

LE  
BONHEUR PRIMITIF  
DE L'HOMME,  
OU  
LES RÊVERIES PATRIOTIQUES.

The Primitive Happiness of Mankind, or Patriotic Reveries.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps my reveries have led me astray: indeed I needed to distance myself from my aim in order to encompass this title. I will lay out my reflexions according to my simple lights; and nature, my mentor, will guide me in my enterprise. My project is perilous, this enterprise is bold; but were I obliged, myself, to recognise my errors and my impotence, yet I would speak....I will examine, without discrimination, all that characterises the stupidity of mankind since its loss of happiness. I will observe it in all its pleasures, ambition, torments, hypocrisy, villainy and hopes.

This subject needs the art and genius of Rousseau who comprehensively portrays educated man and natural man. Meanwhile his opinions nonetheless excited criticism; and when altars should have been erected in his memory, several religious productions sought to tarnish it: but it is engraved, in ineradicable characters, in the temple of Glory. Did Voltaire, along with many others, wish to ruin the world? No, surely not; they had their principles; they were free to make them known: but shame on those who presume to condemn an other's opinion, and who have the prideful vanity to believe that only theirs is good, and that it must be adopted.<sup>2</sup>

If mankind is not free to think, then reasoning must be taken from him. We all think we observe the same truth, though we observe things quite differently. It is thus with Religions. So many diverse cults! But the true God, as one should envisage him, is, it seems to me, a generous and benevolent God; he allows all Nations to prosper, however they wish to adore him. Whatever strangeness men may apply to the prayers they address

1 Published in 1789 this work is a creation myth that compares an original utopian world, its decline, and de Gouges's own times. The egalitarian principles of the first state might return if the faults of the second could be addressed rather than magnified. Man seen working in harmony with the natural world and his kith and kin provides the template for a good life. The essay contains some of her most impassioned arguments against the misuse of power and wealth. De Gouges's critical view of religious organisations is clearly articulated; her preference for a form of nature worship over a supposed revealed truth is clear. In this six chapter long essay she offers varying solutions to contemporary ills without fearing the contradictions that she feels are inherent to such discourse. Being a 'reverie' the author can allow herself to digress while she advances her arguments. As Carol Sherman writes in *Olympe de Gouges, Witness to Revolution* ([www.gopublished.com](http://www.gopublished.com)) 'Her paradoxes are not contradictions. They are principles that admit of exceptions.' Olympe de Gouges anticipates criticism, in part due to her sex, but fiercely claims her right to offer her own views which, thanks to her limited erudition, might be more perspicacious than those of Rousseau himself. In reflecting on man's first community, de Gouges offers suggestions for improving the lot of man in 1789 - which is far from ideal - and hopes that an ordered constitutional monarchy can make France a better nation. Later on, as the situation in France changed, she was to abandon these royalist ideas in favour of a republic if it were democratically chosen by a majority of citizens.

2 This comment is surely influenced by the treatment meted out to de Gouges's supposed father Jean-Jacques Le Franc, marquis de Pompignan, by Voltaire following the former's acceptance speech at the Académie française on 10 March 1760. It sparked a famous spat between the two men as de Pompignan's conceited and pompous acceptance speech brought him into direct conflict with the Philosophes, some of whom had voted him in. He asserted that true men of letters should allow Christianity to guide them in order to counter the vanity and falsehoods of men claiming to be the philosophers of the modern world. Voltaire counter-attacked with his customary wit and vitriol. De Pompignan was so successfully ridiculed by the exchanges that he no longer dared appear at the Académie and subsequently retired to his country estate to write devout poetry and translate religious texts. De Gouges could have made a name for herself, and perhaps made useful literary connections, if she had accepted an offer to use Voltaire to expose her paternity, during her natural father's lifetime. Nothing could persuade her that reopening old wounds was a reasonable way to behave towards any man, father or not.

to him, those prayers will all reach him nonetheless. The only supreme Being, he cannot share them with anyone. Meanwhile, has Religion not created countless ills? How many more disputes will it yet encourage! Is man generous enough to be just? Yet, in order to find him so, one would have to return him to primitive times. Despite all the reasoning that has been expended on this subject, I glimpse no concrete point, no well founded notion, that proves to me that man was without genius, without justice and without humanity in his earliest origins.

The most ancient Authors depicted the manners of the first men differently. Modern ones have denatured them equally, by wishing to place them close to Nature. So many differing opinions! So many systems have appeared, opposed one to the other! Based on these observations one could doubt the laws and manners of these early men, since the most enlightened have not been able to agree on the subject. I, ignorant as I am, wish to attempt to go astray as others have. And who knows whether or not I will come across the truth? So, who will be so bold as to say that I have deluded myself? If such a one exists, which I cannot guarantee, I state in advance that he is quite mad and thoughtless. We will expound on the subject and confront our follies. I admire man in his vast designs, but when I examine his errors and his idiocy, I feel sorry for him. Can the most educated modern man think himself a greater, more marvellous, man than the one who grew from the hands of Nature? Ah! no doubt he has degenerated; and if God himself moulded man and woman, those two models must have been perfect. If we are descended directly from those two mortals, then men did not live as brutes: they did not, at first, construct palaces, but huts as agreeable, and no doubt healthier, than those forms of sumptuous prisons that the arts and luxury have created.

It is to be believed that early man carried within him spirit, genius, sciences, talent, vice and virtue; unless God, before creating man, cast all of this on the earth and, as he animated him, said: seek, and you shall find what you need.

Those, I presume, are the different systems of the Philosophers. If one believes Jean-Jacques in his Discourse on the origin and basis of inequality among men, one can see that, according to this famous Writer, man has suffered for centuries to reach his present degree; sometimes he raises him up in his natural state, and sometimes he debases him.<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques was too enlightened, his genius carried him too far, and that may be what prevented him from grasping the fundamental character of mankind in primitive times; but I, who feel this early ignorance so deeply, and who is both of this enlightened century and out of place in it, my opinions may be more accurate than his. So much enlightenment and knowledge have not produced the benefits that they have cost. Also, I will present man coming from the hands of Nature, lift him to the degree he has reached, and allow him to glimpse the state to which he could fall.

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## FIRST CHAPTER.

### *On the happiness of man.*

I will presume that men numbered a hundred or a thousand; I prefer to consider them in their first generation, to observe the first man handing down laws to his children and his great-grand-sons. He seems to appear to me on his death bed exhorting his entire family.

<sup>3</sup> De Gouges is referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* published in 1754.

Did these men live in a forest, in the forks of trees, or in caves? I envisage that at this time they had chosen a hillside, an agreeable view, and that their habitations were shaded from the sun and protected from intemperate winds; that these men had already discovered all that was necessary to their needs, in clothing as much as food. So, which most agreeable law had established itself among these men? No doubt it was that of humanity, at least that is what I choose to believe. This law was suggested by the most senior and this is how I imagine it was pronounced, or how I have dreamed it.

If all the World were to ask me, at my last, for advice that could contribute to recover the happiness of man (which is no longer practicable after it has been eroded by ambition for so many centuries), I would send all the World back to the first man instructing his children at the end of his days on equality and humanity. "I received from Heaven intelligence, feeling and speech. These advantages, superior to the instinct of brutes, made me all powerful, and fearsome to all the animals on earth. I felt and recognised that I had to bring up my children with the same dispositions that God had given me. I saw the brutes running about in all directions, never having a fixed abode, owing their food and shelter to luck alone. My initial care was to cover my body with leaves; my first food was fruit; but as I understood the value of fire, animals became my sustenance; and as I became more enlightened I recognised that the skin of bears or lions, or of other animals, was a better covering to keep me warm than leaves that wilted on my body after a few hours. To rest, sheltered from the sun, I would go into a forest; but night was too cool; the evening and morning dew soon drove me from it. The tree canopy appeared to be better suited to offer me a more wholesome shelter, if I moved it elsewhere. I placed my first shack on dry flat land; I covered it with leafy branches, and I sought the driest leaves for my bed. My Companion alerted me to the little birds who had formed a nest with materials more solid than those I had used for my first cover. I took this nest and examined how it was made and I saw, how I do not know, that if the supreme Being had given me reason and intellectual faculties then, in exchange, he had given animals an instinct that had gone beyond the superior lights that he had accorded me. I found in this nest three little birds that had just hatched out; they were covered in a sort of down that made their habitation more confined. The body of this house was made of earth, of straw, of very solid material. Straight away I built a hut like this nest: I covered it in thatch; and the feathers of the birds I killed became our bedding. We embellished our homes in accordance with the development of our understanding; but, my children, I want you to stay at the level you have reached. Your families will grow; be wary of multiplying your needs. Happiness is innate in man; I have preserved it for you until now: fear the loss of it." They all threw themselves at his feet to ask him how to maintain the order and friendship that reigned among them, and to indicate what punishment should befall the one who would wish to stray. "He will find it" he told them "in his own misery. Cherishing you as you love me, seeing you united as you are, I cannot foresee what powerful misfortune could divide you. But you ask me to predict my fears for you, without divining the cause. I will establish a law; may it forever preserve you in the contentment in which I leave you, and not become the source of your troubles. Woe betide he who infringes it, for no doubt he will not be the last."

Seemingly the wise Elder sensed that man was disposed to disobedience and revolt; but his children's joyful cries made him realise that mankind wished to be dependent, so he pronounced: "You number one hundred: in less than a century you will number a thousand. The earth is large enough to supply your needs but you must tend Nature with care. You must till the soil; and as you make discoveries, you will emulate each other. Let your possessions be held communally, your portions equal, your clothes and your dwellings the same, your manners simple and gentle; the eve of the harvest will be a feast day. Strong, robust, humanity will always succour suffering humanity; children will serve fathers, younger brothers their older siblings, except in times of sickness. If the son is sick,

the healthy father becomes the son, and must give him all the help that a father can offer his children; the older brother becomes the younger, and he who has no father or brother, becomes the adopted son of his nearest neighbour; he will have the same prerogatives as the other children. All men, indiscriminately, must work for the common good, without refusal, under any pretext whatsoever, other than infirmity or sickness. Women breastfeeding their children will be exempt from public works; young girls will go to the fields, minding the livestock. It seems to me that sheep's wool has a property that could one day be very useful; but it is not for me to comment on the experiences that you are about to discover. I sense that God is taking back the life he gave me, and that, through my death, you will be convinced that man is born and then dies; but never lose from sight that law that I have established among you. Let he who wishes to preempt the rights of his brother, his neighbour, his friend be chased from the heart of his family and society, as a rebel: he will go and live all alone in the desert, to wait until the wrath of heaven ends his days. Never soil your hands with the blood of your own kind: God alone has the right to dispose of a man's life, since God alone gave it to him. You cannot cut short your brothers' days without exposing yourselves to his eternal wrath, without offending, at one and the same time, the supreme Divinity and his celestial power....Remove from the wicked the means to exercise his wickedness, but do not remove from him what does not belong to you. Leave that to the supreme Being who alone has the right; it is he who inspires and revives me in my last moments. Follow him in all of nature; lift your eyes toward heaven; and never forget that he ceaselessly watches your actions and reads into your souls." The Elder asked his children, as a final favour, that he be placed in the doorway, so that he could contemplate the sun once more. "Oh, my God" he cried as he admired the star, 'may I, before my final hour, offer up this prayer for my children. May your divine fire cease to warm the earth, may it dull its clarity, if any of my offspring deviate from the natural law that I have suggested to them, inspired by you." After these words he embraced each of his children and breathed his last, his eyes fixed on the sun.

