

## Réminiscence.

### *Reminiscence.*<sup>1</sup>

I must prove to the Public that the spirit of satire and mischief is not always what I favour; what dominates me above all else, and ill-intentioned people cannot deny it, is the spirit of sensibility and generosity of heart (charity) unlike M. C. who, blessed with a noble heart and protector of the unfortunate, assured the indigent of a salutary future.<sup>2</sup> How it would have pleased me to see him at the head of that Company which would have named him Founder of the good milk of wet-nurses; the project was charming and admirable, but the great M.C. did not wish to solicit widespread adulation. Simple and sober in his manners he withdrew the money from his Play.<sup>3</sup> A hundred or so splendid Performances must have made, I imagine, a considerable sum that he has carefully put aside: he enjoys multiplication, and in his vast projects he allows humanity to cry out for some time. He is deaf to the cries of those mercenary mothers who, obliged to undertake backbreaking work, give up their children into the hands of strangers and who during that time had high expectations of his charity. But if M. C. D. B. takes a step back at this point it is in order to make a noble use, in future, of his folly and his extravagance.<sup>4</sup> *Tarare*....<sup>5</sup> Ah! A sublime and seductive work that the good taste, or repentance, of the Nation must immortalise!.... So much good and bad combined at the same time in M.C.! Curiosity and singularity have often contributed more to a man's reputation than true merit. His productions are condemned and despised yet a vast Public runs to crowd into his Performances. There stand French frivolity and inconsequentiality; he who profits from their irregularities ought to fear being punished by them one day. Boldness and impudence can dominate for a time but in the end the mask will be stripped away and the real man exposed for what he is. Ah! C., what would you do without the caprice of the French.... Why do I concern myself with you when speaking of charity if it is not to show the contrast that exists between you and a

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1 Published in 1788 in her three-volume edition of theatrical works this piece is sometimes referred to as a letter to the father of Chérubin i.e. the playwright Beaumarchais. De Gouges often wrote of her frustrations concerning this particular writer and of her shabby treatment by the Comédie Française over the years (the then state run theatre had a monopoly – until January 1791 – on all serious French language works performed in Paris).

2 M.C. (also C., M. C. D. B. etc.) is the playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732 - 1799).

3 In the mid 1780s Beaumarchais involved himself in one of the most notorious and long running adultery cases of his time between Kormann, a wealthy French banker, and his allegedly adulterous Swiss wife who had brought her husband a hefty dowry. The playwright defended the wife following her imprisonment when the husband used a *lettre de cachet* against her. Although Mme Kormann won her case for false imprisonment there had been so much dirty laundry exposed that public opinion was not on her side, nor on Beaumarchais's. Plenty of pamphlets accused him of seducing the wife himself, murdering his own wives, or generally being grossly debauched. He was also accused of using the case, and therefore Madame Kormann, to publicise his own career. Here de Gouges is specifically referencing Beaumarchais's attempt to regain public sympathy by portraying himself as the supporter of impoverished mothers. He offered the proceeds of the fiftieth performance of his *Marriage of Figaro* to this particular group, in order to encourage them to nurse their own infants rather than use wet nurses. The playwright's intentions were questioned at the time. De Gouges clearly understood that these mothers were obliged to earn a living and did not choose to pay wet nurses fecklessly. For more information see <https://www.cairn.info/revue-dix-huitieme-siecle-2016-1-page-481.htm>

4 I have translated 'follies' as folly though the term could also imply debauchery in eighteenth century French.

5 *Tarare* was an opera composed by Antonio Salieri (1750 – 1825) to a libretto by Beaumarchais. It was first performed in Paris in June 1787. Not well received by critics it was nonetheless very popular with audiences.

famous woman who knows how to ally the grace of wit with heartfelt feelings, who bestows her wealth on the unfortunate; a woman immortalized by her works, modest with her inferiors, discreet in her favours and ceaselessly attentive to the needs of the poor: such people are useful and dear to society but how rare they are! This is the aim of my charity.

*The Generous Man*, that I had printed three years ago, was generally well received which leads me to offer a new edition of the work today.<sup>6</sup> The Unfortunate Montalais family whose fate I soften in my Play, experience, in reality, the most wretched fate. The respectable old man was once a wealthy Merchant who, after losing everything through trading and giving up all that he had left to his creditors, found himself in irons at the age of sixty or so. Marianne, the virtuous Marianne, is just as I depicted her. She therefore saw her miserable father linger in prison. Her mother became infirm from a chest lesion at the very moment that her husband was torn from her arms, a calamity which, it is feared, will lead her to the grave.<sup>7</sup> This unfortunate family approached me to encourage good souls to bestow upon them their benevolence. Judging by M. C. I should distrust all benefactors in the Capital but Madame la Marquise de S. came into my mind like the benevolent Angel that God sent to his Prophets. I was inspired by the virtue and humanity of this famous woman. I did not hesitate to write to her. The simplicity and candour of her reply will show that this woman is indeed accustomed to doing good. For ten months these unfortunates have been aware that I am addressing their fate and that I have been able to get a woman, whose merits are rare, to take an interest in them; they live in the hope of seeing an end to their troubles. Ten months are like ten centuries for those who await the moment that will end their plight. I could not get the project underway as early as I had hoped originally due to the intentions of Madame la Marquise de S., whose letter I quote below.

