

# LES DROITS DE LA FEMME

## A LA REINE

The Rights of Woman. To the Queen.<sup>1</sup>

MADAME,

Unused to the language of kings I will not affect the adulatory tone of Courtiers to dedicate to you this singular production. My aim IS TO SPEAK TO YOU FREELY: I did not wait for the era of Liberty to express myself thus but showed the same determination at a time when blind Despots punished such noble audacity.

When the entire Empire accused you of being responsible for its calamities I alone, at a time of dilemmas and storms, had the courage to defend you. I could never believe that a princess raised in the bosom of greatness could stoop to such base viciousness.

Yes, Madame, when I saw the sword raised against you I threw my observations between the victim and the sword but now that I can see that the mass of mutinous retainers is closely observed and that it is restrained by a fear of the law, I will say, Madame, that which I would not have said before.

If foreigners bear arms in France I will no longer consider you to be a falsely inculpated Queen, an affecting Queen, but an implacable enemy of the French. Ah! Madame, remember that you are a mother and a wife; use all your influence to encourage the Princes to return. This influence, so wisely applied, will strengthen the crown of the father, preserve it for his son, and reconcile you with the French. This worthy negotiation is the true duty of a Queen. Intrigue, cabals and bloodthirsty plans would precipitate your fall, were it possible to suspect you of such designs.

Madame, let a nobler occupation characterise you, excite your ambition and attract your attention. Only one placed by chance in an eminent position can promote the Rights of Woman and hasten its success. If you were less enlightened, Madame, I might fear that your personal interests would outweigh those of your sex. You are fond of glory: consider, Madame, that the greatest crimes are immortalised, as are the greatest virtues, but what a different renown they achieve in the annals of history! One is permanently taken as an example whilst the other is forever the execration of the human race.

You will never be incriminated for working to improve morals nor for giving to our sex all the steadfastness of which it is capable. Unfortunately for the new government this cannot be achieved in a day. This revolution will only be complete when all women are aware of their deplorable fate and of the rights that they have lost in society. Madame, support such a great cause; defend this unfortunate sex and soon, you will have one half of the Kingdom on your side and at least a third of the other half.

---

<sup>1</sup> This tract was published on 14 September 1791 to expressly coincide with Louis XVI's ratification of the Constitution, a system of government that reduced the Rights of Man to a bare minimum, leaving women (and many men) out of all political engagement by denying them any voting rights or full citizenship. Olympe de Gouges, a supporter of the Constitution, was bitterly disappointed with the result and wrote her Rights of Woman as a direct reflection of the Rights of Man, symbolising the equality between the sexes that she believed was essential for the health of any nation. The suggested contract between women and men that ends the piece is so ground breaking that even two centuries after its creation it continued to be problematic. De Gouges knew, as she was writing the Rights of Woman, that it was a major work and indeed it is virtually the only one of her productions that has been remembered by posterity although it gained little attention at the time and lingered in obscurity for over a century; it must also count as one of the first published tracts in favour of the political rights of women. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published a few months later in 1792.

These, Madame, these are the exploits that you should make known and use to your credit. Believe me, Madame, our life is insignificant, especially a Queen's, if that life is not enhanced by love for the people and by the endless delight that is generosity.

Is it true that some French are arming all the powers against their motherland? Why? For frivolous prerogatives, for chimeras. Believe me, Madame, if I can judge by what I sense, then the monarchist party will destroy itself, it will abandon all tyrants and everybody will rally to defend the motherland.

These, Madame, these are my principles. In speaking to you of my motherland I am losing sight of the object of this dedication. This is how all good Citizens sacrifice their glory and their interests when they have none other in mind than those of their country.

With the deepest respect,

MADAME,

I am your very humble, and very obedient, servant,

DE GOUGES

[NEW PAGE]

## THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

Man, are you capable of being fair? A woman is asking: at least you will allow her that right. Tell me? What gave you the sovereign right to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents? Observe the creator in his wisdom, examine nature in all its grandeur for you seem to wish to get closer to it, and give me, if you dare, a pattern for this tyrannical power.<sup>2</sup>

Reconsider animals, consult the elements, study plants, finally, cast an eye over all the variations of all living organisms; yield to the evidence that I have given you: search, excavate and discover, if you can, sexual characteristics in the workings of nature: everywhere you will find them intermingled, everywhere cooperating harmoniously within this immortal masterpiece.

