

LETTRES.  
– À LA REINE.  
– AUX GÉNÉRAUX.  
– AUX AMIS DE LA CONSTITUTION.  
– ET AUX FRANÇAISES CITOYENNES.

Letters to the Queen, to the Army Generals, to the Friends of the Constitution and to French Citizenesses.

DESCRIPTION  
OF THE FESTIVAL OF 3 JUNE,  
*BY madame DEGOUGES* [sic].<sup>1</sup>

TO THE QUEEN.<sup>2</sup>

MADAME,

I am the author of a petition, written on behalf of women, for the festival decreed by the national assembly in memory of the mayor of Etampes.

That day, madame, will see law triumph, the law by which you are bound; the law that defends your rights. Thanks to public force this law, that supports the oppressed and threatens the wicked, will take on an imposing character.

Is there a better time than this, madame, to clearly manifest your attachment to the constitution? The time has come to confound the spiteful, and to dissipate the clouds that conceal from us the beneficent truth. Madame, I cannot hide from you that, from both sides, good citizens see despotism and slavery under very different guises; but the mass of good citizens is too imposing for any party to ever make it retract its promise to maintain the monument it has raised to posterity. It is up to you, madame, to give to the decreed festival all the glory that it is capable of. The French people, fair and generous, will be gratified to see you bestow on impoverished women the benevolence that a queen can enhance with such grace; I believe, madame, that I anticipate your wishes, by suggesting to you how to apply your generosity on this occasion: the *département* should distribute two hundred veils, belts and crowns, to young ladies who live with their parents, and who would be admitted into the cortège by a note from their district attesting to the conformity

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1 Written separately in May 1792, these letters were presented together to the public in pamphlet form. De Gouges petitioned deputies at the Legislative Assembly to support her inclusion of women in the national ceremony honouring Simonneau, Mayor of Etampes. He was murdered on 3 March 1792 in confusing circumstances after an uprising in the town caused by grievances against the rising cost of staple goods. His killing was a cause célèbre that divided opinion. Posthumously honoured as an upholder of civil law by the Legislative Assembly, a festival in his honour, the Fête de la Loi, was planned for 3 June 1792. De Gouges organised a female procession within the cortège to highlight the importance of women in public life. Although many deputies applauded her efforts, the most revolutionary commentators, violently opposed to women participating in such activities, vilified her for addressing men (the deputies) in such a way and, worse still, encouraging other women to join her in processing through the streets. Rain may have dampened the proceedings on 3 June but her cortège of women did participate in an official ceremony and was allowed to march on the hallowed grounds of the Champs de Mars alongside the men.

2 This letter was originally sent to the duc de Brissac, he passed it on the princesse de Lamballe who supervised the Queen's household (for information on these two see *Correspondence de la Cour, Compte moral rendu* see [www.olympedegouges.eu](http://www.olympedegouges.eu)). She refused to consider de Gouges's request. Not put off by this, de Gouges went to the Tuileries to persuade Lamballe to change her mind. She did. Marie-Antoinette donated 1200 *livres* from the civil list to the cortège. Intrigued by such a figure, the Queen sent an informant to find out more about de Gouges, with the view to offering her a pension and bring her into the courtly fold. This de Gouges refused. Tragically her successful fund-raising for the cortège probably cost de Gouges her life: she parodied the Tuileries scene in her play *La France sauvée ou le tryan détrôné* (see [www.olympedegouges.eu](http://www.olympedegouges.eu)); at her trial those satirical words were falsely taken for royalist sermons. They were an expedient excuse to send her to the guillotine.

of their conduct. It particularly behoves beauty, adorned with a diadem, to encourage the virtues of her sex. Will you allow me, madame, to end with a few philosophical reflections? May they recall you to that touching popularity, that characterised you, when you mounted the world's most exalted throne!

