

LETTRE

AUX REPRÉSENTANTS

DE LA NATION.

*Letter to the Representatives of the Nation.*¹

My heart is as pure as the light of day.²

GENTLEMEN,

I have long foretold that your august Assembly would one day be the world's second areopagus; I take pleasure in believing that I will live long enough to enjoy this famous day myself.³

It would be flattery, GENTLEMEN, to tell you that you have achieved this; no doubt it will prove difficult for you to destroy all the thorns and brambles that are constantly under your feet but in the end your works will be more precious and useful to the nation thanks to the efforts these themselves will have cost you.

1 This text, written in September 1789, shows de Gouges still addressing the criticisms she received for earlier works (see footnote 5) but characteristically fighting her corner after having eaten humble pie. Though clearly shaken her courage holds firm. Her oft repeated refrain of not belonging to any party continues unabated, as does her criticism of the deputies who refuse to abandon their particular allegiances for the common good. Recognising that the nation's finances are boosted by foreign visitors spending their money on luxury goods she accepts that certain ecclesiastical and courtly rituals are necessary to attract them and fears that the current violent disturbances have already driven away this source of income upon which the livelihoods of traders depend. In an attempt to rally the deputies to her side she reminds them of her previous patriotic writings and seeks to gain their support for her anti-slavery play awaiting performance.

2 A quote from Act IV scene 2 of Jean Racine's 1677 play *Phèdre*.

3 The Areopagus was a powerful non-elected council of ancient Athens. De Gouges often uses the expression to imply wisdom and integrity of the highest order.

Having made you aware, GENTLEMEN, of my confidence in your virtues and your enlightenment, allow me to ask you for an act of justice that I believe is my due by all accounts.

Public opinion often unjustly brings about a man's downfall. Equally it immortalises him, without always knowing why.

I have just learnt, GENTLEMEN, with the most acute pain, that the Public, thrown off the scent, has mistaken my principles; perhaps I failed to develop my ideas sufficiently but I had reason to believe that the French people would not misunderstand my true sentiments.⁴ Meanwhile I am sure that at this time many people are wrong about the meaning of my *duc d'Orléans' Motion* and also the *Royal Session* that I offered to you as fiction.⁵

I now find myself obliged to justify a text that may lack talent, a knowledge of the law, style and grace but not patriotism, sensibility or sincerity.

If I had the audacity to speak of a regency it was to say to the French people that they should greatly fear losing such a good King, a good father, and that in the end the only option left to him was that he sacrifice his crown on their behalf.

This maxim, I admit, did not suit me. It is too political for my feeble means but I had in front of me an anecdote about the King of Sweden and I thought that the King of France,

4 I believe there is a typographical error here possibly dating back to de Gouges's dictating her text to an amanuensis. The original is 'le Public a pris l'échange sur mes principes' which means nothing whereas the commonly used phrase 'prendre le change' (making an identical sounding 'le Public a pris le change...') means to be mistaken, or misled and comes from a hunting term to indicate that the pack of hounds has lost the scent and is following the wrong trail.

5 De Gouges is referring to her text *Séance royale. Motion de monseigneur le duc d'Orléans ou les Songes Patriotiques dédiées à monseigneur le duc d'Orléans par Madame de Gouges* (*Royal Session. His Lordship the duc d'Orléans' Motion, or Patriotic Dreams, dedicated to His Lordship the duc d'Orléans by Madame de Gouges*) written in July 1789. *Séance royale* was originally produced as a poster in which she addressed Louis XVI directly, suggesting that he abdicate in favour of a regent as he seemed unable to respond to the crisis facing France. Presenting the text as a dream bestowed upon an innocent author did nothing to hide either the temerity of such a direct address or the audacity of the arguments. She reprinted the poster and incorporated it into a lengthy pamphlet *Motion de monseigneur le duc d'Orléans* in which she attempted to justify her thoughts and distance herself from the erroneous belief that she supported the duc in any plans he might have to become regent.

in a similar circumstance, could react in the same way to confound the enemies of the Monarchy and to better recognise his faithful Subjects.⁶

That, GENTLEMEN, was the aim of this project.

As for the *His Lordship the duc d'Orléans' Motion*, I said what I thought in favour of my King and my Motherland; I respect this Prince; I am sure that his maxims are noble and his intentions are good; those who can suggest otherwise may well travesty this *Motion* in every way. If I had believed that false ambition could lead him away from his good principles then I would have had all to fear, I know, since the only happiness that I have on this earth is my son, whose fate depends on the goodwill of this Prince.⁷ These traits of strength and virtue, if I may say so, are part of my character but doubtless today's opinion will consider them to be a response that can only come from a febrile mind.

Yet I have good reason to congratulate myself on these feeble works. The generalised horror that manifested itself when a Regent was proposed proves how much the Monarch is adored, and this proof from his Subjects can only move him on their behalf once again.

