

REPENTIR

DE MADAME DE GOUGES.

*Madame de Gouges's Repentance.*¹

How little it takes to alienate the public's esteem! Two miserable pages, where my imagination went astray, have robbed me of that esteem that had been my patriotism's due. I am forced to justify myself! I have lost my wager.

I was quite happy to appear aristocratic, without even disguising my principles. But certainly, I never believed the French were so blind. Me? An aristocrat? Ah well, yes, I am one, and with good reason; I admit it, I confess it, I look it, and I boast of it. By the way, I have forgotten my justification.

Occupied for several days putting the finishing touches to a major work, I discover, in my solitude, that the National Assembly has finished the CONSTITUTION and that they have just presented it to the KING.² Desperate at seeing this masterpiece finished before having been able to communicate my ideas, a black vapour suddenly took hold of my senses and my reason: I left home with the intention of doing a mischief; I was going to plunge myself into the river, and I fell on the aristocratic rocks. Could I have done anything worse? I reach my printer's, without a manuscript; I dictate to the compositor, with the passion of the abbé M.... and of M. C.... *l'Avis pressant au roi*; I do not leave until he has made the press groan.³

Proud of this work, that characterises the national inconstancy, I, timid, go and deliver it everywhere. Barely is it distributed than I hear the serpents of disapproval hiss. What is my crime, I ask? They answer that I am an *Aristocrat*. I consider myself, and I notice that there is indeed a grain of truth there. I address myself to people acknowledged to have common sense, they assure me that I have lost the good opinion of the public. I wager the opposite is true, and I ask again if this is possible.

At the National Assembly, I am told, certain honourable Members opine that I am mad; let them prove that they are more reasonable than me. I have lost my case but I appeal to the sane majority of our legislators. Here I am at the bar: what are your proofs of aristocracy, I ask the president. My *Black Slavery*, published in 1784, that portrayed both the shackles of the French and those of the American Negroes; my *Patriotic Purse* of 1788; my charitable ideas for the destitute during the 'great' winter, the creation of public workshops, the responsibility of ministers, etc. etc. right up to my reservations about the king of the French, so ingeniously found in my writings; the principles of equality, of justice and humanity, for which the constitution is indebted to me.⁴ There is my veritable aristocracy. What recompense does the National Assembly reserve for these deeds, recognised long before it existed? An honourable pension....J. Jacques' companion, whose only merit was to live closely with this great man, got it without any trouble, and I,

1 Dating from 5 September 1791 this text is a response to a short piece written on the spur of the moment, *Avis pressant au roi (Urgent Notice to the King)* whose existence, according to de Gouges's biographer Olivier Blanc, is no longer certain and which de Gouges later denied writing. He suggests (from extant criticism) that she responded too hastily to fears that the new Constitution would deprive Louis XVI of valid powers and gave the wrong impression of her views which were solidly constitutional and not ultra-monarchist. Her use of irony in this piece, as in the second paragraph, and the humour that is threaded throughout the text were also frequently misinterpreted.

2 The major work de Gouges is referring to is almost certainly her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* which she finished and published on the 14 September 1791 to expressly coincide with Louis XVI's ratification of the Constitution. The 'masterpiece' she refers to later is, I believe, the Constitution and not her *Declaration*.

3 The abbé M.... might be the prolific writer abbé André Morellet and M. C.... could be the playwright Beaumarchais, whose original surname was Caron before he added de Beaumarchais. De Gouges quite often referred to him, using acronyms such as C. de B. and M. C. B. when wanting to refer to the dramatist without actually naming him.

so I am assured, will need to request it; I will never get it at that price.⁵ I have merited it; for me, that is enough. I, more than anyone, have cause to bemoan the injustices of the new regime, but despite that I will not abandon the good cause.

I have proposed two options to the king, both fit to make him possess a character that you have accused him of lacking. Would you now be angry that he has one? Keep him as he is if that will lead you to the felicity you desire. *So be it.*

May the French receive this pleasantry as the most serious justification on my part. May all the aristocrats follow my example and retrace their steps to embrace, as I do, the real interests of the motherland for, if I have had the courage to manifest my fears regarding our tranquility, it is because I consider the constitution like a superb balloon ready to lose its way in the skies; the work of man who deems it as perfect as that of the divinity; if man finds its direction I will acknowledge twelve hundred gods.⁶

Was this the work of pure hands? Time will tell. Will its execution be entrusted to virtuous beings? I hope so, but I doubt it. The dominating form of corruption that is already making itself felt is an obvious obstacle to the progress of this august social contract, for I fear that by and by, in practice, it will become ever more inconsistent with the theory.

To bask in hope, and imminent happiness, is, they say, the gratifying illusion of a good patriot. This illusion can neither seduce me nor lead me astray. I declare that having imposed upon myself the duty of being useful, I will pursue vice in all its twists and turns, and in the end I hope it will be recognised that, more than anyone, I have drawn close to the true duty of mankind and genuine constitutional principles. But...farewell to the pension.

DE GOUGES.

Monday 5 September 1791

4 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*).

Lettre au peuple, ou projet d'une caisse patriotique (*Letter to the People, or Patriotic Purse Project*) was de Gouges's first political pamphlet. Printed in early November 1788 it offers a remedy to France's deficit in the form of voluntary donations to a Patriotic Purse.

5 Thérèse Levasseur (1721 - 1801) was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's partner and mother of his five children who were all allegedly placed in an orphanage at birth. Rousseau died in 1778 and Levasseur survived by selling various manuscripts and some financial aid from well-wishers. In December 1790 Mirabeau persuaded the National Assembly to erect a statue in honour of Rousseau and offer Levasseur a state pension.

6 I have used 'man' for 'homme' in this sentence because although in English 'mankind' would read better de Gouges is playing on the fact that only men were involved in creating the Constitution, one that gave women no access to voting rights. In French the singular 'homme' can be read both ways, a man or mankind: 'men' would lose the nuance of the original. 'Twelve hundred' is the approximate number of deputies sitting in the National Assembly when the Constitution was put together. There were in fact 1514 members, a huge and unwieldy number. The next assembly, now named Legislative and responsible for making the Constitution function, numbered 768 deputies and was formed in October 1791 a few weeks after this pamphlet was printed.