

OLYMPE DE GOUGES,

DÉFENSEUR OFFICIEUX

DE LOUIS CAPET.

Olympe de Gouges, Louis Capet's Unofficial Advocate.¹

CITIZEN PRESIDENT,

THE UNIVERSE is minutely observing the trial of the first and last king of France. I race to bring to the convention the actual letters written to me by the gentlemen Brissac and Laporte.² With them I enclose five hundred examples of my *Moral Reckoning*.³

Citizen president, today I am interested in a greater matter; that of the glory of my country. I offer myself, following the courageous Malesherbes, as Louis' advocate.⁴ Let us leave my sex to one side; heroism and generosity belong equally to women; the revolution offers more than one example. I am a candid and loyal republican, without stain or fault; no one doubts it, even those who affect to disregard my civic virtues: I can therefore take charge of this cause.

1 Written as a letter to the Convention on 16 December 1792 and then produced as a placard liberally posted around Paris this text was disregarded by the Convention (Tronchet having accepted to defend the King alongside Malesherbes), derided by those who believed that de Gouges was merely attempting to steal the limelight and vilified by others who saw in her words nothing but overt royalism. De Gouges produced three further texts in response to this negative reaction: *Mon dernier mot à mes chers amis*; *Adresse au don Quichotte du Nord*; *Arrêt de mort que présente Olympe de Gouges contre Louis Capet*. In her defence of Louis XVI de Gouges expresses her customary fair-mindedness, in her understanding of the Convention's Parisian bias her shrewdness and in her plea for exile rather than death her pacifism.

2 Louis Hercule Timoléon de Cossé-Brissac was a politician, a courtier and commander in chief of the King's Constitutional Guard. He was killed with other prisoners in Versailles on 9 September 1792. Arnaud II de La Porte was Minister of the Marine and Minister of the Royal Household; he fled France in 1789 but returned to serve the King before being arrested and executed for treason against the Revolution in August 1792. Both were involved in responding to a letter sent by de Gouges to Marie-Antoinette in which she asked the Queen to contribute towards the funding of a female cortege; both had been executed. Fearing that her letter might be found among the mens' papers de Gouges made the correspondence public to pre-empt any criticism of her republicanism.

3 *Compte moral rendu*, de Gouges's spirited response to a Jacobin attack elicited by her *Pronostic*, was printed in mid-November 1792.

4 Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721 - 1794) trained as a lawyer but never practised; acted as a liberally-minded midwife to many important Enlightenment texts (the *Encyclopédie*, many of Rousseau's works etc.) when he controlled the Librairie, the government's censorship of all printed publications; was a minister twice, and, passionate in his belief in freedom of expression, he wrote copious lucid *Memoires* that directly confronted the monarch with the difficulties faced by France before 1789. He believed that any man should have a fair trial; doubting that this would be the case for Louis XVI he offered his services, in the full understanding of their limited value, because, having accepted to work for the crown in the past (in government) he saw only ignominy in refusing to work for it at this parlous time. He was virtually alone in this belief. He knew the risks and believed that his life would be endangered but being elderly he accepted the danger; he believed his two beloved daughters would be safe due to their sex. In this he was wrong. In 1794 he was made to stand beside the guillotine and watch as his grand-daughter and her husband were executed, followed by his daughter (her sister had fled), before he himself was dispatched. His son-in-law had been guillotined a few days earlier and his sister was executed a few days later.

As king, I believe Louis to be in the wrong, but take away this proscribed title and he ceases to be guilty, in the eyes of the republic. His ancestors had pushed the troubles of France to the limit; sadly for him the cup shattered in his hands and he was left in charge of all the shards. I could add that without the perversity of his court he might have been a virtuous king. One only has to remember that he hated grandees; that he was able to force them to pay their debts; that he was the only one of our tyrants who did not entertain courtesans, and whose manners were unspoilt. He was weak, he was misled; he misled us, he misled himself: there in a few words is his suit.

