

The Rights of Woman (1791)

Olympe de Gouges

TO THE QUEEN.

MADAME,

BEING unused to the language one addresses to Kings, I shall not employ the flattery of Courtiers in presenting you with this singular production. My aim, Madame, is to speak to you frankly; I have not waited for the era of Liberty in order to express myself in this way: I revealed myself with the same energy in a time when the blindness of Despots punished such noble boldness.

When the whole Empire was accusing you and making you responsible for its calamities, in a time of trouble and tempest, I alone had the fortitude to take up your defense. I was never able to persuade myself that a Princess, raised in the bosom of dignities, had all the vices of vulgarity.

Yes, Madame, when I saw the sword raised against you, I threw my remarks between that sword and the victim; but today, when I see that the bribed mob of mutineers is watched closely, and that it is restrained by the fear of the laws, I shall say to you, Madame, what I would not have said then.

If foreigners carry the sword into France, you are no longer in my eyes that falsely accused Queen, that interesting Queen, but an implacable enemy of the French. Ah! Madame, reflect that you are a wife and mother; make use of all your influence for the return of the Princes.¹ This influence, so wisely bestowed, fortifies the crown of the father, preserves it to the son, and reconciles to you the love of the French. This worthy negotiation is the true duty of a Queen. Intrigue, conspiracy, bloodthirsty schemes would precipitate your fall, if one could believe you capable of such schemes.

May a more noble occupation, Madame, distinguish you, excite your ambition, and attract your attention. To give momentum to the flight of the Rights of Woman, and to hasten their success, is the sole prerogative of one whom chance has raised to a place of eminence. If you were less well educated, Madame, I could fear that your personal interests would outweigh those of your sex. You love glory: reflect, Madame, that the greatest crimes immortalize one like the greatest virtues; but what a difference in the annals of history! the one is forever taken as an example, and the other is the eternal execration of the human race.

It will never be made a crime for you to labour for the restoration of morals, to give your sex all the firmness of which it is capable, This work is not the labour of a day, unfortunately for the new regime. This revolution will only come to pass when all women are struck with their miserable fate, and with the rights they have lost in society. Sustain such a splendid cause, Madame; defend this unhappy sex, and you will soon have for yourself one half of the kingdom, and at least a third of the other half.

There, Madame, those are the exploits by which you should distinguish yourself and use your influence. Believe me, Madame, our life is a very trifling thing, especially for a Queen, when that life is not adorned by the love of the people, and by the eternal charms of beneficence.

If it is true that Frenchmen are arming all the powers against their fatherland; why? for frivolous prerogatives, for chimeras. Believe me, Madame, if I judge of it by what I feel, the monarchical party will

1. [The royal émigrés hostile to the Revolution included Louis Joseph, prince de Condé, Louis François, prince de Conti, and Louis-Stanislas-Xavier, comte de Provence, the brother of Louis XVI.]

abolish itself of its own accord, it will abandon all the tyrants, and all hearts will rally around the fatherland to defend it.

There, Madame, those are my principles. In speaking to you of my fatherland, I lose sight of the aim of this dedication. It is thus that every good Citizen sacrifices his glory, his interests, when his only object is those of his country.

I am with the most profound respect,
MADAME,

Your very humble and very obedient servant,
DE GOUGES.

THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN.

40 MAN, are you able to be just? It is a woman who asks you the question; you will not take that right, at least, away from her. Tell me: what has given you the sovereign power to oppress my sex? your strength? your talents? Observe the creator in his wisdom; survey nature in all its grandeur, to which you want to seem to compare yourself, and give me, if you dare, an example of this tyrannical power.² Go back to the animals, consult the elements, study the vegetables, cast a glance, finally, over all the modifications of organized matter; and submit to the evidence when I give you the means to; search, excavate and distinguish the sexes, if you can, in the government of nature. Everywhere you will find them mingled, every-
where they cooperate as a harmonious concert in this immortal masterpiece.

50 Man alone has dressed up this exception as a principle. Bizarre, blind, bloated with sciences and degenerated, in this age of enlightenment and wisdom, into the crassest ignorance, he wants to rule like a despot over a sex which has received all the intellectual faculties; he pretends to rejoice in the revolution, and to claim his rights to equality, in order to say no more about it.

DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN AND OF THE FEMALE CITIZEN,

To be decreed by the National Assembly in its last sessions or in that of the next legislature.

PREAMBLE.