I had no other hope, no other ambition, than to bring the French closer to the King in an inviolable way; that was my experience of their character and their love; it was a success, according to my wishes; I should be satisfied on this matter: pleased furthermore if I have not displeased his Lordship the duc d'Orléans. No. Only doubt could destroy all the good that I think of this Prince.

⁶ At the time of this letter's publication Gustav III was King of Sweden. At a crucial point in his reign in late 1788 or early 1789 Gustav briefly considered abdicating and coming to live in France (see Barton, H. Arnold. "Gustav III of Sweden and the Enlightenment." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1972, p.26.) This may be the anecdote de Gouges references though given that Gustav was using warfare to resolve his domestic troubles and to avoid abdication it seems an odd choice for a peace loving author terrified that France would descend into either civil or external war.

⁷ As a result of de Gouges writing about the duc d'Orléans and his ambitions to create a regency in order to rule France her son, Pierre Aubry, lost his position in the duc's household regiment and she herself was threatened by a group of thugs she believed were set upon her by Choderlos de Laclos, the duc's influential secretary.

Meanwhile in Paris my Work is seized. I hear that I am being reproached on all sides; my heart which has nothing to reproach itself for is nonetheless sickened; it is up to the Nation alone to vindicate an oppressed innocent. Could a woman fear not being heard by this august tribunal? Her sex was always respected, in every century, by the French; GENTLEMEN, you cannot behave any differently when taking into consideration my defence, in order to offer me the justice I am entitled to expect from your noble proceedings.

You know all my writings, or at least curiosity has made you cast your eyes over some of them. I call upon your equity, and your enlightenment. Could you quote me a single thought that does not breathe love for the Motherland, the King and the People?

I know that I am reproached for not siding with a particular party. Forgive me, GENTLEMEN, this expression; I believed the two parties to be extreme: I kept to the middle ground. I thought that in order to bring these two violent parties together one only needed zeal, action and patriotism: that is what I tried to prove, and I flatter myself that I cannot, at least, be refused that advantage. Some meanwhile claim I am an Aristocrat, the Aristocrats affirm that I am a democrat. I find myself constrained like that unfortunate dying man to whom, at his last breath, a rigorous Priest demanded: 'Are you a Molinist or a Jansenist?' 'Alas', replied the poor moribund man, 'I am an artist.'⁸ Like him I recognise no party. The only one that really interests me is that of my Motherland, of France, in other words of my country. Yes, Gentlemen, I declare to you, though deprived of the knowledge that alone could justify my boldness at writing on this matter, I have not viewed the upheaval of the Kingdom with indifference; this superb edifice, this France envied by all the known Peoples, this flourishing Commerce, this gentle and civilised People, this happy

⁸ Jansenism and Molinism were two religious philosophies that questioned Roman Catholic doctrine from within the Catholic church. Jansenists gained power in France and after a century of quarrelling were able to oust the Jesuits from the country in the 1760s. Their philosophy influenced some aspects of political thinking during the revolutionary period even as religious observance was diminishing. In de Gouges's joke the dying man answers with the rhyme that he is an 'ébéniste', a cabinetmaker.

and majestic Court, these famed Performances of which our masterpieces were the constant enrichment, the writer's profession that elevated the soul and mind of the French, everything appeared to me to be in ruins.

And those Foreigners who hastened to this Kingdom from the four corners of the world, they returned home with minds and hearts full of charming images and their anecdotes continuously excited all those who longed to know France. These are the losses that have quickened my regrets and my verve. What has become of this famous Kingdom today, I ask you, GENTLEMEN? What Foreigner could recognise it? Did the fairest of taxes necessarily have to disfigure it and produce so much disorder? Money was all that was needed, and for every one of France's resources there were a thousand more; I dare even say that the country lost itself only because of its wealth. Doubtlessly had it been poorer it would have managed its means more carefully.

The Nobility and the Clergy were the first to be in the wrong, and the Third Estate perhaps irreparably so through a misplaced and excessive stubbornness. The disputes, since the convocation of the Estates General, enfeebled the efficacious remedies that could easily have been offered to remedy the State's difficulties.

That is what I proved last year through the project I offered of voluntary taxation, which is the same as the one you are realising today.⁹ It was the only method that could deflect the catastrophes that are overwhelming us during this time; we are getting there finally but I am less heartened than if it had been implemented before all these disasters.

If, GENTLEMEN, my avowals have seemed too severe, and if these avowals have similarly seemed to wound your particular interests, I beg you to see me as merely a woman who feared only the total destruction of France. What wrongs have your debates not produced? You should have been united from the first Assembly, and this union would

⁹ In November 1788 de Gouges produced her first pamphlet, *Lettre au peuple (Letter to the People)* in which she suggested a voluntary tax to which individuals could contribute whatever they felt they could afford. Thus a patriotic purse would be created that could help alleviate the nation's deficit.

have calmed the Public; nothing would have been wrecked, and the French would not have sullied themselves with the indelible stain of the appalling murders that were committed. The most urgent needs still had to be rapidly addressed, rather than start where one should end. But it is also possible, GENTLEMEN, that persuaded of this truth you will stop the harm that you have unwittingly caused and that, finally, love of the Motherland will bring together your rights and your opinions in her favour.

