

L'ESPRIT FRANÇAIS,
OU
PROBLÈME à résoudre sur le labyrinthe des divers complots.

French Wit, or Resolving the Labyrinthine Problem of the Various Plots.¹

DEDICATED TO LOUIS XVI

SIRE,

THE EMPEROR is dead: on the very day that the French receive this news you sack M. de Narbonne; if his actions are as transparent as his conduct then he will be a loss to the Constitution.² Time will tell. The conduct of the Minister of the Navy is widely suspected yet, Sire, you declare to the Nation that he is worthy of your trust.³ Time will show. Time, Sire, will teach us a lot of things so long as we oppose, with imperturbable courage and moderation, all the unconstitutional parties, converging on the same point with opposing interests. But, Sire, perhaps it depends on you to conciliate, once more, the love of the French, it also depends on you to ensure their happiness, to recall to your Person your Brothers, to force the Emigrants to come back home, and to remove from them all means and all hopes of re-establishing the tyrannical rights of feudalism or conspiring against their Motherland; finally, Sire, it also depends on you to become the premier King of the World.

The erstwhile Nobles ceaselessly show you, Sire, that your power is destroyed, your dignity attacked and the Throne ruined; unfortunately for the dignity of a free People who should, in the eyes of the Universe, give its leader the imposing character of the King of France, every minute of the day a flood of written rubbish ruins this character thus giving credit to the enemies of the Motherland. Hey! What will be the fruits of their labours? A divided Citizenship, the destruction of all powers and the dissolution of the Empire; there, Sire, is where their pride and plots will lead you. With their faulty reasoning the fools represent your Ancestor, Louis XIV, as Jupiter brandishing lightening; they tell you that if he were on the Throne then the French would pick up the yoke of slavery; their ignorance shows their lack of understanding of Louis XIV's character; he was undoubtedly a great Conqueror, perhaps he could have spared more of his People's blood, but he loved all that elevates the soul and the genius of mankind. I am not speaking of his iniquitous edicts that dishonour his memory, those were the fruits of Sacerdotal cupidity.⁴

¹ This pamphlet opens with an epistle style preface boldly dedicated to Louis XVI. It was addressed to the Legislative Assembly, the Jacobins and the Feuillants on 22 March 1792; in it de Gouges speaks out against the pervasive, corrupting, influence of power and the disorder at the heart of the administration, the threat of civil war and the lack of common sense and reason used to persuade all to work for the good of France and its people rather than to seek personal reward. A good review in the *Thermomètre du jour* of 24 March 1792 praised Madame de Gouges for her sensibility and pertinent arguments. Pétion and Manuel responded to the pamphlet (the latter famously remarking that the author would have preferred a revolution strewn with flowers) which in turn drew a rejoinder from Madame de Gouges, *Le Bon sens français, ou l'apologie des vrais nobles, dédié aux Jacobins*.

I found, for this pamphlet, that 'wit' was a more apt translation of 'esprit' than 'spirit'.

² Leopold II (1747 – 1792) Marie-Antoinette's brother died on 1 March. Louis Marie Jacques, comte de Narbonne (1755 – 1813) commanded the National Guard and was Minister of War from 6 March 1791 to 10 March 1792. Appalled by the events of 10 August 1792 he fled to England where he joined his friend Madame de Staël. His resemblance to Louis XV led to rumours that he was the king's illegitimate son.

³ Bertrand de Moleville was Minister of the Navy from October 1791 to March 1792 when he was obliged to resign. The king put him in charge of the secret police; he fled to England after the events of the 10 August 1792 having failed to organise a successful escape for the royal family.

⁴ De Gouges is referring to the Edict of Versailles of 1685 (and by implication other draconian orders) by which Louis XIV quashed all legal rights acquired by Protestants in France granted by Henri IV's Edict of Nantes of 1598, it is often known as the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

At the time Louis XIV already had one foot in the grave: the brilliance of his reign was almost effaced, but at your age, Sire, at the height of his intellectual powers, he would have held on to the Sceptre that was in danger of escaping him; proud to hold the title of King of a free People, this new triumph would have been, for him, the highest achievement among his great conquests, and this Monarch would yet again have made the Universe tremble. He would neither have irritated his People in order to reduce them to desperation nor conquered them by reducing them to a terrible poverty; he would not have authorised the despoiling of the finances; he would have incited the courage of the French against the enemies of the Motherland; he would have known neither Brother, nor Brother-in-Law, nor Minister, nor Wife for only the glory of the Kingdom and the interests of the Motherland would have captured his attention and with his soul enflamed by a love of liberty he would have blessed, by authentic acts, the equality of all Citizens.

