

## LES FANTÔMES DE L'OPINION PUBLIQUE.

The Ghosts of Public Opinion.<sup>1</sup>

*The mind one already has is spoilt wishing for another.*

I think of public opinion like a spoilt child: the more one does for it, the less one receives in return. Forever seeking novelty it mercilessly throws away the informative characters that you have just placed under its eyes in order to foolishly run after the puppet that idleness, or malice, dangles in front of it. It praises or discredits, turn and turn about, the very same thing. At times I have seen it smile on my feeble efforts but, not being able to equal its prodigious versatility, reminiscent of the audacious mountain that conceals in its heart the flame that feeds its volcano, I stayed rooted to the spot, amid the storms, surrounded by my principles.<sup>2</sup> And it is to these same principles that I now seek to restore public opinion. I understand that the endeavour is doubtful but it is noble to attempt it.

Patriotism is as nuanced as the tricolour ribbon; I, like this ribbon, am equally nuanced.<sup>3</sup> Those who seek to tarnish the colours of my patriotism will do so in vain; they will only become brighter and even more vivid. I have served my country loyally, courageously and, dare I say, with all the abnegation of a true, civic-minded, soul. The sacrifice of my wealth, which just leaves me the honour of a most particular mundaneness, answers better than I can that vile clamour that I have no intention of rebutting.<sup>4</sup> I can state, with the satisfaction of a free and candid soul that has known neither fear nor the

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1 This pamphlet, originally entitled *The Dangers of Public Opinion*, was written in October 1792. Olivier Blanc, in his erudite biography of de Gouges, believes that she may have written it as a response to Marat's uninvited flying visit to a soirée that she attended given by Talma (famous actor at the Comédie-Française) and his wife Julie in honour of Dumouriez and the Girondins. Marat arrived with a gang of armed men, surveyed his assembled political rivals - who were frozen in horror - and accused them, in an article the following morning (17 October 1792) of plotting a federal republic. The massacres of September 1792 had divided political opinion. The Girondins, appalled by the excessive use of violence, wished to exclude, among others, Robespierre and Marat from the Assembly. De Gouges took up her pen in support of the moderate elements and against those whose aggression she detested, seeing in it a route to a dreaded insurrection that would play into the hands of France's foreign enemies and/or lead to civil war. De Gouges genuinely believed that both the royalist and the Jacobin extremists would destroy any hopes of France creating the equitable government promised by the revolution. This pamphlet pleads for action to be taken before it is too late. Her spirited attacks, her provoking attitudes and her independence of mind upset many powerful political men not least because she had the audacity to adopt a masculine role, in print, when it suited her.

2 De Gouges enjoyed playing on her name Olympe and its connection to Mount Olympus, seat of Zeus and home to the Greek gods. Zeus sent thunderbolts from on high but real volcanic activity was being felt, and understood by some scientifically, at the end of the eighteenth century. On 8 June 1783 a volcano erupted in Iceland whose gasses were to have a devastating effect on Europe (and later the wider world). The volcanic activity continued until February 1784 first sending a thick sulphurous fog over Europe and the Middle East then clouds of particles that cooled climate for several years devastating crops in Japan, America and Egypt. Benjamin Franklin, living in Paris at the time, believed that volcanic activity was responsible for the adverse weather conditions; Gilbert White in England thought the same. De Gouges enjoyed natural history - attending lectures on the subject - and would not have believed in the 'act of God' scenario popular among many at the time; it is probable that she was familiar with the scientific discussions surrounding this latest climatic event.

3 The cockade made up of tricolour ribbon, was, according to Lafayette, created by him in July 1789 to signify the enduring alliance of the Bourbon king (white) with Paris (traditionally represented by blue and red). Others claim that the colours represented the three groups making up the Estates General: white for the nobility; blue for the clergy; red for the third estate. Whatever its origins the tricolour pattern soon became a symbol of patriotism and was taken up in 1790 as the flag of the French navy. The tricolour flag only became the national symbol we know today in 1794; falling in and out of favour according to political preferences, its use as a sole emblem of the French nation was only cemented at the outset of the Fifth Republic in 1958.