60 The mothers, daughters, sisters, representatives of the nation, demands to be formed into a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of woman, are the sole causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of governments, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration, the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman, that this declaration, being constantly present to all members of the body social, may ever remind them of their rights and their duties, that the acts of the power of women, and those of the power of men, being capable of being every moment compared with the end of all political institutions, may be more respected, that the claims of the female citizens, founded hereafter on simple and incontestable principles, may always tend to the maintenance of the constitution and of good morals, and to the general happiness.

Accordingly, the sex that is as superior in beauty as in courage, in the sufferings of maternity, recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the supreme Being, the following Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen.

FIRST ARTICLE.

Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions can only be founded on common utility.

2. From Paris to Peru, from Rome to Japan,
The dumbest animal, in my view, is man.

II.

The end of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Woman and of Man: these rights are liberty, property, security, and above all resistance to oppression.

III.

70 The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation, which is nothing more than the union of Woman and Man; no body, no individual, can exercise an authority which does not emanate expressly from it.

IV.

Liberty and justice consist in rendering to others all that belongs to them; thus the exercise of the natural right of woman has no other limits than the perpetual tyranny that man opposes to it; these limits should be reformed by the laws of nature and of reason.

V.

The laws of nature and of reason prohibit all actions hurtful to society: nothing that is not prohibited by these laws, wise and divine, may be hindered, nor may anyone be compelled to do what they do not enjoin.

VI.

80 The Law should be the expression of the general will; all the Female and Male Citizens should concur personally, or by their representatives, in its formation; it should be the same for all: all the female and all the male citizens, being equal in its eyes, should be equally admissible to all honours, positions and public employments, according to their capacities, and without any other distinctions than those of their virtues and their talents.

VII.

No woman is exempt; she is accused, arrested, and detained in cases determined by the Law. Women like men obey this rigorous Law.

VIII.

The law should impose only those penalties which are strictly and evidently necessary, and no one can be punished except by virtue of a Law established and promulgated previously to the offense and legally applied to women.

IX.

Whenever a woman is declared guilty, all rigour is exercised by the Law.

X.

90 No-one should be molested for their opinions, even fundamental ones; woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she should equally have the right to mount the Tribune; provided that her actions do not disturb the public order established by the Law.

XI.

The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman, since this liberty ensures that fathers acknowledge their children. Every Female Citizen may therefore say freely, I am the mother of a child who belongs to you, without a barbarous prejudice to force her to con-

ceal the truth; provided she is held responsible for the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by the Law.

XII.

100 The good of the majority is necessary in order to secure the rights of woman and the female citizen; this security should be instituted for the advantage of all, and not for the particular good of those women to whom it is entrusted.

XIII.

For the maintenance of the public force, and for the expenses of government, the contributions of woman and man are equal; she takes part in all the drudgery, in all the laborious tasks; she should therefore take the same part in the distribution of positions, of employments, of commissions, of honours and of business.

XIV.

The Female and Male Citizens have the right to determine, by themselves or by their representatives, the necessity of public contributions. The Female Citizens cannot enjoy this right except by being allowed an equal share, not only in wealth, but also in public administration, and by being allowed to determine the amount, the basis, the collection and duration of taxation.

XV.

110 The mass of women, united for the purposes of taxation with that of men, has the right to demand of all its public agents an account of their administration.

XVI.

Every society, in which the security of rights is not assured, and the separation of powers is not determined, has no constitution; the constitution is null and void, if the majority of the individuals who make up the Nation has not cooperated in drawing it up.

XVII.

Property belongs to both sexes, individually and collectively; it is everyone's inviolable and sacred right; as it is a true patrimony of nature, no-one may be deprived of it, except when public necessity, legally ascertained, evidently demands it, and on condition of a previously established and just indemnity.

POSTAMBLE.

120 Woman, arise; the tocsin of reason makes itself heard through the whole universe; know your rights. The mighty empire of nature is no longer surrounded with prejudices, fanaticism, superstition and lies. The torch of truth has dissipated the mists of stupidity and usurpation. While enslaved, man increased his strengths, he needed to have recourse to yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust towards his companion. O women! women, when will you stop being blind? What advantages have you received from the revolution? A more obvious contempt, a more conspicuous disdain. In the ages of corruption you reigned only over the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed; then what remains to you? the conviction of the injustices of man. The claiming of your patrimony, founded on the wise decrees of nature: what would you have to fear from such a splendid enterprise? the *bon mot* of the Legislator of Cana?³ Are you afraid that our French Legislators, correctors of that mortality which has long been hooked to the branches of politics, but which is no longer in season, will repeat to you: women, what have you to do with us? Everything, you would have to reply. If they should persist, in their weakness, in

3. [John 2: 4.]