'I have been unwell these last few days, Madame, and was thus prevented from replying sooner to the letter you kindly addressed to me. The young Princes have made a prodigious quantity of gifts this year and have even doubled the funds usually allotted to these alms; however, between my Pupils and myself, we will willingly provide thirty *louis* to contribute towards the freedom of this unfortunate old man; as for the rest of the sum, M. Alion will be honoured, Madame, to explain to you my ideas on the subject. The glory of this action is all yours, you alone must be recognised for it and I believe that my plans are simple to execute. I already knew of *The Generous Man* and I had read it with equal amounts of pleasure and interest. In all ways, Madame, I am extremely grateful for the gracious forbearance that you have the goodness to offer me.

I have the honour of being, etc.'

Her plans are to open a subscription in the *Journal*. The Montalaises, the fictitious surname in my Play, are the Clamets of Rouen. The unfortunate old man is held in the Conciergerie of the Palace, and funds will have to be sent to the Priest of the Madeleine.

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6 Olympe de Gouges's third play *L'Homme généreux* was first published in January 1786 and reprinted in the 1788 edition of her *Œuvres*. The play took as its inspiration a true story of a man imprisoned for debt whose sick wife and young family were destitute. De Gouges sent the text to Mme. Genlis (the marquise de Sillery mentioned later in the text) governess to the duc d'Orléans's two sons, whose charges were so moved by the narrative that they arranged for sums to be paid and the impoverished gentleman to be released. De Gouges attempted unsuccessfully to have the play put on so that she could donate the first six performances' box-office receipts to charity. The Montalaises were the play's impoverished family.

7 The original French 'un accident au sein' could mean accident, problem, lesion of the breast, chest, womb, torso etc.

If I fail to name the charitable woman who has come to the aid of the unfortunate Montalais family it is in order not to disobey her orders but how will keeping her name quiet prevent people from knowing her? Eh! Will not all the unfortunates for whom she is a mother recognise her from the bottom of their hearts, and will they be able to resist naming her out loud? I can only offer my *Works* to those who wish to contribute to this charitable act. I am not rich but I like to help the unfortunate. If my Drama is performed, as I hope, at the French, it is my intention to give, to the Montalais family, the first six Performances.<sup>8</sup> If my Play is a success, inspired by the divine grace that the Comédie Française afforded me eight months ago by giving me a turn that it has not yet provided, though, in recompense, it has played several tricks on me since; [this is why?] I have waited until now to offer to the Public my *Works* published at that time.<sup>9</sup> What a strain on my patience! It will be hard to credit, but the wish to succour my unfortunate Montalaises was the only driver of this miracle. Rushed by the Comédie's offer, and tormented by the fear of failure, even if I went unheard, I could find nothing more salutary than to recommend my soul to God and my wit to the Public while begging from it all the indulgence I need; but the Comédie sees things with a calmer eye than an Author to whom a favour has been granted, or to whom they have behaved with outrageous injustice, and who in such parallel circumstances can only praise or complain: that is why in my Preface to *The Philosopher Corrected* it can be seen that I congratulate myself with regard to the Comédie Française, and that I am most aware of their good policies, but I will go no further for must one destroy, at the end of a work, all the good that has been said of it at the beginning. The Gentlemen Comédiens are noble, generous, sensitive, and true in all their undertakings with a woman, taking care of her sex, offering it all the attention that it deserves. Therefore, I have no complaint to make regarding them but allow me to recall a minor anecdote about my Junior, about that amiable C. whom I believe to be the guiding spirit behind the pretexts found by the Comédie to forego keeping their word to me. Finally one day, perhaps, my turn will come. It may be that neither myself nor my children will see it, but my descendants may rejoice in such satisfaction. I hope so. In the meantime, let us consider M. C. Four months ago I entrusted, only to M. le Chevalier de Cubières, a bound copy of *The Philosopher Corrected* that he left on his chimney piece and that a friend of M.C.'s perused; apparently he spoke of it and revealed its face. It could be that M. C.'s aim was praiseworthy, and as I am ignorant of most of the facts, I cannot really condemn him. Nor could I believe that his mind was full of petty quarrels, he has always seemed to me – in the twelve years that I have known him – to be of a sweet and honest disposition, only wanting to be helpful, always seeking opportunities to reconcile minds therefore I cannot suspect him of that awful talent which, under cover of affability and the greatest trust, seeks to embitter them.