Only man has cobbled together a rule to exclude himself from this system. Bizarre, blind, puffed up with science and degenerate, in this century of enlightenment and wisdom, with the crassest ignorance, he wants to command, like a despot, a sex that is blessed with every intellectual faculty; he feigns to rejoice in the revolution and demands its equal rights, to say nothing more.

## DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN AND THE FEMALE CITIZEN

*To be decreed by the National Assembly in its last sessions or in those of the next legislature.*

### PREAMBLE

Mothers, daughters, sisters, representatives of the Nation, all demand to be constituted into a national assembly. Given that ignorance, disregard or the disdain of the

---

<sup>2</sup> [Original footnote.] From Paris to Peru, from Japan to Rome, man is, in my opinion, THE stupidest animal. [This is a direct quote from Boileau's 1667 Satire VIII in which he argues that man is in no way superior to other animals.]

rights of woman are the only causes of public misfortune and the corruption of governments [they] have decided to make known in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of woman; this declaration, constantly in the thoughts of all members of society, will ceaselessly remind them of their rights and responsibilities, allowing the political acts of women, and those of men, to be compared in all respects to the aims of political institutions, which will become increasingly respected, so that the demands of female citizens, henceforth based on simple and incontestable principles, will always seek to maintain the constitution, good morals and the happiness of all.

As a result, the sex that is superior in beauty as it is in courage during the pains of childbirth recognises and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen.

#### FIRST ARTICLE

Woman is born free and remains the equal of man in rights. Social distinctions can only be founded on a common utility.

#### II

The purpose of all political organisations must be the protection of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Woman and Man: these rights are liberty, property, security and above all the right to resist oppression.

#### III

The principle of sovereignty is vested primarily in the Nation, which is but the union of Woman and Man: no body, no individual, can exercise authority that does not explicitly emanate from it.

#### IV

Liberty and justice exist to render unto others what is theirs; therefore the only limit to the exercise of the natural rights of woman is the perpetual tyranny that man opposes to it: these limits must be reformed by the laws of nature and reason.

#### V

The laws of nature and reason forbid all acts that are harmful to society: anything not forbidden by these wise and divine laws must be allowed and no one can be constrained to do what the laws do not demand.

#### VI

The law must embody the will of the majority; all Female and Male citizens must contribute personally, or through their representatives, to its development; it must be the same for one and all: all Female and all Male citizens, being equal in law, must be equally entitled to all public honours, positions and employment according to their capacities and with no other distinctions than those based solely on talent and virtue.

#### VII

No woman may be exempt; she must be accused, arrested and imprisoned according to the law. Women, like men, will obey this rigorous law.

#### VIII

The law must only establish punishments that are strictly necessary, and none can be punished other than by a law established and promulgated prior to the offence, and legally applied to women.

## IX

The law will rigorously pursue any woman found to be guilty.

## X

None must be disquieted for their opinions however fundamental: woman is entitled to mount the scaffold; she must be equally entitled to mount the rostrum so long as her manifestos do not disturb the public order according to the law.

## XI

The free expression of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman given that this liberty ensures the legitimacy of fathers and their children. Any Female citizen can therefore freely declare 'I am the mother of your child' without a barbarous prejudice forcing them to hide the truth, unless in response to the abuse of this freedom in cases determined by the law.

## XII

Guaranteeing the rights of woman and the female citizen will be a great benefit: this guarantee must be instituted for the good of all and not just to benefit those individuals to whom it is entrusted.

## XIII

Women and men are to contribute equally to the upkeep of the forces of law and order and to the costs of administration: woman shares all the labour, all the hard tasks; she should therefore have an equal share of positions, employment, responsibilities, honours and professions.

