

RESPONSE TO THE AMERICAN CHAMPION
OLYMPE DE GOUGES
(1790)

Since we are no longer fighting in France, Sir, I agree with you that we sometimes assassinate each other; that it is imprudent to provoke assassins; but it is even more indiscreet, more indecent, and more unjust, to attack people of honor, to attack them in the most inept way, and yet the most calumnious, by imputing a lack of courage to M. de La Fayette, whom you fear, perhaps, at the bottom of your heart. I shall tell you that I do not know this magnanimous hero as you claim. I know only that his reputation is intact, his worth known, like Bayard's heartⁱ, his is fearless and unimpeachable; we shall perhaps owe him France's good fortune and her power as a nation. I shall not undertake to justify the famous men whom you provoke; they are all military men and French, and this title suffices for me to believe them worthy.

But, if I imitate you, Sir, by this kind of challenge, I stray a bit too far from my aim and blunder into the same gross error as you with respect to me. It is not the philosophers' cause, the cause of the Amis des Noirs, that I undertake to defend; it is my own, and you shall kindly permit me to use the only weapons that are within my power. We are going then to wage war, and this single combat, thanks to my jeanlorgnerieⁱⁱ, will not be murderous. Yet you grant me virtues and courage beyond my sex. I could acknowledge them without too much pride; but you do not credit me less gratuitously with the ambition to consult academicians, learned men and women of letters, and all the Muses, which protect more than one fool, and on which I set very little value, except for the writers, who have respected talent with honor and integrity, about language and my feeble productions. Literary merit amounts to very little when it is stripped of these two advantages: but let us pass on to that which is important for me to tell you, and of which you are completely unaware.

You claim, Sir, that the Amis des Noirs used a woman to provoke the colonists. It is certainly much more extraordinary that a man who evinces some spirit, some aptitude, and even gallantry, should charge a woman with being the bearer of a cartel, and want, by a venture as singular as it is cowardly, to prove her courage. I can appreciate your merit only as a kind of Don Quixote, and regard you as a slayer of giants and phantoms, which do not exist. Yet I want, by bringing you round to reason, to laugh with you at the troubles for which I see no remedy. You have to battle the Société des Amis des Noirs, and I, I have to confound something even more terrible, that is Time, which destroys everything, which changes the arts, manners and human justice at will, shall never change the corporate feeling of those of whom I have very strong reason to complain.

For several months now in France, we have seen error, imposture, and injustice unveiled, and finally we have seen the walls of the Bastille fall; but we have not yet seen the fall of the despotism that I attack. I therefore see myself reduced to trying to overthrow it. Despotism is a tree in the middle of a thickly wooded maze, bristling with thorns and prickles: to prune its branches I need all of Medea's magic. The retrieval of the golden fleece cost Jason less care and skill than the torment and snares it is going to cost me to avoid these poisonous branches that damage the celebrated tree and man's genius. To destroy them, I must lay low twenty dangerous dragons who, turning sometimes into zealous citizens, sometimes into supple serpents, creep everywhere and spread their venom over my works and my staff.

But, in my turn, must I not, Sir, rightfully suspect you of putting yourself honorably forward in this rampant faction which protested against L'esclavage des nègres? With what do

you charge this work? With what do you charge the author? Is it to have sought to have the colonists in America slaughtered and to have been the agent of men whom I know less than you, who perhaps do not value all of my productions since I have shown that the abuse of liberty had born much evil? You know me very little. I was the apostle of a sweet liberty in the midst of despotism. But a true French woman, I idolize my country: I have sacrificed everything for her; I cherish my king to the same degree, and I would shed my blood to restore all that to which his virtues and his paternal tenderness entitle him. I would sacrifice neither my king to my country, nor my country to my king, but I would sacrifice myself to save them both together, persuaded as I am that the one cannot exist without the other. Man is known, so we claim, by his writings. Read me, Sir, from my Lettre au peuple to my Lettre à la nation, and you will recognize, dare I flatter myself, a heart and spirit that are truly French. Extreme parties have always feared and detested my productions. These two parties, divided by contrary interests, are always unmasked in my writings. My invariable maxims, my incorruptible sentiments, there are my principles. Royalist and true patriot, in life and in death, I show myself such as I am.

Since I have the courage to sign this written document, do likewise to show you are my equal and obtain my esteem, which is not perhaps indifferent to a gallant man: for I grant it with as much difficulty as Jean-Jacques. I may elevate myself to the level of this great man with respect to the righteous mistrust that he had of men: I have met few who are just and truly estimable. I do not reproach them minor faults, but their vices, their duplicity, and their remorseless inhumanity toward the weakest among us. May this revolution regenerate the spirit and the conscience of men, and reproduce the true French character! Permit me a word more, please.