4 De Gouges was often in hock to moneylenders, pawning her jewellery and garments in order to pay for the printing of her tracts.

expectations of those cowardly ambitious people whose only courage is found in denunciations and assassinations, that this mundaneness will always elevate me above those who believe themselves to amount to something despite having been mere shadowy slayers of tyrants. All of you, those who have dared to accuse me, who could not conceive of the elevation of this soul although it was known to you: can you say as much?

Some have cast doubt on my integrity, others have sought to denigrate my political writings. These last are right and I forgive them for I never intended to please through the graciousness of a sophisticated style. But at least none will be so unjust as to deny that I have been useful to my Motherland; if ever a summary is made of my works therein will be found my hatred of tyranny, my love of equality, of charity, my useful plans for institutions, my respect for propriety, for the law, the example of good Philosophy, ultimately a love of all the virtues that befit a great people.

This is what characterizes me in all my texts, those that have preceded and followed the revolution, matching the speed of its development, as Mirabeau stated several times. But I had the misfortune, or should I say the ineptness, to publish alongside a work of my soul, that of my mediocre wit. The address to the Don Quixote of the North is a lethal example: it has erased all my useful contributions and fools, who by nature like to criticise, have not failed to give serious consideration to the first sally of an overly facile imagination, one that does not wish to be introspective.<sup>5</sup> What do our great Philosophers think of this? They allow themselves to be carried by the current: they are French.

Citizens, what is the principal aim of this Text? It is to offer immediate observations to the National Convention while they await the presentation of my latest political Work. Incriminated men, ones that, right now, I could pick out amongst that pestilential horde whose attacks I have been pursuing a long time, have accused me of puffing up my Writings. This is a falsehood.<sup>6</sup> With a clear conscience and strengthened by the approbation of good Citizens, I have nobly pursued the factions on all sides and, clandestinely, the plots within the Court. It was not my benefactor: it wished to become one. I disdained its offers: the proof is in the press; this will be the last time I respond to my detractors.<sup>7</sup> I have been, turn and turn about, a source of derision among the Conspirators from the Court and from the City and, like the virtuous friend of that unfortunate Fouquet,

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5 *Adresse au don Quichote du Nord* (see [www.olympedegouges.eu](http://www.olympedegouges.eu)) written in September 1792, was addressed to Frederick William II of Prussia (1744 - 1797); one of the first foreign leaders to attack the French revolutionaries, he had recently been defeated at the battle of Valmy. De Gouges, fearing that Louis XVI would be executed if the threat of war continued, begged the Prussian king to abandon his aims or take responsibility for regicide.

6 [Original footnote.] However pure their patriotism their Logic is definitely at fault regarding my productions! The ignorance of these Gentlemen is equal, in this instance, to that of those miserable Secretaries and Scribes who have extravagantly and pretentiously proclaimed themselves to be the authors of my works despite these poor souls not being capable of even understanding the effect of a simple transposition. I have often foxed their ineptness by dictating pleasantries to these creatures that they did not perceive. One of these simpletons has just admitted that he was given an assignment to create a pamphlet that would spread the word in Cafés, notably *Zoppi's*, the former *Procope*, that I was not the Author of my Works; in truth I found the good-nature of this man so particular that I could not deny myself the pleasure of seeing him write, at my dictation, this opusculum.

7 In May 1792 de Gouges presented a petition to the Legislative Assembly asking that women be allowed to participate in national festivals and processions. She was lauded for her civic enthusiasm by many deputies and generally praised in the press though misogynist jacobins decried a woman seeking a public role, it being far better for her sex to cultivate its modesty in silence. De Gouges was allowed to form a female cortege in honour of Simonneau and charged with financing it. Having donated 50 livres of her own to the fund de Gouges approached Marie-Antoinette for help, pointing out that in giving to such a cause the queen would be showing her support for women and the law. The queen declined to participate but, intrigued by de Gouges, she approached her through her lady-in-waiting the princesse de Lamballe and offered the author a royal pension. De Gouges made her refusal known in public and represented the encounter in her unfinished play *La France sauvée, ou le Tyran détrôné* (see [www.olympedegouges.eu](http://www.olympedegouges.eu)); the manuscript was used as evidence against de Gouges during her trial. Placing royal personages on the stage, irrespective of any satirical intent, was considered counter-revolutionary.