Remember, madame, that at that time the French people were not only subjugated but also condemned to be enslaved in irons; in vain did the noble farmer water his field with his sweat and tears; he fed mankind but himself lacked bread; public calamities had been swamped beyond measure by the previous depredations: the revolution seeded itself in every soul and like a flash, the general uprising instantly broke through the clouds covering daylight's star! Thunder followed apace, the lightning burst and the sky became pure and serene.

In the name of your dearest interests, madame, draw closer to the consoling philosophy; in the name of the motherland, from now on, only consult her ethics for they will instruct you better than I on all that you have left to do, in order to reign over a free people.

These are the wishes of a citizeness who is not seeking to shine and who will live in obscurity only too happily if her devotion to the public cause can ensure your happiness and that of the empire.

I am not suited to court life, madame, but if fate had wished to place me amongst the women who surround you, preserving the character it had given me, you would not be in the dreadful position in which you find yourself, or I would be no more. I would have told you, madame, that bees divide themselves like men, and when insurrection appears in a hive, their queen's efforts are ineffective. She loses her authority, and order can only be restored by tempting the dispersed swarm with honey. Ah! Madame, if the nobility had professed this principle, it would never have turned its weapons against its country and against you, yourself; forgive me, madame, the loyalty that the sacred interests of my motherland inspires within me; if I were to continue I could tell you great truths regarding this perfidious nobility that for 15 years has ceaselessly delivered you up to censure and public persecution; and you would support it? No, madame, I cannot believe it, and you are being slandered; look to the past and see the future.

I am respectfully,  
MADAME,

Your most humble and  
most obedient servant,  
MARIE-OLIMPE DEGOUGES [sic].

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**A PETITION TO THE MUNICIPALITY.**

**YOUR WORSHIP THE MAYOR,<sup>3</sup>**

Marie-Olimpe Degouges, indefatigable in her service to a good cause, long since isolated from society, comes confidently, on her own, to share with the municipality a project in memory of the Mayor of Etampes. She is unable to reckon with the prejudices that are attached to all the initiatives of her unhappy sex; for the motherland she has turned herself into a man, and will sustain that character, and alone will offer, to the eyes of the

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<sup>3</sup> Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve (1756 – 1794) was the Mayor of Paris between November 1791 and December 1792. A lawyer and friend of Robespierre he was sent to bring back the royal family following their attempt to flee in June 1791. Elected mayor of Paris the same year, success went to his head. A constitutional monarchist, he presided over the Convention and the Jacobins, but lost the support of Robespierre when he pleaded against the King's death sentence. He fled Paris when denounced by his erstwhile friend and committed suicide in order to avoid arrest.

municipality, the petition that women will present to the national assembly, convinced as they are that she will support it with all the credit she possesses; her hatred of assassins, her love of heroic virtues, and her devotion to principles, all convince her that the magistrates of the people will not reject her point of view.

This solemn festival is not a private one, where confusion and disorder can reign; it is a reunion of all the administrative bodies, of the national guard, and of all good citizens that the law rallies around itself. Therefore, gentlemen, women must be assigned a special imposing cortège, and a continuous march. May my wish touch the hearts and minds of my fellow citizenesses, and show the rebels in league with the foreigners in order to turn their arms against their motherland, that the citizenesses will join together to defend the laws and the constitution even should they perish like the Mayor of Etampes, victim of the dissidents.

#### WOMENS' PETITION TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY.

Representatives of a people that is not longer subjugated, we come to share your regret at the death of the virtuous Mayor of Etampes; our sex, too weak to equal you in courage, yet more sensitive to your loss when you succumb to the murderers' irons, rapturously embraces the monuments that you elevate to the glory of the victims of patriotism. Simonneau died at his post, the law and true honour's martyr. This atrocious assassination fills us with eternal tears; may we be allowed, gentlemen, to take part in his funeral cortège; but what am I saying, funeral cortège! It will be the triumph of the law. You yourselves stamped it with this sacred character, we must therefore attempt to honour at one and the same time both the regret we feel at the loss of this virtuous magistrate, and the courage that his triumph must excite; all the women, covered in crepe, must precede the sarcophagus, and a banner representing the heroic action of this great man inscribed: *To Simonneau, Mayor of Etampes, from appreciative women'* be placed by them, in his memory, at the French Pantheon.