## XIV

Female and male citizens have a right to decide for themselves, or through their representatives, the necessity of public contribution. Female citizens can only subscribe to it if they are allowed an equal share not only of wealth but also of public administration and in determining the amount, assessment, collection and duration of the tax.

## XV

The collective of women, joined to that of men for the purposes of taxation, has the right to demand of any public agent an account of its administration.

## XVI

No society can have a constitution if rights are not guaranteed, or the separation of powers not determined; the constitution is worthless if the majority that make up the Nation has not participated in its redaction.

## XVII

Property belongs to both sexes, united or separated; for each it is an inviolable and sacred right; no one can be deprived of a true natural heritage unless a general necessity, legally verified, obviously requires it and on condition of a fair indemnity agreed in advance.

## POSTSCRIPT

Woman, wake up; the tocsin of reason is resounding throughout the universe: acknowledge your rights. Nature's powerful empire is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition or untruth. The light of truth has dissipated all the clouds of nonsense and usurpation. Enslaved man increased his power and had to have recourse to yours in order to break his fetters. Freed he became unjust towards his companion. Oh women! Women, when will you cease to be blind? What advantages have you gained through the Revolution? A greater scorn, a more pronounced disdain. During the centuries of corruption you only reigned over the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed: what is left to you? The conviction that men are unjust? Reclaim your heritage, that right founded on the wise decrees of nature; what can you fear from such a fine undertaking? A witticism from the Governor of the Feast of Cana? Are you afraid that our French Governors, correctors of an inappropriate morality that was too long caught up in the branches of politics, will say repeatedly: women, what have we got in common?<sup>3</sup> Everything, you must reply. If, in their weakness, they should obstinately allow such inconsequentiality to get in the way of their principles then courageously oppose their vain claims of superiority; unite under the banner of philosophy; use all your innate energy and you will soon see these haughty men, our slavish admirers, [not?] grovelling at your feet but proud to share with you the treasures of the Supreme-Being. Whatever barriers are thrown in your way it is in your power to overcome them; you simply have to want to. Let us move on and reflect on the frightful position that women held in society; given that a system of national education is now being contemplated, let us see if our wise Legislators will be rational in their consideration of the education of women.

Women have done more harm than good. Constraint and dissimulation have been their lot. What force stole from them, ruse returned; they had to resort to the power of their charms and the most irreproachable man could not resist. All was submitted to them, poison, the sword; they commanded over crime as over virtue. The French government, in particular, depended for centuries on the nocturnal administration of women; secrets could not withstand the indiscretion of the boudoir: ambassadors, officers, ministers, presidents, pontiffs,<sup>4</sup> cardinals, all that characterises the stupidity of men, sacred or profane, all was subject to the cupidity and ambition of this sex once despicable yet respected but since the revolution, respected and despised.

What an opportunity this sort of antithesis offers me for commentary! I have only a moment to make it known but the moment will fix the attention of the most distant posterity. Under the ancien régime everything was deceitful, everything was shameful yet is it not possible to perceive an improvement in things even in the substance of these vices? A woman had only to be beautiful and amiable; when she possessed both advantages a hundred fortunes would be spread at her feet. If she did not take advantage of them she was deemed to be odd or of an unusual bent that encouraged her to despise riches: she was then reduced to being considered awkward. The most indecent woman became respectable through gold; the commerce of women was a sort of trade that was accepted in the highest circles which, from now on, will have no credit. If it still had any then the revolution would be lost and, in new relations, we would still be corrupted: yet can reason pretend that all other paths to fortune are closed to a woman purchased by a man, like a slave on the coasts of Africa. The difference is great; that is understood. The slave

---

3 De Gouges seems to be referencing the gospel of St John's account of Jesus's words to his mother before he performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, turning water into wine. When Mary told him there was no wine left he brushed off her comment stating it had nothing to do with him.

4 [Original footnote.] M. de Bernis, in Mme. de Pompadour's own method.

