, as has the Constituent Assembly, the same pamphlets that you received in 1789

13 On 20 April 1792, a few days after this pamphlet was presented to the Legislative Assembly, France declared war on Francis 1 King of Hungary and Bohemia (last Holy Roman Emperor and future Emperor of Austria, aged 24 and just six weeks into his reign) accusing him of supporting and arming French malcontents who were seeking to return France to its pre-revolutionary regime.

14 Champcenetz and Rivarol's lampoon the *Petit almanach des nos grandes femmes* (1789) has an entry for de Gouges 'the playwright' which ironically ridicules her avowed ability to create texts at speed.

that had already been circulating around all of France for a year: the point is to confound the enemies of the public good for they are my enemies too, the point is to prove to the so called patriots, more aristocratic in their souls than true born aristocrats, how I sought to defend the people from kings when no one dared to openly declare themselves as their defender. The great virtue of the monarch at that time inspired in me some enthusiasm; this enthusiasm grew when I saw him abused and endangered; by and by he taught me to no longer believe in the virtue of kings above that of the rest of humanity. My enthusiasm is much diminished and if it only depended on my opinion to decide his fate I would say to him: Sir, if you are bad then you wanted to harm us considerably; if you are merely feeble, then you have allowed us to do much more damage. Therefore, as you are incapable, retire to a castle where you may enjoy all the benefits that belong to your position as the king of a free people along with an inalienable tranquillity, but abdicate your crown.¹⁵

As a result of this proposition I see the bloody sword of the counter-revolution raised against me, I see the Cromwellians smile and my proposition makes me shudder.

Dear God, which regent would the constitutional rules assign to France? Ah! If one of the two triumphs my head will have a price on it, but if they could be honourable enough to disdain a woman's valiant character I would be bold enough to flee my motherland and live amongst the furthest flung people.¹⁶ There is my aristocracy, there is my demagogy: I love loyalty alone, the interests of my country are my only concern, I find everything else odious.

And you, great Magistrate, who are not yet influenced by proximity to the throne, maintain this fortitude and you will end your career in glory despite the thorny interventions of party jealousies. I had your letter printed, I hope you will forgive me, for I needed to regain the good opinion that I had lost: and you also, M. Manuel, forgive me, however slapdash the letter that you wrote in a rush it retains a style that is too pure and flowing to

15 [original footnote] However should he be unjustly inculpated and should his flight have been only driven by fear caused by the abuses that he had received then the dignity of Nation requires that he be once again the best king in the world.

16 Louis XVI's brother the comte de Provence (who emigrated when Louis XVI fled Paris in June 1791 unlike his younger brother the comte d'Artois who fled France immediately after the fall of the Bastille) officially called himself 'regent' after the execution of his brother (21 January 1793) and then Louis XVIII after the death of the dauphin (Louis XVII) in prison, in June 1795. However, he had considered himself to be a form of regent since his brother's loss of power following his return from Varennes in 1791 and even more so after the king's arrest following the events of 10 August 1792. The second 'regent' mentioned by de Gouges was the duc d'Orléans, the king's cousin, who hoped to be named regent following Louis XVI's flight in June 1791. He had placed himself firmly on the side of the revolutionaries after the fall of the Bastille (though his motives remain disputed) and changed his name to Philippe Egalité after the abolition of noble titles in September 1792. De Gouges had been impressed by his stance though the rhetoric that emanated from his seat, the Palais-Royal, soon became too extreme for her taste. She distrusted him personally and his entourage, particularly Choderlos de Laclos, his highly influential secretary, following an incident in October 1789 when a band of ruffians came to her house in Versailles, behaved abusively, and sought to harm her; she was surrounded by friends who protected her. In July 1789 in her pamphlet *Séance Royale* she had suggested that Louis XVI should abdicate in favour of his under-age children, choosing his own regent i.e. the duc d'Orléans; the ideas were ably formulated as the author's dreams. Unfortunately both the court and the duc's entourage took umbrage, each denouncing her as a partisan of the other. Writing to the duc d'Orléans subsequently she believed he, and not the court, had sent the interlopers. Her fears expressed in this actual pamphlet were prescient for in March 1793 armed men, who were almost certainly orchestrated by Laclos, pursued her in the streets. She escaped by weaving through shops in narrow streets unknown to her harassers yet when she successfully had one of the men arrested by the national guards he was soon released as de Gouges was discredited for having sought to defend Louis XVI during his trial. Random acts of aggression against women deemed unacceptable had become more prevalent in these chaotic times with bystanders providing encouragement; help would have been hard to find. Typically she wasted no time in writing about these affairs, publishing a poster in March *Union, courage, surveillance et la République est sauvée* and a pamphlet a month or so later (*Œuvres de la citoyenne de Gouges, dédiés à Philippe*) decrying the duc and Laclos.