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<sup>8</sup> The stagings, had they taken place, would have been benefit performances for the Clamet family.

<sup>9</sup> I find the real meaning of this sentence hard to grasp. De Gouges frequently complained of typographical errors so perhaps it was not meant to be one sentence, or some crucial word is missing, or misspelt. There is a play on the word 'tour' which means both 'turn' as in the playwright's turn to have her play performed, and some form of trickery or knavery. Because de Gouges had no play performed at the Comédie Française before the very end of December 1789 I believe her reference to a recompense implies that the following 'tour' is a trick and not a turn. Here is the sentence in French as it appears in the version held at the British Library in London: 'Si ma Pièce réussit, entousiasmée de la grace divine que la Comédie Française m'a faite, il y a huit mois, en me donnant un tour qu'elle ne m'a point lâché encore, mais qui en récompense m'en a joué plusieurs depuis; j'ai retardé jusqu'à ce moment de donner au Public mes Oeuvres imprimées à cette époque.' De Gouges's plan was to offer any earnings from the first performances to the family she was succouring.

After the trust he had inspired in me I had to discern and appreciate his observations. 'You speak of an estimable man for too long in your Preface' he told me. 'It seems as though you only wrote it for him, and the Public will not thank you for it especially at a time when it is unhappy and drowning in Lampoons. Your Preface is not a preface, but is even more cruel than an unintelligible composition; you banter with an epigram and you thrash it to the ground too easily given the circumstances it finds itself in.' 'Eh, what must be done?' I replied. 'Although I did not put as much purpose into this work as you imagine, given it was created in a moment of gaiety, it is ill-fated and I give it up, having no more resolve than a child when it comes to causing harm.' It can easily be believed that M. le Chevalier de Cubières had no trouble disarming me. He added that M. C. had visited him to beg him to persuade me to abandon my Preface, saying to him that he had, on all sides, cruel domestic woes, and that he would be sorry to see himself obliged to reply to me. Several times I interrupted M. le Chevalier, assuring him that I would throw my work into the fire, but that I wanted M. C. to come to me and apologise, to prove his innocence regarding the impudence with which he had treated me in the past, that he was indeed a curious animal which, unlike his Plays, one could not pay to see, and that I wished to look him in the eyes to see if all that is imputed to him is true; finally that it was necessary I assured myself, in front of witnesses, of his honesty towards me; I did not remotely fear him in Public, but I could dread, like all honest people, his shadowy machinations that cost him nothing.... I could explore the subject further. I fear a rock could fall on my head, an unexpected pistol shot, and all that an honest citizen can encounter on his path. He was due, then, to have visited me a few days later, accompanied by one of his friends. One can imagine that my resentment would have been extinguished by this meeting but, suddenly rediscovering his dignity, he believes himself to be humiliated by an apology that a woman is entitled to wring out of him and he dares threaten me, through his friends, in a most indecent manner. So, truly recognising the character of the man, I took pleasure in allowing my Preface to see the light of day: I even retract my statement that he is Theatre's contemporary creative genius. I had not read the *Diable Boiteux*, and admit my ignorance, but when I realised that his *Eugénie* was drawn from this Novel, scene by scene, I can only compare him to myself, in Dramatic work, as a small boy.<sup>10</sup> I will convince him of it when he wishes. I have been assured that he will end by telling me a lot of nonsense. What can one expect from such a man? But why expose yourself to it, I will be told. I admit at that first observation from M. de Cubières, I could have given up willingly, but the imperious tone of a man who wants to dominate everyone cannot impress me with its brazenness and false worth. Affording him the pleasing opportunity to say, everywhere, that thanks to his threats he frightened me into relinquishing my Preface. A true person, whose good maxims are seen in the full light of day, cannot cringe from M. C. who himself is never above reproach.

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<sup>10</sup> *Le Diable Boiteux*, a novel by Alain-René Lesage was published in 1707: Beaumarchais's five act play *Eugénie* was first performed in 1767.

<sup>11</sup> An official 'Approbation' signed by the Chevalier de Gaine is included below *Reminiscences* and reads as follows: By order of Monseigneur le Garde des Sceaux I have seen the First Volume making up a part of *The Works of Madame de Gouges*, and I have found nothing there to prevent it being printed. This preliminary production signals knowledge, talent and the natural wit of a woman who wields her pen with lightness, charm and facility in all types of genres, and who knows throughout how to maintain a tone of decency and

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honourable sentiment. Paris the 11 November 1787.