Legislators, if the gate of the Champ de Mars is closed to us, remember that among the most famous peoples, it was women who crowned heroes and who assisted at the funerals of those who died, fully armed, to defend the motherland.<sup>4</sup> Greece had its sages, France has philosophers and free men; open honour's gate to us, and we will show you the path of all virtues.

Women, at the head of this national cortège, will confound those parties bent on destruction, and the seditious will shudder.

This arresting tableau will teach all peoples that French women are worthy of marching alongside their Roman sisters; let us throw flowers and burn incense at this apotheosis. That, gentlemen, is the wish of regenerated French women, who wish to die or live free: we swear it.

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*Cortège of French ladies for the festival of the triumph of the law, and the battlecry of the field of Bellone.*<sup>5</sup>

A banner, from which would float tricolour ribbons held by young people, will open the march; it will be carried by a woman dressed in the following costume, surrounded by one hundred young women carrying baskets of flowers and vases filled with incense. A civic

<sup>4</sup> The Champ de Mars (Field of Mars) in Paris was, at this time, an enclosed parade ground attached to the military college nearby: a place where men performed and women might watch.

<sup>5</sup> In antiquity Bellone was a goddess of war, the female equivalent of Mars she is usually depicted armed and breast-plated, wearing a plumed helmet. The field of Bellone was a poetic name for a battlefield.

crown held aloft by garlands of flowers, will be carried by a young demoiselle, surrounded by a great number of people of her age.

Another group of women will carry three crowns of bay, interlaced with myrrh, suspended from a branch of bay, and supported by Renown holding this inscription in her hand: *To the three generals, defenders of liberty, if they are worthy*. Then widows will surround the sarcophagus. The cortège will march in two columns.

The young demoiselles will be dressed in white, with a fine linen veil, white crown, sash and shoes.

The married women in white dresses, black veils, crown of roses, and tricolour sashes.

If the executive power accepts the women's requests, and charge the *département* with the details of this festival, I will suggest it invites the ladies of the Parisian theatres. They understand the conventions of costume. With imposing apparel, these conventions will mark this august ceremony with all the interest it can muster. Ought not this new spectacle, at one and the same time simple and majestic, be embellished by the charm of some martial songs? A chorus sung by the women artistes of the opera, of the *comédie Italienne*, of the theatre of the *rue de Feydeau*, etc., at the motherland's altar, in which the God Mars would be invoked to defend liberty, would doubtless produce an effect that would imbue the soul with the purest civic duty, calm seditious passions, and thus unite divided parties. A bellicose feeling should intoxicate our young warriors; this sensation, produced by beauty, will be even more redoubtable as not one Frenchman would refuse to fight for his motherland and his lady.

Time is precious: poets and musicians of both sexes must straight away hasten to compose a piece of poetry and music to consecrate the wishes of the nation for this memorable festival.

If time does not permit the fulfilment of this last object, could we not use familiar words and music? I am reminded of the first verses of the chorus of an opera that was performed twelve years ago at the *comédie Italienne*, music composed by M. Grétry [sic], whose effect was truly picturesque and quite in keeping with the martial and melodious sounds of a festival such as the one to be executed in this memorable ceremony.<sup>6</sup> I have allowed myself to parody the first four verses; fearing to not achieve my end I stopped half way: here is the strophe.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE SINGING NUNS.