This inanimate body filled the family with dread, for the first time. They tried in vain to warm him, they kept vigil over his bed, but they soon realised that nothing could save a dead man, and that the infection that emanated from him obliged them to move away from his side. They imagined ways of hiding him from view: they found no solution other than to abandon their homes without moving too far away from the land that they had already cultivated. They built new huts a little removed from the old ones, and blocked all the paths that might draw them back to that side of the valley with rocks and thickets. Meanwhile their glances often strayed towards this enclosure; tears flowed from their eyes, when they remembered their original father. Time, that effaces all, staunched their weeping. Concord always reigned amongst these people who multiplied as far as the eye could see; with time their knowledge grew and spread: the sun was the god they adored. The men started work when dawn appeared. As the first rays of the sun rose they knelt before this beneficent star, and at its setting they performed the same ceremony. All work finished as soon as the star had disappeared. Then innocent games afforded some repose. Birdsong had taught mankind to discover sounds. Those that were poets and musicians created harmonies. Young girls possessed of attractive voices, recited these natural songs which may have equalled those of today. They had neither slaves nor valets; all were masters and all were obedient; the mind was not exhausted; manual labour ensured a robust health. Man went to work to the accompaniment of birdsong; his cheerful cries mingled with it, creating a perfect natural harmony. Everyone sang constantly and man was always content.

For man's happiness, and for natural law, the finest institution was the respect they felt for the sacred ties that united spouses; two beings were only bound together according to their reciprocal feelings; the temple of hymen was the summit of a mountain. There, in front of the sun, they promised each other enduring love and an indissoluble friendship; they invoked the God of light, as their original father had, and begged him to extinguish his

torch if ever they betrayed their sermon; their faith was pure and natural, as were their delights. They learnt to sow grain; at first they did not mill it, but pounded it to make a sort of cake, very different to the bread we eat today: they had not invented ovens and I dare say that the first dough placed in the fire, was put in the midst of the ashes or under the embers, as I did myself in my childhood; the memory of these experiences still fills me with pleasure. Who does not miss his early years? They say it is a happy time. Can one fail to recognise that this happy childhood is the image of the happiness of these early men? The savants and scientific enthusiasts pity, they say, these ignorant men, who feared no danger and to whom even humanity was unknown. We must therefore suppose that nature had refused them everything, and that she had driven men to centuries of devouring ambition and the most runaway depravity, to teach them happiness and the usefulness of their enlightenment. Ah! Of course, I must think differently and assume that man has spread his knowledge too far. He is now at its final ebb; by dint of seeking he has found only an ignorance that fatigues his judgement and ends by leading his reason astray. He will have neither the strength nor the decency to admit it but I wish to offer him a striking picture of the misery I see him in and the happiness he has lost.

Happiness is not arbitrary, it cannot be denied; it is an ideal: that is a truth well known. Therefore I ask whether the first man who effortlessly found nourishment, clothing, and shelter wasn't a thousand times happier and more satisfied than the one who ceaselessly torments himself night and day beside a burning furnace, to find I know not what; ultimately that philosopher's stone one has seen so many lunatics pursue? Eh! How many do we still see pursuing it! Another lunatic has no other aim than to profit from pointless research. With his inflammable air and aerial machines, he finds us out to irritate us via the newspapers, his emphatic lectures, and his visits to all the Sovereigns of Europe, not in his aerostat, for the arial voyager always takes the post-chaise to reach the foreign Courts, and his ballon goes by coach; but despite that he does not refrain from exhibiting to the Universe's dazzled eyes his tobacco pouches, his etuis, his watches, his diamonds and his happy and wise discoveries.<sup>4</sup>

I do not disdain the sciences, although my bizarre star wished me to be ignorant; it is the abuse I condemn. What man is not a savant at the present time? Where is the Lackey, the Tailor, or the Greengrocer who does not wish to be a philosopher? The furore for self instruction has actually become a national sickness. All men aim for the same goal; it is virtually impossible to distinguish the wise man from the senseless. So many pointless things are and done that I only perceive a confusion of ideas and projects. I compare this century to the tower of Babel; meanwhile the men of today insist that language has never been so pure, ideas never so clear, and that we have reached the ultimate degree of human understanding. So much enlightenment may well bring about great inconvenience. In order to limit the sciences and the arts one will have to descend from these heights. An Artisan should neither speak nor think as a D.P., nor a Hairdresser like a C. D. B, because these men will become too dangerous to society and to the motherland.<sup>5</sup> Since authority was introduced amongst men, this same authority must adroitly hold each class in its sphere. If I went further in this matter, I could reach too far and attract the enmity of parvenu men, who, without reflecting on my good ideas, nor considering my good intentions, would condemn me pitilessly as a woman who only has paradoxes to offer rather than easy problems to resolve. Nonetheless I do not promise to be silent on this subject; but let us pass on to the next chapter.

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4 Balloon-mania swept through Europe since the first manned flights took off in Paris in late 1783 influencing fashion and spawning vast amounts of merchandise.

5 C.D.B. is almost certainly an allusion to the playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais with 'Hairdresser' the clue referring to his play *The Barber of Seville*. De Gouges has used C. de B. and M. C. B. on other occasions when wanting to refer to the dramatist without actually naming him. I have not found the key to D.P. unless it is a reference to her father, the marquis de Pompignan.

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## SECOND CHAPTER.

### *The delights of man.*

Happiness tired him; it was too uniform. I think that the first to be disgusted by true happiness was like that husband in the story of the Eel pâté.<sup>6</sup> He found his wife less interesting than his neighbour's; he conceived the guilty design of seducing her. The effort and the care that this enterprise cost him, redoubled his fire and made his passion indomitable. His faithful spouse became a burden; the more she tried to lavish tender caresses on him, the more his heart was disgusted by her. He dared not appear in daylight: it was at night, when the adored star was absent, that the guilty man abandoned himself to his inclination with less constraint. He became a dreamer, and finally an invalid. The beauty who had led his senses astray appeared beside him, and given that she was more robust than his wife, she was chosen to minister to him.

No doubt love was timid at this time; but how well it expresses itself in the greatest silence. The young nurse was truly touched by her neighbour's state. The same vice, the same poison, or to put it better, the same inclination had subjugated her reason and her virtue. The lover proposed a nocturnal rendezvous. The mistress, weak and more culpable than the lover, accepted. It was in the centre of a cave, on the eve of harvest, that these two lovers took advantage of the general joy, to give themselves up to guilty pleasures; they arrived at the appointed hour in the grotto where love had plotted their loss. The first solar eclipse took place that day. What a terrible phenomenon for this innocent people! The sun is obscured, the thunder rumbles, the earth shakes; the waters, carried by the winds, lash against the rocks; the star disappears and the two guilty parties are found to be missing from the august society. Lugubrious cries are all that one can hear; men, women and children are crying out from all sides, invoking the Divinity. The two lovers, hidden in their cave, are unaware of the disaster that heaven is spreading upon the earth. It is not a natural and temporary event as in our time; the people are virtuous, they believe that heaven is damning them. Finally the two lovers, barely arrived in the grotto, are called out of it by the cries that echo in the depth of the rock: Oh terrible surprise! Their eyes seek each other out but can no longer find each other. This phenomenon calms their passion; the veil of error no longer shields their eyes; they now see their crime alone. The mistress goes deeper into the rock, throws herself on the ground, and implores heaven's clemency. The guilty lover, more extreme in his repentance, wants to throw himself into the torrent; but he can no longer see the path: his hair stands on end. He rejoins his brothers in a valley, where he finds them all prostrated towards heaven. He throws himself among them; he implores death; but they cruelly refused it as they observe only the divine law that their first father left them on his deathbed: Go away, they tell him, flee far from us, guilty son, spouse and father. Barely are these words spoken than the earth regains its vigour, the thunder recedes, the winds die down and the sun returns to its former splendour. Oh miracle of that time! The people, to proclaim it, express themselves through cries of delight. They chase away the rebel joyfully; they plan to encircle the extent of their habitations, as well as their lands, with a prodigiously high wall; but they could not know that the rock enclosing his accomplice was outside these immense barriers. The man who made one step towards criminality, takes a second with no difficulty, especially as he finds

6 The eel pâté in question is at the heart of a fable by la Fontaine of the same name. A master who is easily bored by his amatory conquests turns his attentions from his wife to his valet's spouse. The valet remonstrates, claiming that everyone should stick to what is theirs in perpetuity. The master insists that the valet be served his favourite eel dish at every meal. Soon the poor man is desperate for a more varied diet.

it has its charms. The sun seemed to him to be fairer, brighter than ever; he dared to fix it without blushing, and he believed that in offending it he could invoke it. Like those pious souls who endlessly expiate their sins without being able to correct them.

Thus the first guilty party asked for forgiveness from the Supreme Being, and asked for nothing less than to be able to live in another part of the Universe with the unfortunate object that remained, like himself, without support or asylum. He stepped firmly into the grotto, without fearing that the sky would make the rock fall in on them, and he came out straightaway, calm and reassured, with his new spouse.

Satisfied that her prayer had been favourably received, that heaven was serene, and that the daytime star was purer and more brilliant, thus it was that his new companion, regaining her strength, believed in her turn that the God they invoked was a God who forgave the guilty. They did not cease to adore him, but did so with less fear. Here one must recognise that Religions have lost some of their strength and their power given the task imposed on men; naturally feeble and frivolous, it was impossible for them to conform to it, without wounding the dogmas of this too severe Religion. The fault became a routine sin, or, to express it better, a natural instinct that excites man despite himself. One has become too accustomed to the pardons of God's Ministers.

If it had been possible for men to admit their faults only to the Supreme Being, no doubt they would have been more circumspect. I have the temerity to believe, though I may be wrong, that the people who adored the sun were not altogether without sense. Is this star not the soul that animates all things? Did God not create it to warm and vivify the earth? Is it not demonstrated that without the existence of the sun, nothing would be animate? Would it therefore be surprising that the men who adored the sun, were purer, more faithful to their cult than all these different peoples who follow so many bizarre Religions? This God shows himself everywhere, to all men, and no mortal can avoid him. Temples are closed: the Divinity that one hides is the one that wrongdoers fear not. It seems to me that the acolytes of the sun did not hold guilty thoughts, without being immediately turned away from them as soon as they raised their eyes to the sky. I also presume that were it possible for trespasses to have been committed in this happy time, then they took place in the shadows and the horror of the night. Crime, at the time, did not dare show itself in broad daylight though now it is in public and in society that it raises its haughty brow.

Yet Rousseau does not differentiate, throughout entire centuries, these men from animals. He reports known facts about savage peoples, and he is persuaded that all the earliest men acted and thought like brutes, that their ideas were neither developed nor useful, and finally that they were scattered through the Universe, and only considered gathering together much later; that for a long time they sought to find sounds before discovering speech. The first who made this discovery was a great Man. I would agree, if he had not already received from his fathers his intelligence; and I, on the contrary, believe that, like the revolutions of the earth, men have been at times savage, at times more ordered: but to degrade one's origin means not accepting the existence of God. If men only acquired insight when they were willing to learn to read and speak, it is no less true that they understood each other perfectly in their own jargons, and that they could share all their thoughts. Observe the effectiveness of signs for the deaf and dumb. Language has been so varied so many times! M. le Brigaud found twelve hundred and sixty.<sup>7</sup> I would like, if my observations are approved, that an experiment be undertaken, one for ever useful to the future race; nothing could be easier. I imagine ten leagues of well stocked land with a fine outlook; this space to be enclosed by very high walls; dumb men and women to be handed twelve newborn infants of each sex from the Foundling Hospital: they would be

<sup>7</sup>Jacques le Brigant, or Brigand or Brigaud (1720 - 1804), was a lawyer and gifted linguist who, apparently speaking forty languages, specialised in Celt, believing it to have been the mother tongue of France. His studies led him to abandon law and publish, in 1787, his *Basic Observations on Languages Ancient and Modern*. It is claimed in his obituary that he had twenty-two children (Journal de Paris, 23 February, 1804).

shut in with the mute, in this habitation, and no one could enter, except for those chosen by the Government to manage this establishment. Thanks to this experiment the model of the early men will be easily observed. In all likelihood the children, discovering speech, would think themselves superior to the mute, as men do with regard to animals. I am convinced that after barely fifteen years, one would make discoveries from these people separated from ordered society; very useful discoveries, in my opinion. They would have to be left to their own devices as well as being allowed to model themselves at will, nature must be allowed to act freely, in order to observe its effect in our time.

