

MIRABEAU

AUX

CHAMPS-ÉLISÉES.

Mirabeau in the Elysian Fields.¹

A one act comedy in prose,

by Madame de GOUGES,

Performed in Paris, by the Comédiens Italiens ordinaires du Roi, on the 15 April 1791, with alterations, and several new scenes.

Price, 24 sols.

PARIS

At GARNÉRY, bookseller, rue Serpente, no. 17.

CHARACTERS.

MIRABEAU.

J. JACQUES.

VOLTAIRE.

MONTESQUIEU.

FRANKLIN.

HENRI IV.

LOUIS XIV.

DESILLES.

FORTUNÉ, aged 12 and dressed as a national guardsman.

THE CARDINAL OF AMBOISE.

SOLON.

DESTINY.

MADAME DESHOULIÈRES.

SÉVIGNÉ.

¹ This one act play, written with characteristic speed following the death of Mirabeau on 2 April 1791, was first performed on the 15th of the same month. The theatrical tradition of using the shades of famous men to comment on the present goes back to Greek times and possibly beyond. A fashion for such plays took off in France in 17th and 18th centuries. What is unusual about de Gouges's play is that she represents women as equals among these great men.

Honoré Gabriel Riquetti comte de Mirabeau (1749 – 1791) was as famous for his scandalous life as he was for his writings. The events of 1789 unleashed his consummate energy and verve into the world politics. An aristocrat voted in as a deputy of the Third Estate, his oratory and imposing (and to some, repugnant) physical presence made him a natural leader. Representing the people, he supported progressive reforms while realising that too much chaotic change could unbalance the entire country. He believed in constitutional monarchy. Did he sell his soul to the monarchy as some have said, or was he trying to lead it to safer ground for the good of the country? Burnt out at 42 from the excesses of his youth and the exertions of revolutionary life his reputation still divides opinion. However, when this play was written his death was viewed as a great loss to France.

NINON DE L'ENCLOS.

A multitude of shades from the four corners of the world.

Each actor's costume must be precisely observed.

PREFACE.

Until this moment literature had a certain charm for me; today, filled with horror and disgust at composition, I randomly dictate this preface: that is more or less my manner.

With ardour and good faith I offered the public a patriotic play, it was received leniently: today I present it in print with the same defects, more or less, and the same verve that I have always given my writings; I know that this will not be enough to satisfy the public, it does not suffice to pique its curiosity, one must agitate its taste, and I lack the literary coquettishness required; such coquettishness is quite different from that of beautiful women; the one needs all the graces of youth, the other, on the contrary, needs to age with the labour and experience of the art.

On the 12th of this month I presented *Mirabeau in the Elysian Fields* to the *Italiens*; even with expression underpinned by esteem and enthusiasm I could not offer one worthy of my gratitude towards this company. Having, with one voice, unanimously received my play they told me they would study it in order to perform it twenty-four hours later; I admit that I was less astonished by their alacrity than I was by the possibility of their memorizing it; the time it would take the copyist to deliver the roles was their sole anxiety; a voice cried out: *Hey! Why don't we copy them out ourselves!* Straightaway a patriotic impulse fired all hearts, and in half an hour, in my presence, every performer had copied their role; they did more, they suggested several changes to me, but the little time left to us did not allow us to give to this play the polish that we could have mutually desired. At the same time as the actors were learning the script I thought it prudent to submit it to the taste and learning of an *ordinary connoisseur*; for I must warn the public that I still have the habit of seeking opinions only from those who know scarcely more than I do, and as this comment neither touches on their probity nor on their manners they can hardly be annoyed by it. Thus I was advised to cut the role of Louis XIV by three quarters, being assured that the character would be ill-received at this time, because I presented him in a favourable light. The *comédie italienne*, having determined to learn the play in twenty-four hours, made new cuts of its own, and at the performance my Louis the Great was mighty small, mighty pitiful; my surprise was as great as that of the public to see him arrive on stage. To do what? To say one word and hear disobliging things. The general condemnation regarding this fully justifies the author but the uninstructed public, pending her justification, do not spare her; one had to choose in the moment, hang oneself or justify oneself, the last seemed to me the sweetest: convinced that the French will not always judge me harshly, today I appeal to their impartiality.

All the criticisms that were made to me regarding this play were justified but perhaps the work did not deserve them; let my aim in showing Mirabeau in the Elysian Fields be examined; it was to pay homage to his memory, that was the prime impulse of my heart, of my patriotism; I took only four hours to create this play, and in such a short time it was fair to require that I make a masterpiece of the gathering of all the great men, that I use my artistry to make each one of them speak in their own way, not only as they spoke in their private lives, for no one will deny that our greatest men have always been straightforward in society, but also be eloquent, precise and energetic, as they were in their works. *Mirabeau above all would not have merited the plaudits that are his due if he had expressed himself as I have made him speak.* As though it were easy to make him

speaking without delving into the dialogue of his own writings, as though it were easy to take his place at the national assembly; Mirabeau, one knows, was himself a procrastinator when he was unprepared; and, whatever the sex of the writer, you will insist that the authorial talent be the equal of the great man in his finest moments. You will be satisfied; my effort will not be that great for it consists of incorporating fragments of his sublime speeches into the body of my play; I fear a miscellany, but it is what you asked for. The passage that I thought the best suited to this play was the elegy Mirabeau wrote on the death of Franklin: Franklin himself presents it at the Elysian Fields, he speaks the very words that Mirabeau pronounced in his honour at the National Assembly; everyone with whom I shared this alteration assured me that it was well conceived; I thought it augured well. But the women! The women! So generous towards their sex, but not one of them noticeably lent a hand in the performance of this play. And my friends, my good friends! I must address one word to them now that I have made a start. All awaited, or feared, my success for friendship nowadays does not preclude petty jealousies. Some, I know, applauded its limited success, the more disinterested took another view: a feeling of pity covers with opprobrium the one who provokes it. None had the noble generosity to come and console me and, as though I had committed a crime, everyone abandoned me. Ah! Such friends! Ah! Harsh ordeal! No, none are as certain as those of the theatre: success hides all defects, even vices; a failure offers them all up, and virtues disappear.

My play, far from failing, was actually applauded; it provoked criticism and, even more so, envy, which convinces me that it is not so bad; but I have none to laud it; but I have no multitude of authors who usually stick together to make their works succeed; alone, isolated, and the butt of so many disappointments, how could I expect any success, even one I deserved. I am unhappy besides, I believe in ill-fate and have shown it through the transmigration of souls.²

I have, I believe, been worthy of my motherland's praise; she never could forget that at a time when she was in irons, a woman had the courage to take up a pen and be the first to break them apart. I attacked despotism, ministerial intrigue, the vices of the government: I respected the monarchy and I embraced the people's cause; all my acquaintances trembled on my behalf, but nothing could shake my resolution; doubtless talent did not rise to my noble ambition, but I showed myself to be an ardent patriot; I sacrificed my repose, my pleasures, the greater part of my fortune, even my son's position, for the good of my country, and I have received no recompense other than the one that resides in my own heart; this must be dear to me and bring me joy, for I seek no others. Perhaps I might have been entitled to expect a mark of goodwill from the National Assembly which ought to set the universe an example of the esteem that one owes all citizens who devote themselves to the good of their country; it cannot dissimulate that it has adopted all the projects that I offered in my writings prior to its convocation; all hostilities are denounced to its august tribunal, and I denounce its indifference towards me to posterity. The Assembly, each and every member, has received the collection of my works, and only the incomparable Mirabeau expressed his gratitude to me, he alone had the magnanimity to encourage me, maybe above and beyond my talents, but this accolade convinced me that he validated my views, my patriotism. I include here his letter as my justification.

² De Gouges allegedly believed in metempsychosis i.e. the possibility that souls could transmigrate at death into the bodies of others. This was not limited to humans and reincarnation could take place between species. De Gouges liked to say that her pets i.e. dogs, bullfinches, cats etc. had once been great men whose hubris obliged them to do penance as lesser beings. Preexistence and metempsychosis, mentioned by Pythagoras and Plato, were cornerstones of the Cathar religion (embedded in de Gouges's Languedoc) and continued to be philosophically debated among Protestants who retained a strong presence in de Gouges's home province. She herself was of no religious persuasion but her imagination undoubtedly enjoyed the possibilities offered by the idea of reincarnation.

Versailles, 12 September 1789.

I am very touched, Madame, that you were kind enough to send my your work; until now I had believed that the graces only adorned themselves with flowers. But an effortless understanding and a strong mind have heightened your ideas, and your advance, as speedy as the revolution's, is equally marked by successes. I pray, Madame, please accept all my thanks, and trust in the respectful sentiments with which I have the honour of being, Madame, you most humble and most obedient servant,

THE COUNT OF MIRABEAU.