Sire, I love your virtues and it is to your integrity that I addressed the pressing advice not to accept the Constitution without modifications for I could see its difficult path but, as today you have accepted it, it will have to work as it is. Ah! Sire, if your Ministers, your supposed friends, your Allies, in a word all who surround you and all the Citizens who share in the public administration and the social order had a pure vision, the Nation would not find itself in such an appalling labyrinth. The few honest people are stuck between two chasms, on one side is despotism and on the other Republican anarchy: such is the cruel alternative, Sire, facing France; by saving her you would regain your Crown, by perturbing her you will lose it.

I will finish, Sire, by showing you that it is impossible for Ministers to do their duty until you swear to distance yourself from all those who assure you that a counter-revolution is necessary to restore order and peace; what honest man could now accept the post of Minister without fear of corrupting himself in this poisoned position, or at least of being judged corrupt by public opinion. There, Sire, is the recompense that can await those that serve you, the Scaffold.

FRENCH WIT, By MME. DE GOUGES.

THE moment, the actual moment, that must restore the Spirit of the French people is perhaps upon us; I will state, at the same time, what they were and what they must become: never has there been a more beautiful cause than the one that is about to be resolved. It is the People's cause.

'Nous tromper dans nos entreprises,
C'est à quoi nous sommes sujets;
Le matin je fais des projets,
Et le long du jour des sottises.'

Volt.⁵

SPIRIT or wit was everything in France, without wit one could do nothing; wisdom and probity had become chimeras and never had wit better characterised the French than when they claimed to have renewed themselves. They have yet to do so.

Modern Gauls on coming into the world bring with them all the grace and amiability of wit along with a seed of inconsequentiality and folly; take the French Monarchy in its cradle, follow its bizarre and superstitious History, everywhere you will see the marvellous effects of French wit, and everywhere you will see that its inconstancy and frivolity have altered the character of the Government. French wit, naturally enthusiastic, suddenly

⁵ 'To err in our undertakings, is what we are subject to; in the morning I make plans, and all day long I make mistakes.' is a quote from *Memnon, ou la sagesse humaine* (1749) by Voltaire, a philosophical tale of a man who wants to be perfectly wise; with irony and wit it suggests that reason and experience are better than theories.

transformed itself into a wise Legislator. It cast a swift eye over the ancient and modern Histories of all Peoples; it found in our greatest Authors the principles of a good-natured equality; it made a résumé of all while spoiling the principles of everything, but it created a Constitution which must be defended and maintained, were it faulty in all regards, now is not the moment to repair it.

French wit has cobbled together an idol...Liberty; in all other Nations it would be called licence or envy, or even slavery with the right to cut the throats of Citizens with impunity, depending on the credit of the latest opinion; one could also call this liberty the People's rattle with which French wit plays; the despotic French wit wants all or nothing, slave or sovereign.

Who made the Constitution? Is it French wit? Will it be stable? It must be more so than its Creators. Has it done any good? Yes, but it will harm the entire world if it is shackled and if the executive and legislative Powers do not walk in step together.

This Constitution is one of the great wonders of the world; brought into being by a French wit that from day to day finds itself at odds with its own creation. What does it really want? War? Its Constitution forbids it but surely its Creators have a right to reprisals; after all do they not claim to have a right to change this Constitution at will, depending on their caprice? And would they not find a way to say it was staying the same while changing it annually, or daily, in its form and principle? What was French wit expecting? To glide in the air, to create an uproar, to pursue fame while moving away from the core of its most precious interests?

The time has come when wisdom must take the place of this frivolous and excited spirit, it is time for the French to take note of what reason dictates.

The French Monarchy was born in the bosom of ignorance and barbarism. Does French wit want its career to end in the bosom of the Arts and Sciences, dragging the Motherland with it to its downfall? That is the path they are taking.

Were our Ancestors wiser than us to have maintained themselves for so many centuries and brought us to our present era? They were not more reasonable than us but they were less learned, and French wit was less damaging. In the time of Montaigne one could count the number of Orators, now the streets are paved with them. French wit swears it exists for the good of the Motherland yet everyone thinks only of their personal interests; vagabonds, cynics, hypocrites, etc....do these men have wit? They attain everything now and no consideration is given any more to whose hands manage the public administration; if the French must destroy themselves through extremes, there is one great truth, we have altered the form of the cavern of State.⁶ But starving brigands have yet again retaken it; France is guarded, and appears defended, but I fear that in an instant it will become a vast den of thieves. If Citizens do not unite discord and crime will fight over this superb Kingdom. Who are the true friends of the Motherland? The least strong. Who will save them? Providence perhaps? What has French wit done in a year? Did it see danger coming? That was the least of its concerns; it followed its usual course, it wrote songs, witty epigrams, great convoluted periphrases stripped of logic, metaphysical motions, antitheses that had no clear opposition, oceans of discourse that were as incomprehensible to the Listeners as they were to the Speakers; but everyone applauded, especially those overblown petitions that presented as many opinions as there were opposing parties; a brilliant elevated style was all that mattered. So much diversity in the particular interests of each individual: those are the sublime benefits of French wit for all the known peoples. Three cheers for French wit, three cheers for its harmony, three cheers for its equality, three cheers for its wise foresight!⁷

⁶ De Gouges may be making an allusion to Plato's Allegory of the Cave from his *Republic*.

⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* of 1794 held strikingly similar views on the detrimental effects of French wit when applied to politics and felt that the French were the least suitable nation in Europe to be in charge of a ground-breaking revolution.

In vain did I try and call wisdom to these happy climes, I was rewarded by the presumptuous French, for my pure civic duty and wise foresight, with the epithet of lunatic. Certainly those suffering from my illness, with letters patent from the Goddess who presides over everything in this new regime, she who rattles the bells with supernatural force, who yells, who screams against the real interests of the Motherland, despatch all their disciples to me. But I will not stop; I carry on.

What is the point of all the plots of the implacable Emigrants? Where will all these preparations for war lead us, how will we sustain a campaign, how can we not fear the effects of the slightest attack? The French will fight against the French, against their Brothers, their Friends. Who will be the winners? The French. Who will be the losers? The French. Blind fury! Awful victory! So many dear, precious victims will fall under the enemy sword.⁸ The earth will be covered by nothing but a *mattress* of men; in the Cities, Towns and Villages where war will not excite minds, famine will do its best to foment it. No credit, no confidence, paper, pathetic paper money that will have no value if our enemies were to win the slightest victory; no, they will not be victorious if the Citizens can be of one mind. A fraternal reconciliation must bring them together; those who perturb the bosom of society must be set aside, then every Frenchman will become a Hercules in order to defend his hearth.

How much wiser it would have been to find a means of creating a forceful expedient from the beginning! If only the Emigrants' provisions had been cut and all that could fund their odious projects had been intercepted. But French wit did not anticipate events in advance; on the one hand it established an inquisition against speech and leaving the Kingdom; on the other it attenuated it and retracted; did it sleepwalk through the wise precaution that established perfect liberty? Change is its element and I would not be surprised if, without a violent shock, it ended up by demanding the counter-revolution. It is mad about everything; it tires of everything. Before the Revolution I yearned for this particular regime: the disorder that multiplies, the poor choices made by the public Administration, the new abuses that are as dreadful as the old and the noticeable alteration in opinions, all show me that French wit was nothing but effervescence and that it will never be capable of liberty so long as that liberty does not unite with a public force to maintain law and order.

I would need a volume to expound on French wit: from sagacity it went to imprudence, from imprudence to stupidity, from stupidity to folly. In this vertiginous century, the worst evil is that hearts are gangrenous from vice and passion; the Revolution occurred in a perverse century.

Now is the time to recognise this truth so that public feeling can find a solution in a stoic steadfastness and constancy that will upset the plots of the destructive parties.

French wit has yet to change, it has but reached the uppermost level of its nature; its triumph might become contagious and break all the Sceptres of the World but it may also only strike at itself.

The Robespierres, the Pétions, the Brissots, the Abbé Fauchets, the Manuels, these Tribunes that are more confirmed in their opinions than the Representatives of the people who have sold themselves cheaply to the Court, and its plots, will not hesitate to shout 'she's a royalist'. In truth my maxims are probably more republican than theirs, but the real spirit of the French Government and the true interests of my Motherland demand a Monarchy. These interests, dear to my heart, will always be my guide; between a throne or a scaffold, free to chose a diadem or a sacrifice I would, as a French woman, refuse to mount the throne but would die, like a Roman matron, for my Motherland.

⁸ [Original footnote.] It is a good moment to remember this anecdote concerning Louis XV as he saw, at the battle of Laroselt, the Field covered with the dead: 'So many victims,' cried he, weeping tears of blood, 'for the stubbornness of two men!' So many men will die for the stubbornness of two senseless parties! (At the battle of Lawselt, Flanders, in July 1747 the French, personally commanded by Louis XV, beat the Allies commanded by the Duke of Cumberland.)

It is my soul that speaks at the moment and not my wit. By defending such a great cause I am defending my Nation; I plead the case of the French Monarchy.

To restore this Motherland and save this Monarchy we needed a regal King, a friend to his people and not a friend to the tyrants who command on his behalf.

The people needed to be virtuous to enjoy the fruits of the most august of revolutions; all the assemblies needed strength of character; finally, hearts without reproach were needed to bring everything together for the good of the Motherland. What were our Districts, our Sections, our *Départements*, our National Assemblies made of? Renewed Frenchmen? No, corrupt Frenchmen.

