

RÉPONSE
À LA
JUSTIFICATION
DE
MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE,

ADRESSÉE À JÉRÔME PÉTION,
PAR OLYMPE DE GOUGES.¹

Response to Maximilien Robespierre's Justification, Addressed to Jérôme Pétion, by
Olympe de Gouges.²

Virtuous and simple man, a model for the philosophers, please forgive the error I made in suspecting you for an instant. My eyes were opened on the 10th; we owe everything to this day, it brought hearts and minds together, and made known the perfidious behaviour of a king too long upheld by the credulity of good citizens.³

You have taught me, through the gentle morality that imbues your speeches and the obligation you were under to give your opinion, to curb my own exalted impulses; those feelings that a sensitive soul should always be wary of and that insurgents use to their advantage only too well. True patriotism dictates this calm, this civic gentleness that colours your writings and conveys to all souls, a touching expression of virtue. I was, therefore, wise to recognise you! And if, in my dramatic text of the day of the 10th that I will write for the great day of representation, I manage to render the greatness that you deployed in the most terrible circumstances, then I shall be happy indeed. Happy if the accents of your gentle and pure teachings lead the people away from the agitators who deceive them with regard to their most cherished interests! Happier still if the title I have given the play, *France Saved*, were to prophesy the glory and destiny of this republic.⁴ But alas! You know only too well, virtuous republican, that if the French continue to be divided I will never see my play achieved or you, your work accomplished.

I know that you disapprove of certain strongly worded expressions targeting Maximilien Robespierre; it is one of those *urges* that I have never been able to contain when I believe the common good to be in danger. Yet, in the midst of such fiery ideas you will find the reverse; a charitable soul who would serve as a shield to the conspirators if the assassins' swords were turned against them. That is fundamental to my character, as everyone knows.

Signed OLYMPE DE GOUGES ⁵

1 Jérôme Pétion(1756 – 1794) was president of the Convention at this time, a constitutional monarchist (he was part of the delegation sent by the National Assembly to bring back Louis XVI and his family from Varennes in June 1791) and Robespierre's friend. Mayor of Paris from November 1791 to October 1792 and President of the Jacobins in September 1792 he veered towards the Girondins and lost the support of Robespierre's support; as the latter's star rose Pétion's fell. He was proscribed in June 1793, lived in hiding for a year, and committed suicide in June 1794, days before Robespierre's fall from power. His body was found in a field partially eaten by wild animals.

2 This pamphlet of November 1792 was de Gouges's lightning response to Robespierre's speech of 5 November in which he triumphantly justified his political position. She took apart his arguments, giving full vent to her anger and frustration: her pointed irony was misunderstood and taken for lunacy. Attacking powerful men with such courageous bravura did not endear her to their many followers.

3 On 10 August 1792 armed insurgents overran the Tuileries palace and the royal family had to take refuge in the Legislative Assembly. The Assembly decreed a provisional suspension of the King in favour of an elected Convention. Three days later the King and his family were interned in the Temple.

4 The play *La France sauvée, ou le Tyran détrôné* based on the events of the 10th August remained unfinished; it was used as evidence against de Gouges during her trial. Placing royal personages on the stage, irrespective of any satirical intent, was considered counter-revolutionary.

5 A version exists without a signature or extra line space and Robespierre is not capitalized which indicates that the pamphlet had at least two print runs.

ROBESPIERRE you have just enlightened me; you tell us that you have given up your right to fair revenge against your accusers.⁶ You only seek a return to peace, the abandonment of personal hatred and the maintenance of liberty. What a sudden metamorphosis! You, disinterested; you, philosopher; you, a friend to your fellow citizens, to peace and order? I could quote you this maxim, when a wicked man does good, he is preparing great wrongs; this sudden conversion is hard to bear; this *ritornello* in your ambition seems to announce a lugubrious tune. Forgive me; I may be mistaken: I am as fanatically patriotic as you are personally ambitious. You may have served the revolution, I would not deny it, but your excessive behaviour has wiped out, in all hearts, any gratitude...Let us examine your justification.

You presented yourself at the tribune to wash away all the denunciations that had been so painstakingly erected against you. Certainly, it is a fine thing to be calumniated when one can quash one's enemies! But you are very far from that triumph of innocence that leaves no doubt regarding the accused. I pity you, Robespierre, I abhor you. See the difference in our souls! Mine is truly republican, yours never was. If I appeared to vote for monarchy it was because I believed it to be the form of government best suited to the *French spirit*. But can you bring yourself to deny that my principles are the less pure for that? If, like Mirabeau, I sought to preserve a constitutional monarchy, it was for the good of all; you say you only sought to destroy it for the love of your own self! Descend into the labyrinth of your conscience and deny it if you dare.

You impute Louvet of having accused you, of influencing the Jacobins, the General Council of the Commune, the Primary Assemblies and the Electoral Assembly.⁷ Oh! I accuse you, I and a great crowd! I will, with these incontestable rights, fight you, confuse you and vanquish you with your own arms.