The slanders that have been spread about me, the dark calumny that has been used to poison every worthy thing I have done, would be sufficient to puff up my pride, since in truth I am being treated and persecuted as one would a great man; if I could convince myself to do it I would realise the plan that I have made and retire from society altogether to live in solitude, study our authors and contemplate a plan that I conceived in favour of my sex, of my ungrateful sex; I know its defects, its nonsenses, but I also sense that it can rise up one day; that is what I wish to concentrate on.³ This is a work in progress, and I will not present it overnight; yet I wish to bid farewell comically to my fellow citizens; having put the dead on the stage, I want to place the living there; I wish to play myself and not spare my own idiocies so that I need not safeguard those of others; I have found no plan more vast, nor more original, than *madame de Gouges in hell*. It is easy to imagine that I will find myself there with characters worthy of my attention and my indignation; the *comédiens français* for example.... my good friends.... the good authors who pitilessly rebuked me with their brilliant observations on a few synonyms, and who despoiled me, flagrantly stealing from me, like a certain Labreu who had the effrontery to swindle my son out of a play on enforced vows for his own theatre, then had the audacity to print on the poster, by *madame de Gouges and monsieur Labreu*.⁴ He's keen that one; it's as though the *comédiens italiens* claimed to have written a play just because I agreed to the changes they required of me. The giddy aristocratic ladies, the demagogues, the enraged, in a word I will go to hell, *but I will not go alone and someone will follow me there*. However I give notice that I have no intention of touching on morals nor on anyone's probity, these are my principles.⁵ It would be most pleasing, and it would not surprise me, if this farce covered me in glory: my patriotic purse project; the responsibility of ministers; public establishments for the poor; a method for using fallow lands, and all unemployed men; taxes on theatres, servants, carriages, horses, and gambling so that it may be destroyed by an exorbitant tax; my *Black Slavery*, a play that unjustly excited the hatred of the Colonists but which does not alter the fact that I was the first to write on the subject *dramatically* for humanity; three more volumes of my works, no less esteemed by those with taste, have not drawn towards me a generally favourable attention; this is quite the opportunity to cite these verses:

“My Henry IV and my Zaire,
And my American Alzire,
Have never been worthy of one glance from the King;
I had a thousand enemies and very little glory.
At last prizes and wealth upon me now are showering

3 Seven months later, on 14 November 1791 de Gouges published her *Déclaration des Droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*.

4 For more on de Gouges's problem with Labreu see the Preface of *Le Couvent* on www.olympedegouges.eu.

5 De Gouges had personally experienced public denigration and false accusations concerning her private life and had no intention of doing the same to others.

For a fairground farcical story.”⁶

P.S. Mirabeau's anonymous altruism I have been assured is true; I cannot be sure that the infant is dead, but it has been vital that I cut its throat in order to make the good intention public.⁷

[This is presented as an addendum or afterthought.] I have not only made this play available to the capital, I have also hastened to print it for the provinces before it is reprised in Paris, convinced that they will thank me for this haste; equally I beg and charge all the municipalities of the kingdom, in accordance with the National Assembly's decree which gives writers their authors' rights, to deduct my share and donate it to women who have distinguished themselves through some patriotic act, like those of Nancy, likewise all those who will have the honourable courage to imitate it.⁸

YET ANOTHER PREFACE.

THE reader will not fail to say, this woman really likes to preface: patience reader, I will at least try to ensure that this one is useful.

I could be led to believe that nature has placed within me the gift of prophecy. Ah! If I had been a fanatic, how many miracles I could have produced by now! All my writings fizz

6 'Mon Henri quatre & ma Zaïre,/Et mon américaine Alzire,/Ne m'ont valu jamais un seul regard du roi;/J'avais mille ennemis avec très-peu de gloire./Les honneurs & les biens pleuvent enfin sur moi/Pour une farce de la foire.' was written by Voltaire to mark his unsolicited offer of a position as a gentleman of the bedchamber obtained for him by Mme d'Etiolles in recompense for arranging an evening's entertainment *La Princesse de Navarre*, with music by Rameau, to celebrate the upcoming marriage of the Dauphin in 1745. De Gouges is ironically suggesting that her projected comic farce will succeed where her serious works have failed while taking the opportunity to compare herself to the eminent Voltaire and remind her readership of her previous works. Voltaire later sold his court position but retained its prerogatives while Mme d'Etiolles went on to become Louis XV's mistress and marquise de Pompadour having possibly danced with the King for the first time during the performance of *La Princesse de Navarre*.

https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Commentaire_historique/Édition_Garnier

7 This most elliptical post-scriptum only makes sense if one assumes it is poorly placed within the text and should refer to the character Fortuné listed at the top of the piece i.e. he is real, Mirabeau was good to his mother, the boy may still be alive, but in order to place him in the Elysian Fields to speak of Mirabeau's kindness within the play, de Gouges has had to end his life. Given de Gouges's desire to do well by Mirabeau's memory it is probable that she wanted to both uphold the fact of his generosity while also maintaining an ambiguity that might protect his honour, a trait that was always in question. Olivier Blanc, de Gouges's biographer, believes Mirabeau once helped a young woman in a convent though there was never mention of a child. Despite considerable research into army records and other documents Jessica Goodman has not been able to find any concrete evidence that Fortuné or anyone like him ever existed (*Commemorating Mirabeau, Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées and other texts* (MHRA, 2017).

8 I have only been able to find three references to the women of Nancy which might explain this statement. One is in relation to the 1790 military insurrection in the city and their role in supporting the injured Desilles which features in a play, *Le nouveau Arras* (text by baron de Jore, music by Le Breton), performed to great success at the Théâtre Italien in the autumn of 1790: the second is the mention of a local Nancy woman called Humbert who, at great risk to herself during the insurrection, put out the fuse of a cannon by throwing a bucket of water at it, thus saving a troop of soldiers from certain death (Jean-Bernard, *Les Lundis révolutionnaires*, 1790); the third appears in Villier's *Histoire des clubs de femmes*, 1910 in which he refers to the *Compagnie des dames patriotes de Nancy* who, on 19 April 1791, sent a message of whole-hearted support to their National Guardsmen about to swear an oath of allegiance to their country (although this post-dates the performance of this play it may have been known by de Gouges when she wrote the preface).

with them; because they are there for all to see no one believes in them, but one day they will be cited. I am encouraged to refer back to my patriotic miracles because atheism assures me that unlike Joan of Arc I do not have to fear a holy bonfire; perhaps I should fear the national lantern, but I am assured that its noble functions have been suspended, therefore I will make use of all my rights as a free citizen and zealous patriot.⁹

For fifteen years I have anticipated the revolution, greater political minds had anticipated it longer ago; M. de Saint-Germain and the queen have heralded it for at least thirty years, but not as the public understands it; the old fellow St.-Germain automatically doubted the royal household, with no plan to make these doubts of general use; the queen, by dispensing with etiquette lost the respect of the French; I once made an observation regarding her which twenty people will attest.¹⁰ About fourteen years ago I found myself at the entrance of the *comédie française* when the queen arrived, young, elegant, looking just like our most voguish and affected girls; her appearance, her style, enchanted all onlookers but people muttered under their breath. I said out loud: *farewell royal majesty, one day this queen will weep tears of blood thanks to her inconsequence*; the prognosis was only too well realised. But inconsequence is not a vice, it belongs to youth and often pays tribute to innocence. Should a queen be exempt from this innocence? Some will say yes, others no; I say that what is done is done so, my fellow citizens, let us only look to the future. I pity the queen even more given the accusations that she mistreats the French people, for which she may have no reason to reproach herself; evidently she has no real friends! All the scribblers have written against her, and no one has taken up the pen to justify her, no one has had the noble courage to tell her of her obligation to the French, her obligation to herself in such a time as this. If there are any aristocratic plots, refractory priests, supposed patriots, then it is the queen who has roused them, and always the queen. How so! Will a gross lie always lead men astray, allow vice to triumph, and mask the truth! She is surely very badly attended, this queen, as one cannot find among any of the dignitaries of her court one with enough strength, enough loyalty, to say to her: Madame, all the exertions of the nobility and clergy are powerless, the revolution is decided; you must embrace the new government despite any defects it may

9 The 'lanterne' or lamppost was used as a summary gibbet during riots and uprisings; generally Parisian street lights of the period were hung on ropes or chains across the roads but some were fixed to angled brackets attached to buildings, often at street corners, and it is these that were used to hang people.