overwhelmed by the shafts of abuse, I have wrapped myself up in my virtue and only concerned myself with the welfare of my Motherland.<sup>8</sup> It is time for me to show myself in my entirety. I did not court this celebrity; I had expected it from public opinion but it is so sluggish towards me and my country is facing new dangers. I have, on occasion, roused the spirit of the people when it was on the point of collapse: I see it losing its way if the National Convention fails to rise above the demons who seek to disorganise it.<sup>9</sup> I felt it was vital to make it aware, in a few lines, of the imminent peril that surrounds it. Already the National Convention bows to a handful of factious men: it cloaks its terror in the disdain that it has for these agitators, but Marat, the firebrand Marat, has not failed in developing it [terror] at the Jacobins.<sup>10</sup> This Marat whose aspect alone inspires the most grievous doubts, and who probably cannot state, as *Figaro* does: it is not I that deceives you, it is my face. No, never has a physiognomy so horribly born the imprint of crime.<sup>11</sup> From whichever angle he is viewed one seems to see wrongdoing flit upon his face, like the Graces on the lips of a pretty woman.<sup>12</sup> And this cannibal was able to seduce the French people? And this despised man can become redoubtable? He only needs one day, one propitious hour, to upset France and serve the ambitions of England. It is known; we have

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8 Nicolas Fouquet, vicomte de Vaux et marquis de Belle-Isle (1615 - 1680) was one of the wealthiest and most powerful self-made men in France during the regency and early reign of Louis XIV. The young monarch, appalled by Fouquet's staggering financial success (probably illicit in part) and encouraged by suggestions that he was plotting against the state, determined to incapacitate him. He was arrested, tried and condemned to banishment. Friends such as La Fontaine (to whom de Gouges is probably comparing herself), Loret and Madame de Sévigné wrote in his favour: the king commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. Fouquet died in the fortress of Pignerol, allegedly home to the man in the iron mask, sixteen years later.

9 The word 'disorganise' was first used in English in the 1790s with reference to the events of the French revolution; it had been coined in French in the 1760s.

10 Despite her passionate beliefs and swift responses to events de Gouges was generally even-handed and considered in her judgements of others, always willing to retract if necessary. Marat was the exception to this rule. She never forgave him for his part in the September massacres and believed that he, and a few other Jacobins, were attempting to create a dictatorship rather than a republic. She loathed him and saw in him a viciousness that could only endanger her beloved motherland. Born in the principality of Neuchâtel, Prussia (1743) and assassinated by Charlotte Corday in Paris (1793) Jean-Paul Marat, scientist, physician and journalist worked in England and France, obsessively pursued scientific experiments yet failed to be elected to the French Academy of Science, wrote radical inflammatory articles after the fall of the Bastille by creating his own newspaper *L'Ami du peuple* (he refused to collaborate with other editors) and was elected to the Convention in 1792 where he continued to operate as a free agent, belonging to no party. His extreme views, expressed in articles and speeches, incited others to riot and murder (ill health prevented him from participating in such events). His popularity among poorer Parisians eclipsed that of Robespierre and fuelled a long-held ambition to gain power. His death and its immediate portrayal as a republican piety by the painter David (a great piece of artistic propaganda whose composition, and beauty – Marat was considered deeply unattractive by his contemporaries – rendered it ideal for dissemination in print form) did much to consolidate, for a while, Marat's status as a republican martyr. He was entombed, a hero, in the Panthéon but removed (like Mirabeau) not long after when the revolutionary tide had turned.

11 Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732 - 1799) wrote two plays around the character of a politically astute, outspoken, barber/manservant named Figaro. In the second (*The Marriage of Figaro*) the eponymous hero's attitude towards his titled employer was so disrespectful and his own self-respect so strong that the play, considered wildly subversive, was banned for many years. When it was eventually produced it took Europe by storm. De Gouges was so smitten by the play that she wrote a sequel in 1786 - *Le Mariage inattendu de Chérubin* (see [www.olympedegouges.eu](http://www.olympedegouges.eu)) - in homage to the original. Her intentions were entirely genuine but Beaumarchais was horrified, in part because the gesture came from an unknown woman who dared to assume she could write a drama. He consistently refused to receive de Gouges and gave her no credit for the considerable effort she made to secure the rights of authors. He, himself, was a slippery character who, as often happens during political upheavals, managed to make himself very rich by racketeering.