130 employing this irrelevancy, in contradiction to their principles, then courageously oppose the vain pretensions of superiority with the force of reason; rally beneath the standards of philosophy; display all the energy of your character, and you will soon see these arrogant men, not servile worshippers crawling at your feet, but proud to share the treasures of the Supreme Being with you. Whatever barriers may be opposed to you, it is in your power to emancipate yourselves; you have only to will it. Now let us change the subject to the frightful picture of what you have been in society, and since it is a question, at this point, of a national education, let us see if our wise Legislators will think soundly about the education of women.

140 Women have done more evil than good. Constraint and dissimulation have been their lot. What force has robbed from them, guile has restored to them; they have had recourse to all the resources of their charms, and the most irreproachable did not resist them. Poison, the sword, everything was obedient to them; they commanded crime as well as virtue. The French government, above all, has depended, for centuries, on the nocturnal administration of women; the cabinet has no secrets on account of their inquisitiveness; embassy, command, ministry, presidency, pontificate, cardinalate;⁴ everything, finally, profane and sacred, which characterizes the stupidity of men, everything was obedient to the cupidity and ambition of this sex, and since the revolution respectable and despised.

150 In such an antithesis, what remarks do I not have to offer! I have only a moment to make them, but this moment will attract the attention of the remotest posterity. Under the old regime, all was vicious, all was culpable; but could one not notice the improvement of things even in the substance of vices? A woman needed only to be beautiful or amiable; when she possessed these two advantages, she saw a hundred fortunes at her feet. If she did not profit from them, she had a whimsical character, or an unusual philosophy, which led her to despise riches; then she was only considered perverse; the most immodest made herself respected with gold; the commerce in women was a species of business accepted in the highest class, which, henceforward, will have no more credit. If it still had it, the revolution would be lost, and we would always be corrupted in new ways; however, reason can deceive itself so that every other road to fortune is closed to the woman whom the man buys, like a slave on the coasts of Africa. The difference is great; it is known. The slave rules the master; but if the master gives her her freedom without compensation, and at an age when the slave has lost all her charms, what becomes of this unfortunate? The plaything of contempt, even the doors of beneficence are shut to her; she is poor and old, it is said: why didn't she know how to make her fortune? Other examples, even more pathetic, come to mind. A young person without experience, seduced by a man she loves, will leave her parents to follow him; the ingrate will discard her after a few years, and the more she has grown old with him, the more inhuman will be his inconstancy; if she has children, he will abandon her just the same. If he is rich, he will believe that he is exempt from sharing his fortune with his noble victims. If some obligation binds him to his duties, he will violate the force of it while hoping for everything from the laws. If he is married, every other obligation loses its rights. What laws remain to be made to tear up vice by the roots. That of the sharing of fortunes, and of public administration, between men and women. It is easily conceived that she who is born of a rich family, gains much from an equal sharing. But she who is born of a poor family, with merits and virtues, what is her lot? Poverty and shame. If she does not excel specifically in music or painting, she cannot be admitted to any public employment, although she would be entirely capable of it. I only want to give a glimpse of these things; I will go into them more deeply in the new edition of all my political works which I intend to give to the public in a few days, with notes.

170 I take up my text with regard to morals. Marriage is the grave of confidence and love. The married woman can with impunity give bastards to her husband, and give them the fortune which does not belong to them. The one who is not married has only a feeble right: the ancient and inhuman laws refuse her, and her children, the right to the name and the wealth of their father, and new laws have not been made on

4. M. de Bernis, of the making of Madame de Pompadour. [François-Joachim de Bernis (1717–94) was a protégé of Jeanne Antoinette, marquise de Pompadour (1721–64), mistress of Louis XV, but by 1758, when he was made cardinal, he had lost her favour. He was opposed to the Revolution.]

this subject. If attempting to give my sex a just and honourable firmness is considered at this moment like a paradox on my part, and like attempting the impossible, I leave to the men to come the glory of dealing with this subject; but, in the meantime, one can prepare for it by national education, by the restoration of morals and by conjugal agreements.

FORM OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT OF MAN AND WOMAN.

We N and N, moved by our own will, unite ourselves for the term of our life, and for the duration of our mutual inclinations, on the following conditions: We intend and wish to put our fortunes in common, reserving however for ourselves the right to divide them for the benefit of our children, and of those for whom we could have a particular inclination, recognizing mutually that our goods belong directly to our children, whatever bed they come from, and that all of them equally have the right to bear the name of the fathers and mothers who have acknowledged them, and we force ourselves to subscribe to the law that punishes the renunciation of one's own blood. We oblige ourselves equally, in the case of a separation, to divide our fortune, first deducting the portion of our children, as indicated by the law; and, in the case of a perfect union, the first to die would renounce half of his properties in favour of his children; and if one died without children, the survivor would inherit by right, unless the dying person has disposed of half of the common property in favour of whomever he deemed appropriate.