10 It is clear that de Gouges is talking about Marie Antoinette, however thirty years before 1791, she was still a child in Vienna so one must take 'thirty years' with a pinch of salt. There is also some difficulty placing M. de Saint-Germain who could either be Claude Louis de Saint-Germain (1707-1778) or the comte de Saint-Germain whose life span, according to those who attest to having known him, is said to have started around 1680 and ended after 1820 (his servant was prone to saying he had worked for his master for five hundred years). The former Saint-Germain was a soldier who became a Field-Marshal and Minister of War under Louis XVI in October 1775 (he was introduced by Turgot and Malesherbes as part of their cost-cutting initiatives). He tried to cut down numbers of officers and reorganise the army. He improved exercises and manoeuvres and generally increased the efficiency of the military but resigned in 1777 as his reforms were hugely unpopular. He died in 1778 but his Prussian style methods very taken up and proved influential in reshaping the revolutionary army and making it surprising successful. De Gouges may have felt some animosity towards him given that her son was an officer in the army and her partner ran a business provisioning the troops: both would have been vulnerable to cutbacks in defence spending. In 1777 Marie Antoinette attended a performance of *l'Amant bourru* in which a character called Saint-Germain was accused of getting everything wrong and needing to be sacked. The audience turned to face the Queen and showed their approval of these sentiments and their dislike of the General by clapping long and loud (Lunel, *Le théâtre et la révolution*, Slatkine, 1911). The latter Saint-Germain was an adventurer, philosopher, magician, musician, alchemist who travelled the world always in the top echelons of society, often the guest of royalty. He had as many pseudonyms as he had talents, Voltaire claimed he knew everything. He met many of the great and good, and is mentioned in many memoirs. Official papers in Germany claim he died in 1784 but Mme de Adhémar wrote that she met him in 1789 in Versailles and that he predicted the fate of the French monarchs. Certainly, both men would have been 'old fellows' in the 1770s (assuming one wasn't immortal); my money is on de Gouges referencing the General and not the alchemist but I may well be wrong.

have; you must embrace the cause of the people, and gain anew their love for you; you must distance from your court all those who affirm the counter-revolution; you yourself must write to the people, and not withstanding the dignity that belongs to sovereigns, an altruistic queen can for a moment come down from the throne to prove to her people that her happiness depends on its own contentment, and solemnly declare that she will be the first to unravel any plots against the public repose that come to her attention, and that her majesty must again reassure her people that she will unmask, pursue as a criminal of lese-nation and lese-majesty, the woman or man of the court who would wish, by false alarms, to lead it astray. Her attendants will not hesitate to poison my observation but as I have no expectations, as I ask for nothing, and as I am not fit to pay court to the king, or to parvenu citizens, I will speak the truth without worrying that it has hurt the ears of those who dislike it. I will say much more; the only point of my writings is to contribute to public tranquility, to the general good, and that is how I will loyally serve my motherland.

But why have our new ministers, who represent the king and queen, offered no similar precautionary observations? Why have they not sought to purge this court that still preserves ancient chimeras? And these chimeras, far from providing it with its original brilliance, make it lose its lustre on a daily basis. What charms does this court possess to make all heads giddy after only three months at the most? Have ministers forgotten that they have been charged with our sacred concerns, have they forgotten the responsibility we have conferred upon them, have they forgotten the esteem with which the public proclaimed them? No, they cannot have forgotten, and I believe they are still worthy of it; but as I have said, this court is fatal; it is composed of those who are amiable, insinuating, especially the women, and our ministers are men, soon we make gods of them and they believe it. The health of the nation is in their hands, and it is so delightful to deify oneself; that is more or less how the courtiers use adulation around the ministers; but times have changed, and the old politics of court are no longer in fashion. Today keeping one's position is not a marvellous secret and nor is it a great effort, one just has to be impartial and sincere; if they never forget this lesson I can assure them all they will die honourably at their posts.

Incendiary projects, put together so artfully by the seditious, and immediately thwarted, spread alarm and perpetuate anarchy. Some genuinely fear for the king, his false friends add their weight to this fear, and the conclusion is that his majesty must be stolen away from the fury of these two parties: the king has nothing to fear, and if he were to disappear the kingdom would be turned upside down, all would be delivered up to bloodshed, to fire, and the state would be lost without resource. But whatever their troubles, the mass of good citizens is too impressive to put the king in danger; the king must be free and able, in safety, to visit his country houses whenever he so wishes.¹¹ Mirabeau contained these two parties, it is said, by pilfering from both; he profited, as did the state, by being faithful to the constitutional principles; his true ambition was to bring back order. At the start, he said, someone was needed to grease the wheels of the popular chariot, and the dupe was found. This dupe is not hard to recognise, it is said that he is beginning to yelp again and that he is singing once more. I have no idea why our engravers did not think to create a caricature of the turkey wearing a crown; it is said that after all his spending he has been left with rage alone, and so he continues to foment sedition. The poltroon! The coward! Can he be blind to justice, to the French spirit's character? Can he forget his aversion to traitors? Can he forget that from morning till night

¹¹ On 18 April 1791 the King wished to spend Easter at Saint-Cloud, a chateau near Paris that he had acquired from his Orléans cousins to offer to Marie Antoinette. There he hoped to attend a mass but rumours abounded that he was seeking to escape the country (fuelled in part by pamphlets from the Cordeliers club probably written by Marat and Danton). The royal family were in their coaches when an angry crowd gathered and prevented them from leaving. Neither Lafayette nor Bailly could resolve the situation so after three hours the journey was abandoned much to Louis XVI's distress who found his royal household constrained and unable to celebrate the most important mass of the Christian calendar.

hate has taken the place of love, and whatever sacrifices he has made of his fortune, he has never possessed the esteem of the public, he will only ever reign in the gutter. Why does the rabble-rouser not tremble, does he not fear the punishment that public vengeance is reserving for his assaults? Wretch! Are those the means you use to serve the motherland! She is traduced by both sides, torn apart by both sides, and the people are led astray yet again, not yet knowing how to distinguish real friends from the traitors who cheat wearing specious masks. I know perfectly well that I am endangering myself by speaking like this; the crowned dupe has already attempted to take my life, *but it is beautiful to die serving one's country*.¹²

What, will it not be possible to regain order: the nation is divided, the king is without strength, the military is insubordinate, the leaders are mocked, the general insulted, the magistrate powerless, and the law is voiceless; everything is appallingly out of kilter, a shock can be terrible, yet there is still time to repair everything, and to save the state and its citizens; but one must, by a general reconciliation, a concord of patriotic enthusiasm, bring people back to their homes, to their work, make the law speak with all its vigour for all citizens without distinction, recall the fugitives, engage foreigners to return to France. Alas! Given we have but one moment to spend on earth, let us leave to our children and our descendants, the imprints of a constitution that must ensure for ever their happiness and our glory, and let us in our time, if we can, make the kingdom flourish anew.

That is what I had to say; I have told the truth as it needs to be pronounced, without reflexion, without research, without caring about style; the alterations to my play, the creation of these prefaces are the work of an afternoon; if I had asked for any advice maybe I would have had the modesty to take it, but as those that I have followed on two or three occasions have been disapproved by the public, I present myself as I always have, with the disorder of untamed nature, always myself, adorned by my simplicity.

I will not fail to address this play, with two extra copies, to all our ministers while engaging them to deliver one to the King and one to the Queen; if they already fear candour, my forthrightness will not amuse them. Meanwhile M. de Montmorin can justify me, he knows that I have not waited for permission to speak the truth; I dared manifest it with energy under the *ancien régime*, several letters from him praise it and are proof of my patriotism.¹³ I have not invited him to execute his good will; he does not know me, I am not on the register of pensions, [but] my zeal and my disinterest are known: and I have sacrificed even my son's position. So whether or not my son has a position I will, nonetheless, serve my country.

12 The 'dupe' no doubt refers to Louis Philippe Joseph, duc d'Orléans - de Montpensier and de Chartres - (1747 - 1793), of royal blood and extremely wealthy he sought power through various means, assisted by his ambitious agent Choderlos de Laclos. Hoping, but failing, to be regent he embraced the new political order, was elected to the Convention under the name Philippe Egalité. A liberal supporter of writers and artists his Parisian home the Palais-Royal became, during the revolution, a hotbed of political and sexual intrigue. De Gouges dedicated her first volume of theatrical works to this patron in 1788 but later saw in him, and Laclos, only greed and a total lack of integrity. Making her opinions known was indeed dangerous. In October 1789 a band of ruffians had accosted her outside her lodgings, she believed Laclos had sent them. In March 1793 armed men, who were almost certainly orchestrated by Laclos, pursued her in the streets. She escaped by weaving through shops in narrow streets unknown to her harassers yet when she successfully had one of the men arrested by the national guards he was soon released as de Gouges was discredited for having sought to defend Louis XVI during his trial.

13 Montmorin-Saint-Herem, Armand-Marc comte de (1745 – 1792) attended Louis XVI in his youth, was the King's Ambassador in Madrid, and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1787. Close to Necker he resigned and was reinstated alongside the Swiss. Following the events of 1789 Montmorin somewhat reluctantly agreed to collaborate discreetly with Mirabeau to facilitate a constitutional change of government. Implicated by the royal family's flight to Varennes because he had (probably innocently) signed the false travel papers, he resigned his post but continued to clandestinely work for the King. Arrested a few days after the 10 August 1792 he was in the Abbaye prison on 2 September and died at the hands of the mob who broke in that day.

I am not one of those venal women whose maxims are as changeable as fashion, who preach religion when it doesn't need any encouragement, but who destroy it when it loses its support, who wage war on the dead and the *philosophes*, who adulate the living, encourage crime, and sacrifice the most sacred things to their insatiable ambition and egotism.

In all my writings, I attacked Mirabeau as a public figure, perhaps I alone was not afraid of him; I dared tell him that if his heart were as big as his mind, the state would be saved; that phrase in my *Discours de l'aveugle* has not been forgotten: *once your pen is constantly directed towards the good, altars will have to be raised up to you*. That is another of my prophecies that has come true. He is dead, and I have eulogised him because he is no more.

