

LETTRE

AUX LITTÉRATEURS FRANÇOIS,

Par Madame DE GOUGES.

Letter to the French Littérateurs, by Madame de Gouges.¹

GENTLEMEN,

It is to you alone that I have recourse in the knowledge that you have created a committee made up of writers in order to particularly consider the demands they will make, not only against Parisian actors but also provincial directors who arm themselves with tyranny and the exclusive rights they have over the property of playwrights.² I bring you new information which will be the means of improving the cause you have sought to defend. It will not suffice, Gentlemen, for you to limit your work to your interests alone: as you know women, for at least a century, have sought to emulate you in the arts; it has pleased you to see them enter the fray alongside you. Far from rebuffing this timid sex you have encouraged it, you have even raised it above its merits; you cannot refrain from being concerned by its glory; above all you cannot abandon it in circumstances where you share a common cause. Lastly, Gentlemen, it will be enough for you to learn that no author has been as badly treated as I have for eight years by the comédie française; you are not unaware of its frequently excessive behaviour but it has found it even fitter to torment, in an extraordinary fashion, a weak and timid being, a woman after all. If I survived the horror of the torments I endured it is because some kind of providence is watching over me.

1 Written in the spring of 1790 in response to her treatment at the hands of the Comédie Française and her inability to persuade the authorities to act on her behalf de Gouges hoped with this letter to influence writers and journalists to act on her behalf. The text was well received by several newspapers. A similar missive and its accompanying pamphlet sent to the members of the Assembly (*Lettre au Représentants* and *Mémoire pour Madame de Gouges contre les Comédiens-Français*) was ignored by the deputies. Opening with the ironic trope of weak womanhood de Gouges moves on to hit hard at the men in power, both in theatre and in government, who are behaving, post-revolution, with the same despotism so reviled during the previous regime.

2 Actors of the Comédie Française had had a stranglehold on the theatrical world thanks to their position as the king's players. It could take years for a new play to be read let alone accepted and performed. If the new text failed at the box office it became the actors' exclusive property, allowing them to rewrite it or recreate it to their heart's content. De Gouges was outspoken in her condemnation of this appropriation and felt, rightly, that the players massaged the figures and acted badly in order to take control of the plays so they could reap financial rewards from it at a later date: others agreed but kept quiet for fear of being ostracised. Playwrights had no authors' rights, relying on court pensions or wealthy patrons for support. De Gouges struggled in a world where it was just about acceptable for women to write novels but quite inappropriate for them to attempt dramas or mix in theatrical circles. In late 1789 public establishments came under governmental control and the Parisian assembly set up a committee chaired by Jean-Louis Brousse des Foucherets (1742 - 1808), a deputy mayor and writer of theatrical comedies, to reassess the management of theatres and other venues. In August 1790 La Harpe petitioned the National Assembly on behalf of writers insisting that without enlightened authors the revolution would not have taken shape; for the sake of public good, and not individual glory, playwrights should be accorded rights and enabled to support themselves in order to share their patriotism with a wider audience. In January 1791 a decree was passed that freed up theatrical management and gave rights to authors. De Gouges who had fought long and hard for this outcome did not benefit from the new regulations; women were still as marginalized as before.