As for the prerogatives of the Clergy and the Nobility it appears to me that for the glory of France, the support of the State and the emulation of the People it was necessary to maintain them up to a certain point, and furthermore it seems to me that one should not have treated the French Monarchy like a Republic without order or a leader: there, that is what I manifest in all my writings.

I may have been wrong at times; my zeal may have led me astray but that will not prevent you, GENTLEMEN, acknowledging my sentiments and my patriotic wishes, as I ask you to be lenient towards what might have displeased you.

This is what I can expect from my Nation's Tribunal: it alone can acquit me of the bad impression the Public has conceived of my work which only exudes the characteristics of the love and respect I bear our august Monarch.

I am hoping for impartiality from these Deputies, and that they will deign to charge the Superintendents with the task of justifying their opinion of my works.¹⁰ I dare to flatter myself that despite the fact that this cause is not of major importance, it is nonetheless nuanced enough to interest them. All it will need is a few of the National Assembly's famous Orators to have a deep knowledge of all my works to do justice in the full Assembly to the purity of my maxims and my unwavering principles.

¹⁰ Since the resignation of the royal censor Louis Thiroux de Crosne, on 17 July 1789, and the National Assembly's declaration allowing press freedom the following August, censorship was no longer authorised by the state. The explosion of printed material that resulted, much of it previously banned, led to demands for some form of control, particularly on pornography or texts inciting violence. Local police superintendents used their powers to try and limit the spread of certain materials by targetting printers and the peddlers of their wares.

This report alone can save me from a stain that is unworthy of me; on this matter the Nation cannot avoid rendering me the justice that I ask of it, and that I can expect of its equity.

It may be dangerous for me personally if the Public continues to be mistaken about me; I have been threatened a few times; I can believe that some fun could be had with the latest joke. Such kindnesses seem to me neither fair, nor light-hearted, nor polite. I am inconsequential at times, as a French woman, but I do not push it as far as modern principles.

It is enough, GENTLEMEN, that I have spoken to you of all my concerns; doubtless you will not disappoint me with regard to them but a more important point is the one that must prove that while being the original author of the voluntary tax I must not be the last to impose upon myself or to offer my donation; I will remit a quarter of my modest income to you. Please, I beg, accept this contribution and place me in the category of good Citizenesses. I add a gift: it is the profit of a Drama, should it be successful.

It is about to be played at the Comédie Française. Maybe my ambition and my glory permit this generosity on my part: I have shown my character, I am candid and sensitive; both of these two give rise to my admission but if my Drama were to be a famous day, like THE MAD DAY, I wonder if such success would gratify me more than the profit in favour of the voluntary tax: I hope that the actors of the Comédie Française will not even retain the costs and if this Drama is only performed once, at least the entire sum will go to the patriotic purse.¹¹

¹¹ De Gouges is referring to her anti-slavery play *Zamore et Mirza, ou l'Heureux naufrage* (*Zamore and Mirza, or the Fortunate Shipwreck*). Written in 1784, accepted for performance by the Comédie Française in 1785, published in 1788, it was performed in 1789 with a new title *L'Esclavage de Nègres, ou l'Heureux naufrage* (*Black Slavery, or the Fortunate Shipwreck*). It is the first French play to put a slave on the stage in the hero's role, to give people of colour voices equal to their white peers, to highlight the barbarity of slavery - emphasising the damage it does to both the enslaved and those who oversee the trade - while simultaneously portraying women and men as equals and addressing the problems of children born out of wedlock. Powerful slave owning members of society who patronised the theatre made sure that the play was a failure (claques were hired, the pro-slavery press virulently attacked the play and its author etc.) so after three performances the play was taken out of circulation and, following the complex system then in place at the Comédie Française, the play became the property of the theatre and could never be performed

Also, GENTLEMEN, deign to accept its dedication: allow me to place *Black Slavery* under the protection of the French Nation so I might rejoice in the sweet satisfaction of offering a copy to each and every Member.

It is with this gratifying hope that I am, GENTLEMEN, with the deepest respect.

FOR YOUR AUGUST ASSEMBLY,

Your most humble and obedient
servant, DE GOUGES.

From L. Jorry Printer, rue de la Huchette.

elsewhere. Contrary to the playwright's wishes the patriotic purse did not benefit from this play's performances.

'THE MAD DAY' is Beaumarchais's astonishingly successful *La Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (*The Mad Day or the Marriage of Figaro*) which had taken Paris by storm in 1784.