You, French, who will read me, however little your taste runs to this perusal, learn to recognise me and you will attest to my principles; I will end by recommending that you, for your own benefit, affirm, and secure your king on the throne, and dread the fate of the frogs in the fable.¹⁴

PROLOGUE.

DESTINY, *in a chariot*.

I have just had the days of the great Mirabeau cut short. For the first time I saw the hand of fate tremble; a child followed close behind this great man, that was my design.....

One has to admit that the human race is quite strange; how does it use the genius it has received from nature in preference to all other animals? Feeble mortals! How far removed you are from the happiness you seek! Yet you are so close to it, but the consuming ambition that torments you and the insatiable thirst of your personal interests make you poison all those gifts that heaven has spread on the earth. Ah! If I did not watch over their prosperity, men would eviscerate each other without even knowing why. What a lesson in morality I am giving the French, by removing one of their strongest pillars in the prime of his life. At present they complain of my rigour: unjust men, cast an eye on your inconsistencies and your prejudices and you will recognise your wrongs: you have persecuted, and you still persecute, those alone who sacrifice themselves for the common good. You only know how to appreciate them when they are no more; all in good time! Yet I cannot deny that I love the French, their character, their spirit, even their madness; but in this moment of giddiness that is leading them astray, I would not be astonished if they were to conspire against me for they are quite capable of it; but I defy them to reach me, I am a bit too high up to fear that famous lantern; in truth their revolution is most original....They arrived, without shedding blood, to a level of constitutional perfection; all other nations would have turned the soil red to achieve it. But will they be constant enough, reasonable enough, not to destroy such a miraculous work....That is my secret; let us see how they will conduct themselves after Mirabeau's death; let us see if they will know how to engage me to name a successor to this great genius. Let us prepare everything at the Elysian Fields to receive him. Ah! How surprised and afflicted will the great men of France be to see him arrive among them; but I hope to console them by the

¹⁴ This is a reference Aesop's fable of the discontented frogs who prayed for a king. Jupiter sent them a log, soon they were bored and asked for another monarch. This time they got a crane who gobbled them up. The survivors realised their folly, life had been pretty good before the log, and begged for the past to be reinstated. But, they had got what they asked for so Jupiter made them live with the consequence of their wishes.

gifts I will make to their motherland; I will arrange everything and may heaven and earth today applaud my favours.

As the chariot disappears in the wings, the cloud lifts to reveal the Elysian Fields and the shades.

MIRABEAU AT THE ELYSIAN FIELDS.

ONE ACT COMEDY IN PROSE.

The shades should be in costumes suited to their period.

The overture should be of a sweet and peaceful music, mixed with a few plaintive tunes.

The set represents the Elysian Fields.

As the curtain goes up all shades are wandering at the back of the stage. One should see a sort of cloud, imitating a vapour, which imperceptibly lifts. This vapour should conclude the play as the last chorus ends.

FIRST SCENE.

JEAN-JACQUES, VOLTAIRE, MONTESQUIEU.¹⁵

VOLTAIRE.

I say to you again, Montesquieu, times have changed.¹⁶ The dark ages are over: light has spread across all the world; your principles of government are no longer opportune; everywhere mankind recognises natural law, everywhere its gentle doctrines are felt in all hearts. Jean-Jacques, better than any of us, deployed this divine law.

JEAN-JACQUES.

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778), Voltaire aka François-Marie Arouet (1694 – 1778) and Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (1689 – 1755) were the three philosophers who most influenced political thought preceding 1789: Montesquieu challenged the notion of absolutism and believed in the separation of powers; Voltaire likewise attacked an overweening monarchical government as well as seeking an end to fanatical religious beliefs; Rousseau, younger and more radical, attacked society itself, believing that it corrupted the fundamental instincts of mankind and that a return to the ideals of a more natural age would allow a new order to arise based on freedom and equality.

¹⁶ Throughout the play the characters address each other using *tu* irrespective of their previous rank on earth. French grammars codifying the literary use of the informal pronoun suggested that it be used when the dead speak to each other but de Gouges may have used it for other reasons i.e to create a Utopian atmosphere at a time when the use of *tu* was acquiring political weight (the law enforcing its use on all occasions was not passed until 1793). Other plays of the period set in the Elysian Fields do not stick to any one rule with both *vous* and *tu* used within a given text.

Voltaire, do not envy me this advantage: you laid the foundations for all the great and useful things that took effect in France.

VOLTAIRE.

We were enemies on earth, when our true principles should have united us: we were both heading towards the same ends but I was not free from glory or jealousy. Ah! How many times you made me tremble. (*Aside.*) The brute! He scorched the paper with his fiery pen.

JEAN-JACQUES.

We no longer sense, in this peaceful sojourn, our terrestrial concerns. But Montesquieu is most sombre. What! You seem to find our conversation distressing. The memory of you could never die: your works are still much admired across the universe. But would you want to assume that all men, everywhere, are the same? There is but one truth: everything changes, the man who has served never dies, and whatever new form the French government takes, your writings will remain immortal regardless.

MONTESQUIEU.

Indulgence becomes you: you can afford to be generous when your writings are more popular than mine; but do you believe they suit the French spirit? The government is at the moment without strength or dignity; trade is annihilated and merchants are bankrupted; the ruin of the three orders has produced financial penury; workshops are deserted; labourers are unemployed; there is no relief for the poor; artistry and talent have disappeared along with the emigrants.¹⁷

VOLTAIRE.

They'll return and all will be reestablished in a better form.

JEAN-JACQUES.

The state was weakened; the ministers were villainous. The people, crushed by taxation, suffered their horrible slavery in silence. Tired of the tyranny that pitilessly oppressed them, they recognised their rights, their strength. Perhaps they have gone too far, but that is the effect of all revolutions.

MONTESQUIEU.

How many victims will perish before the moment of perfection you hope for is attained? The generous Desilles, that young soldier, a partisan of the good cause, was nonetheless assassinated by his own side.¹⁸

VOLTAIRE.

17 In her earlier political pamphlets de Gouges often commented on the difficulties faced by those most affected by France's financial crisis i.e. the working classes. In *Discours de l'aveugle aux Français* of June 1789 she refers to Mirabeau as someone of great talent and facility who would do more for people if he could set aside his inconsequentiality and determined to work for the common good.

18 André Joseph Marc Guillier Désilles (or Des Isles) was a young infantry officer who tried to prevent the mutineer soldiers in Nancy (31 August 1790) from firing cannons at the soldiers sent by the government to quell their insurrection. He wanted to prevent brothers in arms firing on each other. The ensuing fight killed many including civilians; when peace was restored the remaining mutineers were severely punished. Three regiments had been involved in the mutiny including the Swiss Guards of Châteaueux who, despite being mercenaries, were considered particularly loyal. Désilles's actions – he was severely injured in the leg – made him a hero throughout France and, at Mirabeau's suggestion, the young man was thanked by the National Assembly while also being awarded a gallantry medal by Louis XVI. He died six weeks after the event of septicaemia, aged twenty-three.

They were won over; but after the report he has given us of the actual state of France, of the legislators' foresight, the citizens' vigilance in dissipating seditious plots, you should now have more confidence in a revolution so wisely managed. Mirabeau, in particular, has the ability to contain both parties. This does not surprise me as his genius was going to destroy despots one day; irons, prison, exile, dungeons, none could deflect him from his vast career.¹⁹ Let this great man be another twenty years on earth, and I promise you, Montesquieu, that France will shine forth with renewed splendour.

MONTESQUIEU.

On the contrary, I fear that the new constitution lacks this energy that you suppose. The three orders are indubitably necessary to the spirit of a monarchic government. The French character is changeable: it is thanks to its inconstancy that it loves all that flatters its vanity. I have worked for the good of my country, and according to you I have only created one work!²⁰ But do you believe, either of you, that this constitution is properly consolidated?²¹

VOLTAIRE.

Undoubtedly: I wager that all is actually in the best order.

JEAN-JACQUES.

It has been a long time since we had news of France; it has been a long time since a good patriot appeared in the Elysian Fields.

MONTESQUIEU.

I am on the lookout for someone arriving. I am as curious as you are to know the actual state of this kingdom. Here is Henri IV with Desilles. It appears they wish to avoid us: let us leave them to discuss at their leisure.

They exit.

SCENE TWO.

HENRI IV, DESILLES.

HENRI IV.²²

Come, brave young Desilles, let us distance ourselves from these shades whose presence troubles the sweetness of our conversation. Louis XIV is irritated by the reports you give us of the great changes you have witnessed operating in France. Talk to me alone, it would give me greater pleasure. Talk to me of the good people of France; of my

19 Mirabeau famously spent time in prison or exiled thanks to his turbulent youth.

20 This is a reference to Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* which Voltaire thought was his master work, though by no means his only production.

21 From July 1789 the creation of a French constitution had been discussed, with a limitation on the powers of the hereditary king endlessly debated. The variously named national assemblies and their deputies were wrestling with the challenges of turning a feudal country into a modern state in as short a time as possible while avoiding a civil war. A Constitution was finally proclaimed on 3 September 1791, six months after Mirabeau's death.