Judging by the details argued in an essay to the nation, I trust, Gentlemen, that you will impose upon it an addendum worthy of true french lovers of literature who, by defending their cause, will plead that of a woman who undoubtedly merits your zeal and your attention especially when you find out how, in this era of liberty, the french actors were able to be as successful in their attacks against her as in the age of despotism. Yes, Gentlemen, I cannot hide from you my great astonishment, possibly at the risk of my life for I am writing this letter to you from my bed, that M. Bailly, the Mayor, has been misled by these actors: they had threatened me in this way but I had not believed them.³ Forced, thanks to this threat, to address this man of integrity, I went to see him. I was told that he was about to go out, so I waited for him at the door of his office. In order not to waste his time I had thought to bring a document which contained all the wrongs and injustices perpetrated against me by the comédie. How surprised I was to receive a welcome so contrary to the one I might have expected from a man who always seemed so affable. He took my document without any greeting, without saying a single word, as we walked through three rooms. At last we arrived at his antechamber where he says to his secretary: 'M. Boucher, it's madame de Gouges about the actors.' Not wishing to have dealings with this M. Boucher, I will explain why in my memoir, I simply begged him to remind the Mayor of the letter that I had just given him; I particularly impressed it upon M. Dufour. A week passed without a reply. I wrote a second letter and I received no response; a third suffered the same fate. Finally, after three weeks, I determined to go and find out for myself the nature of the invincible obstacle that was resisting this public obligation. M. Dufour excused himself by suggesting that the Mayor's silence should have convinced me of the impossibility of his becoming a judge or mediator in this affair. This conversation, that is no less curious than all the rest, will be detailed in the memoir so, Gentlemen, I will move speedily on to the facts that you need to know in this instance.

Shown the door at the Mayor's, who appears to me now like the dumb, invisible, divinity, I am told to consult M. des Faucherets; I am assured that he is the one who should be apprised of this affair. Truisms can sometimes be strenuous and, like God himself, I saw myself sent from Caiaphas to Pilate. Finally, the actors who triumph everywhere, tell this latest judge that the Mayor has condemned me and this latest judge tells me the same thing. Petrified, devastated, I had only the strength to drag myself to the town hall. I asked the assistant what decree, what secretary, what man, what form had given rise to this extraordinary judgement that all the world knew about, like the comédie's secret, except for me. I was told again that the Mayor had not condemned me but that he had not wished to be embroiled in this affair. Why did he not apprise me of his neutrality? Why were so many assistants paid to answer to everybody? Why was I not able to meet the Mayor. M. Dufour, fearing that he would be compromised no doubt, obtained an audience for me straight away. What an audience! I will only report here the minimum of facts. The Mayor told me that he had not condemned me but that he had felt entitled to give his opinion to those in charge of this affair. 'No, Sir', I replied firmly, 'an impartial judge, like you, when he has chosen to be neutral in an affair, must, at the very least, impose the greatest silence upon himself and allow the subordinate judge to act according to his own conscience for, fearing to displease or compromise his superior, that judge may condemn the innocent and often favour crime and injustice.'

³ Jean Sylvain Bailly (1736 - 1793) an astronomer and man of science took up politics and was first elected president of the Constituent Assembly, then mayor of Paris. He officially welcomed Louis XVI to Paris on 17 July 1789 after the fall of the Bastille; a hero of the early revolution but constantly attacked by Marat and Desmoulines he lacked the authority or popularity to be effective so resigned in 1791 (after the disastrous July Champ de Mars massacre) staying in place until Pétion was elected in November. Preferring to stay in France rather than emigrate to London, he was arrested and brought to Paris to be a witness at the trial of Marie-Antoinette; accused of being a royalist he was executed a few weeks after de Gouges on November 12.

The Mayor having been warned, misled, threatened me in such ways that, sadly, he seemed to resemble a despotic minister more than a Mayor of Paris. At last it was suggested that the affair be concluded at M. des Faucherets's: sick, I went there at ten in the morning on Sunday 21 February. Mister Naudet, the representative of the comédie française was there.⁴ How could I dream of making myself heard at M. de Faucherets's? How could he presume to speak out against the views of the Mayor? Nor did he have the strength to tell me that the comédie would no longer continue performing *L'Esclavage des Noirs*; yet he allowed the audacious M. Naudet to master the situation and point out to me that he had imperatively made it clear to me that the comédie was neither able nor wished to perform my play; that this is what they understood; and besides the Americans who took boxes at the comédie française had threatened to give them up if this incendiary play was performed again and that he did not want to lose his bread on my behalf.⁵ Such discourse and the awkward position of M. de Faucherets defeated me. Forcing myself to hide my indignation deep in my heart, and aware that my strength was about to give way, I retired, no longer able to articulate a word. Climbing into the carriage I succumbed to this extreme persecution. Had I not met on the stairs one of M. des Faucherets's assistants who, perceiving my indisposition, ran up to me and straight away found me a glass of water and offered me all imaginable help, I might have died of sorrow and indignation at M. des Faucherets's door and the actors' odious plots would have sent me to the grave just as they did the unfortunate Dubelloy.⁶ You will not be surprised, Gentlemen, that a sensitive soul aroused by glory, that glory that arouses only those of finer feelings, should have been so affected. Yes, Gentlemen, I may not survive this latest blow. It is not the disputes themselves that have affected me the most: it is the extreme injustice, calumny and wickedness all together that have overwhelmed me.