To prove that my opinions are not without foundation, I recognise that there are still savages who commit ferocious acts, and who do not think in advance for tomorrow. But can I not offer the same tableaux in our own ordered societies? Villains who breath nothing but transgression, and whose instinct has only ever consolidated crime, are they not a thousand times more savage and barbarous than those who lived in rock hollows, in the depths of forests and in deserts? Has one not witnessed a son assassinate his father? Has one not witnessed a husband slash his wife's throat? And lastly an infamous Pastry cook use human flesh to satisfy his cupidity and turn it into a delicacy for men? Those, I think, are the savages that our ordered society has been unable to render more humane. The savage who sells his bed in the morning, and who perhaps foresees things differently to Rousseau, believes that death will dispense him from needing it that night. I do not know what use he can get out its value, unless an equal amount can procure him another one, when he needs it. In which case I consider this usage as a type of commerce that must maintain a certain competition in this population. But our dissipators in these ordered centuries, these run away spendthrifts, these men who would sell, not only their beds, but also their wives, their children, nature in its entirety, to gratify an instant of pleasure, are they not educated savages, nurtured by vice and without the slightest shadow of foresight for the future? The gamblers with their games, the libertines with women, the drunkard with his wine, the glutton with a meal: well, if I had to enlarge on this subject, how many examples I would have to report! But are these demonstrations not sufficient to persuade me that at all times, in all climes, in all traditions, there have been ferocious and debauched men? But nature has never lost her rights, and when she favours a being with the light of genius and a portion of compassion, she has done more for him than all possible instruction: she has been covetous and prodigal with certain men. And, one day, I will relate a fact that will prove that instruction can do nothing for individuals who are stupid blockheads; it can make them into unbearable pedants, who only speak to you using citations, who only think through others, and who are incapable of having an ingenious idea.

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### THIRD CHAPTER.

#### *Man's ambition.*

These two unfortunates, chased from their home and the bosom of their families, withdrew to a place where nature had chosen to display all her riches. Their industry soon gained them every advantage from it and, after a few years, their family grew to match their fortune. Barely thirty years had passed than this father was more advanced in discoveries, and in fertile land, than his early ancestors. He had experimented: for example, using a raft on water loaded at first with stones. He let it drift as it pleased and following it from afar, he saw, and realised, that the water had enough power to carry a bigger one with a heavier load, in which he could venture with his family, if he could find a means of steering it. He

noticed that this sort of raft stopped at the foot of a piece of wood projecting out of the water, and was made to change direction by it. Nature, or God himself, seemed to have placed this pole in the river, to teach the man that he must use a piece of wood to direct his raft. From there, he constructed oars, and having agitated them in the water a few times, he found the way to steer his barque. His neighbours, who had not seen him for thirty years, and who thought that heaven's lightening had cast him into the darkness, along with his accomplice, were far from expecting to see him arrive one day in triumph on the waves, none of them having attempted to navigate. This father of a new people planned to present himself, along with all his children, to his brothers and friends. This project was considered by him alone, and presented his wife and children with nothing more than a pleasurable party on the river. Everyone awaited this chosen festive day with joy. Oh unexpected misfortune! A chance phenomenon that has made most men throughout time superstitious!

It was again the eve of harvest, an eclipse day when the proscribed man returned to the place of his birth. Since his departure vice had also gone. These people were happy because they had not sought false pleasures. The river that crossed their compound was not blocked; they had not yet built a bridge. The transgressor having reached a level of understanding superior to the knowledge of his ancestors arrived in view of his family, in a barque richly apparellled, well built and full of men and women, who all showed the most robust health because the richness of the land that they could roam furnished them with all their needs: those who had closed themselves in had not foreseen that they might grow in numbers, and that their needs would multiply along with their families. Society had become their lot. An epidemic sickness had destroyed half of these inhabitants, and weakened the rest. Scarcely had they noticed the barque, than all flew to the riverbank. But what new event came to overwhelm the remaining happy men in their peace, in their concord? It was a second eclipse that offered them this phenomenon. They recognised, at one and the same time, the author of their troubles. Their soul is moved, their spirit is gripped; but the transgressor, more courageous, speaks first, and gives a speech in an assured tone: "Heaven, as you see, has not crushed me with its wrath. I failed, I know, but you failed even more than I, by sending me away from your paternal protection. God did not create man in order to harm him; he has given man reason so that he can correct himself. He did not inspire me with the dread courage to destroy myself: through pity I knew remorse. The victim that I had dragged into my crime was going to perish in the depth of a rock. The star that we adore, and who will, in a few minutes, appear to us purer and more brilliant, regained its light. After we had wandered for a few hours, it seemed to bring me back, by its setting rays, towards the grotto where I had abandoned the accomplice to my fault. Alas! Such was her situation that she wanted to die in order to expiate my crime! But I showed her that her life did not belong to her; that she must follow heaven's absolute decree. She yielded to this striking truth. We distanced ourselves from this compound by several leagues but barely had we left our home, that regret took hold of our hearts. We turned our steps, a few days later, towards this august compound; we hoped to soften your hearts when these horrible barriers appeared before us. We had to accept the rigour of our fate. Alone and without asylum we produced this numerous family: all are industrious men who cherish you, as I do. Reach out to us; our chattels and our discoveries are yours. Let us just be one family afraid to separate."

Several yielded to this speech, but the most superstitious revolted, and cursed him anew; as ferocity was not one of their traits, they contented themselves with fleeing these new inhabitants. Some of the more superstitious ones, only attending to their despair, and firmly convinced that the revolution of the sun was a certain sign of God's wrath, threw themselves into the deeps of the river. The children of this new race had already discovered the useful ability to swim. They dived into the flow, and saved them all from their own violence: the proscribed man's speech had so influenced their souls and

enlightened their minds that after a few days, these two families became but one! Ambition had already taken hold of his soul, and had suggested to him the idea of coming back to the centre of his family; this innocent people soon cherished him for his mind and his discoveries.

Religion, which has always given rise to discord, to the elevation of some and the debasing of others, grew from their errors: belief in a just God and a beneficent being was not followed. Men, by abandoning the cult of Nature, lost their true happiness. Could they have held on to it as they increased? Compare the concord and confidence of villagers with those who dwell in Capitals. In these good people, there is one mind, one heart. Big cities are republics of unknowns: each has a separate mind, ambition that is out of measure. Paris is a pit of vice, where nonetheless great virtue and the best talent unite. But this mix cannot produce the peaceable happiness of hamlets or that of these early men. All, then, was just humanity and virtue.

I pity the one who began to demand submission and respect from his equals. He was, it seems to me, ambitious, and I make this ambition go back to a proscribed man at the heart of his family. He had studied the movement of the stars and the revolution of the sun; he sensed the advantage he had over his brothers, and had little trouble persuading them that he was the one to explain it.

The rebels who had fled from him were soon recalled by his precepts, which he claimed came from the adored star: they all tended towards spreading goodwill to all people. He easily forgave the errors of love, which had been responsible for both his disgrace and his elevation.

It has to be admitted that love and Religion have produced great revolutions. It seems that men can only be guided by these two leanings. The first ambitious man observed and recognised this truth, but he was still close to nature's system. He felt that men were not born to be the slaves of men: he treated them as he would have wished to be treated himself. But his precepts progressed in a terrible way. His greatness and his merit created enthusiasts who became, after him, the grand legislators of the cult of the sun. This sect grew with the world and the Priests of its rule became absolute in those early times.

Just as one has seen Jesuits, in all parts and from one pole to the other, subjugate opinion and the reason of all men, overthrow kingdoms, found establishments, rule as despots over hearts and minds, devastate the entire Universe at will, to satisfy their uncontrolled ambition so, more or less, I suppose the first Ministers of the sun behaved towards credulous men and simple hearts. In our time it is not religious fanatics that rise up but enthusiasts of liberty, who, not envisaging in this century of egoism the danger of an appalling anarchy, will be the first to throw themselves into the abyss that they have opened up for our motherland: they colour the bile of their writings with the varnish of style; they disguise their own interests with the appearance of public good; they menace citizens with horrible slavery should they not shake the yoke. Mankind is so feeble when unhappy that it becomes terrible when irritated by its misfortunes, and it is always in these disastrous circumstances that rebels create parties which wisdom and harmony alone can destroy. When you put a bad work into the hands of an Executioner it straightaway gains in importance. I know that laws must speak, but there are times when they must be silenced. To convince ill-intentioned minds using principles opposed to theirs, ones that are beneficial to the public good, forces their creators to stay within the judicious bounds. The Writer who circulates shady works is always a man who cannot stand broad daylight. But now that citizens have the liberty of the press, one must be an enemy of the human race, to rebel against this liberty in a moment of calamity.

In order to impose their yoke on other men, how much effort, how much torment did these Priests of the sun impose on themselves before they were in agreement, and their oracles took on some authenticity! They needed a certain sense of superiority, as did their

Prophet. Ambition dominated them, but they had not acquired that hypocrisy that has become the mask of most men: this hypocrisy, child of torment and ambition, that soon passed to the heart of man, has caused the downfall of the human race. Equality, at this time, no doubt started to lose the charm of its sweet concord. The Priests, like Sovereigns, became all powerful and, without giving out laws, totally ruled over the minds of their brothers: they excited murmurs in their families, revolts among their children, and disorder in society. Friendship, nature, filial love no longer served humanity, and humanity began to suffer. Superiority had crept in and the true happiness of the human race began to disappear. Wasted efforts, pointless regrets! The wisest blushed internally at their weaknesses, and the strongest dominated the weakest. Hypocrisy took the physiognomy of decency, of pity, of privation; men who had made themselves great, dispersed around the earth and created republics whose welfare depended on Priests who adored the sun; the peoples were mastered, enslaved by a tyrannical power, but as men became better instructed, astronomy taught them the movements of the stars. Thus new religious sects were formed; they became so bizarre that men ceaselessly slit each other's throats to defend their differing opinions. The true God no doubt sent the right one to the earth but how many troubles has it wreaked! Should not the fury of the Catholics and the Protestants be forever a terrifying image for the future race! God only wanted peace: everywhere he was offered war. It was with the sword of fanaticism that the great, the rich, the poor, the innocent, the orphans were massacred indiscriminately: but before these two Religions, those that preceded them had shaped leaders. The vanquished crowned the victors; men gave themselves masters and were reduced to an eternal servitude. Oh misfortune of the great and the lowly that destroyed this equal fraternity! Recognise the troubles that this superiority and this servitude have produced. Fortunes were divided; they became the prey of the strongest and the cleverest. Those who did not have equal talents, fell into the deepest indigence: they had to serve the rich and the great. This servitude kept rivalry alive in the class of unfortunate men; without the regrets of having lost their primitive equality that ceaselessly besieged these servants, they would have been happier than their masters. Ambition did not dominate them; the desire to cut throats, in order to possess the rank and the effects of their neighbours, did not torment their peaceable soul, whereas that of the master was gnawed by anxiety and uncontrolled desire: they were philosophically adapted to their fate. After a few centuries the ignorance that was carefully maintained in this class of men allowed them to forget their original equality and they were shaped into faithful servants but, since Valets have taught themselves and are no longer unaware, how many villains and bad subjects have been created in this class of men! How many masters have been assassinated by their servants! How many robbers has servitude produced! How many bold strong arms has it not wrenched from the earth! And masters are now badly served, such is the considerable increase in the numbers of Valets! Meanwhile one must observe that the Government's wisdom has not yet looked into this subject; if it wishes to deepen its understanding it will see that therein are some very dangerous difficulties. It must also be recognised that the Lords, the wealthy, do not live enough in the countryside; that they do not share their benefits with their vassals. They have never sought to render the existence of the Peasants happy or peaceful. Yet it is the Labourers whose labouring hands have unearthed the treasures of the soil, and all the delights of the great and rich. What compassionate soul softens the rigour of their fate! What generous heart comes to succour them in their infirmity, which most often has been caused by their excessive efforts and travails! They feed men yet lack bread themselves. The educated Villager, as soon as he is self-acquainted, abandons this labour and place of birth. Brought up since childhood to labour, he goes in search of laziness in the Capital. He adopts the noble employment of Lackey or Porter. He regrets, when it is too late, his farm, his mind and body being enervated by debauchery. The fear of the militia chases him from his peaceful hearth, and it is at the heart of a city that he goes in search of his cruel end.