figure in a crude work despite the facility with which it was written; and you, my critics, read what follows and judge me fairly.¹⁷

LETTER TO THE PEOPLE
or the Patriotic Purse Project of 1788.

Page 8. And you, famous authors, who only knew how to speak to kings, aspire to something greater, purer and more praiseworthy: I address the people. [...] All that comes from my feeble genius must be considered as a fruit that nature has developed, one that has never been embellished by the hands of men. This fruit is not for sale. [...] Shame to all those whose appalling talent is to sow discord and poison through their ambiguous writings. Oh how I pity those who, against their better nature, sell their eulogies to the highest bidder! Sublime truth! You have always guided me, been the foundation of my opinions, take away my ability to write if ever I betray the conscience that your light has illuminated.

Page 12. Oh unhappy citizens! Listen to the voice of a fair-minded and sensitive woman. You can only be happy if you do not face financial ruin. Your labour is arduous your ambitions modest. You work solely to feed your wives and children whose languishing arms reach out to you; and during this public disorder, maybe you are abandoning them to die of want or pain. The twenty-four hours that you lose create a deficit in your finances that are as dangerous as those of the State: the State has resources, you only have your strength. If you wear it out with late night foolishness, how will you find the vigour and the courage to usefully return to work? What am I saying? Is that all you have to fear? What of the bloody battles that always follow these unbridled jublations? Authority has to be maintained and the result is a frightful butchery. Without knowing whom you are fighting for, you throw yourselves heart and soul into a treacherous path cleared for you by a seditious, ill-intentioned Felon. This can start a civil war: a civil war! Heavens! I tremble as I speak of it! Are there any greater fears for humanity than this calamity?

Page 15. What then is this system that in my opinion would be suitable to pay off the national debt? It would be, I believe, voluntary taxation, something the Nation would celebrate. This memorable heartfelt gesture on the part of the French, recorded for posterity, would shape the most singular and remarkable epoch in the annals of France.

Page 16. Some muddle-headed individuals argue that this expedient would bring shame upon the State; I argue that the opposite is true and that it would glorify the State.

Page 17. The King, asks for extra taxes. Parliament, sensing that the populace is facing ruin, refuses: these alternatives of demand and refusal aggravate the situation and do nothing to restore confidence, a voluntary tax...a voluntary tax in the name of the Nation would allow it to distinguish itself.

Pages 18 and 19. I will start with the Market Porters and indiscriminately rise up to the highest levels of society; all who call themselves French will co-operate to save the State. The purse fit to receive these voluntary sums, offered to the King by his subjects, will be considered sacred; these assets will be limited by statute to paying off the national debt, no sum whatsoever can be taken from them under any pretext, or for any form of speculation. [...] All citizens contributing a sum to this purse, according to their means, would inscribe their names on a register, below the sum they had remitted to the said purse. This precaution would protect us from corruption and give each contributor a chance to acknowledge the other; all citizens would see themselves through the same

¹⁷ The extracts that follow have been heavily edited by de Gouges though not much altered in any other way; I have placed square brackets with ellipses to mark excisions. The full texts are available on www.olympdedegouges.eu.

mirror and this touching portrait would define both the soul, the heart and the spirit of the French.

Page 20. The Cobbler, the Tailor, the Wig-maker, the general Shop-keeper, seeing that all is blocked by inaction, that commerce is virtually destroyed, will make savings in the considered belief that when the State is less indebted all will flourish again: elderly bachelors who benefit from considerable fortunes, will offer their wealth to the State, in order to see their names on the list of true Frenchmen. As for Priests and Monks and others of the type, I must make some alternative suggestions: set apart from the luxuries of this world, not obliged to entertain, Ministers of peace and the corner-stones of the Church, without doubt they will hasten to add their names to the head of the register that will list the benefactors of the Nation. Habituated, as they are, to self-imposed privations, a few more in order to pay off the national debt, as the good citizens they are, will be as nothing to them. Those who find themselves endowed with great abbeys and vast priories will, without doubt, render to the King what is his due, as much from religious observation as from gratitude.