Tune: *God of love on this day, etc.*

Oh God Mars,  
Your perils  
Offer nothing than can affright us;

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6 André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741 - 1813), born in Liège to a musical father, studied in Rome composing mostly sacred music (he had been a choirboy in his youth) before coming to Paris and making his name writing comic operas. Despite poor health, he composed two to three works a year with great success, receiving a pension both from the King and Napoleon. This last was welcome as his finances had been depleted by the Revolution which had left him the sole provider for his brother's widow and seven children. Outliving both his wife, the miniaturist Jeanne-Marie Grandon, and their three daughters, he died in 1813 in Montmorency, having purchased the Ermitage (built by Mme d'Épinay for Jean-Jacques Rousseau) a few years earlier.

7 De Gouges is basing her version on Grétry's martial chorus for young Samnites (Act 1, Scene 7) of his 1776 opera *Les Mariages Samnites* which begins 'Dieu d'amour/ En ce jour/Viens avec Mars nous défendre...' [God of love/come this day/with Mars to defend us...] The tune was so popular that Mozart wrote eight variations for piano based on it in 1781 (K.352/374c); these are now more readily available than the original opera.

Our cause,  
And our laws,  
Will guide our endeavours.

More imposing and interesting emblems can be added to this cortège. A woman, dressed as liberty, as depicted by M. David in his painting, could head the people leading the first procession.

Then Bellone would follow in her warrior costume leading the national guard.

Thirdly a woman representing justice, would head both the *département* and the municipality preceding the sarcophagus.

Fourthly, one would see France arriving at the head of the national assembly, and if the king, with the president of the assembly, could be at her side, this ceremony would become the foremost in the world.

Maybe my enthusiasm runs away with me regarding this festival; it should be marked by mourning, but it must also offer us the hope of victory and the certainty that we shall very soon celebrate the triumph of the motherland.

#### LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE JACOBIN CLUB.<sup>8</sup>

MR PRESIDENT,

Wholly devoted to the common good, nothing else concerns me other than the bringing together of all citizens. The empire's welfare depends on this reunion alone; may the festival that is being prepared bring it about. Hate, revenge, pride must extinguish themselves on such a glorious day. May all petty passions fade before the immensity of good this reunion can produce, and give way to a noble pride in allowing truth to triumph.

It is in hope of this that I conceived the project that I address to the society, no doubt it will hasten to applaud it and encourage its execution.

I am, SIR, with all the sentiments of equality, etc.

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*Invitation to the ladies of France, to the festival for the mayor of Etampes.*

My fellow citizenesses is it not also about time that a revolution take place amongst us? Will women remain forever isolated one from another, and only ever form part of society in order to carp at their own sex, and induce pity in the other?

French women, the time has come to imitate the Roman matrons and abjure the privilege of beauty that seems to encourage the privilege that is the enemy of the motherland.

Our reign! Like that of the rose, it passes swiftly; but that of virtue accompanies us to our last moments, and we will live on in the future. Previously my language might have estranged my sex but, today, it should have a familiar ring. Timid women must embolden themselves; women and enlightened mothers must encourage young girls and fulfil the pledge I made, in the name of women, to the memory of the mayor of Etampes; it would have been pointless to try and persuade me that French women are incapable of this heroism or that the number of women participating in this cortège would be inconsiderable. Would they, at this time, wish to cover themselves in eternal ignominy, and instead of this general dedication, see the ill-intentioned inscribe only one grateful woman to, Simonneau,

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<sup>8</sup> Robespierre was President at the time.

Mayor of Etampes? No, no, my fellow citizenesses, you will not lose the fruit of the revolution, you will impress yourselves upon this most distinguished festival given to you by the nation and the king, by placing yourselves at the level of the administrative bodies; you will impress upon it at one and the same time your love for heroic actions, for the law and for the constitution; seeing the imminent peril that threatens us can you maintain a culpable indifference to the unacceptable powers, the violation of laws, the insubordination of the army, property owners threatened, the talents and the arts ready to disappear into the shadows, and the complete overturning of the most beautiful of kingdoms. What a triumph for the women of France if, by participating in the public cause, they prevent the ruin of humanity!

