

The Duchess Reflects

Summary

The duchess takes stock of the Revolution thus far, and considers what it has meant for her and for the country. Her decision to begin this review with religious matters highlights the centrality of her Catholic faith to her own sense of self. The duchess is withering in her assessment of the Revolutionaries's record in this area, which includes the highly controversial Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Aside from religion, the duchess focuses on what she regards as the corruption and financial mismanagement of the new and rapidly expanding Revolutionary political class. It is in this Letter that the duchess gives her first indication that she is planning to emigrate, a course of action many in her social class had taken already.

Date and place of writing

29 December 1790, Moreuil

Themes

- The Duchess
- National Politics
- Nobility
- Religion
- Enlightenment

Letter

Moreuil. 29 December 1790

You are right, Madame. We can no longer have any hope of happiness in France during the coming year. Everything points towards it being a source of endless woe, across both the spiritual and temporal realms. But perhaps you are wrong to demand that I share with you the details of everything I am thinking about all this. Alas! Wouldn't we be much happier distracting ourselves away from such thoughts! If only that were possible!

So, Madame, here we are on the threshold of some kind of English Church.¹ Our own National Assembly wants to exert its authority over the Gallican Church² by removing fifty French bishops and is shrewdly targeting those who would be best placed to oppose these plans. The Assembly also plans to reduce the size of the lower clergy in similar fashion, in a way that allows it to select who will remain its

allies, and so that the church's expenses will be reduced in the future. The Holy Father³ will no longer be involved in our affairs in any way. The people will elect all their own clergy, and good God what electors we have!

As for temporal power, Madame, this is being wielded in ways which lead inexorably towards the kingdom's ruin. All these bourgeois, who lord it over us in everything, they share between themselves the property of the first two Orders and the authority of government, while displaying a sovereign disdain for the likes of us. They sell off whatever church property they can get their hands on, target ours bit by bit by raining down new taxes on the privileged (which they increase without justification), and set all kinds of traps for us. If it was only a matter of displaying the virtue of patience then the king would be a fine example to follow, but alas no one, not even the lowly earthworm, can put up with such outright contempt. And so I think only about how to arrange my affairs so that I can leave this debased and impoverished country.⁴

The country has been deluged with *assignats*,⁵ and I believe those fine fellows [in the National Assembly] can do whatever they like in this regard because the administrative posts they create every session are filled with their own kind. After their departments, districts and municipalities we now have thousands of justices of the peace and judges for commercial, criminal and appeal courts. Because these posts are all for their cronies and friends they are well remunerated, and it is said that the annual wage bill now stands at 200 million livres.⁶ Furthermore, these judges are typically elected in the most token fashion. All this stems from the Third's infatuation with an immoral philosophy peculiar to this century, and of which Voltaire was a founding father.

Already these philosopher-legislators have eaten their way through 18 hundred million in paper money, while only putting perhaps two hundred million towards paying the state's debts. They live in great style and run up huge expenses.

All these lucrative opportunities given to the bourgeois in the towns and to every village bigwig in the countryside have bound them closely to our rotten Assembly. The same thing has happened with our young people, who all now strut around in the National Guard. And so by catering to the self-interest of the old and flattering the vanity and licentiousness of the young, they are erasing religion, monarchy, and all the decent sentiments anyone once possessed.

Notes

1. A reference to the English Reformation.
2. Gallicanism maintained that the Pope's authority over the Catholic Church in France was circumscribed by the nation's temporal powers, rooted in the monarchy until the Revolution.

3. The Pope.

4. The duchess left France at the end of September 1791, but returned to Paris six months later.

5. A new paper currency linked to the Revolution's programme of mass nationalisation of property, in particular church property. It was beset by inflation problems from an early stage.

6. The annual basic (male) wage at this time was 300-400 livres. The livre (tournois) was part of the standard metal coinage of eighteenth-century France, though from 1790 it operated alongside the Revolution's new paper currency, the *assignat*.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, pp. 46-47).

Published at www.revolutionaryduchess.exeter.ac.uk as part of the AHRC-funded project 'The Duchesse d'Elbeuf's Letters to a Friend, 1788-1794', a collaboration between Queen Mary, University of London and the University of Exeter.