That is roughly the formula of the conjugal deed who implementation I propose. On reading this singular document, I can see the Tartuffes,⁵ the prudes, the clergy, and the whole infernal gang rise against me. But how it will offer to the wise the moral means to arrive at the perfection of a happy government! I am going to give the physical proof in a few words. The rich Epicurean without children thinks very well of going to his poor neighbour to increase his family. When there is a law that will authorize the poor man's wife to have the rich man adopt her children, the bonds of society will be strengthened, and morals made more pure. Perhaps this law will preserve the good of the community, and prevent the disorder which leads so many victims into the asylums of shame, of baseness, and of the degeneration of human principles, where nature has groaned for a long time. Let the detractors of sound philosophy cease, therefore, to cry out against primitive morals, or let them go lose themselves in the source of their citations.⁶

I would also like a law that would benefit widows and young women deceived by the false promises of a man to whom they were attached; I would like, I say, for this law to force an inconstant man to keep his engagements, or pay an indemnity in proportion to his fortune. I would also like this law to be rigorously enforced against women, at least against those who had the boldness to have recourse to a law which they themselves had infringed by their misconduct, if it were proved. I would like, at the same time, as I explained it in *The Primitive Happiness of Man*, in 1788,⁷ for prostitutes to be placed in designated quarters. It is not the public women who contribute the most to the corruption of morals, it is the women of society. In reforming the latter, one changes the former. This chain of fraternal union will at first present disorder, but by its consequences, it will produce in the end a perfect harmony.

I offer an invincible means to raise up the souls of women; it is to unite them to all the activities of man: if man persists in finding this means impracticable, let him share his fortune with woman, not according to his whim, but by the wisdom of the laws. Prejudice will fall, morals will become pure, and nature will recover its rights. Add to this the marriage of priests; the King would be strengthened on his throne, and the French government could not be destroyed.

It was very necessary that I saw a few words about the troubles that are caused, it is said, by the decree in favour of the men of colour, in our islands.⁸ It is there that nature shudders with horror; it is there that reason and humanity have not yet touched hardened souls; it is there above all that division

5. [From the title character of Molière's *Le Tartuffe* (1664), a satire on religious hypocrisy.]

6. Abraham had some very legitimate children by Hagar, the handmaid of his wife. [Genesis 16.]

7. [*Le Bonheur primitif de l'homme* (Amsterdam, 1789).]

8. [The National Assembly addressed the situation in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in an ineffectual decree on 8 March 1790. A Mulatto revolt was suppressed in October 1790; the great slave uprising began in August 1791.]

and discord trouble the inhabitants. It is not difficult to find out the instigators of these incendiary agitations: there are some of them in the very bosom of the National Assembly: they are lighting in Europe the fire that should set America in a blaze. The Planters insist on reigning like despots over men whose fathers and brothers they are; and disregarding the rights of nature, they seek the source of their claim in the smallest tinge of their blood. These inhuman Planters say: our blood circulates in their veins, but we will spill it all, if necessary, to satisfy our greed, or our blind ambition. It is in these places, the closest to nature, that the father disowns the son; deaf to the cries of blood, he stifles all its charms; what can one hope from the resistance which is opposed to him? to constrain it with violence is to make it terrible; to leave it in its chains is to send every calamity on its way to America. A divine hand seems to pour out everywhere the prerogative of man, *liberty*; the law alone has the right to curb that liberty, if it degenerates into license; but it should be the same for all, it is the law above all which should confirm the National Assembly in its decree, dictated by prudence and justice. If only it could operate in the same way with regard to the state of France, and make itself as attentive to new abuses, as it has been to the old ones which become more frightful every day! My opinion would still be to reconcile the executive power with the legislative power, because it seems to me that the one is everything, that the other is nothing; from whence will begin, perhaps unfortunately, the fall of the French Empire. I consider these two power like man and woman,⁹ who should be united, but equal in strength and virtue, to make a good household.

It is true, indeed, that no individual can escape fate; I experienced it today.

