

RÉPONSE
AU CHAMPION AMÉRICAIN
OU
COLON TRÈS-AISÉ A CONNAÎTRE.

*Reply to the American Patron, or Colonist Very Easy to Recognise.*¹

As we no longer fight duels in France, Monsieur, I agree with you that we occasionally assassinate one another; it is imprudent to provoke the assassins, but it is even more indiscreet, more indecent, and more unjust to attack people of honour, to attack them in the most inept and also the most slanderous manner by imputing a lack of courage in M. de la Fayette, whom you perhaps fear in your innermost heart. I will tell you that I do not, as you suggest, know this magnanimous hero. I only know that his reputation is intact, his valour known, his heart like that of Bayard is without fear or reproach and we probably owe him the happiness of France and the power of the nation.² I will not attempt to justify the famous men you provoke; they are all French soldiers and that title is enough for me to believe them to be valiant.

But, Monsieur, if I imitate you in this type of challenge then I stray a bit too far from my goal by falling into the vulgar error that you have committed with regard to me. I am not undertaking the defence of the philosophical cause, or of *Les Amis des Noirs*: it is my own cause that I defend and you will allow me to pick up the only weapons that are at my disposal.³ We will therefore do battle, and this singular combat will not be lethal, thanks to my *hocus pocus*. Meanwhile you grant me virtues and courage superior to my sex. Without an excess of pride I could agree, but equally gratuitously you suggest that for language and my feeble productions I am determined to consult academicians, knowledgeable men of letters, and the sacred Parnassus that protects more than one idiot but to which I attach very little importance, apart from writers who have honoured talent through honour and probity. Literary merit is a small thing when it is stripped of these two advantages. But let us proceed to the most important thing I want to teach you, and of which you are wholly ignorant.

1 This witty and courageous piece was written in January 1790 in response to an anonymous open letter published on December 25 1789 days before the first performance of her anti-slavery play on 28 December. De Gouges had three hundred examples printed and sent to members of the Parisian governing body, the Commune. The rise of abolitionist sentiments among certain leading figures (e.g. Condorcet, La Fayette, Mirabeau, abbé Grégoire) led some slave traders and plantation owners to use the conservative press repeatedly to attack those openly condemning them, accusing these individuals of being enemies of the white race. Vitriol was ever present. The unknown letter writer threatens de Gouges with assassination and suggests she cease enraging those who have daggers at the ready. Since de Gouges is being used by her fellow abolitionists as a scapegoat she is invited to face the angry colonists in a duel. They are itching for revenge and Mr Anon is clearly titillated by the idea of a woman confronting them in a low cut dress, exposing her unprotected bosom and bare arms. Advised by friends to ignore the challenge, these men being ruthless and dangerous, unusually de Gouges took her time and responded in writing three weeks later.

2 Pierre Terrail Seigneur de Bayard (1473 - 1524) was a soldier known as 'le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche' (a blameless knight who knew no fear); he was considered the epitome of chivalric heroism.

3 *Les Amis des Noirs* was the first French abolitionist society co-founded by Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Etienne Clavière in February 1788. It was modelled on the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded in May 1787. De Gouges was an early supporter and had expressed her abolitionist views as early as 1784 in her play *Zamore et Mirza, ou l'heureux naufrage* [*Zamore and Mirza, or the Fortunate Shipwreck*]. It was published in 1788 with the addition of her forceful anti-slavery essay *Réflexions sur les Hommes Nègres* [*Reflections Concerning Black Men*]. Reworked and renamed *L'Esclavage des Nègres, ou l'heureux naufrage* it was performed briefly in December 1789 and republished as *L'Esclavage des Noirs* [*Black Slavery*] in March 1792. This final version was never performed in the author's lifetime although it has been produced a few times since the 1980s and is the only one of de Gouges's many dramatic works to have gained a reputation.