If Paris is composed of a thousand inhabitants, at least a third are Domestics. A quarter, at the most, are occupied, the rest are lazy men, debauched women, who contribute considerably to the total dissipation of at least a third of the citizens of the Capital. The countryside is abandoned; the cities are overcrowded; the greatest number of men neglect essential things, in order to busy themselves with discoveries that are of no use to humanity. Luxury, born of the agreeable arts, child of laxity, has led to the depravation of the most ordered society. The lowly want to equal the great; the great find this amusing, and the lowly are ruined. A worker who has earned an honest fortune will stupidly not educate his children in the craft that his fathers gave him: the son of a Tailor, a Cobbler, a Carpenter will be found in a college or boarding school alongside a Marquis or a Count. Will all these young people be successful? No....The savings that their fathers have spent to furnish their education have served only to turn them into bad subjects; all of them, apart from those who are blessed with transcendent talent, will be exposed. Sometimes the son of a Cobbler can become a great Man, of great use to the motherland, but most have only the mind of their father, but not that of their profession. Fit for nothing, they never do anything. This misplaced education only tears men away from their true vocation and if this continues into the future there will be no more workers. And, how exorbitant workmen have become!

I would want all men of all ranks and classes to be raised in their father's state and profession. A brave Soldier could only produce good army-men; a Magistrate of integrity, good Judges: often this last tears from the bosom of Themis enlightened members, in order to send to the fields of battle subjects who have not acquired through birth the art of war and combat.<sup>8</sup>

I think that blood and fellow-feeling have a great influence on the emulation of men.<sup>9</sup> By dint of wanting to vary and denature man, they will amount to nothing. Ah! let us get closer to nature, and men as they are meant to be. I know how much my opinions and the bizarreness of this Work will attract criticisms. -- I await them without fear.

Several people will attempt to prove that it is a paradox to want to show that education damages most men. Yes, without doubt, I affirm it; and I prove that the general sciences have weakened the human race. The man of genius learns almost everything in the blink of an eye, and guesses the rest.

One should only educate the young when they start to develop their understanding, their tastes, and their inclinations: those born to Greatness would become such without tiring their organs nor their Teachers. I believe that in all times, men have been lost when they have strayed too far from Nature. This mother, the essential depository of all we have discovered, silences herself when she no longer has anything to show to men, but they are neither wise enough, nor elemental enough to stop when she no longer speaks. They wander away; what am I saying, to wander? They go astray! What am I saying, to stray? They argue, they fight, they no longer get on! They want to enslave everything, and everything is dreadfully unbalanced. True genius is no longer preferred, either because it no longer exists, or because it is discouraged. Those great works that lifted the mind and spirit, and made the French forever amiable and redoubtable to their enemies, are no longer read. Luxury and pride have taken the place of genius and loyalty: this untrammelled luxury has led to the downfall of the French: just as one saw the Assyrian, the Greeks and the Romans lose their strength, their courage and their genius when laxity came and perverted their good customs.

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8 The Ancient Greek goddess Themis was the daughter of the Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth) and was thought to personify law, order and justice.

9 [Original footnote.] (1) This fact provides conclusive evidence. One day Louis XV asked the Comte de Saxe: "Why, in my Kingdom do I not see great Men such as you?". This excellent General replied: "Sire, it is since our women....".

The arts, I know, enrich a kingdom, but when they are pushed to the last degree, they indubitably bring luxury with them; that and laxity; thus luxury has destroyed all the Nations. I call upon the Sages, to whom I submit my Reveries.

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## FOURTH CHAPTER.

### *The villainy of man.*

Men having reached a stage of founding States and Governments over the surface of the all the world, Despotism, Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy held authority across the Universe. Off these different Governments, which has been the most propitious for humankind? I think it is Monarchy; it is still the most peaceful State for men. Observe the perpetual tyrannies of Republicans: the citizens have a thousand tyrants for one Master; rivalry for the top places lead them to devour each other, to continually persecute each other. Observe their History, alongside that of England, whose Aristocracy fill the Parliaments and the people with pride; observe the terrifying History of their revolutions; observe their diverse parties, their agitation and their cruel riots. When did England become more calm? Since it was reconciled to Monarchy. But given that men are never happy with their lot, since they lost their primitive happiness everything bores them even a monarchical State. Despots have often been assassinated by their slaves, by their brothers, or by their sons. Ambition has equally driven Europeans to this same villainy; it has turned them into patricides and fratricides. It is always under the purple and the dais that these great crimes are born. Kings have often been less happy than their subjects; their superiority has only resulted in them becoming the slaves of their people. Not being able to do everything themselves, poorly assisted and always wronged, they are often prey to evildoers and villains. But as this villainy has only produced general harm, and ordered customs have softened the ferocity of men, as the pleasure of reigning no longer makes life sweeter, more peaceful or longer, the sons of Kings, their brothers, have become more philosophical than ambitious, and they have rendered to Nature all that they owed her. Never has man's enlightenment been more widespread, customs gentler or more analogous with perfect happiness. If only, no longer ignorant, they could be just; if they would sympathize and be of one accord; if they would fix for every rank, and every State, limits to their duties; if they would all work together for the good of the motherland and the State, be equals in time of great crisis, have but one voice, one heart, and one soul for the good of the motherland; get past this crisis, each to his own again, reconciling their interests to their means: that is how I think governed men should think and act. But sadly opinions and systems are very different from those that should be the basis of a good constitution, like France's. The Great should be an example, to other citizens, of the patriotic ardour that was once seen in famous battles; the likes of Duguesclin, Bayard, Condé, Turenne all fought alongside their soldiers: all should battle together as brave Warriors to gain victory and sustain the glory of their country and their King.<sup>10</sup> Then a state

10 Bertrand Du Guesclin (1320? - 1380) was a Breton warrior much feared by the English, though he was beaten by the Black Prince in Spain; with a small band he harried the larger forces of his enemies with great success. Made Constable of France (the highest military rank) by Charles V in 1370 he died of a fever during one of his campaigns. Pierre Terrail Seigneur de Bayard (1473 - 1524) was a soldier known as 'le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche' (a blameless knight who knew no fear); he was considered the epitome of chivalric heroism. Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Condé, duc d'Enghien (1621 - 1686) was known as le Grand Condé thanks to his fearless glittering military career. A well-read, unorthodox, man who claimed to be an atheist while remaining true to his Jesuit upbringing he knew both highs and lows as his arrogance allied to

of equality would have been created in their august assembly. In those times, a General was a simple soldier on the field of Mars; a leading Prince, a good citizen and a protector of the people, as are those of today. But at the moment a spirit of discord, spreading through Society, seems to be altering these happy dispositions; the swiftest and wisest action that our Sovereign can take is to close his ears to all these vain clamours. Let the King pronounce and ordain, like the first Leader of his Kingdom, it is up to the Nation to assemble in whatever way he deems suitable, for the welfare of his State and for the good of his subjects.<sup>11</sup> If he allows the Nobles and the Third Estate time to bring up contestations, never will the fruits of wisdom and enlightenment be gathered from the Nation. A partisan spirit will arise, and discord will manage to divide the most united hearts and the most peaceful minds. The bad citizens who seek for an equal state, who glimpse independence as a perfect joy, are far from understanding all the blood that will flow before they obtain it: they excite the storm, and lightening is ready to strike them down. This independence would cause the upheaval of the Kingdom and bring terror to the motherland. No more King, no more Princes, no more Magistrates with integrity to defend persecuted citizens, and soothe their misery. An equal ambition would devour you; you would all want to reign at the same time, and you would all be lost, all together. This independence that appears to herald a spirit of rivalry and revolt, what will it produce? The peaceful liberty, they say, that men have been led to by learning. That is the reasoning of the senseless. They add that an educated Universe no longer wants a Master; that mankind is too enlightened to be subordinated. Where will this dreadful enlightenment lead? Is it to get closer to the primitive happiness and that equitable simplicity? Let the stage mankind has reached be examined by degrees; let men see if they can descend from this elevation, to go and labour in a corner of a field, to serve a neighbour in times of sickness or infirmity. Where is the most insignificant Bourgeois, with just enough to be adequately served, who will renounce his superiority without trembling? But, I will be told, we are far from wishing to return to man's infancy, or to allow ourselves to be carried away by the lure of this fabulous chimera that is its primitive happiness: we want to be equal; but with superiority, will say the wealthiest and those who want to reform the law. But those whom you subordinate now, who, following your example, have seized the spirit of revolt and independence, once they are as free as you, instructed and enlightened, they will begin to say to you: share with me that which you have no right to keep, since I defended your interest as well as my own. That will be the result of this general instruction, of this deep knowledge that all men are so proud of today. The lax party will wish to establish maxims and create new Governments in vain. The strongest and the most robust will constantly oppose it, doubting nothing, and seeing a path cleared that will allow them to stop at nothing. The lowest of classes will become the highest, and will lay down the law for everyone else. These rebels insist that the entire Universe must veer to the same degree of equality. What a sinister prediction for posterity! Civil wars, the rivalry of Kings, their ridiculous claims that lead them to ceaselessly usurp ports and provinces, was that not enough. So humankind wants to destroy itself, and make of the future race the butchery of the world. The rich, without asylum; the wise, without equals; the great, without

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his brilliance often led him to challenge the king's and the state's authority. He supported many of the free-thinkers and writers of his time. Henri de la Tour d'Auvergne, Vicomte de Turenne (1611 – 1675) a Protestant, trained in military strategy at the side of his uncle Frederick Henry of Nassau, Prince of Orange (then allied to France) and was made a colonel of the French army by Cardinal Richelieu. His tactical talent and courage allowed him to rise to become Marshall of France in 1643. He was so highly regarded at his death – he was killed in action by a cannon ball – that he was buried in St Denis alongside the Kings and Queens of France. Esteemed by the revolutionaries of 1789 his remains were preserved when those of the monarchs he served were desecrated, and later Napoleon had him reinterred in the Invalides.

11 Here de Gouges is referring to the Estates-General which were being recalled by the King; they would officially meet for the first time since 1614 on 5 May 1789. There was much dissension and debate about how the three parties should be organised, particularly with regard to voting rights as these would crucially alter the balance of power.

power; the mediocre, without strength, the poor, without succour; all devoured by the thirst for subordination, all will perish in a frightful anarchy and a dreadful equality.

Oh Third Estate, what are you doing? Is this how you respond to the goodness of the fairest King? I am addressing you directly. My writings cannot hide from you that I am entirely devoted to you. You only wish for the good of your country, but your enthusiasm will destroy the motherland. The King accords you everything; the great have reflected, and you must in turn show an example of wisdom and modesty.