Pages 21 and 22. Dare I say on behalf of the performers, as well as the audience that the theatres will undoubtedly contribute to fill the purse that I propose for, despite the poverty of the State and the People, they are still attended with the same zeal. As for princes, lords and the wealthy, they will all compete to pay this voluntary tax; a suitable name is needed to better embody this tax; I would like it to be called the patriotic tax: no one, down to the boarder in a convent, would refuse to make savings and participate in this tax. Ah! So many young people would register themselves on this list; [...] yes, I dare opine in this way and, based on my own feelings, judge all my fellow citizens.

Pages 23 and 24. Penetrated as I am by my love for the motherland I can present my opinions, fired up with this emotion, right up to the steps of the Throne and remind the king of the august promise he made to his people, when he encircled his brow with the diadem, to ceaselessly watch over the happiness of his subjects; his wishes were thwarted for fate, that master of the world, its people and its kings, decided otherwise; but this contrary fate cannot stop mistakes and injustices being rectified once one understands the universal harm they do. All sums used in fruitless expenditure should be refused and, instead, sent annually to the Patriotic purse.

Humane and Patriotic Observations at the end of 1788.

Page 1. France is sunk in grief, the people are suffering and the monarch cries out. Parliament is demanding the Estates-General and the Nation cannot come to an agreement. There is no consensus on electing these assemblies. All these alternations are hobbling the welfare that the State expects from these lights.

Page 2. The Third Estate, with reason, claims a voice equal to that of the Clergy and Nobility; but the dignity of the latter will not allow that the representatives of the People have voices that are equally beneficial to the administration of the Finances or to finding prompt remedies for the problems that get worse every day. I feel as though I am seeing someone on their sickbed in need of an urgent operation. A good Doctor recommends immediate intervention; but the parents who frequently hold opposing views to those of the wise Doctor ask for a second opinion on the operation from the cream of the Faculty. The august Assembly of Asclepius cannot agree. Long discussions ensue; the illness becomes acute, or the patient dies: the good Doctor is the Third Estate. The gentlemen of the Nobility are the august Assembly of Doctors to whom I address, with the freedom that my sex permits me, the plea that they leave aside their rank, their titles and the pointless prejudices of their perfect dignity, to fly en masse to attend to the kingdom, chasing away the bad and introducing the good. These are the subjects we must discuss. Superciliousness must keep quiet and allow reason to take its place and in such a calamity

barons, marquises, counts, dukes, princes, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, all must become citizens and work together for the good of the State and the glory of the country. Gentlemen, who think you are superior to the people, to better understand the truth consider the terrifying picture that I will trace before your eyes. Trade is suppressed, incalculable numbers of workers are unemployed and without bread. What becomes of them? I ask you, can you bear witness to this without trembling? All is in stasis while the heartless rich stash away their wealth, that vile instrument of their cupidity; can it prolong their lives, can it make them happier? These inactive treasures, what good do they do anyone? They must be offered, interest free, to the State, in the same way they are placed in the safes. By placing your money in the nation's fund your investment will reap benefits in excess of its value. [...] If such a beautiful victory fails to touch your abject souls then you must fear the desperation of the poor and their subsequent revolts. You cannot hide from yourselves that it is always the rich who are attacked by their murderous hands. [...]

It is therefore up to you wise, great, good, citizens to deflect these problems that I fear will assail the motherland. It is conceivable that my troubled heart has become over anxious and that these fears have enabled me to perceive an obvious danger. Ah! How many times have States self-destructed by failing to foresee great upheavals? These are controversies that involve everyone and the most powerful party must happily accept and hear the opinions of the weakest. You must pronounce on the concerns of the State and the People; but these pronouncements must unify and be agreeable to both for if you create divisions you will lose them both. I appreciate that in happier times the principles of the State differ from those of the public, and that the rules of government would not permit any observations to be made concerning its administration.

