

LETTRE

A MONSEIGNEUR

LE DUC D'ORLEANS,

Premier Prince du Sang.

Letter to his Lordship the duc d'Orléans, First Prince of the Blood.¹

MY LORD,

We have reached that terrible revolution where all Citizens have arrogated to themselves the liberty of undertaking everything and saying anything. Heaven preserves me from employing any violent means; I wish only for the good of my Fellow Citizens, the salvation of my Motherland, the repose of the Monarch and the happiness of the public.

The People love you, MY LORD, good Citizens consider you to be a friend of mankind but the wise are quietly murmuring; wickedness is easy and the bad exercise it without hindrance: the virtuous likewise do good, but they do not always succeed.

MY LORD, remember your honourable exile: from that moment you were the idol of France, your return to Court without the recall of three Councillors, obscured for an instance your glory; your journey to England, at such a critical time for the Nation, nearly lost you the public's support. The French, up until the moment of the Estates General, have always poorly grasped, MY LORD, all that you have undertaken. The day is come when your true principles have been recognised; the time to manifest them is favourable, you will seize it, MY LORD, and if I am ahead of it by a few hours, my only merit will be to have anticipated it.²

¹ This open letter was written in early July 1789. The duc d'Orléans' Parisian base, the Palais-Royal, had become a meeting place for numerous progressive and revolutionary orators, some hosting clubs on the premises. It became the heart of a movement that sought to create a more liberal form of monarchy, necessitating a new head of state. As a Prince of the Blood with a perceived track record of countering royal abuse and supporting the people he was seen as an obvious choice to replace his cousin, the existing monarch. The duc's entourage, famed for their political ambitions, were hoping to create a new order centred on their employer. His procrastinating yet flighty character combined with his lack of clear political motives (pique too often underpinned his gestures) made any serious bids for power unlikely to be fruitful however when this anonymous 'letter' was created the duc d'Orléans and his supporters were viewed as a threat to the established order. Days later de Gouges published *Séance royale* (see www.olympedegouges.eu), in which she publicly admitted to being the author of this text though the duc and/or his secretary would have known beforehand as a few days earlier, on 4 July, she had written to the duc in person enclosing both this piece and her *projet d'une Caisse patriotique* pamphlet of which she had admitted authorship. By reacting spontaneously amid the confusion of events unfolding around her de Gouges sometimes embroiled herself in dangerous arguments; in this instance both the court at Versailles and the duc's entourage took umbrage, each denouncing her as a partisan of the other. The result of this affair was that her son lost his position in the duc's regiment and de Gouges herself was threatened by a group of thugs she believed were set upon her by Choderlos de Laclos, the duc's influential secretary.

² This paragraph offers a potted history of the addressee's political manoeuvrings. In 1771 he and his father were exiled by the king (to their lands) for supporting the Parlements revolt against Louis XV and his Chancellor Maupeou. Their resistance gained them great public acclaim and Parisians considered them friends of the people. Whilst the father did not particularly wish to hold this position, the son enjoyed the plaudits. On 3 July 1789 the National Assembly voted in the duc (the future Philippe Égalité) to be their first President by an overwhelming majority. He refused the honour and debate is still lively as to why. Mirabeau believed that he would have been better suited to be Regent of Lieutenant General as he lacked the conformity and discipline to fulfil the needs of the presidency. The role was taken by de Gouges's uncle (assuming her claims of paternity were accurate) the Archbishop of Vienne.

Have you forgotten, MY LORD, that the Public, made up of all classes, is a severe judge, and when one does not generally obtain a suffrage then there is always something beautiful, something sublime, remaining for a great Prince to become.

Have you lost from sight, MY LORD, that sometimes this mixed Public travesties good ideas into designs that are noxious to the repose of the State: yes, MY LORD, all these nuances are offered to your view: your heart trembles, and your noble principles will always rebuff its infamy.

France is at the present time in such a revolution and in such an alarming effervescence that it seems as though the French want to end their brilliant career by renewing the one that engendered all the troubles in England.

It is as though a Cromwel [sic] were hidden among the French to excite minds and lead them to revolt only in order to show himself to our all powerful view.

Fears, alarms, terror may have created this phantom, to make us dread new irons made heavier by the weight of a tyrant and a usurper.