I had resolved and decided not to permit myself the smallest funny story in this production, but fate decided otherwise: here is the fact:

Thrift is not forbidden, especially in this time of poverty. I live in the country. This morning at eight o'clock I left Auteuil, & set out towards the road which leads from Paris to Versailles, where one often finds those famous little taverns where travellers gather together cheaply. No doubt an evil star had been following me since the morning. I arrive at the barrier, where I don't find even the pathetic aristocratic cab. I rest on the steps of this insolent edifice which shelters toll-collectors. Nine o'clock strikes, and I continue on my way: a vehicle presents itself to my sight, I take a place in it, & at a quarter past nine, according to two different watches, I arrive at the Pont-Royal. There I take the cab, and fly to my Printer's, in the rue Christine, because I can only go there very early: in correcting my proofs, there is always something left for me to do, if the pages are not very closely set and filled up. I stay about twenty minutes; and tired from walking, composition and printing, I decided to go take a bath in the Temple quarter, where I was going to have dinner. I arrive at a quarter to eleven by the bath clock; so I owed the coachman for an hour and a half; but, so as not to have an argument with him, I offer him 48 sous: he insists on more, as usual; he makes a scene. I still don't want to give him more than his due, because a just being prefers to be generous rather than duped. I threaten him with the law, he tells me that he laughs at it, and that I will pay him for two hours. We come to a commissioner of the peace, whom I have the generosity not to name, although the act of authority he allowed himself towards me deserves a formal denunciation. No doubt he did not know that the woman who was claiming justice was the woman author of so much beneficence and equity. Without taking my reasons into consideration, he pitilessly condemns me to pay the coachmen what he asked. Knowing the law better than he does, I say to him, Monsieur, I refuse, and I beg you to bear in mind that you are not a beginner in your position. Then this man, or to be more precise, this madman, loses his temper, threatens me with Force if I do not pay instantly, or with staying all day at his office. I demand to be taken to the departmental tribunal or to the town hall, having a complaint to make about his act of authority. The grave magistrate, in a dusty frock-coat as disgusting as his conversation, said pleasantly to me: no doubt this affair will go before the National Assembly? That

9. At the magic supper of M. de Merville, Ninon asked who was the mistress of Louis XIV? She was answered, it is the Nation, that mistress will corrupt the government if she assumes too much sway. [Unidentified; "XVI" may be a misprint for "XIV," since the celebrated beauty Ninon de Lenclos lived from 1620 to 1705.]

260 could well be, I say to him; & I was half furious about it and half laughing at the judgment of this modern
 Bride-Oison,¹⁰ saying, so that's the kind of man who deserves to judge an enlightened people! That's all
 one sees. Similar adventures happen indiscriminately to good patriots, as to bad ones. There is nothing but
 an outcry against the disorders of the sections and the tribunals. Justice is not done; the law is disregarded,
 & the police are becoming God knows what. One entrusts one's effects to coachmen and then can't find
 them again; they change their numbers as the fancy takes them, and several persons, like me, have experi-
 270 ence considerable losses in their vehicles. Under the old regime, whatever its highway robbery was, one
 found the trail of one's losses, by calling the roll of the coachmen, and carefully examining numbers; in the
 end, one was safe. What do these justices of the peace do? what do these commissioners, these inspectors
 of the new regime, do? Nothing but stupidity and monopolies. The National Assembly should direct all its
 attention to this faction, which is setting the social order on fire.

P.S. This work had been composed for several days; it was still held up in the printing; and at the
 moment when M. Taleyrand, whose name will always be dear to posterity, has just given us his work on
 the principles of national education, this production was already in press. I will be happy if I have coin-
 cided with the views of this orator! Nevertheless, I cannot prevent myself from stopping the press, giving
 free rein to the pure joy which my heart felt at the news that the king had just accepted the Constitu-
 tion,¹¹ and that the national assembly—which I now worship, not excepting abbé Maury;¹² and la Fayette¹³
 280 is a god—had proclaimed, with a unanimous voice, a general amnesty. Divine providence, grant that
 this public joy is not a false illusion! Send back to us, in a body, all our fugitives—if only I could soar, with
 an affectionate people, over their journey—and on that solemn day, we will all render homage to your
 power.

[Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications*, ed. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Ontario: Broadview,
 1997), 380–392.]

10. [Brid'oison is a foolish magistrate in *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784), by Beaumarchais.]

11. [Louis XVI accepted the constitution on 14 September 1791.]

12. [Jean Siffrein Maury (1746–1817), known as a defender of the clergy and nobility, went into exile in 1791.]

13. [Marie Joseph, marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), moderate leader and hero of the early phase of the Revolution; he lost his popularity after the Massacre of the Champ de Mars (17 July 1791) and went into exile in 1792.]