22 The cult of Henri IV 'the good king' (1553 – 1610) was given a great boost in the 18th century by the *philosophes* and the physiocrats amongst others: Voltaire and Rousseau each praising the first Bourbon king of France. His own propaganda (Henri IV had been an able creator of a personal myth, understanding the power of distributing his image in prints around the country, more often than not as a new Hercules) was used to cast him as a tolerant monarch, beloved of the people and capable of creating unity where discord had existed. He was a potent symbol of kingship for an era that was losing faith in its own Bourbon monarchs and was soon enshrined in the popular culture of the time as the ideal monarch, one his descendant Louis XVI could emulate.

descendant, of your legislators, of the incomparable Mirabeau, of whom you have given us such a good report.

DESILLES.

Dear Henri, idol of France! The people, forever dear to your memory, still see you reflected in your descendant who walks in your steps. The French, by extirpating all the abuses that surrounded the throne, have returned their monarch to his genuine existence. Mirabeau, Mirabeau in particular has developed this great principle that is so important to the welfare of the state. The People and the King; that is his maxim. No intermediaries between the two powers.

HENRI IV.

I find this report most interesting, but I fear the effects of these innovations. I know how far fanaticism can push its vengeance. Here, in vain, Jean-Jacques and Voltaire offer us great hope based on their immortal writings; I cannot conquer my fears.

DESILLES.

Is one not free of all painful memories in the Elysian Fields?²³ As for myself, so far I have only experienced a gentle peace.

HENRI IV.

In this sojourn, my son, we maintain the imprint of our original character and that is, my friend, the reason for the noteworthy rapport that is to be found between the great men often born in very distant times. After several centuries of repose, each one of us returns to life, but our genius never changes; our tastes, our humours are consistently the same; thus you will not find here the shade of Louis XII, the father of the people, nor that of the Greek orator Demosthenes. Both are on earth at the moment. Destiny returned to Louis XII his crown under the name of Louis XVI, and to your dear Mirabeau, the wisdom, profundity and eloquence of that Athenian orator, equally famed for a love for his motherland and his declared hatred of the rabble-rousers.²⁴

DESILLES.

Ah! I recognise him by these traits.

HENRI IV.

But you, brave Desilles, do you not yet know what man you were before bearing this name? Remember your similarity with that young Roman who, in order to save his motherland, threw himself fully armed into the abyss that had opened up in the middle of the Forum.

DESILLES.

Yes, I can still remember all that I was. Destiny chose me, no doubt, for impressive actions. I do not complain of my fate. May I always have ended my career thus. For you, Henri, the model of good kings, even on earth it was remembered that before being Henri IV you were Titus....But why this noise among the shades.

HENRI IV.

I see Voltaire and Rousseau approaching; let us find out what is new.

²³ In mythology those living in the Elysian Fields would have drunk from the River Lethe to forget their earthly suffering, the Fields being a place for the 'blessed dead' where the righteous could live in an immortal utopia.

²⁴ See footnote 2.

SCENE III.

The preceding, JEAN-JACQUES, VOLTAIRE.

HENRI IV.

Well, sublime and beneficent philosopher of France, what are you coming to tell us?

VOLTAIRE.

Aeacus, Minos and Radamanthus are approaching the gates. We suppose they are going to greet some shade, doubtless worthy of their haste.²⁵

JEAN-JACQUES.

We heard from the Earth cries of woe that presage a great loss. Charon has adorned his barque, and Cerberus seems to have softened his appalling howls.²⁶ We were told that a festival was being prepared to welcome this shade. Who then is this Genius coming to live amongst us?

VOLTAIRE.

See all the shades heading towards the entrance to the Elysian Fields. Could such a festival be prepared for a playwright? Could it be for a legislator, a friend of humanity even more worthy of this homage?

HENRI IV.

I feel, at this time, a terror unknown until now in these parts. Like you I cherish France; if this mortal came to us from that country and if the motherland had lost one of her strongest supports, my heart would be too distressed. I glimpse Louis XIV. From his troubled air I can see that this new arrival does not please him.

SCENE IV.

LOUIS XIV *proudly approaches*, several of his courtiers accompany him.

VOLTAIRE, HENRI IV, DESILLES, LOUIS XIV, JEAN-JACQUES.

HENRI IV *to Louis XIV*.

Louis XIV looks displeased. What sorrow can afflict his heart in this peaceful egalitarian sojourn?

LOUIS XIV.²⁷

I am not in my element in an egalitarian place: I feel I should be reigning.

HENRI IV.

²⁵ Aeacus, Minos and Radamanthus are all mythical kings, sons of Zeus, who became judges of the dead in the Elysian Fields; they are represented as being men of integrity and legislative skill by Homer, Pindar and Lucian among others.

²⁶ According to Greek mythology Charon ferried the dead to Hades across the river Styx and Cerberus was a multi-headed monster of a dog who guarded the gates to the underworld.

²⁷ Louis XIV (1638 – 1715) the Sun King reigned over France from 1643 to 1715 and was Henri IV's grandson.

Over your passions no doubt; but is your reason so feeble that it has not been able to make you enjoy the tranquility that fills us all with joy? You still want to be a king among shades.

LOUIS XVI.

These popular remonstrances cannot reach up to me. Ah! If only I were still on earth!

HENRI IV.

Eh! What would do there, at this time?

LOUIS XIV.

What would I do there? I have not heard that before. I would reign; by making an appearance I would become the master again.

HENRI IV.

Of whom?

LOUIS XIV.

Of the entire world, of the French; whatever the charms of this equality, of this independence which, here, rings in my ears, I know them, they love great kings.

HENRI IV.

Say great men, and good kings. You knew how to make yourself admired but you were not loved; it was your luxury alone that bedazzled the French, today only virtue can seduce them.

LOUIS XIV.

Are all my great achievements forgotten?

HENRI IV.

Yes, your famous conquests; the earth was not large enough to satisfy your ambition.

LOUIS XIV.

Does posterity judge me by my ambition? Have you forgotten my glorious deeds? If I was a despot I did at least know how to make the arts and commerce flourish; I knew how to differentiate the man of merit from a court intriguer: neither women nor ministers held sway over me. I imbued all of Europe with a taste for the sciences; perhaps this hearth of enlightenment that the French are so proud of today is thanks to me. I encouraged talent, I rewarded glorious deeds: if I had moments of weakness, I knew how to efface them, I knew how to admit to mistakes. Once one of my courtiers dared to justify my intractable childhood: I replied, so there were no canes in my kingdom... I was able to preserve my children from the poor education that I had received; my faults reside with my teachers, my virtues are my own. I am my own work.

VOLTAIRE.

I cannot help myself, I still admire him.²⁸

ROUSSEAU.

²⁸ In 1775 Voltaire published his *Siècle de Louis XIV* which the Voltaire Foundation describes as a monument of eighteenth-century historiography and literary history.

He knew how to make himself adored.

DESILLES.

What a shame then that he was a despot!

HENRI IV.

Yes, I agree, in some respects you have merited the esteem and the gratitude of the French; but today they are no longer the same and you would be unpopular on the throne.

LOUIS XIV.

I do not blame you. We cannot change our characters: one day perhaps mine will regain its popularity: other times, other usages, yet I believe that even now I would find some partisans in France.

HENRI IV.

Who would not dare show themselves. But...what lugubrious sounds! No doubt it is that shade arriving.

DESILLES.

They are coming towards us.

SCENE V.

MONTESQUIEU, *the preceding actors.*

MONTESQUIEU.

Friends of France, Franklin brings you one of its staunchest supporters?

HENRI IV.

Ah! What are you announcing?

Monsieur Gossec's music for Mirabeau's cortège can be heard; during this speechless scene the shades come and go on the stage and all come to in front of Mirabeau.²⁹

SCENE VI.

MIRABEAU, *much afflicted*, FRANKLIN, *supporting him*, *the preceding actors.*

DESILLES.

What do I see? Mirabeau!....

FRANKLIN, *interrupting him*.³⁰

Mirabeau is dead. (*He continues with feeling.*) He has returned to the bosom of the divine, he lives among us, the genius that liberated France, and poured over Europe

²⁹ François-Joseph Gossec's *Marche lugubre* was first performed in 1790 to commemorate the dead of Nancy. It was played as Mirabeau's coffin was carried to the Pantheon on 4 April 1791, then again when Voltaire's remains were placed there on 11 July of the same year, and became a popular piece for funerary ceremonies throughout the revolutionary period and beyond.

³⁰ Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790) American statesman, scientist, inventor, businessman, printer and writer who lived in Paris for some time and would have known Mirabeau from their shared social and intellectual circles.

torrents of enlightenment. The man who is equal to the history of science and of empires held, without doubt, an exalted rank in the human race; antiquity would have raised altars to the powerful genius who, for the benefit of humanity, embracing in his thoughts both heaven and earth, was able to tame the thunder of tyrants.

VOLTAIRE.

Brave philosopher, beneficent legislator, that Fate has just taken from the greatest of nations, cease grieving and come and breathe with us the pure air of Elysium.

JEAN-JACQUES, *to Voltaire*.