Page 9. And you, unhappy citizens, unfortunate people, see how courageous I am in revealing myself in order to place under the eyes of the monarch the terrifying images of your 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. Man can only learn from experience, and you, great King, allow me to show you what you understand so well, that the virtues of a true man make a good King, that you were born with these virtues, but that you were misled like all your predecessors. I am far from wishing to accuse your disgraced ministers; maybe they were misled as you were, or they misled themselves, yet it is vital that their misfortunes enlighten today's ministers who, no doubt better disposed, will not allow bad examples to influence their well-intentioned procedures. Public outcry presently pursues ministers right into their sanctuaries; how satisfying, therefore, for an honest man to leave the ministry with the esteem of his monarch and the goodwill of the people!

Page 12. Oh 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, you must be burdened by their troubles. You are facing a few difficulties because your finances are disordered; you suffer because you know that your people are unhappy. Unhappy! Ah, Sire! There is a situation that is tenable between joy and misery and that is the one you believe your people to be in. But the one that exists, the one that I cannot describe without shuddering, is the deplorable condition of one third of your people, the third with the most to recommend them, the masons, the men who till the soil, those whose only wealth is the manual labour they use to feed their wives and children. 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.

In the high season they can still do a bit work that will allow them to drag out the remainder of their miserable life: but in winter, in the frost, when the icicles of age have already frozen their exhausted vigour they want the strength to beg their daily bread and lack the most basic necessities of life. They wrap themselves up in their rags, lie on their pallets, and are found starved to death, frozen stiff. Ah! If only there could be homes, open in winter, for out of work labourers, the weak and elderly, and abandoned children.

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. Once the national debt is repaid your charitable nature will encourage this fine institution; all the pure and generous souls will send vast sums to this edifice.

Royal Session or the Patriotic Dream.

Page 30. Yet there is still a prejudice that disgraces illegitimate children and prevents them from applying for any ordinary position or rank within society.

This prejudice seems to me to be the more absurd, ridiculous and unnatural for if a prince gives life to a child born to the lowest of women, it is nonetheless a gentleman and can aspire to honours and rewards while the natural son of good man, from a simple family, will be seen as a contemptible bastard and deprived of any title or fortune. Reason is affronted and nature trembles.

In Spain, the country of the Inquisition, we can see that this injustice was not even worthy of the inquisitors. Would we be less humane, less just than the Spaniards, and could you, Gentlemen, refuse to work towards destroying this horrible prejudice?

Allegorical Dialogue between France and the Truth, in 1788, dedicated to the Estates-General in 1789.

Page 19. Yet in order to prevent harm and consolidate the good through indissoluble ties, the Nation needs to declare itself against the Ministers who might, in the future, move away from the public good and the interests of the State. On taking office I want them to closely examine the state of affairs that they encounter and then examine the same when they leave so that the irreparable idiocies of those that went before cannot be seen to impact on the decent administration of those that have succeeded them. If I am heeded your government will once again be the greatest and wisest in Europe.

This is how I expressed myself when despotism ruled, this is how I made myself useful to my motherland, to my fellow citizens and I defy anyone, from any party, to suggest otherwise. No subjects were aired at the National Assembly but I had provided the germ, all constitutional decrees were clarified in my feeble works, and as I am obliged to distance myself from the modesty that has always been at the heart of my nature, and as no one, in the end, is willing to defend me, and as, through persecution and injustice I am being treated as a great man, in my lifetime, I have every right to complain of an ingratitude, characterised by an anti-philosophical notion, whose principal aim is to discourage my sex; it is for it, and not for myself, that I raise my voice. In this opuscle I have only reprinted three or four passages from my writings dispersed all over France in 1788. I can even quote a few phrases spoken by Mirabeau in my favour: "She is an astonishing woman," he would say, "she alone had made the constitution..."; but I need not continue, I can simply print the letter he wrote to me in answer to my pamphlet entitled *The Blind One Speaks to the French*.

This pamphlet is remarkable for the critique I made, within it, of Mirabeau's flaws. I must again quote the prediction that is in this work, I made others, of another hue, to kings and courtiers fifteen years ago; they are known and all came true.

I was a philosopher before even studying the theoretical aspects of the subject, but what am I saying, I was a philosopher in my tender infancy; the extract from Marie that will appear at the top of the 6th volume of my works will give an idea of my capabilities.