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## FIFTH CHAPTER

### *Hope.*

Men have reached a wise independence; manners are orderly; Governmental maxims are less severe and more amenable; this is actually a time of true happiness for mankind. If it wished to preserve it, would there be, in future, any Kingdom more flourishing than France? Informed by experience, enlightened by the assembled Nation, it would soon regain its éclat and true constitution. To bolster it with new principles; to make the countryside more productive and more inhabited; to limit the growth of cities: there already, it seems to me, is a useful insight.

The French are entirely in agreement on the need to assemble the Nation, to discover from where vice is spreading, and to block its source. All their hopes are dependant on its good administration. All good citizens wish to see their country adopt a new form; the wisest confirm that the Government needs to make great changes. To correct various abuses, to entirely destroy the excesses of luxury, to abolish an infinite number of public gaming houses, and create amusements that lift the soul of the French and purify courage; to sweep the girls of the night from the streets of Paris, distancing them from the royal gardens, and maintain them in areas where they will be policed away from honest women, the daughters of Merchants who daily witness the excesses of these vile creatures and their awful situation; give virtue distinctive marks. Albeit I take an interest in the proposition, but should women, for example, not receive some signs of encouragement, when merit and honour advance their sex? Do women not form half of Society? And unfortunately their lack of ambition contributes to the loss of the other half. This is what I demonstrate in my *Prince philosophe*, which will appear forthwith. Whatever reform can be made in the Kingdom, the French require distraction. All peoples, even the wildest, have sought amusement, but the most noble and pure are those that have lasted the longest: such as the famous tournaments in Europe; the good theatres in Greece, that still delight us today. But the taste has gone and a revolution is needed to return the French to their true character. Preserve the arts, and rein in the excesses of luxury; abolish, mercilessly, a half of all theatres; create one that can purify manners, make prejudice disappear, and become the source of noble ambition and usefulness to Society. This new theatre should be accorded, by right, to Authors. Why is talent so poorly recompensed? Why do Actors lay down the law to worthy men? An estimable Author can barely subsist on the miserable amount he extracts from his plays; yet the Actor, without talent or good manners, will rejoice in an income of twenty to thirty thousand *livres*. Why have Actors made themselves the owners of property that does not belong to them? What frightful rights have they not arrogated to themselves? With their pride they have succeeded in making merit servile and submissive. The Author who solicits any favours from them can only obtain them through baseness and constraint. It makes him groan in

the depth of his soul but, subjugated by glory, he pays for it sometimes at the price of his honour; the Writer, of whichever sex and however talented, who has the misfortune to lack the ability to soften the pride and impudence of the Actors, becomes a proscribed Author. We are approaching a time when everything ought to be shaped anew. I submit the cause of my Colleagues to the assembled Nation. A second French theatre in the Capital has long been requested. It is up to the King, the Government and the Estates General to agree to propose it: they must reform the needless ones and create the one the Nation lacks. I would like this production to be entitled *The National Theatre, or that of women*. If the King and the State approve my plan, this era in the reign of Louis XVI will be forever remembered by History. I am assured that my project cannot be rejected, and that it will obtain the esteem of the Monarch, and the goodwill of Ministers. I may have merited both by sacrificing my interests, by augmenting the resources of the State and my country, and I have forever closed upon myself the doors of every theatre. The *Comédiens français* have even conspired, once more, against the drama they received from me five years ago, without enquiring whether my position could withstand their injustices without ill effect.

Yes, citizens: without any means, I attempted to earn such wealth by a noble ambition, to encourage my sex to distinguish itself, likewise men, by honest industry. A great number of well born women are lost because men, who have seized everything, have deprived women of the useful and durable resources they need to advance themselves. Why then should my sex not be saved from the mass of inconsequentialities its lack of ambition exposes it to? In all times women have written; they have been allowed to compete alongside men in theatrical careers but they should be given proof of greater encouragement; here is my plan.

## PROJECT FOR A SECOND FRENCH THEATRE, *Or the National Theatre.*

Between Nobles and Traders there exists a respectable class: honest Individuals who have offered their children a good education. Sometimes, all of a sudden, misfortune arises to deflect their good intentions; they are often reduced to penury, thus is a class of men lost. Prejudice prevents them from placing their children in the theatre. Several take this course of themselves: but this course is always taken too late; it does not produce the effect that I would boldly anticipate from mine.

I assume, therefore, that women who wrote plays, and all those who like me write them now, could provide a very varied Repertoire. As for Actors and Actresses, here is the rule that I would impose on them, and the good that would result from it.

Only well brought up young girls would be accepted in this theatre, as well as young men whose highest allowances do not exceed a thousand écus. After ten years they would not be entitled to a pension, but to an honourable retirement. Forty thousand *livres* would be allotted to them, to establish themselves according to their dispositions, but this sum would always be used properly: the young men to purchase a Charge; the young girls to establish themselves, in order to become honest citizens and be admitted in all society. To maintain order and decency, the theatre would be closed to the public; the women's Foyer would be separated from the men's; any who threatened their decency would be sent away from this society. Inspections would be made with the greatest rigour. What Financier, Lawyer or Notary could possibly blush to unite himself with a women both amiable, virtuous and educated?

Ten years after its establishment, in order to give this enterprise greater consistency, the surplus, following expenses and Appointments, could furnish two drama schools; to these schools all arts could be joined, such as music, painting, architecture, performance,

philosophy, all that could allow these young people to chose a state according to their dispositions. Children would be taken from five years old: there would never be more than twelve of each sex. From the age of fifteen they would be free to choose the theatre or any other art. There would be public competitions. This noble ambition would cost the State nothing; the public would be doubly satisfied in its pleasure. By being entertained it would, at all times, be useful and doing good for Society.

In order for this project to be successful one must assume that the theatre would have a following, that women would be talented enough to create a fund of plays to constantly encourage a new audience. I cannot answer for all my sex, but if it must be judged by my example, I could give thirty plays for study. Might I add that none is lacking in dramatic talent? And this is a truth that no one has yet contested, not even the strongest critics, nor my greatest enemies. Why, then, would this establishment not be authorised? Because I am a woman would I not be entitled to start with my own plays, as Molière did? Is it not my asset? Is it not my property? Why would the State oppose it: I who desire only its welfare, I who have no other fortune than my feeble talent, and who asks for no other rewards. If, with this noble impartiality, the Government casts its benevolent eye on this virtuous project I would have nothing left to wish for in order to see it accomplished.

It is not an auditorium that I wish to have built, there will be plenty ready made when the Opera, or the new theatre that has just been built, will be altered. The Tuileries [sic] would be the most suitable place for this school of manners. The funds needed to establish mine would not be considerable: actually I will find some easily from the project itself. So many opulent and virtuous women would participate in this establishment! So many honest Financiers would support it with their credit!

I demonstrate clearly enough that prejudice would fall away of itself; that honour alone would elevate the hearts of the Actors and Actresses; that the fear of being ignominiously expelled would maintain them in their true principles; that also reward is both noble and lucrative, and that men are nearly always guided by profit, especially when glory is attached to it: I venture that not many would behave reprehensibly. There would have to be, besides, a certain proof of parentage, family affidavits, in order to enter this theatre. Eh! What honest parents in poverty would not solicit places for their children in this establishment! Ah! no doubt we would refuse more that we could take in.

Another remarkable fact, that I can place under the eyes of the King and Ministers, is a third of the public, and the most respectable third, who deprive themselves of theatre, these virtuous minds, these pious souls, who only bring their children to *Esther* and *Athalie* etc.<sup>12</sup>

The performing of Madame la Marquise de Sillery's tragedies, inspired by the Scriptures, would be a feast day for these families; they would go to these performances with all the more pleasure given that prejudice would no longer restrain them; they would understand that the young who put on these plays are all virtuous and educated in purified principles.<sup>13</sup> If all the women who have written in this century could contribute to this

12 *Esther* and *Athalie* are plays by Jean Racine written in 1689 and 1690 after his departure from the theatrical world ten years earlier. Based on biblical texts the dramas were commissioned by Mme de Maintenon as improving works to be performed in the boarding schools for girls that she supported.

13 Stéphanie-Félicité Du Crest de Saint-Aubin, later comtesse de Bursart de Genlis, and marquise de Sillery (1746 – 1830) was a self-taught educator and writer. She married in 1763, and in 1772 became lady-in-waiting to the duchesse de Chartres, wife of the future Philippe-Egalité, and was made tutor to their offspring. This was a position of importance and authority and had never been offered to a woman before. The children were potential heirs to the French throne, being of the Orléans line - Genlis died a few months after seeing one of her pupils, Louis-Philippe, crowned King of France - and were taught alongside Genlis's own children. Two English girls, Pamela (who later married Edward Fitzgerald, the Irish revolutionary) and Hermine, were also pupils; their parentage was hotly disputed, an assumption being that they were the product of a liaison between Genlis and the duc. Genlis formulated her own exacting teaching system and was a tireless author, publishing over eighty works, many devoted to education (especially of girls), as well as numerous plays, pamphlets, histories etc. The plays referred to here are those she wrote for her charges to perform and were,

Repertoire, then one could include the plays of estimable Authors, which have a moral purpose. The energy of their works would sustain the columns of this edifice, erected in favour of women; days would be set aside for plays by Authors of my sex, the emulation would be only the more pleasing and this different competition would uplift women's souls and make men more polite, more genuine, and more considerate. M. Mercier's plays, in which one finds true sentiment and heartbreaking drama, would be of great support to this theatre.<sup>14</sup> Well written and thoughtful comedies, that modest Authors hide in their portfolios given how much the *Comédiens'* attitudes disgust them, would find themselves able to manifest the fruits of their labours in this new theatre.

So that nothing could interrupt this noble emulation I would like there to be a committee of Writers of both sexes. The men would judge and pronounce upon the texts; the women would do the same for theirs. These precautions would prevent a spirit of rivalry and cabal. Which Prince would not take an interest in this project? Which woman at Court would not offer it all her support? Which Individual would not wish to see it accomplished? Which Author would not find satisfaction in seeing a second French theatre arise? Which Minister would not hasten its success, and say to the King: Sire, it is the finest establishment that you have secured; it encourages both virtue and talent, and procures for your subjects useful and salutary pleasures.

Perhaps, with excessively flattering hope, I deceive myself that I could one day uplift the soul, the heart, the mind of every woman, and allow them to obtain again all that they have lost since the time of that noble chivalry.<sup>15</sup>

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## VENGEANCE,

### USEFUL AND HUMANE.

The appeal of vengeance depends on it being gentle, on it correcting the abuses of men, without harming them directly. Some have such characters that it is inevitable they will be pursued and unmasked in Society's eyes: by the same token the virtuous Molière waged war on vice, and revealed all the dangers to which the wicked subject right-minded spirits and sensitive hearts. Doubtless I do not possess the genius or the enlightenment of this famous Author, but I share his frankness and his aversion to the wicked. I will not wage war on my enemies, on the envious, or the stupid, with his mordant and cutting brush but rather depict them with banter and gaiety. To be angry with all those who rise up against me would be a nonsense of which I am not capable. I am a woman, but not altogether

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perforce, of an improving nature.

14 Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740 – 1814) somewhat maverick writer, philosopher, playwright and journalist who was a republican deputy from 1792 to 1797 with a spell in prison during the Terreur that he was lucky to survive. As a writer he is best remembered for his voluminous *Tableau de Paris*. He and Olympe de Gouges were close friends who shared views about the role of literature and performance in society, seeing in both a site and source of education and emulation.