Ah! Do not begrudge him the sweetness of still shedding tears: the cause of his sorrow is so beautiful.

MIRABEAU.

Oh Jean-Jacques! Oh my master! Is it you?

VOLTAIRE.

Cease indulging in pointless regrets.

MIRABEAU, *in an animated tone*.

Ah! It is not life that I regret, I knew how to live, I knew how to die a man. I had a century of courage left when death froze my heart. But listen, can you not hear the dolorous accents of the grieving people; of the people whose total affection for me I only experienced when my separation from them was final; of the loving and sensitive people that I shall never again be able to serve. I shudder at the thought that trouble and confusion can yet destroy the effect of that most beautiful, most sublime, of revolutions: that power may be delivered to different seditious parties who, to suit their particular views, seek only to create alarm and spread discord. I shudder to think that at any moment this beautiful monarchy will be dissolved, and that the rabble-rousers will share the debris amongst themselves.

JEAN-JACQUES.

It is impossible to regenerate a state without running the risk of forfeiting it; that is my fear; that is what I had foreseen in my writings.

VOLTAIRE.

But if it is saved at the end?

MIRABEAU.

I would rather a despot reigned, than anarchy.

MONTESQUIEU.

Powers that are intermediaries, subordinate and dependent, constitute the nature of good monarchical government.

FRANKLIN.

I do not approve of these republican dispositions among the French. I have lived a long time. Many times I was obliged to change my mind, even on the most important matters. Thus I believe it is impolitic and unconstitutional, in France, to not assure the power of the monarchical government, because there is no government, whatever shape it might have, that cannot be good, assuming it is well administered.

MIRABEAU.

Ah, Franklin! If only I had left my motherland in as peaceful, as happy, as flourishing a situation as you left yours. But what are these two shades who appear moved by my account? Henri IV! Desilles! (*He shakes hands with them.*) Hello, hello my friends; and this one?...

JEAN-JACQUES.

Don't you recognise him?...

MIRABEAU.

Yes, now I do, by his majestic air, that conquering air...

VOLTAIRE.

Whatever rank heaven had chosen for his place of birth,
On seeing him, all would have recognised their master's worth.³¹

MIRABEAU, *to Voltaire.*

You are, I believe, the author of this eulogy?

VOLTAIRE.

I liked the glory of kings a little too much, I don't deny it; but it was the fashion then.

LOUIS XIV.

It will return.

MIRABEAU.

I hope so for the happiness of France; yet you will permit me to place limits upon it.

LOUIS XIV.

Would you take away my right to declare war, and to make peace.

MIRABEAU.

Because I wanted to accord the right to the executive power, I nearly lost the public's confidence.

MONTESQUIEU.

What are you saying?

HENRI IV.

Tell us....

MIRABEAU.

While they only calumniated my private life I kept quiet perhaps because a rigorous silence is a fair expiation of faults that are purely personal however excusable they may be, and I only wanted time or my labours to win me the esteem of honest folk; or maybe because the rod of public censure has always seemed to me to be infinitely respectable, even when placed in the hands of my enemies; but when my principles as a public servant were attacked, I could not stand aside, without deserting an honourable post that had been entrusted to me. I offered a particular account of my conduct. This avowal was even more

³¹ 'Et quelque soit le rang où le ciel l'eut fait naître,/ Le monde en le voyant eût reconnu son maître.' These lines from Racine's play *Bérénice* (Act 1, scene 5.) are cited by Voltaire in his *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* where he points out that they are an allusion to the eponymous king.

important, as, placed among the useful tribunes of the people, I owed it the most rigorous account of my opinions. Its judgement was all the more necessary given that it amounted to pronouncing on the principles that distinguish the real theory of liberty from the false, its true apostles from its false apostles, the friends of the people from their corrupters; for the people, in a free constitution, also have their retainers, their parasites, their flatterers, their courtiers, their slaves. I spoke up on a question that had been debated at length for a long time: a pressing peril, great dangers on the horizon, had to fully attract patriotism's attention. These words of peace and of war rang loud in the ear. Should the right to make peace and war be delegated to the king, or should one assign it to the legislative body? In a word I had formed the intention of answering the general question that needed resolving, to assign concurrently the right to make peace and war, to the two powers that the constitution had sanctioned.

LOUIS XIV.

The French are thus no longer the same. If talent and genius gave the crown, as rank, no doubt you would have merited it.

MIRABEAU *smiling*.

No not wish upon me such a fatal present: a crown is a heavy load at the moment; but your grand-son will, through his prudence, his goodness and his virtue know how to make it more desirable.³²

JEAN-JACQUES.

I'm sure you didn't quit life without offering some ideas on the succession.

VOLTAIRE.

And on education; that was quite essential.

MIRABEAU.

My friends, I made provision for everything; those are my last works, I did not have the pleasure of reading them to my colleagues. My last words were: I will fight the dissenters to my last breath, from whichever party, or to whatever side they belong, and that was my firm resolution; but already death was circulating in my veins. I hastened to put the finishing touches to my speech on succession, and my plan for national education. I left everything in the hands of my best friend, who, I am quite convinced, will second me; it cannot be that you have not heard of this man, of this priest who is no less necessary to the interests of the state than he is to those of the true faith. He has taken an axe to all the abuses of the holy see, he has uprooted the labyrinth that surrounded the altar, he has demonstrated impressive truth.³³

VOLTAIRE.

32 Louis XVI was actually Louis XIV's great-great-great-grandson given that Louis XV was Louis XIV's great-grandson, and Louis XVI was Louis XV's grandson: de Gouges is referring to the fact that Louis XVI is two generations away from Louis XIV according to his title, not his birth.

33 Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754 – 1838) read Mirabeau's last speech (on inheritance rights) to the National Assembly on the 2 April, the day of his death, having collected it from him the day before. Born into the high nobility, he was ordained in 1779 but renounced the religious life to participate more fully in the politics (and secular activities) of his time. He successfully navigated the upheavals that occurred during his lifetime and managed to achieve high office under Louis XVI, during the revolution, under Napoleon 1, Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis-Philippe. A politician and diplomat whose career still polarizes opinion: his extraordinary achievements culminated in the Congress of Vienna of 1814/15.

A faith is needed that distinguishes the good priest from the fanatic and the impostor. I introduced philosophy, I preached tolerance, but if God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.³⁴

MONTESQUIEU.

Thus you destroyed the prerogatives of the clergy and the nobility, and you ensured that your constitution was good! Soon you will have a populist state, or else a despotic State.

FRANKLIN.

It must be adopted with its faults, if there be any, because I believe that France needs a monarchical government, and that if it were to degenerate into despotism it would not be the fault of the constitution: ensuring the happiness of the people depends entirely on public opinion, on the goodness of the government as well as its wisdom, and on the integrity of those who govern.

JEAN-JACQUES.

Just as it depends on fathers to ensure the happiness of every one of their children. Mirabeau, can you share some of your thoughts on the bequeathing of testaments. Oh! It is so important that humans be enlightened on this matter.

MIRABEAU.

So! The whims and passions of the living, are they not enough for society? Must these passions be endured when they are no more? Is it not enough that society is still burdened by all the consequences that result from testamentary despotism, from time immemorial right up to today? Must we carry on preparing all the troubles that future testators could add to society through their too bizarre, even unnatural, last wishes? Has one not seen a mass of these testaments that were at times imbued with pride, at others revenge; here an unjust distancing, there a blind predilection. The law revokes testaments named *ab irato* but all these testaments that one could name a *decepto*, a *moroso*, *ab imbecilli*, a *delirante*, a *superbo*, the law does not revoke them, and cannot revoke them. How many of these acts declared to the living, by the dead, show madness rivalling passion, show the testator disposing of his fortune in a way he would never have dared confide to anyone in his lifetime; such dispositions, in a word, that in order to permit himself to proceed he needed to totally detach himself from how he would be remembered and imagine that the tomb would shelter him from ridicule and reproaches. (*All the shades applaud this speech.*)

ALL THE SHADES TOGETHER.

Bravo, bravo, Mirabeau!

VOLTAIRE.

³⁴ These much quoted words first appeared in Voltaire's *Epître à l'auteur des Trois imposteurs* of 1769 written in response to an anonymous atheistic tract. Although not a supporter of the Catholic Church he considered that religious beliefs provided stability within society. The poem ends by satirizing dogma and fanaticism, mentioning de Gouges's putative father and uncle 'the Pompignan brothers' with whom he had become embroiled due to their apparent religious bigotry: Voltaire imagines a time when his descendants and theirs could convivially dine together, all animosity forgotten, given that religious prejudice would have become an irrelevance. I am sure de Gouges's irony in including this hidden personal reference would have amused her close friends and acquaintances (the general public would have been unaware of the link between de Gouges and the Pompignans).

Most of these shades recognise, in these thoughts, their own errors and their injustice; their regret is testimony to how much you merit the esteem of the dead and the living.

LOUIS XIV.

Your presence was really needed on earth; you should have lived longer.

MIRABEAU.