François Joachim de Pierre, Cardinal de Bernis, (1715 – 1794) was a court abbot and poet who frequented the best salons and obtained a pension thanks to Mme. de Pompadour; he rose through the ranks of the state and church i.e. ambassador to Venice, secretary of state for foreign affairs, archbishop, and pope-maker in Rome where he died, deprived of his titles and wealth by the revolution.

commands the master, but if the master frees the slave with no recompense at an age when the slave has lost all her charms, what becomes of this unfortunate woman? The plaything of scorn, even the doors of generosity close on her; she is poor and old, they say, why did she not understand how to make a fortune? Other even more touching examples come to mind. A young inexperienced person, seduced by a man she loves, will abandon her parents to follow him; the ingrate will abandon her after a few years, the longer she has aged with him the more inhuman his inconstancy; if she has children, he will abandon her anyway. If he is rich he will consider himself exempt from sharing his fortune with his noble victims. If some agreement ties him to his duty he will violate its power in expectation that the law will be tolerant. If he is married any other agreement becomes worthless. What laws are still to be created in order to extirpate vice at its root? One that will share wealth, and public administration, between men and women. It is obvious that she who is born of a rich family will gain much from an equal partition. But she who is born of a poor family, with merit and virtue, what is her lot? Poverty and opprobrium. If she does not excel specifically in music or painting she can hold no position in public even though she has all the capabilities to do so. I want only to give an overview of how things stand, I will go into greater depth in the new edition of my political works that I plan to offer the public in a few days, with notes.

I take up my text again with regard to morals. Marriage is the tomb of trust and love. A married woman can, with impunity, give bastards to her husband and a fortune that is not theirs. The unmarried woman only has the feeblest rights; ancient and inhuman laws forbid her the right to the name or wealth of the father of her children and no new laws have been devised to address this matter. If trying to give my sex an honourable and fair substance seems, at this time, paradoxical on my part, like attempting the impossible, then I will leave the glory of treating on this matter to the men to come but, while we wait, we can pave the way through national education, the reestablishment of morals, and by addressing conjugal conventions.

#### *Frame for a social Contract between Man and Woman.*

We, N and N, joining together for the duration of our lives by our own volition, and for the duration of our mutual fondness, agree to the following conditions: We intend and wish to combine our assets on condition that they can be divided in favour of our children, and of those that we may have as a result of a special inclination, mutually recognising that our wealth belongs to our children, directly, whatever their origins, and that all, without discrimination, have the right to carry the names of the father and mother who have recognised them, and we engage to accept the law that punishes those who renounce their own blood. Equally, in case of separation, we will fulfil the obligation to share our wealth having deducted our children's portion as dictated by the law; in the case of a perfect union, the first to die will give over half of their assets in favour of their children; if one of the couple were to die childless the other would inherit by rights unless the deceased had disposed of half of their common assets in favour of another deemed appropriate by the deceased.

Here, more or less, is the form of the conjugal act I propose for implementation. As this bizarre piece is read I see rising up against me the hypocrites, the prudes, the clergy and all the infernal gang. But how many moral ideas will it offer the wise so that they may arrive at the perfectibility of a happy government! I will, in a few words, offer concrete proof. The childless rich Epicurean hugely enjoys going to his impoverished neighbour to augment the poor man's family. When a law will be in place that authorises the poor man's wife to oblige the rich man to adopt his children the ties of society will be strengthened and

morals cleaned up. This law might protect the good of the community and restrain the disorder that drives so many victims into the arms of opprobrium, baseness and the degeneration of human principles where nature has so long been suffering. Let the detractors of this sane philosophy either cease in their voluble protests against primitive morals, or let them lose themselves in the source of their citations.<sup>5</sup>

I would like a further law to benefit widows and young women cheated by the false promises of men they have become fond of; I would like, I say, this law to force the fickle to honour their commitments, or to oblige them to pay an indemnity commensurate with their wealth. Furthermore, I would like this law to be rigorously applied to women, at least to those who have the effrontery to have recourse to a law that they themselves have contravened by their misconduct, if such could be proved. I would also like, as I suggested in *The Primitive Happiness of Man* in 1788, that streetwalkers be housed in designated areas. It is not streetwalkers who contribute the most to the depravity of morals, it is society women. By reinstating the latter one modifies the former. This bond of fraternity will create disorder at first but by and by it will produce a perfect ensemble.