I will not say to my fellow Citizens, like those Demons of both parties: 'Return to your irons, vile slaves, they were made for you.' I would say to the French: 'Did you really have a profound knowledge of yourselves that you asked for perfect equality and total liberty? Should you not rather have been wary of the futility that nature bestowed upon you? Do you know when you ceased to be French? It was the moment of the insurrection, the moment when you made a few heads roll and then paraded them in triumph on the end of pikes and your amiable character, becoming suddenly bleak and ferocious, led you to commit all sorts of crimes.⁹ The law should have been allowed to speak with all its might then you would have imperceptibly regained your amiability. Since then songs, witticisms and satire have sustained you in the midst of your misery but what is the cruel choice facing the Nation and the King? What war will they undertake? What battle will they lose? What victory will they achieve? What blood will flow? That of the French.'

Unfortunate King! What will be your position if blood flows in your veins?¹⁰ A King without a throne, a King with no will, a King with no power, a King with no ability to do anything, not even good, a King without people! If the two armies were ever to fight? Oh cruel despotism! Your last breath will cost the Nation dear. Oh liberty! Oh sweet equality that I was the first to bless, must we rue the day you were introduced into France? Must we pine for our irons or will you instigate a new form of slavery? It is said that French wit travels with you both all over the land, together you prepare the lightening that will one day enflame the Universe; France will be at the heart of the destruction of mankind. This equality, this liberty, idols of the French wit, will bring butchery to the whole world! Appalling deities! Your bait is sweet but your consequences are cruel.

French wit has totally altered the way of things but it can still restore the consciences and preferences of men. It could achieve this perfection if it would only use all its resources.

Here I am, yet again, like French wit, perched on a tree, jumping from branch to branch, sometimes high, sometimes low; surveying one thing then another on the surface of the earth; like it I glide according to the breeze and will be lost in the vastness. I can no longer see either in front of me or behind and maybe not even under my nose. I boast, I discredit with no motive or reason; I want to take on everything and I do nothing yet the wisest are no more informed about the bizarre existence of men.

French wit will undoubtedly make a connection between the new brigands and the Ministers of today. I will state that this is not my intention.

I have other comments to make on the character of the Ministers of the new regime. On their character: do they have one? Cringing servants of the executive Power, timid slaves of the legislative Power, playthings of the People, at the mercy of opinion; this is what characterises today these ambulatory machines that hold the reins of State. Truly these spineless nobodies are not remotely capable of improving the Government; should we change them to pick up even worse ones? What should we do? Make men to suit the position and not the positions for the men.

⁹ Interestingly this reference to 'insurrection' predates the murderous events of the 10 August and September by five months.

¹⁰ De Gouges addresses the king using the informal 'tu'.

Those vile creatures that are part of the ministerial gang will object that it is the will of God. Oh well, then I make myself God; both my originality and the extravagant French wit missed this remedy. Oh my poor sex, oh women, you who have acquired none of your natural rights in this Revolution, and who, in this moment of popular distribution, have not dared to even equal men in the breadth of your spirit or imagination, imitate me, make yourselves useful, and you will be able to force the presumptuous usurpers to restore to you the rights they have taken from you.

So many Midas's will rise up against this claim! But now is not the time to cut off their ears or to give full rein to the madness of French wit; it is time for it to rest; the spirit of public good must take precedence over sarcasm and jest. Nonetheless it would be too dangerous to banish forever this amiable urbanity, that element of the French wit that alone, in my opinion, can return us to the interests of society. If most people do not agree with me at least the wisest and sanest are with me therefore I will return to my text on reason and Ministers.

What are the prospects or the pensions of today's Ministers? The lantern and the pike; can these appalling considerations make them better men?¹¹ I doubt it: I will prove, concretely, that given how little latitude Ministers are given it is impossible for them to have the power and virtue of Statesmen.

All is lost in extremes thanks to French wit: previously it made gods of Ministers; now it makes brutes of Ministers; they are spoken to as one speaks to horses; most of them are restive and, as a result of harsh treatment, they have hard mouths and refuse the spur; the riding school has become the Legislative Body and lacks any horsemen good enough to train coursers for the State.

After my project of 1788 on the accountability of Ministers they were advised: you are responsible for any nonsense committed by your *département* and if you behave irreproachably, in truth, you will gain nothing, you may even end up in Orleans.¹² This is not the usage I had proposed: it is atrocious, inhuman, unjust and indubitably leads to duplicity and plunder.

Previously Ministers were drawn from the bosom of wealth, today they are torn from the bosom of penury; suddenly they are made to taste the delights of indolence; they are told, here is 100,000 *Fr.* to maintain your board and household; they pass from their frugal life into a sumptuous life. They are no longer served a broth with no trimmings; the meals become continuous feasts and the civil list supports this depraved luxury, allowing a glimpse of a dreadful future, one that returns them to a fearsome primitive state; from afar it is possible to see the horror of the approaching garret; choices must be made, ambition and wealth are there to ensnare the Minister. *Eh! Where is the man who could resist the bait?*¹³ Here is a solution that I believe infallible.