The Blind One Speaks to the French

Page 9. As for Mirabeau, whose genius and ability I admire, may I be permitted certain observations with regard to him: I suffer to see the best writer in France, the most eloquent of men, not always using those most precious and rare qualities to their best advantage; no doubt if he were ceaselessly to direct his pen towards the good then one day, one day, a statue would be raised in his honour.

Could he have imagined it, then? He is dead and the prediction came true, he is in the pantheon.¹⁸

Letter from Mirabeau.

Versailles, the 12 September 1789.

'I am very grateful to you, Madame, for sending me your work; until now, I had believed that the graces only decked themselves with flowers; but an effortless understanding and a strong mind have elevated your ideas, and your progress has been as speedy as the revolution's, and equally marked by success. Pray, Madame, accept all my thanks and trust in my respectful sentiments, for I have the honour to be your most humble and obedient servant.'

Signed le Comte de Mirabeau.

No doubt I will be reproached for mentioning myself too often in my works; indeed, as nobody has openly had the decency to give credit to the good and useful works I have produced I have been obliged to do it myself, and if it is a weakness to praise oneself then this weakness is excusable in a woman, especially as the greatest men are not exempt from it. Nonetheless my true character is not in question, it is too apparent in my productions to have gone unnoticed; neither my qualities nor anyone else's impress me; there is no great man in front of his valet, that is a universal truth. The mortal who can be useful, irrespective of sex or sect, that is the one who impresses me for it is easy enough to write elegant books by scribbling on paper but to establish, create and do good for society, that is a talent not given to all purists but it is the only one that I aspire to; certainly, this explanation does not satisfy the wordmongers which grieves me for it is the best that one can give and true men will give me credit for it.

ANECDOTE

Tired, worn out, disgusted by politics but always active for the public good, I had planned to go with my son to dine in the countryside on Easter Sunday. This was a happy day for me but an adventure was to beset my return: this singular moment lends weight to all the strange occurrences that have marked my life, and in particular to the rumours that have spread suggesting I have certain authors at my disposition.

¹⁸ The Panthéon in Paris, originally designed as a church, became in 1791 a mausoleum for great French men. Mirabeau was the first person entombed there (though he was removed a few years later) swiftly followed by Voltaire who was allowed to stay.

It is time to confound imposture, it is time for my ignorance to serve as my shield against the blows that are aimed at my reputation; I will not bore my readers with all that I could divulge regarding those pedants, fake savants and all the literary vermin, but I will appeal to the elite men of letters for I can only be judged by men of real merit. The manifest plagiarisms at my expense, the generalised incredulity with which I am treated, all show me that I am above mediocrity. But first to the adventure, then I will throw down the gauntlet.

The excursion was delightful and led us further than we would have wished so we abandoned the carriage that had brought us and I made to return on foot as far as the Bonshommes where we would find a hackney coach; I was mistaken in my expectation, there were none; I was very tired, my son asked for a seat as a bourgeois cabriolet stopped and offered one; the driver of the cabriolet was a man fifty to sixty years old and offered me the seat with so much honesty that, given my circumstances, I readily accepted.¹⁹

As I climbed into the cabriolet those that were staying behind with my son gave my name, there were women there; the Gentleman who had offered me the seat said: 'They have called you Mme de Bouges, I know her well.' 'I am not Mme de Bouges,' I replied, 'but Mme de Gouges', 'Mme de Gouges,' says a strange fellow who was in the cabriolet, 'the one who tries to be clever, I know her very well, I know her very well!' I turned around and examined this whimsical figure that I had never seen before: 'Very well?' I replied. Checking myself suddenly I stopped being Mme de Gouges so that these unknown people would talk about me more freely.

Few men would have born the excesses of this fellow with as much firmness and philosophy as I did.

How the witless impostor was exposed! His impudence knew no bounds for if I was not Mme de Gouges, he could at least have imagined that I might have been one of her friends. He wished to imply that he knew her only too well.

Having endured his review of my birth, the fate of my husband, the decision I took not to bear his name, and a thousand other similar stupidities for which erstwhile nobles always rebuked commoners, having laughed uproariously at everything I brought him back to the works of Mme de Gouges. 'Her works!' he cried, 'Can you really imagine that she ever dreamt up any of the words published in her name, she can't even read?' 'I agree with you there, it's because she is uneducated that her ideas on the sciences in general are astonishing according to those who know more about it than I, and I swear that people have often questioned her apparent ignorance.'