I offer an invincible method to elevate the souls of women: they must be included in all the practices of men; if men obstinately find this system impracticable then let them share their wealth with women, not dependent on their whim but through the wisdom of law. Prejudice will tumble, morals will improve and nature will reinstate her rights. Add to that the marriage of priests; the King's position will be strengthened and the French government will no longer be in a position to fail.

It was necessary and inevitable that I say a few words on the troubles allegedly caused by the decree in favour of men of colour in our islands. That is where nature cries out in horror; that is where reason and humanity have not yet touched hardened souls; that is where, above all, division and discord have agitated the inhabitants. It is not hard to divine the instigators of this incendiary ferment; some of them are in the very bosom of the National Assembly; they light the fire in Europe that must engulf America. The Colonists, brothers and fathers of the men they affect to reign over as despots, disregard the law of nature and pursue its source as far as the lightest tint of their blood. These inhuman Colonists say: 'Our blood flows in their veins but we will spill it all, if we must, to quench our cupidity or our blind ambition.' It is in these places so close to nature that fathers disown their sons; deaf to the cries of descent they stifle all its charms. What can we anticipate from resistance? To constrain it with violence is to make it terrible, to leave it in irons is to send every calamity to America. A divine hand seems to be spreading all around the prerogative of man, *liberty*; only the law has the right to suppress liberty, if it degenerates into licence, but it must be the same for everyone; it is the law that must constrain the National Assembly with its decree dictated with prudence and justice. May it act similarly for the state of France and become as attentive to the new abuses as it has been to the old that every day become more frightful! My opinion would still tend towards reconciling the executive power and the legislative power for it would seem to me that one is all and the other nothing. From this will come, unfortunately perhaps, the loss of the French Empire. I consider these two powers like man and woman who must be united, but equal in power and virtue, to live well together.<sup>6</sup>

So it is true that none can escape their fate; I experienced this today.

I had determined and decided that I would not allow myself even the smallest word of humour in this work but fate has decided otherwise; here are the facts:

---

5 [Original footnote.] Abraham had quite legitimate children by Agar, his wife's servant.

Clearly de Gouges is targeting those who used the Christian bible to argue against her ideas.

6 [Original footnote.] In M. de Merville's magic dinner Ninon asks who is the mistress of Louis XVI. She is told that it is the Nation, this mistress will corrupt the government if she acquires too much power.