You claim that *Les Amis des Noirs* took advantage of a woman to provoke the colonists. Assuredly it is much more extraordinary that a man who declares a degree of wit, facility and even bravura should accuse a woman of being the bearer of a challenge and wish, by an intervention as singular as it is lily-livered, to prove his courage. Therefore I can only judge your valour as some form of *don Quixotry* and consider you as a slayer of non-existent ghosts and giants. Meanwhile, by returning you to reason, I would like to laugh with you about the wrongs for which I see no remedy. You have to fight *Les Amis des Noirs* and I, I have to expose something much worse, it is..... Time, that destroys everything and of its own choosing changes the arts, manners and the justice of men, will never change the esprit de corps of those whom I have to object about so strongly.

In France over the past months one has seen the veil of error, imposture and injustice destroyed, and finally the walls of the Bastille; yet the despotism that I attack is still to fall. It is a tree in the midst of a dense labyrinth, spiked with brambles and thorns: it would take all the magic of Medea to prune its branches.⁴ The conquest of the Golden Fleece cost Jason less skill and care than the torments and traps I will face in avoiding these poisoned branches that shame the celebrated tree and the genius of mankind. To destroy them twenty dangerous dragons must be struck down who sometimes transform themselves into zealous citizens, sometimes into flexible serpents slithering everywhere and spreading their venom over my works and my person.

But Sir, must I not for my part, and with more reason, suspect you of *honourably* putting yourself forward on behalf of this cringing faction that has risen up against *Black Slavery*. Of what do you accuse this work? Of what do you accuse the author? Is it to have incited the cutting of the American colonists' throats, and to have been the agent of men that I am acquainted with less than you, who perhaps do not appreciate all my works since I showed that the abuse of liberty had produced a deal of harm? You know very little about me. I was the apostle of a gentle liberty even in the time of despotism. But as a true French woman I idolise my motherland: I have sacrificed everything for her; I cherish to the same degree my King, and would give my blood to return to him all that his virtue and paternal tenderness deserves. I will sacrifice neither my King for my motherland, nor my motherland for my King but I would sacrifice myself to save them both together, quite convinced that one cannot survive without the other. One can tell a man by his writings, so it is said. Read me, Sir, from my *Lettre au peuple* [*Letter to the People*] right up to my *Lettre à la Nation* [*Letter to the Nation*], and you will recognise, I dare flatter myself, a heart and a spirit truly French.⁵ The extreme parties have always feared and detested my works. These two parties, divided by opposing interests, are always unmasked in my writings. My invariable maxims, my incorruptible sentiments, there are my principles. A royalist and true patriot, in life and death, I show myself as I am.

Since I have the courage to sign this piece, make yourself known too and you will gain my esteem which may not be immaterial to a gallant man, for I am as hard to impress as Jean-Jacques.⁶ I can rise to the height of this great man thanks to the justifiable distrust he had of men: I have met few that are fair and truly estimable. I do not criticise them for slight misdemeanours but for their vices, their falsehoods and the inhumanity they

4 Medea was a sorceress figure in Greek mythology who helped the mortal Jason gain the Golden Fleece, a symbol of kingship located in a sacred grove on the edge of the known world protected by a frightful dragon. The complex legend of Medea is thought to predate the written word, exists in various cultures, and has never lost its fascination. De Gouges and her readers would have been particularly familiar with the Medea story thanks to a resurgence of interest in Europe during the mid to late eighteenth century when the myth was used to examine the popular topics of motherhood, universal humanity and ethics.

5 *Lettre au peuple, ou projet d'une caisse patriotique* [*Letter to the People, or Patriotic Purse Project*] was de Gouges's first political pamphlet. Printed in early November 1788 it offers a remedy to France's deficit in the form of voluntary donations to a Patriotic Purse. Her mention of a *Letter to the Nation* probably refers to her *Lettre aux Représentants de la Nation* [*Letter to the Representatives of the Nation*] from August 1789, between these two works she had written another sixteen political texts.

6 Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a tendency to view himself and his fellow men through a misanthropic lens.

remorselessly exercise on the weakest. May this revolution regenerate the spirit and the conscience of mankind, and reproduce the true French character! Two more words I pray.