What crimes have I committed to merit such infamous treatment: how have I transgressed; how have I wronged anyone in any way? What? A dramatic work, a text full of humanity, sensibility and justice has provoked people unknown to me? Has incited the blackest calumny, has encouraged my enemies, renewed their vigour. All around I see myself incriminated, deceived and denigrated by cowardly, vile, slanderers. The actors stop at nothing to avert the blow that they anticipate from one side and one knows only too well the methods they use to beguile minds and seduce hearts. The generosity they have recently shown to the municipality and the seats they have offered to some of its members, is this the fruit of their generosity or the object of their own self-interest?⁷ They give as they receive; to deceive those that depend on them, or those that they themselves need: clearly, this is what I will prove in my memoir. I am yet again threatened with failure in the municipality of Paris: I will address it with greater confidence in the belief that three

4 Jean-Baptiste Julien Marcel Naudet (1743 - ?) was an actor at the Comédie Française who began his career in 1784, having spent his early years in the army, and retired in 1806: tall and imposing he allegedly was most successful in roles portraying unctuous hypocrisy despite being a figure of probity in his off-stage life (he was a captain in the National Guard from 1790, avoided imprisonment in 1793 when the theatre ran into trouble, and having gained letters and passes allowing him to travel to Switzerland, used his influence to save a considerable number of proscribed individuals from imprisonment and death). The text refers to Naudet as a 'semainier'. A 'semainier' was an actor who, for a week, would be responsible for all aspects of every play being performed in the given week though the term was also used to describe actors involved in overseeing the theatre longterm; I know of no English equivalent.

5 Faucherets and Naudet were in favour of maintaining the status quo as much as possible so it is unlikely that they would have looked favourably on de Gouges. The boxes held by Americans (i.e. slave trading French colonists) would have brought in a considerable revenue to the theatre in excess of 1,500 livres per year per box.

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

7 The municipal government of Paris was known as the Commune de Paris from 1789 to 1795. Bailly was its first mayor.

hundred citizens, who assiduously seek to end the persecution of the oppressed so that innocence can be justified at last, will be less susceptible to being deceived and misled than a lone magistrate sometimes rendered inaccessible by his surroundings.

Until now I had believed that if the top position in the world was the reward for merit, modesty and integrity, then it was due to M. le Bailly. I am obliged to cite a passage from my patriotic writings, one that touched him deeply when he was president of the third estate. 'Their duties must be underpinned by a noble and decent conduct, in this way the commons will obtain the title of second Areopagus of the world, from which will emanate only judgements and decrees that will forever be an example to the universe. At its head is a man of spirit and merit, who along with his talents has a reputation of being a good man who is, once again, in the public eye. He fulfils his office with an august zeal, his manner is always noble, decent, and never out of place despite such difficult circumstances; this can only add to the glory and the general esteem in which M. Bailly has been held for so long.'

That, Gentlemen, that is how I had described the respectable M. Bailly. What a different man he is today. If, at the time, he felt no need to acknowledge me does he now feel unable to offer me justice? He has taught me that one should never eulogize a man until one has seen all aspects of his life. I think that this avowal is as useful to him today as my eulogy was favourable to him in the past. I am not awestruck by his position despite his threatening me with all his might. During the reign of ministerial despotism I dared to speak the truth to people in power. Could the Mayor fear truth when he has been its apostle, and when we now act through it and for it alone? The minister, the government, have they changed merely to endorse intrigue, to facilitate fraud, to oppress defenceless citizens, and to force us to regret our former fetters?