The nation must increase the remuneration of Ministers from twenty to thirty thousand *livres*, it must retain a hundred thousand *livres* annually, the interest from which will support the increase for as many years as the Minister stays in place, a yearly gratuity for each year's work; if the penalty is terrible then the recompense must be all the greater. Oblige the Ministers to only spend thirty thousand *livres* per annum and only a modest number of friends, too small to corrupt their ways, will gather at their tables; oblige them to account for themselves to all Citizens, always giving proof of their actions and their scrupulousness, the Government reimburses them enough for this correspondence. Add this discipline to their responsibilities and the continual complaints, which lower the esteem in which Ministers should be held by public opinion, will be brushed aside. Clarify this opinion and you will at the same time clarify the Minister's position; create parity between his recompense and his duties, encourage virtuousness but if you do not link that virtue to

11 Lanterns (street lights) were used to summarily hang people; pikestaffs were used to parade the decapitated heads of those killed by mob rule.

12 The prison at Orleans.

13 [Original footnote.] I am far from believing that anyone has succumbed, I merely imagine what is possible.

his personal interest he will always be susceptible to corruption when in office; in anticipation of this pension he will obviously give preference to a National allowance and public esteem. Though he may lack experience he is nonetheless entitled to recognition for the services rendered to the State as an honest man; it is the surest way to create men suitable for office. Obligated to live within his means, the Minister will have the time to reflect on the true interests of the Motherland and, having less opportunities to go astray, he will not give in to all his passions but will have the time to work seriously for the good of the State. I will rest, he will say, when my tasks are done. When all the delights of good fortune and the advantages of true merit are to be found in a Minister's recompense the disgraced office will no longer be shunned and the man in position will be sought out, no longer viewed as an object of pity.

Let the National Assembly pronounce a decree that stipulates clearly that Ministers rule in favour of Citizens and that the least violation of this decree be seen as an authentic challenge to their integrity; they must no longer be able to give, even in situations of equal merit, preferential positions or employment to their favourites, or their mistresses, thereby prejudicing those who sacrificed themselves in the sole interest of the Motherland.

It pains me to use myself as an example but the challenge of a Minister, I will not name him out of pure pity, whose head has been turned by beautiful aristocratic ladies, obliges me to make his challenge known.

No one denies that I was the first to publicly raise my voice against despotism; that in early 1788 I offered my ideas on the patriotic Purse and a voluntary tax. Everyone knows that this project raised immense sums for the State. In 1789, at the start of the great winter, I published my patriotic, humane, observations; all the News-sheets of the day attest to the good these Writings brought about by stirring people in favour of the dispossessed and the workers of the Realm; accordingly all have been saved and workshops have been opened as I had suggested.

Humanity, or fear of the Ministers of the *ancien régime*, made everyone thank me and offer me encouragement; I was quite indifferent to these offers, the list of pensions proves this well enough; everyone was aware that I alone was responsible for my place on this list as will become clearer by and by.

Any salary that does not elevate the soul is unworthy of my ambition; the Revolution took place, my writings multiplied, and as they followed the good cause with a rapid eye, they could not fail to strengthen public opinion. My son, an Engineer in his *Département* from the time his mother devoted herself to the Motherland, dispersing her fortune in its favour, was defending his country in Lorraine in a noteworthy fashion, chasing Brigands, and risking his life on a daily basis. The letter that I had printed in July 1789, on the Cromwellian plot, drew upon me the hatred of the generous Philippe even though I was not attacking him; I wanted to recall to him of the principles of justice and humanity that he had first appeared to protect and support: if only he had been then as he should, and ought, to be now, *more than a Sovereign*, and shown himself both the supporter of the People and a friend to the King.¹⁴ But, rather than limiting himself to the august advice of a woman, he punishes my pure civic duty and my integrity through my son.

M. de la Fayette was told of these facts; he promised, in fairness, to give my son, who only asked to work in the defence of a good cause, a position. Eighteen months passed by in pointless proceedings; Ministers, aware of my rights, made promises and made me wait. But I had a right to the Constitutional recompense; am I not allowed to state that women, who only speak on behalf of the Motherland's Constitution, and not in the name of the Constitution of the civil list, are awarded nothing? I relied on the fairness of my demand; two years elapsed with no sign of my gaining justice. Thousands and thousands of creatures with no authorisation were awarded positions yet my son spent a further week in inactivity. My son owes his employment to M. de Narbonne, whom I do not know; I owe

¹⁴ Philippe Égalité formerly known as the duc d'Orléans.

him my gratitude and I manifest it loudly given that he is disgraced; perhaps he served the Motherland better than is believed; I will not be his guarantor for he has been just and time will speak on his behalf better than my appreciation or his detractors.