I am not well informed though it pleased you to bestow this glory upon me. One day, perhaps, my memory will be well-known because of my ignorance. I know nothing, Sir; nothing, I tell you, and I have learned nothing from anyone. Student of simple nature, abandoned to her care alone, she thus enlightened me, since you think me completely informed. Without knowing the history of America, this odious Negro slave trade has always stirred my soul, aroused my indignation. The first dramatic ideas that I set down on paper were on behalf of this class of men tyrannized with cruelty for so many centuries. This feeble production may suffer perhaps a little too much from its being a dramatic career's debut. Our great men themselves did not all begin as they finished, and an attempt always deserves some indulgence. I can thus bear witness, Sir, that the Amis des Noirs did not exist when I conceived this subject, and you had rather assume, if prepossession has not blinded you, that this society is perhaps based on my drama, or that I have had the happy talent of nobly coming upon it. May they form a more general society, and inveigle it more often with its own representation! I did not try to chain public opinion to my patriotism; I patiently awaited its felicitous return in behalf of this drama. With what satisfaction I have heard myself say on all sides, that the changes that I had made generated wide-spread interest in this play, which can only increase when the public learns that, for four months now, I have dedicated this work to the nation, and that I have assigned its proceeds to the coffers of the patriots, whose establishment I presented in my Lettre au peuple, in print for 18 months. This priority justifies perhaps my considering myself, without vanity, the author. This pamphlet caused quite a stir at the time, was likewise criticized, and the plan that it offered has not been the less successfully effected. I should inform you, as well as the public, of these deeds that characterize the love that I have for the true French character and the efforts that I make for its preservation. I do not doubt that the Comedy, moved by these zealous acts, conspires to give the most propitious daysⁱⁱⁱ to the performance of this drama; I cannot dissemble their boundless

interest in my play. The Comedy has given me proof thereof, which I cannot call in question. While multiplying their pleasures, the author, the Comedy, and the public will all contribute to increasing the stock of the patriots' coffers, which alone can save the state, if all citizens recognize this truth.

I must further note that in these patriotic performances a number of persons have often paid beyond the price of their seats. If this one moves them in the same way, then we must distinguish between the patriot's profits and the Comedy's rights. An accurate list, remitted to the nation by the Comedians, will give proof of these new citizens' zeal and fiat.

I hope, Sir, and I dare flatter myself, that after my enlightening you on L'esclavage des nègres, you will no longer proceed against it, and that you will become on the contrary the zealous protector of this drama; in having it even performed in America, it shall always bring black men round to their duties, while expecting the abolition of the black slave trade and a happier fate from colonists and the French nation. There are the attitudes that I have displayed in this work. I have not sought, under the circumstances, to make my play a banner of discord, a signal for insurrection; I have, on the contrary, since tempered its effect. If ever you doubt this assertion, read, I beseech you, L'heureux naufrage, in print for three years; and if I have made some allusion to men dear to France, these allusions are not at all harmful to America. The performance of my play will convince you of this, should you honor me by coming to see it. It is in this sweet hope that I beseech you to believe me, Sir, in spite of our little literary discussion, in accordance with accepted convention, your very humble servant,

DEGOUGE.

Paris, 18 January 1790.

POST-SCRIPTUM.

I would have thought to have compromised myself, if I had responded in the body of this letter to all the filth that an infamous lampoonist has just spread about me in his mercenary rag. It is sufficient for me to remind the public, in order to confound this abominable calumniator, of La lettre écrite à M. le duc d'Orléans, La motion, or Séance royale. The public will recognize that I employed the voice of honor with this prince in order to bring him round to his duty, if he had strayed from it; but at the same time these writings unmasked him, if he were guilty. I do not know if he were in fact, but that of which I am convinced, is that my son was sacrificed and has just lost his position in the house of this prince. There is my justification.

ⁱ Bayard, Pierre du Terrail, Chevalier de (c. 1473-1524), 'le Chevalier sans peur et sans reproche', a famous captain known for his brave exploits in the Italian wars.

ⁱⁱ The expression "Jean Lorgne" designates a fool, a simpleton, someone absolutely mindless. This expression can be found in two forms, as one word or two, in Marivaux's *Le Télémaquetravesti*. An allusion in Voltaire's *La pucelle d'Orléans* also seems to refer to the expression. (I am indebted to Normand Lalonde at the University of Montreal for this information.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Everyone knows that when the Comedians do not take every possible interest in an author, they grant her only the worst days for the performance of her work, that is, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and furthermore, that her work is most often performed only with hackneyed plays, which are not liable to draw a crowd.