15 De Gouges often expresses a nostalgic longing for an idealistic chivalric past: her upbringing in the Languedoc – the heartland of French chivalry – probably influenced her feelings but she was also reflecting a contemporary movement influencing both politics and literature. A glorious medieval past had been mined by French historians and academicians (e.g. Lancelot, La Curne, Duclos, Sallier, Bonamy, Lebeuf, Falconet) between 1720 – 1740 who sought to establish their country's political and cultural primacy in Europe. This love of medievalism spread and influenced literary works, eventually giving rise to the craze for gothic novels, but also imbued the writing and speeches of certain deputies of the Estates-General, and National Assembly who, like de Gouges, used a chivalric past to represent duty, honour and courage. This glorification of the past ran counter to the ideas of Voltaire and other philosophers who saw in France's medieval past all the horrors of religious superstition and persecution. De Gouges's medievalism is more romantic than rational.

weak: so let us see by what or by whom I will start. By the Gentlemen Journalists: this is a topic endlessly repeated by all Authors, constantly complaining that their productions have not been liberally accorded eulogies. I know not if these quarrels are well founded, but I do not imitate my Colleagues and though a certain Journalist contradicted his opinion of my plays, I did not complain. Examine the *Mercure de France* of the 4 March 1786, on the subject of the *M.... innat.... de Ch....[Marriage inattendu de Chérubin]*, the most mediocre play that emerged from my feeble talents; his eulogy meanwhile placed it in the first rank, and it is affirmed that this same Editor criticised the plays that I have had printed since, which were generally esteemed.<sup>16</sup> Further I was persuaded that the Gentlemen Editors of the *Journal de Paris* had ceded to the supplications of the *Comédiens*, and that they had sacrificed my plays to their animosity.<sup>17</sup> It must be recognised here that the *Comédiens* have become VERY IMPOSING great personages; it pains me to trace the regrets that I feel on having lost the good will of the Gentlemen Editors of the *Journal de Paris*. It is not their criticism that I fear, since I was already over familiar with their eulogies, but to suffer neither one nor the other from them is a blow so terrible for an Author that it cannot be born with sangfroid. A year ago I presented them with my third volume that includes *M.... Ch. N...., ou le S....des G.... H....[Molière chez Ninon ou le Siècle des Grands Hommes]*, heroic comedy in five acts and in prose; *Z..... & M....[Zamore et Mirza]*, drama in three acts, unanimously received at the *Comédie française*, and so badly treated since by the *Comédiens*, whose subject was drawn from the deplorable history of Negro men. Following all the efforts that great Men and the Nation made to destroy the awful prejudice that enslaved this type of man for so many centuries, this drama has become a *pièce de circonstance*: it is the first dramatic subject to mention their customs and true history.<sup>18</sup> Five years ago the *Comédie française* received this drama, and it has had one turn to be performed, as well as the one that rightfully belonged to it; in the end, this play, having been learnt, fell again to the cabals and the *Comédiens'* plots. This third volume is without doubt my best and yet, regarding it, the Gentlemen Editors of the *Journal de Paris* have maintained a profound silence with no consideration for the name that adorns it.

According to the duties that they have imposed upon themselves in their regulations, in favour of all Authors, I could at least have hoped that they would announce it. But these Gentlemen have not noticed that they are acting against a woman, and that in depriving me of the sale of my book not only did they damage my finances, but also my renown: for who can fail to be aware that if one is not cited in the *Journal de Paris*, one is neglected by the whole world?

Well, even I ceased to think about my third volume. Compelled by current concerns I once again roused myself on behalf of nobler and less selfish subjects. Entirely dedicated to the affairs of the times, I wanted to fight seditious and ill-intentioned Writings with the integrity of my feelings and opinions alone, and I succeeded.

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16 *Le Mariage inattendu de Chérubin* was written in 1784 and published in 1786. The *Mercure de France* of that time was a political and literary publication founded by Panckoucke in 1778 that ran until 1792: it appeared about every ten days and aimed, politically at least, to remain objective.

17 The *Journal de Paris* was the first daily paper to operate as a business in Paris. Set up in January 1777 it was progressive, pro-encylopédiste and had a reforming outlook. Its selling point was early morning home delivery (often problematic), high quality paper, innovative design and an immediacy denied the weeklies. Favouring sexual equality it garnered a large female readership. De Gouges would have paid 24 *livres* per year for her subscription. Originally reforming (pro a constitutional monarchy) by aiming to remain moderate the owners appeared counter-revolutionary leading to the offices being stormed and destroyed. It was brought back to life and finally became a right-leaning pro-Bonaparte publication.

The *Comédiens* were the actors of the *Comédie Française* with whom de Gouges fought on and off during her creative life.

18 A *pièce de circonstance* is a literary work inspired by specific events or circumstances.

My *Letter to the People*, or the Project of a patriotic purse rallied, and I can allow myself to say this impartially, more than one mind that had strayed.<sup>19</sup> My *Letter* is known throughout France; there, already, is a sweet vengeance concerning the Gentlemen Editors of the *Journal de Paris*.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of December last I sent them my *Patriotic Observations*, with the following Letters.<sup>20</sup>

'Gentlemen, your Papers are generally devoted to decency; all good souls address themselves to you to succour the unfortunate: the public has not yet been shown the greatest number. Your pages are filled with the gifts made by the great and the rich in favour of their parish poor; but the rich and the great do not live in the faubourgs Saint-Marcel, Saint-Antoine, Saint-Denis, Saint-Martin etc, where the miserable are reduced to the most awful indigence. Therefore it would be appropriate, Gentlemen, to insert in your pages the observations that I have made in favour of the faubourg's poor, all of them are unemployed labourers, who lack bread and fuel in this rigorous and murderous season.<sup>21</sup> I hope, Gentlemen, that good souls will pass on further gifts to the parish Priests in the faubourgs. Alas! Alone I can achieve nothing, my only faculty is to observe. May my *Patriotic Observations* move all hearts in favour of these unfortunates whose appalling situation I have just depicted! I have the honour to be, One of your Subscribers'.

To this letter I attached the following.

'Gentlemen, pray be good enough to insert this letter in your pages. As one of your Subscribers, I have certain rights regarding your *Journal*. My third volume could perhaps be worthy of your approbation yet you have not even deigned to announce it. But, as far as it concerns me directly, I could not be angry with you; permit me, Gentlemen, to point out to you that you could at least make a few useful observations on the *Letter to the People*, that your Gentlemen Colleagues have cited with the zeal of true citizens. Your fortune depends on the public, and your *Journal*, on the goodwill of the Government; you owe everything to one and the other. You could not disoblige a woman's representations; her sex affords her certain rights, but more so the zeal that inspires her on behalf of her motherland. I like to believe, despite your disregard, that you are nonetheless good citizens, and this, Gentlemen, is what engages me once again to send you my *Patriotic Observations*. On behalf of the unfortunates, you will kindly allow them to suffer a better fate than the *Letter to the People* and insert my Letter, as soon as your are able, with these *Observations*, so that good souls come to the assistance of poor labourers in the faubourgs. I have the honour of being, Gentlemen, etc.'

The reply from the Editors of the *Journal de Paris* taught me that one must never preachify to people who have made their fortune, who are no longer good enough to bear reproach, nor to avoid it.

*Decent reply from the Gentlemen Editors of the Journal de Paris.*

19 De Gouges's first political pamphlet, *Lettre au Peuple*, was advertised in the *Journal Général de France* of 6 November 1788 as a remedy to the country's deficit.

20 Written in December 1788 the *Remarques patriotiques* set out de Gouges's ideas for social and agrarian reform and an equitable taxation system that included a wealth tax ahead of its time by over a century. A harrowingly realistic description of poverty underpinned her demands for sheltered housing offering the homeless security and warmth in winter.

21 Late November 1788 saw the start of an unprecedented cold snap (-18° recorded in Paris and 60cm thick ice on the Seine) that lasted until mid-January 1789. The effect of the *grand froid* was particularly savage as a week earlier the weather was still unseasonably warm with summer flowers recorded in the hedgerows. The homeless were dying on the streets of Paris: the church asked parishioners to give more alms given that lack of work had swelled the ranks of the destitute.

'The Authors of the *Journal de Paris* are greatly touched by the lessons that Madame de G....kindly wishes to give them; but an abundance of subjects does not allow them to offer an extract of all the excellent Brochures that appear on a daily basis'.

Ah! Gentlemen Authors, I beg a thousand pardons for having dared to offer you a few propositions. Nonetheless, if all men wished to give themselves salutary advice, and mutually profit by it, they would commit fewer idiocies: you would have recognised the truth of this before replying to me in this way.

I forgive you for not having mentioned my third volume or my *Letter to the People*, they are already sufficiently well known. But as for my Letter in favour of the poor in the faubourgs, I cannot similarly forgive you for refusing to insert it in your pages. In all likelihood this Letter would have prevented the cruel events that took place in the interval that passed between my Letter and that of the Priest of the faubourg Saint-Antoine. Today, you oblige me to publish the fact that I was three weeks ahead of this good Priest. Ah! How many unfortunates have died in this moment! My vengeance would be excessive, if I were to cite it; I would rather convince you than punish you. You see the effect that the Priest's letter produced. Can you have believed that an entire public would reject one from a woman, whose aim was the same? Ah! How your mistake allows me to taste a gentle vengeance! Know that my *Patriotic Observations*, disdained by you along with my Letter for the poor of the faubourgs, have produced the effect that I had promised myself; they moved sensitive hearts, they made good souls speak out, and all the unfortunates were helped at once. Decency is no more charitable than wit, but it is possible to cooperate through shared sentiments. What joy for me that I encouraged this in my Writings! And learn, to your shame, Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris*, that these *Observations* were printed on the 12<sup>th</sup> December last; that they had already appeared everywhere by the 15<sup>th</sup>; that they had been seen by Magistrates, Princes, Ministers, and perhaps at the foot of the Throne. All the benefits that have multiplied, since this moment, in favour of the unfortunates, the projects for the Priests, and Monseigneur the Archbishop's pastoral Letter; if it is not my *Observations* that have produced this great humanity, they have nonetheless contributed to it, and the touching pictures within this work are reproduced in this pastoral Letter.

I must congratulate myself on being differentiated from all these famous Writers, who, too preoccupied in reproducing the ancient customs of assembling the Nation, did not occupy themselves with the people's situation, the most distressing situation, deprived of all succour.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps I helped to ease it a little; this touching idea, if I were less resolute, would make me give up my anonymity and procure me an even gentler vengeance.

One of your Subscribers, in sending you twenty-five *louis*, would have instructed me to name myself loudly, if I had not resolved that my name be only whispered; but you must be convinced that, despite being a woman, I am not lacking in character. I promised in my *Letter to the People* to remain unknown: I will allow myself to be guessed at, but I will not name myself. My sole anxiety is to see, Gentlemen, that you have an aversion to the works of women. Eh! What matters the sex, when the aim is good and praiseworthy? So far I have only been able to indicate to good souls what I would have done myself, if fortune had been my share; but, alas! I am poor, and I do not blush to admit it, while not demanding any help, or favours from anyone. I have the pride that suits my fate and my character: I can, following this admission, make yet another effort on behalf of the wretched.

Therefore, Gentlemen, I am offering you five hundred copies of my *Primitive Happiness of Man*, of my *Patriotic Observations*, and my *Letter to the People*, all three

22 At the end of 1788 political commentators were taken up with the recall of the Estates General to Versailles, an event not seen since 1614. De Gouges felt that the plight of citizens struggling in a harsh climate, both actual and financial, was dismissed in favour of more exciting constitutional events.

bound in one volume, with a print that will be sold for 6 *livres*, and will be entrusted to the generosity of the public. This sum will be placed in your hands, and, at the price that I have fixed for this volume, it will rise to 3000 *livres*. Here is how I would like it to be distributed.