The Swiss Johan Kaspar Lavater (1741 - 1801) published a very influential and popular essay on physiognomy in the early 1770s that was widely read throughout Europe; it was deemed possible to judge someone's innate characteristics from their facial configuration.

12 The Three Graces in Greek mythology were three beautiful goddesses (Aglaiá, Thalia, and Euphrosyne) who personified and bestowed charm, grace, and beauty.

been warned, and the National Convention remains indifferent! No doubt it is laudable to place oneself above such fears but, is it not common knowledge that the Constituent Assembly was lost thanks to having disregarded the Court plots?

Now there is talk of putting Louis XVI on trial. Louis XVI who is, we cannot deny, of interest to the Powers across Europe; Louis XVI may perish on the scaffold for having betrayed his Nation. And Marat? Marat! A true agitator, destroyer of Laws, mortal enemy of order, of humanity, of his motherland, accused and convicted of wanting to introduce a dictatorship into France, and of ceaselessly threatening to bring about the complete dissolution of the National Convention, Marat lives in freedom in the society of which he is the tyrant and the plague.<sup>13</sup> Oh my Motherland! If only I could quote you four verses on the events of the day by a famous man! I would flee like him and distance myself from the air breathed by a *perfidious King* and Citizens who are assassins. In the meantime, before I abandon my post, I will have seen the danger up close, or I will have saved my fellow Citizens from it.

Mandatories of a nascent Republic, now is the moment to enlighten the Universe on its best interests, or to plunge it back into eternal slavery. This moment will depend on either your energy or your weakness. If the malevolent intimidate you, that is the end of the Republic. A widespread disorganisation, a wholesale massacre, may be carried out by a dozen villains who will infallibly perish, but you will be no more. Be able, then, to prevent such a disastrous misfortune, and do not lose from sight that, having failed to prevent treachery, France nearly became the prey of the Foreigners. Hasten to follow the example of great peoples: exile those who are malevolent, as you did those who were refractory.<sup>14</sup> There is nothing that they will not use to enflame civil war, today their pretext is paper money and relief funds, tomorrow it will be something else. Stop them and do not disdain the advice of a woman whose predictions are always exact.

Remember that having shown how great a friend I was, a sincere friend, to the Motherland and the common good, I warned Louis XVI (through my *Addresses to the King, the Queen and the former Prince de Condé*) of the fate that awaited them [sic], if they [sic] ignored my advice.<sup>15</sup> The work that will appear after this one will reveal even more startling prophecies. Previously, I was a Demagogue in the eyes of the Constituent Assembly; today no one knows how to describe me. But then the individuals who dare to calumniate me are such insignificant things!...I have never vacillated in my opinions and yet, in the last four years we have had three Governments.<sup>16</sup> That of the Republic is no

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13 [Original footnote.] The moment when the National Convention seemed to me to have demeaned itself, which is not to say that I felt no pity for it, was the one when Marat threatened to blow his brains out in its presence if it dared pass a Decree against him. It was the moment to deploy all its energy and equity by expelling from its midst a runt of humanity, who has neither the physique nor the integrity of man, and who dishonours it by his excesses.

14 On 26 December 1790 the king sanctioned a bill put forward by the National Assembly that required all clergy to swear an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The pope refused to approve the Constitution so in effect the clergy were being asked to swear allegiance to their religion or their new revolutionary state. Seven bishops and about half the clergy agreed, the rest refused and became known as 'non-jurors' or 'refractory priests'. Although initially allowed to continue practising many fled into exile to join the nobles and clergy who had emigrated earlier.

