

RÉFLEXIONS SUR LES HOMMES NÈGRES.

Reflections on Negro Men.¹

The deplorable fate of black mankind has always elicited my interest. My understanding was just beginning to develop, at an age when children are carefree, when the first sight of a Negress made me reflect and enquire about her colour.

Those that I could question at the time did not satisfy my curiosity or my reasoning. They treated such people as brutes, as beings that Heaven had damned but I, growing older, clearly observed that it was force and prejudice that had condemned them to this horrible slavery, that Nature had no part in it and that the unjust and powerful interest of the Whites was responsible for it all.

Imbued with this truth for a long while, and convinced of their appalling situation, I treated of their Story in the first dramatic work that came from my imagination. Several men took an interest in their fate, they worked to temper it; none thought to represent them on the Stage, complete with their costume and local colour, as I did, if the Comédie Française had not opposed it.

Mirza had conversed [in or conserved?] her natural tongue; nothing was more affectionate. I felt that it added to the value of this Drama, this was also the opinion of all Connoisseurs, apart from the Actors. Let us spend no more time on my Play as it was received. I present it to the Audience.

Let us return to the dreadful fate of the Negroes; when will work be undertaken to change it, or at least to temper it? I know nothing of Governments' Politics, but they are fair, and never has Natural Law been more in evidence. They cast a benevolent eye on all the worst abuses. Man everywhere is equal. Fair-minded Kings do not want Slaves; they know that they have loyal Subjects; France will not abandon the unfortunates who suffer a thousand deaths for one, since personal interest and ambition settled the most uncharted Islands. Europeans, greedy for blood and that metal that cupidity has named gold, have changed Nature in these happy climes. The father disowns his child, the son sacrifices his father, brothers fight each other and the conquered have been sold like cattle at a market. What am I saying? It has become a Trade in the four corners of the world.

A trade in men!...Almighty God! And Nature does not shudder! If they are animals, are we not likewise? How do Whites differ from this kind? It is in colour...Why does the pallid Blonde not want to cede to the Brunette who resembles a Mulatto? This impression is as striking as from the Negro to the Mulatto. The colour of mankind is nuanced, like all the animals that Nature has produced, as well as the plants and minerals. Why does day not compete with night or the sun with the moon and the stars of the firmament? All is varied, that is the beauty of Nature. Why then destroy her Work?

Is man not her most beautiful work of art? The Ottoman uses Whites in the same way that we use Negroes: we do not treat him as a barbarian or an inhumane man and we exercise the same cruelty on men whose only resistance is their submission.

But once this submission has run its course what does the barbaric despotism of the planters of the Isles and Indies produce? All manner of revolt, a carnage that the power of troops only serves to augment, poisonings and all that man can achieve once he is rebelling. Is it not atrocious that Europeans, having acquired considerable plantations thanks to their industry, should rain blows from morn till night on these unfortunates who would nonetheless till their fertile fields if afforded more liberty and kindness.

¹ This anti-slavery pamphlet was written in 1788 and appended to de Gouges's play on the subject *Zamore et Mirza*.

Is their condition not the cruellest, their work painful enough, without them being subjected to the most horrible punishments for the slightest misdeed. Changing their condition is discussed, new means of tempering it are proposed, without fearing that this type of man might misuse such total or limited freedom.

I understand nothing of Politics. It is predicted that general freedom would render Negro men as essential as Whites; that once they had become masters of their own fate, they would be masters of their desires; their children would be able to stay with them. They would work with more exactitude and more ardour. The spirit of dissent would no longer torment them: the right to advance themselves like other men would render them wiser and more compassionate. Deadly plots would no longer threaten. They will be free Farmers in their own lands like the Labourers of Europe. They will not leave their fields to come to foreign Nations.

The freedom of the Negroes would create a few deserters but far fewer than among the inhabitants of the French countryside. Barely have young Villagers acquired maturity, strength and courage than they set off towards the Capital to take up the noble employment of Lackey or Porter.² There are a hundred Servants for each position whereas our fields are short of Farmers.