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### LETTER TO THE ARMY GENERALS.<sup>9</sup>

Generals of the French army, intrepid warriors, defenders of a free people! Brave soldiers, close your ears to intrigue, to calumny, and be wary of a culpable discouragement.

May the honour that shaped your souls act as a shield, and hold them always in the safety of innocence. It is not easy to inculcate heroes such as yourselves; the universe is paying attention! Mars and Bellone are preparing a harvest of laurels for you, which one day will serve as brotherly ties to unite all mankind around the chariots of liberty that you defend.

Compelling triumvirate of a regenerated empire, be in the battlefield as Bayard, without fear or reproach; the beautiful sex is already preparing your crowns.<sup>10</sup>

The enemies of such a glorious cause will attempt in vain to dissolve the army or create dissent between the leader and the soldier; honour on the battlefield will ceaselessly unite them. When you fight for liberty, for the motherland, where is the soldier who would fail to obey his leader? May your glory, after this expedition, pass on to our descendants and efface from the pages of our history those fearful images of conspiracy, treachery and crime.

And you, Lafayette, at your dawn, amongst a foreign people, you declared yourself for liberty; cherished hero of two worlds, fear adulation more than calumny; hatred serves you, flattery misleads; civic duty and valour, there are your guides.

Lukner, Lafayette, fight, triumph! And you, Rochambeau, take back command; the security of the empire depends upon great manoeuvres from all three of you; you must conquer or die, there is your motto.<sup>11</sup> Renown will sound your exploits to all peoples, and

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<sup>9</sup> France declared war on the King of Hungary and Bohemia on 20 April 1792 (the conflict would last until 1815). De Gouges's son was a professional soldier. She would have known the French army was badly organised and imbued with revolutionary politics that caused confusion among the ranks; too many leaders were aristocrats no longer able to inspire loyalty in their soldiers. Her letter reads like a rallying call to those in charge urging unity for the common good.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Terrail de Bayard (1473? – 30 April 1524) was a soldier known as 'le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche' (a blameless knight who knew no fear); these words became a catchphrase in France. Famed for his bravery and good character he became the model of chivalric virtue, standing up for the oppressed and shunning glory. He broke his back in battle but provided cover for his retreating men stating that he must be left there to die; never having turned his back on the enemy, he was not about to do so at the end.

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Luckner (1722 – 1794) was born in Bavaria. A professional soldier, after serving in Bavaria (and other countries) he entered the service of the French king as a lieutenant general in 1763. A constitutional monarchist, he swore allegiance to the National Assembly after the royal family fled from Paris. A successful Commander in Chief of the army of the Rhine and then the Army of the North he was made a Marshall of

will recall them in the most distant centuries: die as you have lived. Can a few more years be counted by true warriors, and compared to centuries of glory? Fight and die for liberty, on the remains of our adversaries. Your bellicose courage will enflame the hearts of all our young warriors; think only of the motherland; throne, friends, family in Coblenz, all must be foreign to you. If the king of the French truly seconds your enterprise, as all good citizens must believe, his people will know how to properly destroy the enemies within; take charge of those without, *et ça ira*.<sup>12</sup>

True friends of the public good will offer me, no doubt, the indulgence due to my attachment to the good cause. If I do not possess the art of writing, at least I possess the virtue of thinking well, despite the envy and persecution that rains down on me every day; time does not permit me to finish; the wicked pursue me; they equally pursued the author of the august social contract; but the wicked perish and innocence triumphs.

I will allow myself to add that, at risk of pulmonary congestion, I left my bed to take care of my motherland. Ah, the motherland is such a good doctor for a civic minded soul! I passed rapidly from serious illness to robust health; nonetheless I believe that this work is tainted by the weakness of my spirits; it is the effect of my lethargy. May my delirium become contagious and fill all the French with the fever of love for the motherland.