To return to the Minister and his challenge; in truth this Minister deserves me to be as good as my word; he has the nerve to say to me, after the thousands of platitudes that are spoken to women: '*Madame, as a Minister I owe you nothing.*' 'Monsieur,' I replied, 'you are wrong; as a private man I know little of you or what you could offer me, in the way you understand such things, but as a public man, you owe me all the recognition of a patriotic Minister. Do you want me to make this truth known to the public?' I asked him. 'Yes,' he said. I do not *know* if, by this challenge, he wanted to prove to me his impartiality, persuaded that I would not fail to print this singular *excess of refinement*. But he deserves a lesson, therefore I ask the Public, Journalists, men of Letters, and particularly representatives of the Nation, should not Ministers offer their protection, in equal measure, to all those who have shown support for the Motherland, rather than to those who have done nothing for her. It is not for myself that I ask for this law, since my son is now employed, but for all those Citizens who have defended her.

I therefore find fault with this Minister, not in order to denounce him, for I do not believe him to be a dishonest man, but to allow him to regain the consideration and esteem necessary to a man in position, who has perhaps gone astray and lost from sight the true constitutional principles; those principles that brought us closer together and made a distinction between the merit of female Citizens and those women whose only merits were illusory titles and very real favours.

Women are strange creatures, their only credit in Society is derived from the art of intrigue and the seduction of men: however wild men's characters or however great their supposed superiority, they are always tamed by these creatures, none can escape when they strike; all women, in general, possess the art of seduction but men, due to a bizarre weakness, perceive the most perfidious ones as the most exciting. Ministers are not exempt from weakness and seduction; if it were possible for the Ministers of the new regime, and those of the ancient, to make a sincere avowal all would agree that it is women who corrupt men in power.

I have facts on my side that show that Ministers of the Revolution only lost sight of their duty, maybe unintentionally, through the insinuations of erstwhile Countesses and Marchionesses; it has to be said that, when it suits them, they can be very appealing; the erstwhile Nobility has, in truth, used every form of machination to corrupt Ministers. One ex-Marquis, the father of two pretty daughters, would say: 'I will, myself, place them in the beds of Ministers in order to accelerate the progress of the counter-revolution.' These are the noble procedures by which the Nobility distinguishes itself. But it is time to be brave and cut to the quick in order to uproot vice. For a crime of lese-Nation, lese-Majesty, theft or assassination, accomplices of either sex are punished; why not punish women who are guilty of nocturnally meddling in affairs of State and cabinet secrets? When these women are arraigned and convicted of fraudulently acquiring the secrets of men in power and of having *unconstitutionally* taken advantage of their weaknesses, why, I ask, should they not be implicated alongside colluding Ministers?

My words escape me, the truth flows from its source; so many erstwhile Countesses and Marchionesses will be startled by my insinuation regarding the liability of Ministers. In truth it is pointless to seek for the source of the illness or the cure; perhaps only a woman could designate the origin of the disease and apply the remedy. I serve my sex by persecuting it; I honour it by stripping it of its shameful underhand schemes and by letting fall the blindfold that ambition, no doubt, places over the eyes of women; I will make them more attractive to men and love will embellish them no less. These means that will clarify the position of Ministers are equally suitable to restore propriety. I do not presume to make Ministers into Saints or to save them from that most praiseworthy sensibility, for an

inclination worthy of an estimable man lifts the soul and refines courage, but Society is still so far from understanding these inclinations that are the joy of life.

Finally, I only have time to offer a glimpse of my good ideas, may people profit from them! And may the National Assembly say of me, like Mirabeau: 'For these great discoveries we are indebted to an ignorant woman.'

I will designate none; those led astray by a stupid pride, those who have totally lost the traditions of manners and true merit will no doubt be angry with me but the suggestions I offer regarding the improvement of the Ministerial spirit will do them less harm than good.

However good my opinions I expect the bitterest criticism; finding themselves attacked without cease by the Author of *French Wit*, the Triumvirate of the factious and the stubbornness of the opposing parties will waste their venom in vain...

I await them like Bayard, without fear or reproach.¹⁵ Few men can say as I can: I have often seen fame and fortune at my feet; I despised them and I have never felt otherwise. It is said that men change, I maintain otherwise; all those who fluctuate are without character and virtue: knowing themselves to be feeble and corrupt they have sought to deceive the vulgus and, with artistry, to hide their vices under a specious mask; they prepared their subtle poison long ago, flattering, creeping and caressing, according to circumstances, manners, prejudices and opinion. Ah! If one could delve into consciences how many ill-acquired reputations would one see, how many of the virtuous persecuted? Feeble humans! Blind popular approval, whatever your frenzy and your favours no one can escape their nature; to judge a man, wait until he is in his grave. This judgement, though somewhat inhuman, is based on divine grounds that you cannot comprehend. To pronounce with certainty on a man you have to have followed him throughout the course of his life; in his old age you can see the development of the dispositions he had in his childhood; in order to afford yourselves a perfect understanding of his character, oh French, learn from the observations of a woman, and do not forget them. Alongside your new principles of national education create an honest Journal in which your public Tutors must give an account of the moral and physical dispositions of all their Students so that their inclinations can be developed; thanks to this Journal you will teach your descendants to form true men for I defy anyone to ever encourage them to virtue if there is no general understanding of their characters or basic inclinations.

