

TESTAMENT
POLITIQUE
D'OLYMPE DE GOUGES.

Olympe de Gouges's Political Testament.¹

Oh divine providence! You who have always guided my steps, I invoke you and you alone: men are no longer capable of hearing my words. Take charge of my life; hasten its end. My tired eyes can no longer bear the horror of seeing the sad dissension of men, of witnessing their criminal intrigue. If I must die by the sword of the counter-revolutionaries on all sides then inspire my last moments and fill me with the courage and strength to confound the wicked and serve once more, if I can, my country, before my last hour!

You who from a distance prepares revolutions and destroys tyrants! You whose penetrating gaze scrutinises the depths of the murkiest consciences; it is time to strike and unveil this drawn-out and mysterious iniquity; crime is at its height. Or, if you need the pure and spotless blood of a few innocent victims to bring forward your days of terrible retribution, add to this great campaign the blood of a woman. You know whether I have ever sought a glorious death! Glad to have been the first woman to serve the cause of the people; glad to have sacrificed my fortune to the triumph of liberty; glad to have ultimately given, through my son, a true defender of the Motherland, I only sought a quiet obscure retirement; the philosopher's retreat, a worthy and tender reward for virtue! Given that my writings, my efforts to recall men to the dearest and touching fraternity that alone could save the motherland, were powerless I wept in silence for a son who had spilt his blood on the country's borders on its behalf; by a miracle that only you, oh providence, could control, my son was returned to me. Pulled out from under the bodies and horses of the enemy, this son in the French army, believed to have been sacrificed thanks to his burning civic duty, carried among the dead to a hospital and effaced, in a word, from the list of survivors, stripped of everything by his enemies, flies to Paris to find his mother and seek further employment. I had fled the capital seeking only to remain secluded and unknown in the countryside where I had planned to live. On hearing that the heavens have given me back my son, and that he is in Paris, destiny, that it would be useless for me to obstruct, takes me back within the city walls where, no doubt, an end awaits me that befits my perseverance and my arduous labours.

I find out that my son has left Paris and that he owes this renewed proof of confidence, which his youth might deny him but that his military genius justifies, to the members of the *montagne* in the national convention. I know that I appear to them as a moderate who leans strongly towards the principles held by the Gironde, yet they did not allow the aversion they feel for the mother to rebound on the son. Their integrity is worthy of my public recognition, I'll say more, I owe them a debt of gratitude and here is how I will manifest it.

¹ This prophetic pamphlet, distributed by the author to the Convention, the Commune, the Jacobins and various journalists, was written in early June 1793, a few weeks before her arrest on the 22 July. Paris was in a frenzied state. Between May 31 and June 2 insurrection took hold of the city, ending with the house arrest of deputies not aligned to Robespierre and the *montagne* party. Along with July 14 and August 10, May 31 was considered, by those who supported it, a watershed moment of revolutionary progress. Others believed it marked the end of any form of democratic government. De Gouges responded to these events with her characteristic speed and courage. She trod a fine line between rhetoric, bravado, and personal sacrifice. Although the guillotine had been in use since August 1792 as a means of dispatching political opponents the *Terreur* itself did not get under way until September 1793 with the passing of the Law of Suspects. The Girondins deputies and de Gouges were arrested before and executed after the statute's creation. I have seen two fractionally different versions of this text which challenges the received wisdom that de Gouges only ever produced one print run of her texts.

" [No closing quotation marks are present in the original pamphlets that I have seen.] My son, the world's riches, the universe prostrate at my feet, the daggers of every assassin raised above my head, nothing could put out the civic ardour that burns in my soul, nothing could make me betray my own conscience. What have you done, men led astray by delirious passions, what incalculable harm have you piled up on Paris, on the whole of France? It is said that you risked all for all; you flattered yourselves into believing that in order to save the commonwealth a great proscription was all that was needed; that the *départements*, suffused in terror, would blindly adopt your horrible measures.² If you are right and thirty-two victims can extinguish all hatred and passion, if they can make the foreign powers declare the republic independent and destroy the army of the counter-revolutionaries, then hurry up and make their blood flow on the scaffolds and I'll offer you an extra victim.³ Are you looking for the guiltiest party? It is I; strike. I, in my prompt defence of Louis Capet, begged, as a true republican, for clemency from the victors of the dethroned tyrant. I suggested appealing to the people. Ultimately, I wanted, by this great measure, to break all sceptres, regenerate all peoples, and halt the rivers of blood that had run, since then, for this cause. This is my crime, oh French, and now it is time to expiate it amongst all these executioners.