The emigrants say that we are already mad enough. Yes, unfortunately, to divide ourselves: it is most necessary that I say two words on the subject, concerning my meeting with an ex-marquis, on Thursday 23 May 1792.

“Ah! Is that you, madame Degouges?” cried he from afar, “And how are you? Out of sorts, are you not?” “What do you mean by out of sorts! Do you take me for an aristocrat; note that my steps are firm, and I am steady on my feet.” “Is it possible”, adds he, “that a woman of sense should have embraced such a bad party? Why, certainly; reason, natural rights, and all that characterises mankind's judgement are not unworthy of interesting a wise man. But note, note” said he, “your army, your citizens; no leader, no hierarchy, no general, no reunion of citizens, and you would be lost if we had already willed it; we have

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France. Falling foul of the revolutionary parties – due to his support for Louis XVI before his trial – he retired but was arrested and guillotined in 1794. In 1792 Rouget de Lisle had dedicated the Marseillaise (originally known as the Battle Song for the Army of the Rhine) to him.

Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert Motier, marquis de La Fayette (1757 – 1834) fought in the American War of Independence from 1776 to 1785. Imbued with new political ideas (he favoured constitutional monarchy for France) and a great deal of ambitious self-belief he influenced the emergent revolutionary politics in France on his return. Elected a deputy he was put in command, at his behest, of the newly created National Guard. He is said to have created the tricolour cockade. His popularity was immense but his attempts to inhabit the mid-ground during such tempestuous times led to him pleasing nobody. Distrusted by the royalists and loathed by the revolutionaries his public appeal was lost, forcing him to resign in the summer of 1791. Lafayette was given command of the Army of the Centre based in Metz when war was threatened. Following its declaration in April 1792 early battles were disastrous, the Austrian armies massed on the borders were a real threat to French security. Lafayette publicly blamed and denounced the radical politics of Paris for the crisis facing France. That and his demand, with Luckner, for a peace treaty led Robespierre to call him a traitor. Soon after Danton issued a warrant for his arrest. La Fayette fled France hoping to gain America, where he had been offered citizenship. Instead he spent 5 years in an Austrian prison. He refused to swear allegiance to Napoleon who had secured his release; unable to reach America, he lived with his family in Hamburg eventually returning to France in 1799. His name was spelt both La Fayette and Lafayette by himself and his family during the revolutionary period. Although it was still written as Lafayette on his tomb (1834) French usage has generally returned to the former La Fayette, while American and English usage tends to favour Lafayette.

Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau (1725 – 1807) was a hero of the American War of Independence. He was Commander in Chief of the Army of the North before Luckner. He resigned his commission on 15 May 1792 hence de Gouges's exhortation for him to take back command. Arrested in 1793 he was freed following Robespierre's fall from power.

<sup>12</sup> *Ça ira* (all will be well) was a popular revolutionary song dating from May or June 1790 when its lyrics were innocent of its later call to hang aristocrats and clergy from lampposts; the incendiary lyrics were probably added in the summer of 1792. The original rendition uses humour to belittle aristocrats within a song that encourages support for the people and their new government. De Gouges's pun predates the second version.

on our side authority, prudence and consummate soldiers." I seethed, and would have happily slapped him wholeheartedly if I had not feared having to justify such swagger, on which the erstwhile noble depends so much; but, regaining my sang froid, I said as I left him, "If insubordination exists in the French army, it's a great misfortune; if the citizens do not unite, no doubt, that is an even greater one, all your hopes are based on dissent and division; but if union happens, you will see that you are lost: it will happen, I, myself, assure you." He went away sniggering, and I shrugged my shoulders. According to this conversation, my fellow warrior citizens, consider that victory depends entirely upon the army's authority and the harmony of the kingdom; and if we lose it, it will be our fault. We would be worthy of posterity's disdain, when we could be it's eternal example.

MARIE-OLIMPE DEGOUGES.

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