'I have seen her write plays in front of several people; winning a bet as well.' 'Ah Madame!' replied the impudent disbeliever, 'the play was already written and she was made to learn it by heart!' 'Are you quite sure?' 'So much so', said he, 'that I would bet she couldn't do the same in front of me, I've already got the better of her.' The reasonable man tried, as much as possible, to palliate the nonsense of this cowardly impostor and I had the strength of purpose to let his repertoire of puerile idiocy sink without trace but, arrived at my door, I thanked the reasonable man for the seat he had offered me in his cabriolet and, in a few words, I spoke thus to the valet stuffed with aristocratic nonsense. 'Sir, I have listened to your idiotic statements with the serenity of a philosopher, with the courage of a

¹⁹ 'Bonshommes' was one of the Parisian 'barrières' erected by the Farmers-General to collect taxes; it was on the banks of the Seine at the western edge of the city. De Gouges uses the familiar term 'sapin' to describe the fiacre or hackney coach commonly used for public transport. It would have seated four to six passengers but a cabriolet, in principle, held only two, one being the driver. De Gouges mentions a third party in the cabriolet presumably seated behind her as she describes turning around to look at him so this particular vehicle must have been larger than usual but clearly driven by the gentleman who offered the seat, not by a coachman.

good man and with a watchful eye; I am that Mme de Gouges that you have never met and that you are not fit to meet; profit from the lesson that I am giving you, men like you are two a penny but understand that it takes centuries to produce women like me.'

He tried to excuse himself by assuring me that he was talking about another Mme de Gouges but I left him to his embarrassment and went home.

Jean-Jacques [Rousseau], in a similar circumstance, was duped by twenty officers who did not recognise him and calumniated his immortal writings without even having read them; on the occasion he spoke with the dignity of Jean-Jacques, worthy of a great and natural man (simple and timid in company as everyone knows); he rose from the table and pulverised this ridiculous horde of senseless men: each rushed to beg his pardon but this pardon could only increase his disdain.

Less important, no doubt, and less sure of my talents than this immortal man, I find that it is indispensable for me to publicly confound the assertions of this unknown fellow. The man who gave me a seat in his cabriolet is a member of the Jacobins and he told me that he had spoken about the festival that is planned for the soldiers of Chateau-Vieux to M. Collot d'Herbois, their supporter, in the garden of the Feuillants.²⁰ If the members of the friends of the constitution are truly suffused with fairness for the interests of the motherland, as I believe they are, then I beg, in the name of all that I have done for it, one of their members, the honest gentleman who received me in his cabriolet, to name the fellow who defied me, not to condemn him to public indignation, but to oblige him to recognise his deception and his error.

I therefore propose to the friends of the constitution that they arrange a contest between myself and this fellow who claims to be an author, and insists that he wrote, for Mme Gervais, several works in verse with which he poisoned all the newspapers; he says he was the friend of the erstwhile bishop from Montauban, that vilest, most corrupt of prelates, as far as I can ascertain he was one of his sycophants.²¹ Two comedic subjects would be chosen; I will wager 50 *louis*, in favour of the soldiers of Chateau-Vieux, to write on a subject in the midst of the Jacobin assembly, or in the presence of officials that he may chose to name.

All I ask for is a secretary who can write as fast as I speak.

As for the new Midas who, no doubt, has been blessed with lessons in reading and writing, he will write or dictate his play, but likewise in the presence of officials and he will also stake 50 *louis*. If my play is not better constructed by all the rules of the theatre than his, I will nonetheless have done a good deed; I cannot answer for the style, it may be better than his, but I can answer for the plan, the scenes, the characters, its unity and the dramatic and creative genius; this is how I believe I can challenge him. Racine, seeing his plans finished used to say: 'My tragedy is finished, now I only have the verses to write.'

I have no doubt that the honourable member of the Jacobin society, I would recognise him for I have his portrait in my mind, will conduct himself as a gentleman towards a woman who has shown him proof of such caution and who, by this challenge, can do nothing but a good deed and confound this heap of idiots who rise up against my works and dispute my property.