15 *Adresses au Roi et à la Reine, au Prince de Condé et Observations à M. Duveyrier sur sa fameuse ambassade* from August 1791 was an outpouring of frustrated pacifism at a time when de Gouges feared that the King's lassitude, coupled with his wife's appeals to her brother the emperor of Austria, would bring about a European bloodbath. Her tone was unusually severe and disrespectful for a woman who had held the monarch in considerable esteem. Her dream of a peaceful constitutional monarchy were being destroyed by the very monarchs who, with goodwill and energy, could, she believed, make it a reality. Now, having ignored her advice, the royal family were under lock and key.

16 On 7 July 1789 the Estates General set themselves up as a National Assembly with the legislative power to create a constitution in order to define and limit the king's power. In the summer of 1791, following the king's flight to Varenne, parts of the assembly feared insurrection and sought to revise the constitution and instate a second chamber. They failed and on 1 October 1791 the National Assembly was succeeded by a Legislative Assembly which would survive for less than a year. On 20 September 1792 this second assembly,

doubt my element. Great God! Let it be that of the French! This is what I shall analyse in the work that I will publish. But let the enemies of the Motherland, those that only feel at ease in the midst of dissension and *carnage*, delve deep into their conscience; they will see in me only a *good man* who, by contributing to the welfare of the Motherland, seeks to save them, if he can, from their own demons. I know that these very men, on the 5th August last, obstructed a placard that could, at any time, be posted. Only 200 examples of this placard were printed and my printer, who is employed by the Jacobins, took it upon himself to destroy the plate and not deliver the thousand copies I had ordered.<sup>17</sup> I could find no billstickers. In a word, this placard was, at this time, the most Republican, the most legal, the most useful that one could have offered to the People at the point when a decision had to be taken on the conduct of Louis XVI. At the centre of the trouble and disorder of the 10th, I sent examples to Pétion, to Santerre, to the Legislative Assembly.<sup>18</sup> Today I am sending remaining examples of this placard to the President of the National Convention, convinced that all its Members will make it known to each other.<sup>19</sup> It is worthy of the most profound attention. I will allow myself to just point out one error. Several people thought that I had alluded to the Patriotic Ministers ROLLAND [sic] and SERVAN: this is gross contempt for it is obvious that if, like them, Duport-du-Tertre, Duportail etc. had, from the start, told Louis XVI the truth he would not, today, be in the Temple tower.<sup>20</sup>

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whose deputies were overwhelmed by events (the attack of the Tuileries on 10 August, the subsequent removal of the king and the threat of war), declared the 'Patrie' to be in danger, and decided to dissolve itself and create a Convention similar to that of the United States of America. This last was the first example of suffrage in France and although it has been described as 'universal' in fact barely 10 per cent of the population participated, many excluded by the limitations placed upon suffrage (no women, no domestics, an income threshold etc.), while others abstained through fear or partisanship.

17 This placard has never been located. Her biographer Olivier Blanc believes it related to a ceremony she attended in Auteuil on 5 August 1792 to celebrate the opening of a 'maison commune' or civic hall.

18 On 10 August 1792 armed insurgents overran the Tuileries palace and the royal family had to take refuge in the Legislative Assembly. The Assembly decreed a provisional suspension of the King in favour of an elected Convention. Three days later the King and his family were interned in the Temple. Jérôme Pétion (1756 - 1794) was at the time Mayor of Paris and Antoine Joseph Santerre (1752 - 1809) was in command of the national guard.

19 The Convention elected a president from among its ranks every fortnight: in October 1792 Pétion was president during the first week of October, followed by Jean-François Delacroix then Marguerite-Élie Guadet who, if the dating of this pamphlet is accurate i.e. around 18 - 20 October, would have been its recipient.

20 Joseph Servan (1741 - 1808) became Minister of War for a month in June 1792 and again for six weeks in August/September of that year. Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière (1734 - 1793) was Interior Minister from March to June 1792 and again from August of that year, following the overthrow of the monarchy to January 1793 when he resigned two days after Louis XVI's execution. Marguerite Louis François Duport-Dutertre (1754 - 1793) was Minister of Justice from November 1790 to March 1792 and Louis Antoine Jean Le Bègue de Presle Duportail (1743 - 1802) was Minister of War from November 1790 to December 1791: both men were supported by La Fayette.