I have made suggestions for the common good, I have pursued vice and I have given food for thought on the most important questions and on the future happiness of mankind.

But what, at this point in time, are the dreadful alternatives available to the true interests of the Motherland! This Motherland is, today, caught between two awful chasms filled with ordnance that will overwhelm it: despotism burns to conquer it through blood; anarchic Republicanism wants to set it ablaze rather than show itself worthy of a free People. Fire rages through the entire Kingdom; it is not easy to find the creators of these terrible plots and the leaders of the rabble-rousers. Is it the Monarchists? The Republicans? Or the Cromwellians? Or, though their interests are divided, are they marching in concert together? This is the painful perspective offered by the dreadful picture of France; this is the consequence of French wit.

May these reflections produce a fraternal frenzy and rally the hearts of honest people to the Motherland; may those who excite disorder, those who expound anarchy through patriotism and, finally, those despotic creatures who cover themselves in the cloak of constitutional monarchy be found out and perish on the scaffold, according to the Law, like rebels and disturbers of the peace and may the patriotic Journalists recognise, for the

¹⁵ Pierre Terrail de Bayard was an early sixteenth century 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 for having never turned his back on the enemy he was not about to do so at the end.

last time, that the interests of the public could depend on their wisdom and pure civic duty and abjure all sarcasm, all celebrity and all dubious calumny that can excite the populace by dissimulating the truth. Loyal sentinels of Citizens' interests and social repose, create a coalition amongst yourselves that will express your aversion to Authors who distance themselves from the conditions and measures that you will espouse in order to enlighten the people in future; do not to incite them before you have established the factual truth. Distance yourselves from any sympathy for those filthy critics who teach the people to not only despise leaders, but also the Law.

Brigands pillage France and, under the mantle of civic duty, assassinate the organs of the Law; thus are the people of France led astray. What a striking example the Mayor of Estampes offers to Journalists who are the friends of liberty!¹⁶

Will men ever have the wisdom or the humanity to reach up as high as the Eternal intended? All His decrees are in nature and all are disfigured by the hands of men: man is born good in nature, made bad by society, becomes a calumniating liar by habit, ferocious by example, learned by infatuation, extravagant by instinct; there is the life of men. Barely have they stepped forward on the earth than this moveable and fragile earth opens up under their feet. The fools! They live for only a day, an hour, a minute compared to the centuries, yet this brief, rapid, life, filled with storms, infirmity, turpitude and human pain, has yet to inspire them to create a wise and humane form of government.

If only I could, in this short work of ethics, verbose and often diffuse, have included all my good intentions, all my useful Methods! It is not in my power to contain my zeal and reduce it to a short and precise piece, it is not in my power to entice the Reader with a brilliant and refined style; my cachet is to be more natural than eloquent; purists will seal it with their criticism, I care not as long as I am of interest to the friends of the Motherland, my aims will be met and my hopes fulfilled.

The denunciations and the arrest of M. de Lessart will be proof enough and will shed a light on the murky shadows of the Court machinations; is this Minister a criminal for having obeyed! Everything conspires against him. Will he, like Favras, be a victim of the crimes of his leaders?¹⁷ Is it not rather public opinion condemning him, than the Law, and will his Judges say, he is a prey that the people await with avidity? No, no, the people no longer want an illegal form of justice: they themselves demand, on behalf of the accused, impartiality and a pure Law. If the Law strikes the condemned then the people will bless the example and lament the sacrifice; but if the condemned were granted a pardon because he unveiled hidden mysteries, even if he implicated himself, the Law, in such circumstances, would surely speak in his favour for would the Motherland not owe him her salvation? If Kings in the past had the right to save the condemned from the scaffold, how can the Nation not have the grace to pardon the condemned who will have served her at the very moment of being sent to his death?¹⁸

16 Simoneau, Mayor of Estampes, was killed on 3 March 1792 in confusing circumstances after an uprising in the town caused by grievances against the rising cost of staple goods. His murder was a cause célèbre that divided opinion. He was posthumously honoured as an upholder of civil law by the Legislative Assembly, a festival in his honour, the Fête de la Loi, was held on 3 June 1792: Olympe de Gouges organised a female procession within the cortege to highlight the importance of women in public life, some commentators were in favour, others (generally the most revolutionary) were violently against women participating in such activities.