Gentlemen, I address all these incontrovertible facts to you from the depth of my heart; I will provide the most authentic proof and those that judge me will serve as my witnesses for they will neither be able to contradict themselves nor deny anything in my presence if importunity could for one moment distract their reason or slake their probity. Judges assailed on all sides by every kind of insinuation; actors who thoughtlessly destroy a woman. But you, Gentlemen, you will defend her and if my strength abandons me, if I finally succumb to the torments that I am exposed to, you will be aware at least of the cruel treatment that I have received. If this letter shows the effects of the deplorable state to which I have been reduced, your indulgence encourages me to believe that you will nonetheless become my zealous defenders.

It is with these sentiments that I am, Gentlemen, with the greatest consideration, your most humble and obedient servant,

DE GOUGES.

NOTE.

The actors of the comédie française performed *l'Esclavage des Noirs* on Monday 27 December with *l'Ecole des Maris*, a three act play; the second performance was on New Year's Eve, a day when no one comes to the theatre; it was the same for the great play *le Faux-Savant* in three acts.⁸ Obviously, used in this way, by Saturday of that same week my play failed according to the rules. The comédie did not hasten to perform it and did not even bother to learn the alterations, only enough to swallow up my drama in the abyss that it has long opened up to authors. But the comédie could not hide from itself its wrongs towards me, being so close to its injustice and its vexations, so it took great pains to publicise for a week the fourth performance of *l'Esclavage des Noirs*, and its members

⁸ Before the mid 1790s serious French dramas were always written in five acts, the tension rising throughout the first four allowing the redemptive denouement to take place in the fifth. Comedies were usually written in three acts. Clearly de Gouges was deeply offended that her drama on the ills of slavery should have been partnered by a comedy, even one written by Molière.

ceaselessly promised me that it would be performed with five-act plays in recompense for the two occasions that I had been so poorly served, and performed against my better judgement. But as soon as the actors had the ear of the Mayor they changed their tune. And Monsieur Naudet had the audacity to tell me, in front of the administrators, that I was quite entitled to withdraw my drama. One of these administrators, with no forethought, dared to repeat this truth to the municipality which is evidence of his partiality, to suggest nothing worse. When an author has waited for 8 years for her turn, has endured trickery, vexation and injustice from the actors, her only recompense is to see her work performed at the foremost theatre in the world. The estimable author cannot be indifferent to this opportunity and if the actors were allowed the freedom to give back to the authors the plays they have discredited, every day would be marked by new frustrations. The work received by the public belongs only to the public since it pays for its performance and not to see the actors' insolence sacrifice it to their caprice and pleasure. This humiliating, inappropriate, unjust offer only reaffirms that they were convinced of the success of this cause. How could M. de Faucherets, the mayor's second-in-command and a playwright, have countenanced such an outrage? No doubt, after so much injustice, I am allowed to express a few thoughts on the men who judge men, to remind them of their oath of fraternity, to spare no man in power who would forget himself while performing his duty. I believe that a severe example would be the only way to steady magistrates on the benches; they must be put out of office as soon as their wrongs are publicly recognised. This method would forever ensure that the oppressed and the innocent would face incorruptible judges. Cast a blind eye over today's misdemeanours and you will imperceptibly accustom yourselves to become the puppets of tyrants. That is how despotism was born; that is how it grew everyday before the revolution.

A woman, a woman sacrificed to this new tyranny, asks, in this instance, for no reparation for herself: she simply wishes to be the last victim and hopes that this avowal opens the eyes of magistrates who have immolated the rightfulness of her cause in favour of the unjust self-interest of the actors at the comédie.

DE GOUGES.