

MON DERNIER MOT

À MES CHERS AMIS.

My Last Word To My Friends.¹

YES, my friends, I deeply regret that I will bring you satisfaction; I am quitting the thorny (and *ruinous*) career in which my patriotism, your amiable selfishness, your *cannibalistic* kindness and your gallant villainy, whose aim was none other than to have my throat slit by your generous attendants, have engaged me far longer than I would have wished for my own sake or for the glory of your undertakings. Carry on, charming Frenchmen, intrepid champions of this unfortunate sex that hoped the spirit of the revolution would furnish heroes of greater intrepidity, *Bourdon*, *Marat*, all you mosquitos, be satisfied: I have offered up my judgements.²

Yes, my dear friends, you will now be saved from an honest observer, from a watchful sentinel and, something that could endanger you more, saved from an impartial spirit, as proud as she is free and independent.

Once more, yes, my dear friends, the resolution is taken; Thalia calls to me and I fly back to her embrace.³

1 This text was first printed as a poster in December 1792 then bound with a previous response to Bourdon, and sent to the Convention in the same month. Discouragement following physical and verbal attacks had finally pushed de Gouges to consider leaving Paris and abandoning her writing of political tracts. This decision was swiftly overturned as, yet again, events became too momentous to be disregarded.

2 François-Louis Bourdon (1758 - 1798) aka Bourdon de l'Oise studied law and became an enthusiastic republican; he was one of the leaders of the Tuilleries insurrection in August 1792. An inflammatory character, he could be radical and extreme in his behaviour. An electoral confusion in 1792 meant that he and another Bourdon - Léonard - were both allegedly elected to the Parisian assembly and both claimed to have helped bring down the Bastille. They were both instated though posterity has not been kind to Bourdon de l'Oise by suggesting that he took advantage of the situation and was a rascal in many other ways; his unpleasantness and lack of integrity are often mentioned however, as the same commentators often make statements about de Gouges that are untrue, I will have to reserve judgement. He did however attack de Gouges by stating that she was an aristocrat and the bastard child of Louis XV. As a member of the Convention Bourdon de l'Oise was outspoken (often against the Girondins) and fell in and out of favour with Robespierre, narrowly avoiding the guillotine. He played a part in trying to establish (or break up) a government during the melee following the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terreur, and fought against (or lined his pockets using) the speculation that was ruining France. The rise of Bonaparte and the resurgence of royalist interventions created the sort of confusion in which scores could be settled: Bourdon de l'Oise was arrested and summarily exiled (with others) to Cayenne where he died of malaria soon after his arrival.

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 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 pietà 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.

3 Thalia, one of the Graces in Greek mythology; the Muse of comedy in Greek and Roman mythology.

I will even, for your benefit, try and become woman again, but never will this great miracle be made possible by any one of you. I will leave you to enjoy bringing down France at your ease, to pilfer her finances, to excite murder and pillage, to distribute positions among yourselves, to substitute vice, insolence and inanity for talent and virtue. I wish you all the success that the principles of a corrupt century can offer this *noble* enterprise.

And you, good and perceptive philosophers; you the true supporters of the people and the pillars of the State; you, the champions of principles and humanity, parry, if you can, the destructive efforts of our common enemies. I have said, I have done, enough to render myself as redoubtable to their vile passions as I am useful to my motherland. I have lived for spiritual reward alone but I knew that I, also, would live in the future, etc. If mankind cannot be free from fault, and if glory has one, then I will have the noble presumption of admitting that, within my heart, glory has gathered all the virtues.

I sought neither rank nor position; I could not be so extravagantly pretentious; an iniquitous preconception distanced me, in this regard, from all pretension. But the preconception, that has nothing in common with eternal moral truths, assures me that my name will survive, untarnished, through posterity. Let that disturb you, my pitiful detractors; accuse me of folly, of ineptitude, of having sacrificed my fortune to save the motherland that you hobble on a daily basis, but you will never manage to impute to me all the baseness of your own self-interest and of your passions: let us leave it at that, the future can choose between you and me.

I must close with a great example of justice; no one is in doubt that I oppose Philippe Égalité.⁴ Citizen [Huguet, bishop of the Creuse *département*]⁵ has just told me, to my great surprise, that in a conversation with Mister Bourdon, whose awful bourdoning has, for several days, called down on my head all the assassins' daggers, this same Philippe had said to him when speaking of me: 'I know her character better than you do and I will answer for the purity of her patriotism.'⁶ Philippe, if this character were versatile, if I were capable of retracting my words on your conduct, I would loyally say to you: 'I was wrong where you were concerned; the greatest virtue of a man is to be just with regard to his enemies: you possess it, you have a great advantage that I will always seek to equal. There is my retraction: it is your eulogy.'

4 Louis Philippe Joseph, duc d'Orléans - de Montpensier and de Chartres - (1747 - 1793), of royal blood and extremely wealthy he sought power through various means, assisted by his ambitious agent Choderlos de Laclos. Hoping, but failing, to be regent he embraced the new political order and was elected to the Convention under the name Philippe Egalité. A liberal supporter of writers and artists his Parisian home the Palais-Royal became, during the revolution, a hotbed of political and sexual intrigue. De Gouges dedicated her first volume of theatrical works to this patron in 1788 but later saw in him, and Laclos, only greed and a total lack of integrity. Making her views public led to a murderous attack on her person that she believed had been orchestrated by Laclos. Philippe Egalité voted for Louis XVI's immediate death following his trial; this was badly viewed by most people, including Robespierre, despite the republican fervour of the day.

5 Most intriguingly the phrase in square brackets was heavily inked out of the copies of this text in the British Library, the BNF (available on Gallica) and the public library in Lyons (available on Google books). I was able to decipher the words thanks to the help of the British Library staff who allowed me to use their specialist equipment (the cold light uv luminescent sheet was not up to the task but their fibre optic snake light did the trick). Why anyone should have wished to erase the name of Marc-Antoine Huguet in these texts remains a mystery. Marc-Antoine Huguet (1757 - 1796), a priest, was elected in May 1791 as constitutional bishop for the Creuse; a supporter of the revolution he signed up to the constitutional code governing the clergy and was elected as a deputy in September 1791. In September 1792 he was elected to the Convention and sat on the side of the Montagne. Huguet left the church, married and had a child [children?]. He was shot by a military firing squad in December 1796 for attempting to bring about the downfall of the Directoire by encouraging the army to mutiny.

6 A bourdon, in English, is the drone pipe of a bagpipe, the bass string of a stringed instrument and an organ stop. In French likewise, but equally a low toned bell, a pilgrim's staff, a typographical error and a bumble bee. The verb in French 'bourdonner' describes droning, humming, mumbling and, figuratively, to make importunate speeches. I have taken the liberty of using the word as a verb in English to maintain de Gouges's pun '...le sieur Bourdon, de qui l'affreux bourdonnement...'