Citizen president, I will not reveal here my reasons for justifying his defence. I wish only to be accepted by the convention and by Louis Capet to support an elderly man, almost eighty years old, in a painful job that seems to me to warrant the full strength and courage of greener years. No doubt I would not have entered the fray alongside such an advocate if the cold and equally selfish egotism of Mister Target had not enflamed my heroism and excited my sensibility.⁵ I can die right now: one of my republican plays is about to be performed.⁶ If my light is extinguished at this moment, a moment that may glorify me, and if, after my death, principles still hold sway, my memory will be blessed and my disabused assassins will shed a few tears on my tomb.⁷ My zeal may seem suspect to Louis Capet; his infamous courtiers have undoubtedly missed no opportunity to create in his mind an image of me as a cannibal desperate for blood, but how wonderful it is to disabuse in such a way an unfortunate man lacking in support.

May I be permitted to present, to the national convention, an opinion that I thought worthy of all its attention.

Does Louis the Last threaten the republic more than his brothers, or his son? His brothers are still united with the foreign powers and only work on their own behalf. Louis Capet's son is innocent, and will survive his father. These pretenders, will they not engender many centuries of divisive factions? The English occupy a place in history that is quite different to the Romans: the English dishonoured themselves in the eyes of posterity by putting to death Charles I: the Romans immortalised themselves by exiling Tarquin. But true republicans always had vastly superior maxims to those of slaves. In order to kill a king it is not enough to cut off his head; he lives on long after his death; he is only truly dead once he has survived his fall. I will stop here to allow the convention to reflect on all the ideas that I have brought to its attention.

And I will also submit some observations to you, my fellow citizens. Let us abjure a reasonable resentment to remember that clemency always brings honour to the victors. It must be presumed that if the national convention is reduced to declare against Louis

5 Guy Jean-Baptiste Target (1733 - 1807) was a lawyer who came to fame defending Cardinal Rohan during the infamous diamond necklace trial. He was influential in the creation of the 1791 constitution. He refused to defend Louis XVI at his trial, an action that was deemed cowardly rather than politically astute by many at the time. François Denis Tronchet (1726 - 1806) accepted the brief and survived, returning to public life after the fall of Robespierre. He participated in creating the Code civil under Napoleon.

6 *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles ou les vivandiers* was given its first performance at the Théâtre de la République on 23 January 1793, the day after Louis XVI's execution. The play was poorly received and its author was pursued backstage by an angry mob who reviled her attempt to defend Louis Capet. On the following evening the play's second, and last, performance was fatally interrupted for the same reasons. Thanks to a toxic mix of theatrical egos and political intrigue the play never resurfaced except as yet another example of its author's ineptitude, despite being publicly supported by authors such as Mercier and de Cubières. De Gouges, in response to the fiasco, printed the text in full and sent examples to the Convention, the Committee for Public Instruction and various newspapers in the hope of redressing the balance in favour of a play that she felt supported and consolidated the republican government.

7 The fear of assassination was not hyperbole; a few days after this placard was pasted up in public a band of armed angry men came to de Gouges's home and called for her to come out. This she did. Derision and insult followed until one of their number, armed with a sword, grabbed her and held her down by the neck. Sword raised he asked the crowd for a price on her head. De Gouges replied with courageous calm that she would pay the highest price for the privilege. Laughter diffused the threatening situation and de Gouges, pride intact, retired unharmed.

Capet, it will, in its wisdom, only pronounce the death sentence after first having it sanctioned by the eighty-three *départements* and by our armies, as it decreed in the new constitution. Given that Paris is only a tiny fragment of the French republic the convention will find this sanction all the more indispensable. It is said that the members of the convention should be forced to vote, by name, for the sentence of death on the guilty party but, if I must speak from the heart, I believe that no true republican will vote for his death, and that the majority will be in favour of exile.

Louis Capet's greatest crime, it must be conceded, was to be born a king at a time when philosophy was silently laying the foundations of the republic. We have abolished royalty. People, throne: he has lost everything. Let us be generous enough to leave him his life. If he had been the victor we might all be royalists; men as so subjugated by circumstances! By dethroning him we have shattered all the sceptres of the world: the sovereignty of the people has taken back its rights; we should not punish him for the ignorance of our ancestors or the crimes of his. If, as king, he sought, through the perfidy of his peers, to safeguard his prerogatives which have been, successively, the source of civil war and the caprices of men, he was fulfilling his role. Let us be republicans in exiling Louis Capet, and let all the potentates tremble! After this show of heroism what nation will dare arm itself, in the defence of tyrants, against a magnanimous people who can conquer and forgive?

FROM THE PRINTER VALADE SON, THE ELDER, RUE J. -J. ROUSSEAU, N°.12. 1792.