But if, by one last effort, I can yet save the commonwealth, I want those who sacrifice me to envy my fate even as they immolate me. And if French women, one day, are designated by posterity, maybe I will be remembered as the equal of roman women [*alternative version*: And if French women, one day, are designated by posterity, maybe my memory will be held dear]. I have planned it all, I know that my death is inevitable; but, when an ignominious death threatens all good citizens, how glorious and beautiful it is for a noble soul to perish for her dying motherland. I accuse no one directly but what will you do, what will you become, men of bloodshed, if the *départements* rise up against Paris and arm themselves to defend the sacred duties they have entrusted to their mandataries? You exasperate the people, who, in their blindness, will go and immolate them to satisfy your vengeance. But, following this crime, will you escape from the people's change of heart, from the reversal of that public opinion on which you have raised your criminal expectations. No. I can see it in my mind's eye, the people, sitting like the image of the supreme being at the last judgement, terrible in their justice, asking you to account for the blood that they have shed on your behalf and for the imminent peril that your fury has dragged them into. Ah! If it is not too late, erring men (for I can only address those who have only lost their head) put a stop to your hatred and your vengeance! These abject souls, who sold themselves to the foreign powers and who, with torch and sword in hand preach republicanism, are evidently driving us into the most horrible slavery; one day their punishment will equal their crime. It is up to you, I say, erring citizens, to open your eyes to the forthcoming ruin of your miserable motherland, to stop these destructive torrents that are flooding towards this city. And you, representatives of the nation, who in order to save the commonwealth of Paris, have not, with this measure, saved the rest of France. You have sacrificed thirty-two of your worthy colleagues to personal hostility, you will soon be asked to justify you accusations and you will be unable to cite one example against your accused. Do you know what you must do if, once persuaded of their innocence, an even more unjust crime forces you to perform these appalling decrees against you conscience.

2 'Commonwealth' seemed an appropriate translation, in this pamphlet, for *la chose publique* which is the French translation of the Latin *res publica*, government for the people.

3 On 2 June 1793 the Convention voted to place under house arrest twenty-nine Girondins deputies and two ministers; of the twenty-two further detained all were guillotined on 31 October 1793, just days before Olympe de Gouges. By openly aligning herself to this group, while mentioning her defence of Louis XVI, de Gouges was putting herself in great danger as one of the accusations levelled against the deputies was that their desire to put Louis XVI's execution to a nation wide vote was a sign of royalism. De Gouges had already foreseen these arrests when she accused Robespierre in her *Pronostic* of November 1792 of wanting to assassinate his opponents.

Surpass, if you can, the Romans in courage and virtue. Bring these victims back into the bosom of your society and present your heads to the people. Clothed in national sovereignty, what blows could ever reach you? And if by one of those crimes unknown in this world, the infuriated were to fray a path to you through the dying bodies of the good citizens who had armed themselves in your defence, die worthy of our righteous regret and the admiration of posterity.

And you, victims of the blackest of crimes, worthy of the original freedom of Rome after the exile of Tarquin: who could recall your strength of purpose, your acceptance of the rule of law, without placing you alongside Brutus, Cato, etc..

I can see posterity pausing on these pages of history where your names will be inscribed and spilling tears of admiration when it is found that, carried away by republican heroism at a time of terror and menaces, you flew to the tribune and offered your heads to the people and sacrificed your blameless lives to save the commonwealth.

I feel myself moved by the same heroism that tempers courage and makes assassins quake! Yes, all points to my finding my true reward for civic virtues in the same death that awaits you. How proud I would be to take your defence and die like you as a true republican!

You who are called for by France, whose fate most of the citizens of Paris bemoan, and whom no one dares defend, receive this proof of my courage and of the esteem that I have vowed to all men I deem courageous.

But as I am fairly happy to make myself known to my fellow citizens before my death I will in a few words give them an exact account of my conduct and my fortune. Let the intriguers who, with such effrontery, waste the treasures of the republic, give, like me, an accurate picture of their credit and debit and then all will be clear to the people and they will be able to distinguish their true friends from their enemies.