I did not receive an education, the glory of which you were pleased to grant me. Perhaps one day my ignorance will lend some celebrity to my name. I know nothing Sir, I repeat, nothing and I have been taught nothing. I am simply a pupil of nature, left in her care alone. She must have been an enlightened teacher for you seem to find me perfectly well instructed. Despite my ignorance of American history the odious slave trade has always revolted my soul and aroused my indignation. The first dramatic ideas that I penned were in favour of these men tyrannised with such cruelty for so many centuries. Perhaps this weak creation is a bit too redolent of a fledgling playwrighting career. Even our great men did not all start in the manner that they finished, and an attempt always merits some indulgence. I can attest, Sir, that *Les Amis des Noirs* did not exist when I conceived of this subject and had prejudice not blinded you, you should rather have presumed that maybe this society was formed as a result of my drama, or that I had the fortunate merit of nobly sympathising with it. May my drama create a more universal society, and encourage it to attend performances more often! I did not wish to shackle public opinion to my patriotism: I have waited patiently for the welcome return of its approval towards this drama. How satisfied I was to hear myself say all around that the changes I had made throughout this play added a significance to it that can only increase when the public learns that four months ago I dedicated this work to the nation, and that I devoted the funds from it to the patriotic purse, an enterprise which I presented in my *Letter to the People*, published eighteen months ago! This foresight may authorize me, without vanity, to consider myself the creator of the purse. This pamphlet attracted a lot of attention at the time, was criticised too, yet the project that it offered was no less a success. I had to inform you, and the public too, of these facts that characterise the love I have for the true French character, and of the efforts I made to conserve it. I have no doubt that the Comédie [Française], touched by these zealous acts, will arrange favourable days⁷ for the performance of this play in which, I cannot pretend otherwise, it is immensely interested. It has offered me proof of this that I cannot call into doubt. The author, the Comédie and the audience, by multiplying their delights, will together contribute to swell the coffers of the patriotic purse that alone can save the state, if all citizens recognise this truth.

I have to observe once more than during these patriotic performances several people often paid more than the price of their tickets. If this one produces the same heartfelt disposition, one will have to distinguish between the profits owed to the patriotic purse and the Comédie's own rights. A precise list, handed to the nation on behalf of the actors, will demonstrate the level of enthusiasm of these new citizens.

I hope, Sir, and I dare flatter myself, that after the clarifications I have offered regarding *Black Slavery*, you will no longer pursue it and you will, on the contrary, become an ardent patron of this drama; by arranging for it to be played in America it would return black men to their duties while they wait for the colonists and the French nation to abolish slavery, and await a happier fate. These are the positions that I have shown in this work. I have not presumed, according to the circumstances, to create a torch of discord, a signal to insurrection; on the contrary I have recently softened its effect. Should you doubt this assertion read, I pray, *The Fortunate Shipwreck* printed three years ago; if I made some allusion to men dear to France, these allusions cannot damage America. This is what you will be convinced of when the play is performed, if you will do me the honour of attending. It is with this gentle hope that I beg you, Sir, despite our little literary discussion, according to the conventional protocol, to consider me your very humble servant,

⁷ [Original footnote.] Everyone knows that when the actors of the Comédie Française do not take all the author's potential financial share they only allow the play to be performed on adverse days, that is to say Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and also will most often perform it alongside worn out plays unlikely to attract concurrence or crowds.

DEGOUGE. [sic]
Paris, 18 January 1790.

POST-SCRIPTUM.

I would have considered myself compromised if I had replied in the body of this letter to all the rubbish that an infamous slanderer has spread regarding me in his mercenary sheet. All I have to do to confound this abominable calumniator is to remind the public of my *Lettre à Monseigneur le duc d'Orléans* [*Letter to his Lordship the duc d'Orléans*], *Motion*, or *Séance Royale* [*Royal Session. His Lordship the duc d'Orléans' Motion*].⁸ The public will recognise that I used the voice of honour to return him to his duty, if he had strayed from it, but at the same time these writings unmasked him, if he was guilty. I am unaware if he actually is but I am convinced that my son was sacrificed and has just lost his position in the household of this prince.⁹ That is my justification.

⁸ Both texts were written and published in July 1789.

⁹ De Gouges's son lost his position in the duc d'Orléans' household and she herself was threatened by a group of thugs she believed were set upon her by Choderlos de Laclos – the duc's influential secretary – when the open letter to the duc, mentioned in her post-scriptum, was published. In it she questioned his ambitions to create a regency in order to rule France.