This freedom multiplies an infinite number of unemployed, of wretches, in a word all sorts of undesirables. A wise and salutary limit should be placed on all People, that is the art of Sovereigns and of Republican States.

My innate knowledge could allow me to find a sure method, but I will guard against presenting it. I would have to be better educated and more enlightened with regard to the Politics of Governments. I have said it, I know nothing and I submit my observations at random, good or bad. The condition of these unfortunates must interest me more than anyone since it has been five years since I conceived of a drama based on their deplorable History.

I have only one bit of advice to give to the actors of the Comédie Française, and it is the only favour that I will ask of them in my life: they must adopt both the colour and the dress of the Negro. Never was there a more favourable time and I hope that the Performance of this Drama will produce the effect that one can expect in favour of these victims of ambition.

The costume is responsible for at least half of the effect of this Play which will move both the pen and the heart of our best Authors. My aim will be fulfilled, my ambition satisfied, and the Comédie will elevate itself rather than denigrate itself through colour.

My happiness would no doubt be overwhelming if I were to see the Production of my Play, just as I imagine it. Posterity would require of this feeble sketch a touching tableau. Artists keen to use their brushes on its behalf could be considered the Founders of the wisest and most useful Humanity and I am certain, in advance, that their support of this feeble drama would favour the subject.

Ladies and Gentlemen [of the Comédie Française], do put on my Play, it has waited its turn quite a long time if, by rights, it should not already have been done several times. Here it is in print, you wished for it; all the Nations and I beg you for its production, I am sure they will not disagree with me. This sensibility that, in anyone else, would smack of self-esteem is merely the effect produced in my heart by all the public clamour in favour of Negroes. The Reader who has judged me correctly will be convinced of this truth.

But with you, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have to justify myself after you attributed some nonsense to me regarding Molière, and Mercier whom I cherish and admire in more ways than one given that he preceded me in being badly treated by you despite being a most honest gentleman. I am not surprised that you did not know how to appreciate him for he knows neither the adulations nor the petty jealousies of all the low Literati. Despite

² 'Laquais and Crocheteur' are the original terms, 'crocheteur' derives from 'crochet' i.e. hook and can mean docker, porter or, piquantly, picklock.

the many grievances that I have against you I have no doubt that you are capable of being fair, when it suits you, but you have to admit that it does not suit you very often. You appreciate artifice due to your character and your talent suits well-turned phrases. Dramatic expressions pass you by yet that is what you should do best. Well, forgive these last word of advice, they cost me dear and at that price I feel entitled to offer them to you. Farewell, Ladies and Gentlemen: following on from my observations act my Play as you see fit; I shall not attend the rehearsals. I give all my rights to my son; may he make good use of them and may they save him from becoming an Author for the Comédie Française. If he believes me he will never scribble any Literature. Meanwhile I have not be able to prevent him from joining the general impetus. Noyon's daughter [or the girl from Noyon] has suddenly made an Author of him. His Lordship the duc d'Orléans's good deeds have excited his pen. I have to admit that I offered something by way of anecdotes, and were it not for the aim of this bagatelle, this piece would not be tolerable and I would have kept it anonymous. But believing that it was pitiful in its writing I have placed it at the end of my last Volume. There are Authors who always retain their mystery unless they succeed but I see no dishonour in a mediocre text; this one merits indulgence as much for its aim as for the times. He has reworked his idea for Noyon's daughter and with one of his friends he has created a Comic Opera that I think should meet with some success. I must make the Author known to the Public and accept that the worst elements are those in my style. I barely worked on it for an hour, without thought, and my son was no wiser; my mediocrity in this genre has only weakened his first attempt. I beg indulgence on his behalf and for myself the greatest severity; I make honourable amends in advance. And in order to be readily forgiven I beg my Reader to remember that Zamor and Mirza dates from the century of Great Men. It will soon be forgotten that as an unnatural mother I dipped into the subject of the Good Mother.