20 On 15 April 1792 a celebratory parade took place in Paris in support of the members of the Châteauevieux Swiss Guards who had mutinied, among others, in the summer of 1790 in Nancy. The mutiny was suppressed and the Swiss guards severely punished (many receiving the death penalty) for behaviour particularly unacceptable in a regiment that for over a century and a half had formed part of the king's military household. In 1792 political thinking changed and the remaining soldiers, serving virtual life-sentences as galley prisoners, were pardoned and brought to Paris in celebration. De Gouges did not hold with this parade possibly because of its Jacobin support and/or because her son was a professional officer in an army riven with dissent.

21 This would seem to be a reference to her uncle Jean-Georges Lefranc de Pompignan (1715 – 1790).

Few women in similar circumstances would reveal, I dare say, the arduousness of this ordeal but, I who fear nothing, I who know no authors, I who never wished to associate myself with anyone, I have the support of no one, I have my works printed with countless grammatical errors; all these stains are assuredly my seal. Ah well! It is still all the rage to say that this negligence is an affectation on my behalf! Such is the level of idiocy of the French.

It is time, following my example, that a prejudice not only damaging to each citizen but also to the public interest should be discredited.

It is easy to erect a scaffold of lies, piling on more and more nonsense to give credit to the harm one seeks to achieve but, in this century of enlightenment, should we not introduce equity so that when an individual asks for justice they cannot be refused? I ask for it in the name of reason and for all that I have done for my motherland.

This triumph would be as dear to me as an honourable state pension, assuming I had merited it; if, up to now, the works of women, as well as those of many men, are disputed, it will be said that a woman knew how to fight this injustice.

I will end by stating that I do not want any information regarding the subject that I will be given for the play, other than at the time of writing, and that I will write it in public.

This proposal is worthy of the new order for it is, in all regards, interesting, inspiring, equitable and worthy of the resurgent French.

In a few days I will attach, to the volume that is about to be published, other anecdotes that are no less curious than this one. I have no doubt that all those who enjoy such original challenges will join me in giving it the credit it deserves.

This competition will easily be the equal of the *ancien régime's* horse races; I will have been the first to lay the foundations of a tribunal that, in future, will establish public opinion, and call before it all who like myself have been unfairly treated by a frivolous prejudice.

This literary tribunal must be created by the Friends of the Constitution; the subjects presented to it will be above average, it will purify good taste, true talent will no longer be lost in mediocrity; plagiarists, hacks, swindlers, superficial talentless journalists and all that disturb and gnaw at the genius of mankind will be mocked by the tribunal so that in future they will have a poor role to play.

These decrees, founded only on the basis of honour, may become as imposing as those that need to be imparted by the force of law. May these ideas, hurriedly thrown out, produce, like all those that I have offered previously, profound and useful ideas. I end by praying all the members of the Friends of the Society to ask, amongst themselves, who drove Mme. de Gouges, on Easter Sunday evening, from Passy to Paris and to have the goodness to let M. Collot d'Herbois, whom I choose as my advocate, aware of the facts; he may not be too pleased in this regard.²² Reinstating a usurped merit only flatters the one whose self-respect has been damaged but humanity interests and touches all great minds. No matter, I long to fail and lose my wager. This year I have been lucky in challenges and here is another one of a different kind; I have been accused of being a demagogue, a Jacobite [member of the Jacobin club] and I have been denied a good character.

It is with regard to Château-Vieux, which divides opinion, as do all things. An aristocrat, through and through, challenged me to manifest my opinion on this festival; unable to dissimulate I publicly declared that I was against it, only an aristocrat could have suspected me of coercion.

²² Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois (1749 – 1796) was a man of the theatre who became secretary of the Jacobin Club. He joined the Committee of Public Safety in September 1793, a few weeks before de Gouges' trial and, resenting her attitude to the festival in honour of the Swiss soldiers and the fact that her play against slavery stole a march on his, he was assiduous in claiming her head. He was an extremist responsible for inflicting a 'terror' on Lyons similar to that of the capital (2000 odd executions) in the autumn of 1793.

'If you can learn from it I will teach you,' I told him, 'to think loyally. You accuse me of being a Jacobite and that since the beginning I have been in favour of all good things, I am not, for example, in favour of this festival, I find it out of place and impolitic, even unjust.'

As for pardoning the soldiers. Ah! How wonderful to have broken their chains! How wonderful to have defended them! The prodigious gifts offered to these unfortunate men are richly deserved and I would add to them with all that is in my power.