'You do not understand the despotism of opinion unless it be the absolute authority of truth. But, this authority is not personal to one man, it belongs to all who defend the principles of universal reason.'⁸

You will at least agree with me that women are not excluded from it; never would you have spoken better, never been more eloquent, never more persuasive, if that had been your natural language. Judge what advantage the real philosophers have over you; you upset minds without persuading them; by contrast Pétion influences them; his well-meaning truths inflame hearts and minds and, by a last ray of his lights, surprise even you. Tell me, Maximilien, why did you fear the men of letters at the Convention so much? Why, at the Electoral Assembly, did you thunder against the philosophers to whom we owe the destruction of the tyrants, the regeneration of governments and the true support of the world? Did you want to instruct the citizens through the ignorance of the Convention and make it an assembly of the boorish? Did you not rather aim to dominate it? Answer me, I pray. Although your speeches are full of sophisms it cannot be denied that you possess a perfect understanding of revolutions and of the lives and habits of great conquerors; but for pity's sake, never compare yourself with the wise of any parts. Do you know how far you are from Cato? As far as Marat from Mirabeau, or a mosquito from an eagle, or the eagle from the sun. You can only call yourself the caricature of these great men. You depend a lot on the irregularities of the unfortunate human species; in the century of enlightenment it

6 Throughout the text de Gouges addresses Robespierre using the familiar 'tu' rather than the formal 'vous'. In the autumn of 1792 'tu' began to represent the egalitarian ideals enshrined in the Rights of Man, its use marking the advent of citizenship in what had been a population of subjects. Generally only used to address children and servants it was a significant change of usage. The plosive effect of 'tu' fits well with the invective anger of de Gouges's tirade.

7 Jean-Baptiste Louvet (1760 – 1797) a writer and member of the Jacobins who demanded the prosecution of émigrés he frequently attacked Robespierre. Threatened with arrest, alongside the Girondins, he fled France in 1793 returning in 1794 and rejoining the Convention in 1795. It is said he died of exhaustion from working too hard.

8 Here, and later, de Gouges is quoting Robespierre's own words.

is pushing audacity and ambition too far to attempt the impossible by trying to plunge humanity back down into the depths of ignorance. I am sure that, despite your sudden modesty, you still nourish frivolous hopes of climbing to the highest rung of usurpers, both ancient and modern. Cromwell caresses your reason and Mahomet subjugates it; to be the equal of villains you have no need of a fortune. A caprice, a popular infatuation, a revolutionary extravagance are enough to create a marvel and give the sceptre to an intruder. You are aware that happiness and misery have their fluctuations. Frederick was more senseless than you; you have nothing to lose and you are playing for high stakes.⁹ Courage, Maximilien, tempt fortune to extinction, upset, at its birth, the government that has united the constitutionalists and the republicans. But sacred philosophy will shackle your success for whatsoever may be your momentary triumph or the disorder of this anarchy, you will never govern enlightened men; you have only set your eyes on the triumvirate.¹⁰ You say you have no money. But you have friends who have already advanced you some and who would give more to share with you the highest rank! They are well known; they are a guilty and proscribed race. The miserable Marat who has just come out of his cavern in triumph, covered in general ignominy, once again shakes his pestilential papers, the firebrands of the furies; this miserable Marat, I say, is merely the punchinello [puppet] of this senseless project: everyone throws stones at him, you all curse him. This *modern Nostradamus* will find himself forced again to squat in his subterranean den. O Maximilien! Maximilien! You proclaim peace to all but you declare war on the human race; I want to profit from your amnesty; offer me clemency, I beg you.

It is I, I, Maximilien who is the author of your prognostic; I, I say, Olympe de Gouges, more man than woman. You say you will give your life for the glory and the well being of our shared motherland.

Well, Robespierre, be true to your word, free your country.

If it only needs my life to encourage you then I am ready to give it up for my motherland. Do you recall the young Roman who rushed into the middle of the Forum to calm passions and bring peace back to the republic? Could you imitate him? You ridicule the sensibility and humanity of our philosophers, the most precious gifts of nature. The lives of thousands of men are worth nothing in your eyes; therefore you must be indifferent to your own. You must possess the stoical courage of the greatest souls. I, I will admit, am a miser when it comes to the blood of my fellow citizens; but if it were to take only the shedding of my blood to save them then I would know how to spill it. We have no open chasm, and, other than your assassins, we have no executioners who would want to take charge of this expedition. Robespierre! Have you the courage to imitate me? I suggest we take a bath in the Seine but in order to wash away all the stains you have acquired since the 10th we will attach cannon balls of sixteen or twenty-four to our feet; then, together, we will rush headlong into the flow.¹¹ Your death will calm minds and the sacrifice of a pure life will disarm the heavens. I am useful to my country, as you know, but your death will at least free it of its greatest scourge and maybe I will never have served it better: I am capable of such extreme patriotism. Such is the courage of the great characters that you yourself describe without ever knowing any. 'One can outrage virtue but memory lives on forever,' you are right. 'The small-minded and facetious never last, only the great live on.' It is too marvellous that you yourself should write their defence and your proper accusation! Mediocre and boastful compared to your superiors in merit and talent; a cringing impostor to the people: there is your portrait. Tell me, what, actually, will be your place in the pages of history; lift up your eyes, if you dare, and see the model philosopher and people's

9 De Gouges may be referring to Frederick William II of Prussia who had recently retreated from France in September 1792 after the battle of Valmy having previously met with military success when attempting to march on Paris.

10 The 'triumvirate' at this time meant Danton, Marat and Robespierre.

11 In 1764 French artillery reforms had led to five standard weights for cannon balls; sixteen and twenty-four pounds were the two heaviest.

magistrate. Contemplate Petion's letter and see the great distance that separates the two of you.