I worked night and day to restore to my motherland her superb splendour; I sacrificed my whole existence to it. I believed her to be inalterable. I was wrong in that, such is man; but I fulfilled my work on earth, and I am satisfied. Having terrorised potentates since the dawn of my youth, which, in other ways was not error free, in the noontime of my life I rejoiced in the public's esteem. I worked for the good of my country. At forty-two I ended a glorious career. I can still see the people deeply moved and tender-hearted; I can hear their cries of sorrow at my last hour; my soul, still roaming through the skies, sees the people shedding tears. How beautiful it is to die when one has defended one's chosen cause.³⁵

JEAN-JACQUES.

And especially when one has won. Not to mention my social contract.

MIRABEAU.

Your social contract! It is in everyone's hands. It is the cornerstone of the constitution.

VOLTAIRE.

Have I not also contributed something to the revolution.

MIRABEAU.

Ah! A great deal, Voltaire, yes a great deal; but the most brilliant moment of your triumph is not yet arrived. Wait, wait a few moments more and, I can tell you in confidence, a certain bishop of Tiber, whose projects are only fermenting sluggishly, will soon add to your glory, and your fame.³⁶ But who are these three shades who bring a child towards us who is not unknown to me?

VOLTAIRE.

Do not be surprised by the satisfied look that shines on their faces. These three women were each, in their way, the honour and ornament of their sex. They are Deshoulières, Sévigné and the amiable Ninon de l'Enclos.³⁷

³⁵ De Gouges, who shared this sentiment, could not have guessed that she would die for her beliefs.

³⁶ Mirabeau is alerting Voltaire to the fact that the Pope, Pius VI, had condemned the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789, and was against the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790. In March 1791 he had written against freedom of religious expression which he called 'monstrous' and on 13 April, on the eve of this play's performance and eleven days after Mirabeau's death, the Pope issued an encyclical "Charitas" on the state of the Catholic Church in France stating that the consecration of constitutional clergy was sinful and sacrilegious. De Gouges is presumably suggesting that Voltaire, famed for his turning away from organised religion if not entirely from God, would garner more praise when France moved ever closer to becoming a secular state. De Gouges was prophetic. On 11 July 1791 Voltaire's remains were placed in the Panthéon (see footnote 22), symbolically making him one of the forefathers of the revolution, alongside his arch rival Rousseau whose remains were interred there three years later.

³⁷ Antoinette du Ligier de la Garde Deshoulières (1634? – 1694) poet and philosopher inspired by Gassendi and Lucretius, was the first woman to be elected academician in France (Arles Academy). She was a free spirit whose reputation died with her and was, until recently, either forgotten or, according to the literary critic Sainte-Beuve (1804 - 1869), consigned to the fate of someone who wrote only about ribbons and flowers; he was one of the few people to appreciate the talent and depth of much of her work; Marie de Rabutin-Chantal,

SCENE VII.

DESHOULIÈRES, SÉVIGNÉ, NINON DE L'ENCLOS *and the preceding Actors.*

MIRABEAU.

I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see them: but this child.....

DESILLES.

He is unknown to us, as to you.

FORTUNÉ.

Oh my protector! Oh sublime Mirabeau! Fate cut the thread of my life, but I had lived long enough. I rejoiced in the pleasure of hearing you. I was at the head of my company at your funeral. I saw you placed in that superb edifice, which now will have no other inscription than '*To great men, from a grateful motherland.*'¹³⁸

MIRABEAU.

Sweet child! To lose your life so young. By what accident?

FORTUNÉ.

It was nearly midnight when I reached home after this ceremony. Cold and pale, death was in my soul. In vain did my poor mother lavish all her care on me; in vain did this dear mother seek to console me, she hid tears from me that I felt fall on my breast. In you, we lost our protector, and the motherland lost its strongest support. My pain was fatal; we had recourse to an ignorant doctor on the spot; but why complain about it? No doubt his remedies were superfluous. My mother is my only regret; but I bless the destiny that has brought me closer to you.

MIRABEAU.

Dear child! She had put all her hopes in you.

FORTUNÉ.

God! Watch over her days. Heaven! I implore you on her behalf: console the kindest, the best of all mothers. Alas! If you had only stolen me from her heart, and left this great man (*looking at Mirabeau*) still on the earth. He was so needed, he alone contained the rabble-rousers, he was the support of widows, of orphans, of this I was a fine example.

Marquise de Sévigné (1626—1696) was the most famous letter writer in France in her lifetime. Her epistles, primarily written to her daughter, provide a commentary on the ideas and events of her times and reflect the intellectual debates of seventeenth century salon culture. They soon took on a life of their own when they were copied and read by a wider public before being officially published following her death leading to their establishment in the canon of French literary works; Ninon de l'Enclos (1620 – 1705) was a 17th century woman of letters who refused to marry, lived off her own income, had high-born lovers and insisted on maintaining her independence. She was famed for her wit, beauty and the ability to maintain friendships among her lovers, to the point of ensuring that everyone remained on good terms and regularly attended her salon. Her lifestyle and outspoken disregard for organised religion led to a brief imprisonment during which she received a visit from Queen Christina of Sweden then visiting Paris. De Gouges admired her greatly and wrote a play *Molière chez Ninon, ou le Siècle des grands hommes* centred on her life.

38 The 'suberb edifice' is the Panthéon in Paris which, originally designed as a church, became in 1791 a mausoleum for great Frenchmen. The wording of its inscription *Aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante* was decreed by the National Assembly on 4 April 1791, as reported in *Journal de Paris* of 5 April. Mirabeau was the first person entombed there (though he was removed a few years later) swiftly followed by Voltaire who was allowed to stay. There is a move afoot to memorialize de Gouges in these hallowed halls where few women are commemorated among the eighty or so men.

MIRABEAU.

Young man, what are you saying?

FORTUNÉ, *interrupting him*.

I want to make known what you forced us to hide on earth. It was possible to suggest you had no morals. It was not possible to deny your generous soul, your sensitive heart....shades, listen. I had a father who, by birth and principles, was attached to the old constitution. These illusions of nobility often made him unapproachable; this made my mother and I suffer greatly. She is from the third estate, born and bred, which is to say she is a good patriot. Her husband had, for quite a while, taken pleasure in mortifying her by drawing his sword. Ah! If he had not been my father.....but a few months after the revolution, a form of languor led him to his grave. He had dissipated all my mother's fortune: only his court pension was left to him and on his death we lost all our resources. My mother, more distressed on my behalf than her own, despaired. Ah! How the love of a mother increases her strength. Without asking anyone's advice, she presented herself at the door of the incomparable Mirabeau.

MIRABEAU, *wanting to put his hand over Fortuné's mouth*.

That's enough, that's enough.

FORTUNÉ.

No, I will tell all.

HENRI IV, *taking Fortuné by the hand*.

Dear child; carry on, we are happy to listen to you.

FORTUNÉ.

My mother, in tears, throws herself at his feet. It is not for me, she says, that I implore you, it is for my son: he no longer has a father, I have nothing left with which to raise him. Mirabeau gently helps her to her feet. This abasement, madame, is the result of your maternal love; but it offends me. Speak to me without supplication; what can I do for you? Offer my son a place, my mother cries out. As a legislator I have no particular power. You are young, beautiful, soon the help that I would wish to offer you would be held suspect; but, madame, I have friends, I will get them to respond; that is all I can promise. Coldly, he led us to his door. Barely had we arrived home than a notary brought my mother a contract for an annuity of twelve hundred *livres* that would devolve to me. My mother asked to know our benefactor: we were obstinately denied this information; we guessed it easily enough. We flew to his house, his door was closed to us. A few days later I received the grade of Captain in the Royal-Dauphin regiment with a remittance of six hundred *livres* for my upkeep. Alas! I did not enjoy it for long. I lost my benefactor, and my life was the price of my gratitude.

HENRI IV.

How old are you, dearest child?

FORTUNÉ.

I am twelve.

VOLTAIRE.

Your reasoning was in advance of your age; are there thus no children left in France?

FORTUNÉ.

They're no higher than this (*he marks a height with his hand,*) than they're already on guard duty for the King.

LOUIS XIV.

My grandson is therefore guarded by pygmies.

MIRABEAU.

By giants too, Louis XIV; he is safer with these pygmies than you ever were with your imposing household.

VOLTAIRE.

Charming child, what is this edifice dedicated to great men by a grateful motherland?

FORTUNÉ.

It is the temple where you will all be reunited. Oh Mirabeau! What honours were offered to your memory. Never has public gratitude exploded in such a solemn or touching manner.

LOUIS XIV.

Indeed, it must have been overflowing with pomp and ceremony!

FORTUNÉ.

If the ceremony was grand and majestic it was not due to the spread of an outrageously luxurious extravagance but to an entire population shedding tears there. Between two lines of our national guard a great cavalry troop opened the march, followed by twenty thousand volunteers, unarmed and in mourning; the commissioners of forty-eight sections, the municipality of Paris, and its department, preceded the sarcophagus which was not seen pompously elevated on a triumphal chariot, but our actual legislators, your colleagues, who followed it in a body, fought with the citizen soldiers for the honour of carrying you. The ministers, the king's household, and several thousand armed men brought up the rear of the cortège. Add to this detail the profound silence of the onlookers that rendered the sounds of the harrowing music even more penetrating, the sharp clashes of the cymbals, the low and lugubrious rolls of the drums; add the consternation visible on every face, the sweet tears of that interesting and sensitive sex to whom you designated your plans useful to its glory and its happiness, and still you can only get an imperfect idea of the sentiments that continue to penetrate my soul.