Who, MY LORD, can reassure the French better than yourself?...Friend of the People, First Prince of the Blood, acquainted with laws and humanity, you will come in person to your Palais Royal that has now become a refuge for a crowd of demons, whose speeches manage to lead people astray, and strew horror about the Capital: you will show yourself to these misled People, you will tell them that you love them in order to save them from the precipice to which their frenzy drags them.³ – That if laws are no longer observed, – that if subordination has lost its empire, the freedom to undertake everything will lead to its destruction. Yes, MY LORD, you will be heard, you will be obeyed as the true Protector of all unfortunates; you will see before your eyes the model of obedience: when the modest M. Bailly, the virtuous Archbishop of Vienne, etc. etc, present themselves at the door, where the people forced the Guards to gain entry, they will barely have made a few wise observations than these same People, as good as they are obedient (once they have been enlightened by virtue's voice), will retire calmly and quietly as a flock of lambs walking in front of the Shepherd who drives them.

No one knows better than you, MY LORD, that in this terrible moment, only the voice of a cherished Prince can influence the minds of the Citizens; and if, contrary to all expectations, Paris, MY LORD, were to have the misfortune of seeing you fail in this noble enterprise, there would yet remain one more inexhaustible resource, worthy of our Monarch, of the French.

If Soldiers can no longer maintain order on his behalf, let him call on his faithful subjects to help him, and within twenty-four hours formidable battalions of good Citizens will have assembled and encouraged by the Nation, under the orders of a good King, they will finally reestablish order and that too long awaited calm.

These agitations, this lawlessness, this appalling disorder can only prevent the precious work on behalf of the State and the happiness of the People. The Estates General in order to devote itself entirely to its work only awaited the union of the three Orders; MY LORD you finally brought about this august union yet the People, thoughtlessly, will furnish arms against itself.

This agitated People must therefore be calmed; more is required, MY LORD, they must be consoled.

Employment is non-existent; for the poor and the out of work labourer the price of bread is exorbitant. I have already suggested a patriotic purse; MY LORD create a motion on this subject: open this purse yourself, and the Motherland will soon follow your example, and bring back abundance to French villages, putting a price on bread that would allow the hungry to eat. The Frenchman would not only owe you his well-being but you would also be considered as the true supporter of these unfortunates.

³ On 12 July 1789 Camille Desmoulins famously jumped on a table to speak to the assembled crowd in such terms that within two days like-minded Parisians had brought down the Bastille.

It is by this action, MY LORD, that you will confound envy, and all unjust suspicions; then you would rejoice in a veritable success; then you would place the title of First Prince of the Blood in the most glorious light; and this enhanced title would eternally confound your enemies. If I could for one moment doubt your virtues, from this instant I would deem myself to be lost; from this instant I would be massacred by the People; I, who only wished for its welfare, its repose, I who have excited good souls in its favour throughout all my writings, I who was perhaps the author of all the benefits that were spread in the Capital this winter, I who, when all is said and done, cannot be accused of an unpatriotic or inhuman word, would pay this terrible price and not regret it for the rest of my life. These, MY LORD, are my principles, my proceedings and my unswerving sentiments.

MY LORD, I owe you my son's position; his fate at present depends upon your goodness: far from fearing that my frankness will lower him in your estimation, I am on the contrary persuaded that, in YOUR SERENE HIGHNESS, he will have a true Protector responsible for his advancement. Convinced that you prefer useful truths to noxious praises, and persuaded again that my writings, though you accepted their homage, are not worthy to draw your attention, yet this one, I hope, will obtain your indulgence and your esteem in favour of the motive that dictated it.

It is with respect that I am,

YOUR SERENE HIGHNESS,

A Friend to all my Fellow Citizens and to public calm.

P.S. What is the point of these public gatherings?...What good can one expect of the Palais Royal's rabble-rousing?...Where are the Orators who, while instructing the populace, teach them good, useful principles?...This confused assembly, this lack of respect for the site, for revered individuals, can only distance people from their duty, and authorise them to attempt anything, without understanding the magnitude of their ill-considered measures: they are seduced to abandon their work, their poverty increases through indolence, they become accustomed to begging; but once honest Citizens are tired of giving to men who can be actively industrious, and they no longer have the means to enable their generosity, what will become of them, these strong and robust men?...I ask this of the Wise, of the good Citizens who already shudder at this autonomy.

What do all these disorderly deputations amount to that arrive at the Estates General at all hours?...What law authorises them?...What authority allows these public rostra? And if their impunity is not curtailed, may one not fear the consequences?

I am an enemy of oppression, like all good citizens I feel the misfortune of being perpetually subjugated by tyranny: but when the serene day arrives that encourages our hope, why trouble its course just as our wishes are about to be realised.