Is it credible that under the eyes of the Monarch, best of Kings, there exists a privileged place, long since become the tomb of all the poor? It is in this slaughterhouse that they find a slow and cruel death. This horrible habitation is the awful workhouse of St-Denis!<sup>23</sup> There the lazy are indiscriminately locked up with the unemployed labourer, the old and the orphaned; if they survive the rigour of their fate, after a few months they are sent away from this fatal asylum, without clothing, without bread, worn out by a dread procedure.

Is this how one protects the human species? What use is this Saint-Denis workhouse to the State?...It will be said, to protect the number of beggars that is multiplied by the lazy. In that case they must be taken care of, encouraged to improve, and given healthy nourishment. Then this place would become an asylum for unemployed labourers and would force the lazy to no longer be inactive, and a burden on the State; either send them to do public works or, create a form of Militia from among the strong and robust men.

On this footing the beggars should be contained: shutting them up for a time in a poisonous habitation and then driving them out, I believe, can only augment their number, rather than diminish it. If this alteration cannot take place, then only exercise such rigour on young and lazy men, but respect children and the elderly. Ah! How many have the Spies of Paris torn from the bosoms of their families, in order to obtain the horrible salary that they are accorded for each beggar taken.<sup>24</sup> I leave it to the Government's care to examine this subject. May the righteous contribute to the destruction of this house, or change it into an establishment useful to the State and favourable to humanity. But here is what gave rise to my proposition.

A few days ago, and old man of sixty, yellow skinned, lips pale and livid, death depicted in his eyes, chest uncovered, his body wrapped in only a ragged threadbare coat, accosted me in the street. I always stop when I meet a pauper in the street and enquire as to his fate. This one explained to me that he had just come out of the Saint-Denis workhouse, and that he had been arrested one evening as he left work; despite proving that he was telling the truth, he nonetheless was restrained for six months in this appalling habitation, where he had managed to lose the little strength he had left. Whilst this wretch told me his sorry tale, tears flowed from his eyes, and I could not hold back my own. Thus I promised myself, during this touching spectacle, to make every effort to soften the misery of the elderly and the very young, whose numbers in this prison are too substantial and for whom a prompt death would be sweeter than a prolongation of their days. If my edition rises to 3000 *livres*, as I hope, I would like to soften the harsh fate of twenty five of these wretches; that is to say, thirteen old people who are over sixty, and twelve children who have yet to reach their twelfth year: I would wish, as well, that they be chosen, and favoured, according to their conduct.

See, Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris*, if this procedure can move lofty souls, and whether you afford me the pleasure of this gentle vengeance. I do not expect to

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23 Workhouses were created by law in 1767 to control beggars and make them work, often in the textile industry. St Denis, in Paris, was repressive and inadequately funded.

24 France had a well established police department that reported on, and took action against, beggars and vagrants. Police Inspectors had *commis* on the streets who acted as spies reporting on any illegal activity including the taking of a room for the night. All tenants had to be registered by law so there were frequent night time raids on tenements to take away those whose stay went unrecorded. Thus the very poor, unable to take up leases but able to pay for ad hoc accommodation, were forced back out onto the streets, or into the bowels of the workhouses, swelling the ever growing numbers of homeless people in late eighteenth century Paris. De Gouges, in her *Remarques patriotiques*, referred to them as 'Unintentional outlaws that nature and destitution have forced into a life of crime...' when describing the hideous conditions imposed by unscrupulous landlords and an uncaring state.

succeed, but I will use such bizarre methods (since natural ones fail with you) that you will be forced to cite some passages of my useful and humane *Vengeance*.

Thus I will address myself to M. Feydel: why would I not attack him, he who pointlessly squabbles with those whoicker?<sup>25</sup> Ah! M. Feydel, I have not the honour of your acquaintance but I can easily see that you are the happiest mortal amongst the protégés of the *Journal de Paris*. How flattered you must be by your reputation, since it renders a woman envious! Ah! If thanks to this attack I could move your good soul and fill your spirit with patriotic zeal! For I believe you to be, despite your lucky star, a good citizen; and given this idea, I will soon see in the *Journal de Paris*, not the criticisms of my three patriotic productions, but their eulogy, in the correct form. Ah! M. Feydel, how I congratulate myself on fixing upon your glory and hitching myself to your wagon, for you cannot be unaware that I was clumsy enough to quarrel with the Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris*, that my fate depends entirely on you, and on a rapprochement; in order to persuade you, I declare that I have a generous soul and a sensitive heart, give or take a little beastliness; but as I admit to it, it is clearly not dangerous. Moreover I confess that a lighthearted vengeance hurts no one, and brings great relief to the unfortunate being who has been mistreated as unjustifiably as I have been by these Gentlemen of the *Journal de Paris*. To maintain the profoundest silence regarding my third volume, and its productions fetched from the bosom of benevolence, is in my view too harsh a treatment.

Satisfied that I had written in favour of my motherland, and having been approved by all good citizens and men in high places, I was entitled to believe that I could point out to the Authors of the *Journal* how much their zeal was necessary to productions that only strive for the common good. I mentioned all this without rancour, by sending them my *Patriotic Observations*, and my Letter in favour of the faubourgs' poor. This Letter, rightfully inserted in their pages, could have obviated the Priest of Sainte-Marguerite's supplication; how this good Pastor would have been congratulated for relieving, in general, all the poor two weeks earlier!

For all unfortunates two weeks of cold and hunger in this murderous season allows death alone to reap a terrible harvest, and posterity does not so easily fill the gap...Suffering humanity never receives help promptly enough; the remedy always arrives too late, and it is always the same. Sadly men only recognise suffering when it has made great progress. How one should encourage the one who has the good fortune to notice it in its infancy! But the Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris* have not deigned to appreciate the well-meaning observations of a woman. Nature has given us our share of humanity and sensibility, over the strength and courage of men; it is only through our ascendancy that we have often softened their ferocity. It was only with these means that I had allowed myself to touch the Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris*, by this exclusive prerogative, to resist the supplications of a woman as popular as she is humane.

Thus it is to you alone, M. Feydel, that I address my plaints. You copiously fill out the *Journal de Paris*, at least once and sometimes two or three times a week. I, as a Subscriber, could at the very least have demanded just one tiny moment once a year, to see a short and very succinct Letter (always on beneficial subjects) inserted in a corner of their pages; that is the only way that I can importune the Gentlemen Editors of the *Journal de Paris*, by exclusive prerogative, to fail a woman, furthermore one of their Subscribers, and to pitilessly deny what they owe to her sex and her subscription.

Perhaps, M. Feydel, this manner of writing will indispose you towards me, you who have offered an analysis of the deepest ideas, correctly attributed the most varied things,

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25 Gabriel Feydel (1750? - 1820?), journalist, first published under the pseudonym Nicolas Roger in 1783, sending letters to numerous journals. Both Mercier and de Gouges believed him to be part of the editorial team on the *Journal de Paris* (under his real name). During the Revolution he produced his own paper, *L'Observateur* which sold well possibly because he was not averse to being economical with the truth in order to achieve a scoop. He was outlawed for a time in 1794 and survived as a travelling salesman until it was safe to return to Paris and his literary career.

written in the most rigorous style and spoken as a good Frenchman. You will find so many mistakes in this production! Unforgivable grammatical errors, unpardonable linguistic errors, unbearable errors of genius, errors of logic, politics and philosophy. Well all these errors can be erased or indicated by you; you may still, in the eyes of the Authors of the *Journal de Paris*, convert them into virtues, and offer me, the while, profitable lessons: only great geniuses can produce such revolutions.

I offer to all men beneficial reveries; to the Government, practical methods. The Editors of the *Journal* will attest that they are not taken up, because I am a woman and a dreamer; but my sex, M. Feydel may entitle me to some indulgence on your part. You will prove to me that you are, not only a good citizen but still more a zealous defender of the oppressed, and that in taking revenge for me, you will rescue all the unfortunates that I take an interest in

I am only attacking you in this way, because I hope that you will reply to it as an obliging Frenchman and valiant Knight, and that you will defend this too feeble sex, too long oppressed by men: it is ready to shake the yoke of a dishonest enslavement. I put myself in the lead; I will defend the interests and the honour of the Corps with an intrepid valour. Our triumphs are dishonest; our glory merely holds sway over your weaknesses. Neither any longer inspires respect or esteem for women, and contempt now supersedes your desires.

In the past this same desire to please us refined your courage; today it slackly debases it. If men no longer respect us, then understand that there is no quintessential woman who does not despise three quarters of men.

It is thus to the smallest number that I point out this revolution, to the two sexes inseparable one from the other: it will elevate the mind and spirit of both; both, in future, will work for the general good, and posterity will forever applaud this change. This is what I make clear in my *Pr.... ph... [Prince Philosophie]* But, concerning this Novel, allow me, M. Feydel, to say a few words to my Bookseller; I feel so inclined in this moment of gaiety.

Your cruel rejection, M. Brilland (*by acquiring my Novel*) still makes me sick at heart.<sup>26</sup> You refused me a Preface by reasoning that 'a good work has no need of one'.

This is a truth that the creators of Prefaces should have recognised long ago; but the mania for prefacing....

Far from making them aware of this good maxim, what can I say, M. Brilland, to justify the enchanting quality that I find ever seduces me into creating Prefaces? I will so discredit them in the future that I myself will no longer have the courage to bring any into the world.

You insisted that I deliver to you the manuscript without a preface: the effort that you obtained from me, was it able to convince you of my disinterest? Did you think you could escape it, Monsieur the antagonist of prefaces, and that I would allow my Novel to be sold with impunity, without telling the public all that I have to tell on the subject? Without justifying the faults of a genre I have never practised.....I would be phenomenally surprised if this Novel were to have widespread appeal, although it has seduced all those who have read it, and you yourself could not resist it. It is both the maddest and the wisest Novel, the most moral and the most philosophical. I know this well, but the public does not know it like the Author; the latter should take the precaution to alert the reader. I will not expand on the subject of this Novel; that, my dear M. Brilland, is the only favour I can grant you, notwithstanding pointing out to the reader that I only took five days to conceive of and produce this fictional essay. May it become, for your profit and my glory, a masterstroke that will stop the Almanac makers railing at my facility!<sup>27</sup> Their teaching cannot correct me;

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26 This Parisian bookseller was located in the rue Crébillon and may also be spelt Briand.

27 The editors of the *Petit Almanach des grandes femmes*, Rivarol and Champenetz, had recently poked fun at de Gouges for boasting about the speed with which she produced her works.

following my confession and perusal of this Novel, what will they say? What will they do to me, if this Novel is nonetheless successful? Undoubtedly these great Authors of little Almanacs will find me less bearable than ever, since I yet again confess to this facility.

I had flattered myself that having taken revenge on the Journalists, I would no longer need to attack or respond to anyone. Weak as I am, have I not observed the destiny of mankind in enough depth? How many times has this destiny troubled and changed its existence! Yielding to its caprices, man smiles at its bizarre notions. This destiny has therefore obliged the great Authors of little Almanacs to twice place me on the horizon. Thus I have just learnt that my name is no longer veiled, and that it emerges from obscurity, to plane above the annals of literature.

You are come, Sirs, great Authors of little Almanacs, to exact revenge for me on the Authors of the *Journal de Paris*: you have noticed that envy always attaches itself to true worth. The great Voltaire was not exempt from this. Like him, I have written plays; not tragedies, but worthwhile dramas, which could be compared to great works, by their battles and coups de théâtre. Like him, I have written a Novel in the style of an epic poem. No doubt it will be understood that I mean in prose, and in a quite natural prose. Like him, I have offered philosophy, politics, and morality but this universality of talents has yet to be cited in the *Journal de Paris*. Like him, I excited criticism; like him, I respond to it. But rest assured, impartial readers! If for one moment I compare myself to this great genius, it is only to then laugh about it with you: I only share his weaknesses. The stupidest Littérateurs never attacked him with impunity. How many of these pathetic Littérateurs have we seen sent packing by Voltaire's vengeance! It is not in my power to give them so much weight. Voltaire's trait was to become angry at their platitudes, and mine is to laugh at them. But the great Man was free to do as he pleased! His errors, his weaknesses, would be my glory. It is for this alone that one can forgive a woman who wished to momentarily cheer herself up regarding the business of two poor devils who counted on the huge success of their Almanacs. Alas! Everyone knows that they failed to consider their host. The Grocers, the Apothecaries are their guarantors; sixty Booksellers and fifteen Printers have been ruined by this work: some by printing it, others by buying it. Thirty editions of five thousand each were printed, it's assured, and only ten copies sold.