The economy is not protected, least of all at this time of misery. I live in the countryside. I left Auteuil this morning at eight and wended my way to the road that goes from Paris to Versailles where one can often find those famous roadside cafés that gather passers by at little cost. No doubt an unlucky star was pursuing me that morning. I reached the gate and I could not even find the sad, haughty, hackney coach. I rested on the steps of that insolent edifice that secreted clerks.<sup>7</sup> Nine o'clock chimed and I continued on my way; I spotted a coach, took my place, and arrived at a quarter past nine, according to two different watches, at the Pont-Royal. I took a hackney coach and flew to my printer, rue Christine, for I could only go so early in the morning: when I am proofreading there is always something to do, if the pages are not too tight or too full. I stayed about twenty minutes: tired from walking, writing and printing I decided to go and have a bath in the Temple district where I was to dine. I arrived at a quarter to eleven by the clock in the baths; therefore I owed the coachman for an hour and a half but in order not to get into a fight with him I offered him 48 *sous*; as usual he loudly demanded more I stubbornly refused to give him more than his due for an equitable soul would rather be generous than duped.<sup>8</sup> I threatened him with the law; he said he cared nothing for it and insisted that I pay him for two hours. We arrived at a justice of the peace, whom I shall generously not name, although the authoritarian way he dealt with me merits a formal denunciation. No doubt he was unaware that the woman asking for justice was the authoress of so many charitable and equitable works. Paying no attention to my reasons he pitilessly condemned me to pay the coachman what he demanded. Knowing the law better than he did I said to him, 'Sir, I refuse and I would beg you to be aware that you are exceeding the prerogative of your position.' So this man, or to put it better this lunatic, got carried away and threatened me with La Force [prison] if I did not pay straightaway, or he would keep me in his office all day. I asked him to take me to the district tribunal, or the town hall, as I needed to lodge a complaint against his abuse of power. The grave magistrate, in a riding coat as dusty and disgusting as his conversation, tells me pleasantly: 'No doubt this affair must reach the National Assembly?' 'That may well be.' I said, half furious and half laughing at this modern-day Bride-Oison, 'So this is the type of man who is to judge an enlightened People!'<sup>9</sup> This sort of thing abounds. Good patriots, as well as bad ones, indiscriminately suffer similar misadventures. There is but one cry concerning the disorder of the sections and tribunals. Justice has no voice; the law is disregarded and, God knows how, the police are inured. One can never find the coachmen with whom one has left effects; they change their numbers at will and several people, including myself, have lost a considerable amount in these vehicles. Under the ancien régime, whatever its banditry, one could track one's losses by arranging a roll-call of the coachmen and inspecting their numbers; then at least one was secure.<sup>10</sup> What are the justices of the peace doing? What are the superintendents doing, those inspectors of the new regime? Nothing but silliness and monopolies. The National Assembly must direct all its attention to this party that embraces the social order.

---

7 I have used the term 'haughty' where de Gouges uses 'aristocrat' because in the 1790s the term was often used pejoratively and not literally. The 'insolent edifice' refers to the gate or barrier erected by the Farmers General to tax and/or control those entering the city.

8 In Tulard, Fayard and Fierro's *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française* (Paris:Robert Laffont, 1987) the fixed rate for hackney coaches at the time (during daylight hours) is given as 30 sous for the first hour and 25 for the next therefore Madame de Gouges owed the coachman 43 sous, her offer of 48 was indeed generous.

9 Bride-Oison was a buffoonish judge and comic character in Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*; a play (first performed in 1784) whose success was so spectacular and long-lasting that the reference would have been evident to all.

10 In January 1791 a law deregulated the public vehicle trade by removing pre-existing concessions thus giving rise to the difficulties encountered by de Gouges ; in April 1792 the municipality of Paris enforced the clear numbering of taxis inside and out and obliged them to enlist with local authorities.



P.S. This work was written in a few days; it was delayed at the press and at the moment that M. Talleyrand, whose name will always be dear to posterity, presented his work on the principles of national education this work was already being printed.<sup>11</sup> Happy am I to agree with the opinions of this orator! Meanwhile I could not refrain from stopping the press and exploding with joy when my heart responded to the news that the king had just accepted the Constitution and that the National Assembly, that I now love, even Abbé Maury, and la Fayette is a god, had with one voice unanimously proclaimed a general amnesty.<sup>12</sup> Divine providence let this public joy not be a misleading illusion. Send us back, in a body, all our fugitives so that I may, with a loving people, fly to line their route, and on this solemn day we will all give homage to your power.

---

11 Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754 – 1838) successfully navigated the political upheavals that occurred during his lifetime and managed to achieve high office under Louis XVI, during the revolution, under Napoleon 1, Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis-Philippe. A politician and diplomat whose career still polarizes opinion his support for national education is probably one of the rare moments that provoke little criticism.

12 The aside must be considered ironical for in January 1791 Jean Siffrein Maury (1746 – 1817) had, unsuccessfully, opposed a petition presented to the National Assembly in favour of giving dramatists rights over their own works; de Gouges was an ardent supporter of these rights. It is worth noting that women were not recognised as dramatists in this procedure. Maury was a colourful character from humble southern origins who fiercely defended all royal prerogatives to such degree that his life was often in danger; an ex-courtier and preacher he took to politics becoming a famed orator whose biting witticisms garnered him the hatred of his adversaries. He emigrated in 1791 shortly after the publication of *Les Droits de la femme*.