In 1788 I still possessed 50,000 *livres* that I had placed in a well-known establishment and chattels worth about 30,000 *livres*; I now have left, in total, 15,000 or 16,000 *livres* at the most. My contract of reimbursement and the exact accounts of the 40,000 *livres* that I spent on the popular cause can be found at Momet, my notary. My gifts during the big freeze, my writings that spread the notion of charitable aid that followed, my projects for subsidised workshops for workmen, my voluntary taxes, my patriotic donations, my name absent from the civil lists or books of preferment, my sense of duty, my unselfishness, all the most particular evidence available at the notaries, in the statements and in the public records since 1788, all will show my fellow citizens that I never sought glory or recompense and that my conduct, therefore, was all the more brilliant and pure. It will be pointless for the intriguers to accuse me of colluding with those called the *Girondistes*; they know only too well that I have neither public nor personal connection with any of them other than the sharing of good principles. This is the truth; if the God of conscience, as I see him, is the only God that men will come to adore, one day I will see this truth triumph over falsehood. Or, if I am deprived of this pleasure, my fellow citizens, after I am gone, will give me credit where it is due. And never can I conceive that the men who were to be engulfed in a terrible proscription could have been the accomplices of the crowned tyrants; they who would be the first to perish on the scaffold if these tyrants outweighed our republican efforts. But they have talent, virtue and personality; that is their only crime! Prove otherwise and I will be the first to instigate their trial. Alas! I can hardly believe what I am seeing after what I have heard. Yes, I have heard men like the odious Dumouriez argue against my republicanism by saying that it was impossible for it to survive in France and that a king, a protector, a master, in a word, was indispensable in view of the French turbulence; I see that these same men are determined to treat the sages of the republic as rebels!⁴

4 Conquering hero of the battle of Valmy in September 1792 Dumouriez inspired de Gouges to write a revolutionary five act play, *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles, ou les Vivandiers*, in his honour. She

How is it possible to vehemently preach what one does not believe? How can one so audaciously mislead the people by blaming others for the effects of one's own crimes? If these men dominate that will be the end of liberty and equality. Our dissension is allowing tyranny to advance with giant strides. Citizens! You can take my life but, despite yourselves, you will remember my predictions and my civic virtue. Now I must enumerate my bequests, to which society may not be altogether indifferent, and in which I will allow myself a little of that gaiety that I have always included in affairs that are important to me.

I leave my heart to my country, my probity to men (they need it). My soul to women, not an indifferent gift; my creative genius to playwrights [*alternative version*: my dramatic genius to authors], they are sure to find it useful, especially my theatrical logic to the distinguished Chesnier [sic]; my compassion to the ruthless, my philosophy to the persecuted, my spirit to the fanatics, my religion to the atheists, my guileless gaiety to women past their prime, and all the sad debris of an honest fortune to my natural heir, my son, if he survives me.⁵

As for my plays, of which there are several hundred in manuscript, I leave them to the *comédie française*; if, after my death, they think that, thanks to their magical and sublime art, my works are worth producing in their theatre, then my gift will suffice to prove my appreciation of their inimitable talent. Born under a strange star, I would have liked, before my death, to have left an account of a quite interesting life; but if destiny has decided to give a prompt and glorious ending to my days I will leave it to sensitive men, should there be any left, to guess at the feelings of a victim of fanaticism who had rights to a fortune and the name of a distinguished father.

Oh French, here are my last words, heed me in this piece and look into the depths of your hearts: can you find there the serious virtue and compassion of republicans? Respond: who loves and serves the motherland the best, you or I? Nearly all of you are of bad faith. You want neither liberty nor perfect equality. Ambition devours you and the vulture that ceaselessly gnaws and tears at you drives you to the heights of excess. Amiable people, you are too aged, your reign is over unless you can halt it on the edge of the abyss. You were at your greatest, your most sublime, when you kept a majestic calm in the midst of the agitators' recent sanguinary tempests. Keep in mind that the same traps can be laid again but that if you can maintain your calm and august watchfulness you will save Paris, the whole of France and the republican government.

I chose you, Danton, to defend the principles that, with much feeling, I have hastily developed in this work. Although we manifest our opinions very differently I nevertheless give you the credit you are due, and I believe that you feel the same for me. I appeal to your profound discernment, to your generous personality: be my judge. I will not placard my testament; I will not enflame the people of Paris or the *départements*; I will address it directly, and with strength of purpose, to the jacobins, to the *départements*, to the commune, to the sections of Paris, where the sane majority of good citizens is to be found for, however much the evil-doers conspire, they will save the commonwealth.⁶

Signed Olympe de Gouges

This 4 June 1793, in the second year of the French Republic.

presented it to the theatre in November 1792 for immediate performance. It was held back and opened two days after the king's execution on 23 January 1793. It was not a success; partly because events had changed the public's attitude to the previously lionised military but also because female soldiers and the proto-feminist opinions held by their commander portrayed in the play fell out of favour. In early April 1793 Dumouriez went over to the Austrian camp, deserting France and its revolution. His disgrace was used by some to discredit de Gouges; had her play been produced when written, in 1792, it would undoubtedly have been a success for it perfectly expressed the feelings of the time and, according to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, had a Shakespearean quality to it.

⁵ Marie-Joseph Chenier (brother of André), poet and dramatist, whose play *Charles IX* was performed to huge success in November 1789.

⁶ This final paragraph is not included in one version of the text.