MIRABEAU, *tenderly*.

God! How this tale affects me. Oh my fellow citizens! What did I do to merit such sincere gratitude. Like you, I contributed to the good of the motherland. I bore your regrets, was that not enough to tear my soul apart. Oh French! French, your generosity will never end.

LOUIS XIV.

And the ministers that accompanied the ceremony, were they chosen by my grandson?

FORTUNÉ.

Yes, without a doubt, and chosen by his people.

LOUIS XIV.

From what rank were they taken?

MIRABEAU.

Combined in the sole class of all citizens, their virtue and their merit alone distinguished them.

LOUIS XIV.

I actually approve of the revolution; it is worthy of a great monarch, and of the great men who made it happen.

Madame de SÉVIGNÉ.

Have you left this plan, in which you guaranteed my sex a passage useful to its happiness and glory, in safe hands?³⁹

Madame DESHOULIÈRES.

It will have been reversed at his death. No one wants us to be the equals of men on earth; it is only in the Elysian Fields that we have this right.

NINON DE L'ENCLOS.

In other places too but it is a feeble advantage.

DESHOULIÈRES.

Women too may perhaps find the means to restore their authority.

MIRABEAU.

For a great and happy revolution to take place in France there would need to be many women like yourselves.

NINON.

You are right: in general women want only to be women, and are their own worst enemies. If any one steps out of line to defend the rights of her corps, straight away the whole sex rises up against her; one rarely finds women applauding a great deed, if it is the work of a woman.

MIRABEAU.

That statement will achieve it.

NINON.

By men then. Ah! Gentlemen, how little women understand their own interests.

SÉVIGNÉ.

It is indisputable that a government cannot sustain itself, if traditions are not purged.

NINON.

³⁹ Here, and in Fortuné's speech above, de Gouges is probably referring to a text on education that was unfinished at Mirabeau's death and published posthumously in 1791 though there is some question as to whether he wrote it or not given his frequent collaboration with other writers. It makes the case for ensuring the primary education of girls but declares further instruction unnecessary since society requires them to stay indoors and mind the home. Given that it was not published until after this play was finished perhaps de Gouges had expected the paper to deliver more for girls.

And who is responsible for this revolution: it will be pointless to pass new laws, to disrupt the kingdom. Whilst nothing is done to elevate the souls of women, whilst they contribute nothing to being useful, to be more reasoned, whilst men are too small minded to attend to their true glory, the state cannot prosper. That is what I have to say. But who is coming to interrupt us?

SCENE VIII.

DESTINY, SOLON, THE CARDINAL OF AMBOISE, *the preceding actors, with several from the four corners of the earth, like Chinese, Turks, Spanish, Romans etc.*

DESTINY.

Peaceable shades, the time has come to return to the earth a great man to take the place of the one it has just lost. Here is the one we have chosen.

ALL THE SHADES.

Solon, Solon is going to be reborn.⁴⁰

HENRI IV.

It is the cardinal of Amboise that destiny has chosen; he is a wise and generous minister who is fit to be reborn in France.⁴¹

ALL THE SHADES.

Yes, we vote for cardinal d'Amboise.

DESTINY.

Yes, I want to please you. This great minister will be reborn too.

D'AMBOISE.

Will I again be elected bishop of Montauban?

MIRABEAU.

If only you had been ahead of your time! This city would not have been the scene, once again, of sacerdotal fury. Fanatics have made a huge effort to lead astray the people's conscience; thus it was not possible to break the chains of despotism without shaking the yoke of faith. What gross misrepresentation! No, liberty, far from having prescribed such an impracticable sacrifice, made us all brothers. Let all good citizens look at the church in France whose foundations are both rooted and interwoven in those of the empire itself. Let them see how it has regenerated itself alongside them, as well as our faith which seems to display itself as the companion of its eternity and divinity.

D'AMBOISE.

Has the province of Normandy been agitated and persecuted by the nobility? Will my presence be needed there?

MIRABEAU.

40 Solon (c.630–c.560 bc) was an Athenian statesman who laid the foundations for his city's democracy and was famed for creating laws less severe than those that had gone before.

41 George d'Amboise (1460 - 1510) French cleric and statesman, started his ecclesiastical career as Bishop of Montauban (de Gouges's home town), became Archbishop of Narbonne, then of Rouen in Normandy, was Louis XII's prime minister at his accession in 1498 and made a cardinal in the same year. He was famed for his administrative talent, was a learned bibliophile and patron of the arts.

The nobility is very peaceful in Normandy and its inhabitants are most enlightened today.

D'AMBOISE.

Will I be lucky enough to work on the reforms of those religious orders that bankrupt the state, and spawn great indolence.

DESTINY.

In that respect you will have no reforms to undertake. Be a good minister, always be worthy of the your king's confidence, be beloved of your nation, and work tirelessly in the people's interest. Be industrious, gentle, honest, firm and sensible and, above all, use your precious experience. I return you to your original identity.

D'AMBOISE.

Will I reappear in France in this garb?

DESTINY

Yes, and if it were necessary for the reform of all corruption I would give you the tiara.⁴²

D'AMBOISE.

I would only wish for it at that price.

DESTINY.

I love the French, I want to overwhelm them with my generosity; you, Solon, will be reborn and take the place of this legislator.

SOLON, *to Destiny*.

Divinity, whose dominion is so favourable, or so fatal, to mortals, and from which I cannot escape, you want me to return to earth, and I will not resist your decrees. In which country are you planning to place me? Will I see Athens again? Will you send me to Rome?

DESTINY.

The city of Rome, my son, has changed somewhat since Titus; its stage, today, would barely suit your character. What would you do? You who cannot bear hypocrisy or seditious plots; but there is another region, which, almost as affluent, will remind you of Rome and Athens. It is the capital of France.

SOLON.

In France! You are designating me for France. Let the door open; I am ready to leave.

DESTINY.

Go, Solon, go and preach your gentle philosophy in the reign of the best of kings. Support the people's cause. Go and cover yourself in further glory. There you will find souls who will sympathize with yours; be prompt, be vigilant. May your virtue regain its primary energy, or rather I give you the virtue and talents of that proud shade whose

⁴² Cardinal d'Amboise was famously ambitious and made several bids for the papacy. The papal tiara was a three tiered crown worn by popes until Paul VI, renouncing worldly riches in 1963, symbolically removed it from his head. It was later sold to raise funds for charities.

arrival we are celebrating today. If ever your ancient Athens rises from its ashes I will send him there, in his turn, to take your place.

MIRABEAU.

Are you going to excuse his human frailty?⁴³

DESTINY.

I do not claim to excuse him from anything. His errors may in part be determined, more than is believed, by the virtues that I give him in exchange. Let him be a good patriot, courageous, liberty's protector, a sure friend, an enlightened publicist, and I will draw a veil over the rest.

NINON DE L'ENCLOS, *to Mirabeau*.

So, tell us....

DESILLES.

What of your Treatise on National Education.

TOUTES LES OMBRES, *all at once*.

We long to hear.

HENRI IV.

[*To Mirabeau.*] Stop distressing yourself. Here are two successors for one...

MIRABEAU.

That is too many to replace me. I would love to please you but my heart is still so full that, at this time, I can only show you what resulted from all my principles, and all my writings.

DESTINY.

Let the party begin: raise a throne for him.

HENRI IV.

Come, worthy supporter of the French empire; this place is reserved for your genius and your patriotic love for the motherland; all the shades will surround you, and listen to you.

MIRABEAU.

What! You want to make me go up here to the tribune.

LOUIS XIV.

The tribune! But it is a throne.

MIRABEAU.

During my lifetime it was more than a throne in my eyes.

Shades who are listening to me, and who are interested in the happiness of France, who wish to know both my works and my opinions on the actual state, and the future, of this beautiful kingdom, I will in two words tell you about it:

I spent my life studying the spirit of different governments. I covered the immensity of our ancient history. Full of the great examples it offers us, I armed myself against

⁴³ In *Commemorating Mirabeau, Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées and other texts* (MHRA, 2017) Jessica Goodman suggests that this is an oblique reference to Plutarch's mention of Solon's homosexuality.

despotism; but I saw, by the way, the vice of republican conventions and I sought to preserve my regenerated motherland from them. That was my principal aim in all my writings. May France never forget that the only form of government that suits her is a monarchy limited by wisdom.

DESTINY.

Let his brow be encircled by the civic crown.

Two shades bring the crown.

Madame de SÉVIGNÉ *takes the crown and places it on his head.*

You have deserved it.

Here the choir begins [to sing]. Mirabeau is carried on the throne, all around the stage; sweet and gentle music ends, piano [i.e. quietly], piano the march.

End of the play.

Is sold,

At la veuve Duchesne, rue Saint-Jacques.

At la veuve Lesclapart, rue du Roule.

And at Girardin, au palais-royal.