But Desilles, this young hero who fascinates posterity so, cries to me from the bottom of his heart, will you strew the paths of my assassins with flowers!²³ They were led astray, they were lost, I know that as well as anyone else. Their mistake deserves forgiveness but to celebrate, to crown, such error. Ah! My fellow citizens, it is too much, too much. Be aware that these excesses may favour our most implacable enemies for they are not as irritated by the festival as you think; they fear its cancellation more than you; I saw some smile with joy when they heard that the soldiers of Château-Vieux had been received at the National Assembly.

I told them that their sardonic laughter was as inappropriate as the festival for, clearly, the Legislators could not but offer the honours of the sitting to those unfortunates who had come to show their gratitude; to have ignominiously sent them away would have been contradictory, tantamount to destroying good will, but to honour them with the solemnity of a national festival, that is the gravest error.

Nothing could be more natural than that they be celebrated by the People and by the Friends of the Constitution but without any administrative body, or processions, or cortege; my fellow citizens, in the name of the Motherland, do not prostitute these solemn national festivals, save them for worthier, more essential, circumstances; fear lest you become the fable of the universe when you could be its model.

And you, jacobin club, intrepid supporter of the constitution, to whom I dedicated the *French common sense*, you seek to save it from its enemies' long-standing snares and yet you ruin it. You ruin it, I tell you! This ludicrous festival will hew it down.

What necessity obliges you to spend so much, and waste precious time, and for whom? For foreigners [Swiss Guards]: but be assured, you are not in the majority, opinion is not on their side. Then what would you do for the regiment of the French-Guards; what has been done for it? It has been divided and none of the ranks augmented, such is the reward for the authors of the revolution who have not assassinated anyone! They are French and seek no reward, they will spill their blood for the motherland; must all good citizens see it imperilled for the sake of 40 Swiss who had already endangered it?

This event reminds me of my indignation when the troops, arriving in Versailles, marched past my windows: 'These hussars, these cannons, all these destructive machines; what!' I cried, 'All for the sake of a mere mortal who makes the people moan under the weight of taxation and who still opposes dejection with force! Ah! Why have men been so foolish as to give themselves masters.'

M. de Galissonnière, a decided aristocrat, witnessed my righteous indignation and thought to appease it by saying, 'Three or four cannon shots will dissipate this populace.'

²³ André Joseph Marc Guillier Desilles (or Des Isles) died as a result of injuries sustained while he tried to prevent the mutineer soldiers in Nancy (31 August 1790) from firing cannons at the soldiers sent by the government to quell their insurrection. He wanted to prevent brothers in arms firing on each other. The ensuing fight killed many including civilians; when peace was restored the remaining mutineers were severely punished. Three regiments had been involved in the mutiny including the Swiss Guards of Châteauvieux who, despite being mercenaries, were considered particularly loyal. Desilles was posthumously feted but by 1792 attitudes had swung the other way and the Swiss Guards were seen as maligned heroes. Popular opinion was divided as to whether or not a civic ceremony in their honour should be accorded to them after their release from jail. In her play *Mirabeau aux champs elysées* of 1791, written in response to his sudden death, de Gouges gave Desilles a role alongside her eponymous hero, both of them arriving in heaven and enlightening the 'great' already there regarding the contemporary condition of France.

'You will not have the time to fire them,' I cried, 'for this populace is surrounded by a crowd of good citizens.'²⁴

I fear my predictions; all have been realised. I tremble with fear for the festival dedicated to the soldiers of Château-Vieux, this sinister and illegal festival that gives credence to the counter-revolutionary opinion.

As with the constitution, do not adulterate the public authority that preserves law and order and property. Show, by giving up this festival, that you are able to sacrifice empty pride for the common good and public tranquillity.

The court has a scheme that may be based on the people's lack of readiness for this celebration. Its satellites only fan the flames to clear a path for the king amidst public dissent. My fears are well founded.

24 De Gouges may be referring to Augustin-Félix-Elisabeth Barrin La Galissonnière (1757 – 1828), a soldier and a politician who represented the nobility in the Estates-General; a conservative, he voted against most of the changes sought by the constitutional monarchists and eventually emigrated to take command of a monarchist regiment. He returned to Paris in 1801 and was again elected as a deputy.