Mentioning these great Authors is doing them a service, yet the wise will blame me for revealing so much mediocrity.

I have said it before; as touchy as Voltaire, as sensitive as they come, as gay as anyone, as chatty as a magpie, I have not had the strength to keep quiet and renounce vengeance through the effort of moderation, a virtue that belongs to the wise so it is said, one I no more believe in Sirs, great Authors of little Almanacs, than in your bravery; it is a mean fault, to lack courage. Women, you know, do not like cowards and yet you still tried to convince the public. If you had a least treated the merit of all the other women with the same benign colours that you used for me, one would be forced to agree that you are most gay and amiable; but to employ reprehensible characters, disgusting sallies! I am not woman enough to endorse you. I will tell you even more; I wish I were allowed to challenge you to a singular combat: women would soon be revenged. No doubt you will doubt my valour; Mademoiselle Déon [sic] proves only too well that my sex is not lacking in courage.<sup>28</sup> I will admit there are few with this martial character, but there have been some. And you who are more fearful than women, do you not fear this sex that has distinguished itself in other circumstances, and may I, myself, convince you that Mademoiselle Déon has transmitted to me her intrepidity? Would you refuse me the pleasure of blowing out my

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28 Charles Geneviève Louis Auguste André Thimothée de Beaumont, chevalier d'Eon, (1728 - 1810) transgender soldier, spy, ambassador, whose life as a man, and then as a woman, was so complex and full of incident that it would be impossible to relate it here. At the time de Gouges was writing it was assumed that the Chevalière was female and had been obliged to live her early life as a male. On d'Eon's deathbed this was found to be untrue.

brains with you? For I declare that I only want to fight it out with pistols, three feet in the ground, and at four's distance: I will even give you the advantage of the first shot, convinced that you will tremble enough to miss me....At these words, I believe I hear you cry: 'Good God! What a woman! *Stupete, Gentes!*'<sup>29</sup> But in a tone quite different to your critic. Be assured, I already feel sorry for you. If you tremble, and if you already have goose-skin on reading this tale, I am no less afraid. Fear rather that your ears be cut off; I know that there are already plans afoot to do this. Meanwhile, it will give me great pleasure to flay them, as well as those of the Authors of the *Journal de Paris*: they are no fonder of poor grammar or spelling errors in women's works than you are. Gentlemen, you no longer notice yours because their numbers have become too great, and that it is easier to criticise the slight than the formidable. But I am forgetting M. Feydel; it is he who will allow us to reach agreement in this great contestation: the affair is his forte; it is his by right, as a favourite of the *Journal de Paris* and a profound Grammarian.

You will exclaim, principled Judges, against this genre of composition, and on the divergencies within my Reveries. Would you kindly listen to me before condemning me. Is it not true that a work must always correspond to its title? And how many are there today that, despite their most abundant material, do not even share the merit of fulfilling their name?

One can find within reveries very wise fantasies, but they must not endorse themselves otherwise they are no longer reveries.

I am more afflicted than anyone when my neighbour suffers, but when it is literary vengeance, I am infinitely amused if it is only a question of ridiculing my excesses: but I do not forgive injustice, imposture, calumny or outrageous characteristics.

If I wished to imitate irony, I dare say I would succeed. If one day my enemies anger me I will demonstrate it to the public with striking portraits of all the defects and ridiculousness of those who deserve my plaints. But why should I not amuse myself at their expense? It is only in jest that I can cheer up my brush painting portraits that seem to have smiled at me for so long: the colours will be livelier and more pleasing to the eye, and the reader will peruse these pleasing portraits with greater pleasure.

This collection will show Countesses, Marchionesses, Baronesses, Presidents, women about town, a few wives of Procurators; in men, Barons, Dukes, Equerries, Knights, Academicians who reenforce Authors; and if the collection is not complete, a few Actors.

There is the subject I propose to treat, unless a more important and useful one takes my fancy more.

You see, M. Feydel, that it will be both the portrait of my folly and my reason. I beg your pardon, and at the same time I make honourable amends to the public, to offer it my *Vengeance* following on from a Work that is more political and philosophical than gay, and that would merit all its attention.

But show me the great Man who has no weaknesses? What famous Writer has not diverged, has not been gay and lachrymose in the same work! I cite Voltaire; in view of that example, who could blame me? Where is the Philosopher who, having created a sad and severe character, would not occasionally combine the gaiety of nature with his abstract thoughts? Where is the man who has not felt in his life sorrow and satisfaction on the same day, and often in the same hour? Alas! We are machines whose organisation is so subject to change that we lean more or less towards the trait that flatters us. That is nature's game: she mocks the superfluous efforts, made in vain by supposed sages, to beat her.

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29 This can roughly be translated as 'people be amazed'; *stupete gentes*. 'Nations be amazed', is the first line of a famous hymn by Jean de Santeul (1630 - 1697) that became a catch phrase for any astonishing pronouncement.

I will admit that in a work which demands the full attention of the public this combination is misplaced, and that all my excuses are pointless. Man is weak, I know; irritated by these weaknesses, should I be seeking to justify my own? It is by exposing them to the light of day that I may correct them: the voice of the public will reach me and I will hear it with a cool head.

Nature has blessed me with plenty of courage and reason, alongside an excessive petulance too often excited by the injustice of the wicked; I can only overcome it on reflection but once it is mastered I see myself as I am, though perhaps I judge myself too severely.

I do not seek to hide my imperfections with false modesty, or refer to my assets with ridiculous confidence; I believe that, despite many faults, I possess essential qualities. My avowals prove this to be true, also my conscience, which has never reproached me. The wicked themselves, and my enemies, accept the legitimacy of this truth from the bottom of their hearts; they are obliged to agree, even out loud.

These productions will excite their envy and criticism so much! Epigrams and satire will fly from every tongue; the Capital will drown in a rain of pamphlets on my account. This deluge cannot frighten me, nor turn me from the path I have chosen for myself; I am above ridicule because I know my own faults and those of all men; better than that, I can acknowledge them. Have the courage to imitate me; each will find in their own critique enough to instruct themselves.

Thus I have the courage to admit that I acted most imprudently when I embraced politics; that I acted even more foolishly when I jumped from politics to philosophy and then to morality. A woman can cross the threshold without understanding the danger, and get lost by and by.

I returned to this subject three times but a fourth attempt would not be excusable. The first was better written; the second was full of repetitions; the third may be unbearable despite the fiction with which I thought to enrich it.

If my *Letter to the People*, my *Observations*, my *Reveries* produce the good that I promised myself they would, then I have fulfilled my task, and am satisfied.

If these three productions have no effect my zeal will have led me astray and I will blush at having attempted to treat a subject on which the more well-versed often fail.

I will not be accused, in these Writings, of making wit and genius shine....; they have been dictated by the soul and the heart, and that is the only merit they can be accorded. The great Authors of little Almanacs and the *Journal de Paris* will not praise me for this; the attention of these Gentlemen is caught by an elegant style. If a work lacks common sense....Is it well written, they say?....Ah! the style is divine! Sublime! One cannot comprehend the Author but there is so much pleasure in reading an elegant work that one easily dispenses with the essentials. Nowadays people write as foppishly as they behave: thus I can only obtain the approbation of the wise, and the esteem of the righteous.

If my taxation plans are not implemented by the Assembly of the Estates General, this august Assembly will nonetheless offer me its esteem. I must hope so, and judge by the love I bear my motherland, the Nation. I have received letters from every Province and the opinion of all good citizens in the Capital confirms what these letters express: that my writing is imbued with a most precious patriotism, with the strongest love and respect for the Monarch and, that as they read, all citizens feel drawn in despite themselves; that I have been able to touch the hearts and minds of all the true French; that even those who had gone astray rediscovered their noble character. I could print fifty letters, all of them most precious. The cause is so beautiful that it excuses this excessive enthusiasm. But perhaps I have already indulged myself too much; I admit that I would have stifled this glory if the Journalists had behaved otherwise. But I am not so feeble that I will shed my anonymity. I admit that I have not been secretive with my friends, nor with all those to whom I have myself addressed these productions, for fear that they be deemed suspect

before they are read. The eulogies, the criticisms, arrived at the same time. I am taking revenge both on the stupid, on the Journalists, on indiscreet men; I am proving that a woman can be even more useful to humanity, to the Nation, and her King, than many men of high office are to Society.

There, I believe, is a most complete vengeance; an amour-propre that the envious excited within me, that good people will forgive, and that all the true French will approve! It is not in the style of those who give generously: he who donates should keep quiet. Surely glory and humanity should not be stifled; one and the other are both manifest in our writings, in our discourse; the most precious recompense is seeing that our work, our efforts, have not been without fruit, and have produced the general good.

There, M. Feydel, is the sweetest vengeance that my heart has ever felt for all that has been unleashed against me. If you find any hearts among those I have included in my *Vengeance*, bring them back to me.

I await your reply; I yearn to know it: may it be the foundation stone of my Writings. This correspondence will place them in the *Journal de Paris*, and will make known my project for the elderly and children held in the workhouse of Saint-Denis, and you will have an even greater share in this benefit than I. If I have occasionally teased in this piece, believe me, this comes from my heart; may you and the Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris* grasp this truth. By taking an interest in this humanitarian act on my behalf, they will in their turn take revenge on my resentment; this double revenge will be at the same time their eulogy and my own.

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Just as I had finished this work I was brought the *Journal de Paris*; in it I see the terrible disaster caused by the flood. I cannot forgive myself for having cut from my *Patriotic Observations* my prediction on this subject. I fear that the critics will compare me to a second Joan of Arc yet my visions are more natural, I base them on experience.

Born in a country subject to floods I have known quantities of men perish through lack of precaution and assistance, and always expected, after snow and hard ice, that deluging rain would suddenly change the season, and produce appalling floods.<sup>30</sup> Why have men, now having reached such a degree of knowledge, not proposed to the Government the method of preventing these disasters, by proposing that rivers prone to breaking their banks, be filled with boats as ports are filled with ships in peace time?

The Government would then need to build an infinite number of boats, solid enough to survive a long time on the river, that would be transported into the towns and counties subject to flooding, at the first sign of a thaw. I am merely sketching out ideas here, I leave the task of investigating them more profoundly to the Government but it should not be lost from view that three quarters of flooded out inhabitants die as a lack of this wise precaution.

I will not save my Motherland like Joan of Arc, spear in hand; I can prevent its problems only through sound advice; the thoughtless alone may criticise this advice, and not the Gentlemen Authors of the *Journal de Paris*.

Note. I must also observe, at the same time, that a number of printing errors have found their way into these works that are not my responsibility. I will cite but two to prove the point; instead of *economy, sobriety*; a word left out between *families* and *multiplied*, which, in my view should read *his families had multiplied*; these mishaps can be pardoned in the circumstances given the haste with which this work was printed

30 Olympe de Gouges was a native of Montauban, a town prone to severe flooding. In 1766 her husband, Pierre Aubry, died when the river Tarn catastrophically broke its banks: five hundred houses were destroyed and thousands were made homeless. It is not known if Aubry drowned or succumbed to the inevitable diseases that floods create.