17 Claude Antoine de Valdec de Lessart (1742 – 1792), a friend of Necker's, was, in the space of two years, minister of Finance, Interior, Navy and Foreign affairs. He was generally thought incompetent, was unpopular and seen as weak for opposing Brissot's plans to go to war. On 10 March 1792 he was condemned and sent to Orleans prison; he was massacred on 9 September (along with 43 others) by a mob in Versailles while being transferred back to Paris. Thomas de Mahy, marquis de Favras (1744 – 1790) was implicated in a plot in 1789 to save the royal family. Arrested and tried, with little evidence, he was the first noble to be executed by hanging, no distinction being made between him and a commoner. He became something of a Royalist hero for going to his death without implicating the king's brother, the comte de Provence, who probably instigated the plot.

18 [Original footnote.] By defending the innocent, or guilty, Minister I am taking revenge for his injustice towards my patriotic projects which specifically provoked a plot at my expense. In general I can remonstrate

Let us not forget these lines spoken by Emilie to Auguste:

'If I have seduced Cinna, I will seduce many others.'¹⁹

It is vital to know the source of treason; only the King is inviolable, all others are subject to the Law. Maybe the Court did not have culpable designs; maybe they were a sham, a political ruse used in the hope of uniting spirits through the powers of mediation and moderation. In a word, it is time to give up pronouncing on appearances. We are under a stormy sky; clouds have formed everywhere; only wisdom can disperse them; the inhabitants of this globe have to fear the storm that brigands, encouraged by Foreigners, are pushing towards France in this time of calamity. And would it not be of the greatest benefit if the *Départements* and Municipalities were to work towards banishing these brigands from Society? Let all vagabonds, foreigners in France, be gathered up and sent to the frontiers of their own countries! I proposed this in 1788, in *The Primitive Happiness of Man*. We fill up our prisons with Foreigners; they should go to their own homes and there vomit the venom with which they sought to poison us. Finally, the public force being on the defensive, now is the time for it to destroy this army of villains, divided in France, who encourage and wait for anarchy among Citizens in order to strike them and steal their property before reuniting. Paris, especially, is besieged by a dreadful number of these execrable villains; blinded by ambition the different parties use such agents without understanding that they themselves might be disastrously affected by the results.

PROBLEM TO RESOLVE,
CONCERNING THREE POINTS.

WILL WE be Slaves, Republicans or Constitutional Monarchists?

We must not blind ourselves to the truth, these three Parties exist. Which is the most reasonable, the strongest, people will ask? I will reply, it is the most constitutional, but this truth must be tested. By a show of public strength that, in these perilous times, is found in the hearts of all the French? Let private hatred no longer prevail over the interests of the Motherland, let passions be stifled: under a purer and more serene sun, France will lift her brow to the eyes of a Universe attentive to her fall.

against all of them [Ministers]; I found them vain and ridiculous, I spoke or wrote the truth to them and did not denounce them publicly; my son has a position at the moment, I am not one of these malcontents who, not getting what they want, however justifiably, then pursue Ministers as though they were responsible for such ridiculous pretentiousness; if they [petitioners] get all they want from them, they either flatter them or keep quiet on their behalf. I will always serve my country and will never combine my personal interests with those of the Motherland. I have to make one exception [to unpalatable Ministers]: if M. Cahier de Gerville, who is only known to me through his irreproachable actions, leaves the Ministry then the State will lose a brave man who may be hard to replace; with regard to M. Duport, I think his mistakes were all involuntary, sometimes the most honest man can make mistakes and have lessons to learn; may he learn from these and leave the Ministry, as he entered it, esteemed by all. (Bon-Claude Cahier de Gerville, 1751 – 1796, trained as a lawyer, replaced Lessart as Minister of the Interior in November 1791 but resigned in March 1792. Adrien Duport, 1759 – 1798, was an influential lawyer and freemason and a leading light of the revolution; together with Barnave and Lameth he formed the 'triumvirate' that sought to direct the constitutional changes. A founder of the Jacobin Club he broke away from them when their policies became too extreme; a believer in the rule of law he sought to reform the justice system and believed in a system of trial by jury. In March 1792, when this pamphlet was written, Duport's influence was waning; he feared the war that Brissot and La Fayette desired and had suggested that the latter should head a military coup to pre-empt the horrors he saw arising in the future if republicanism took hold. He fled after the events of August 1792 and died of tuberculosis exiled in Switzerland.)

¹⁹ Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Cinna ou la clémence d'Auguste* was written in 1639. In Act 5, scene ii, Emilie admits that she attempted to persuade Cinna to assassinate Augustus; all the parties to the treason try to implicate themselves in order to save the lives of others, moved by this generosity Augustus forgives all the perpetrators.