

ON TRANSLATING OLYMPE DE GOUGES

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Olympe de Gouges wrote the Preface to *L'esclavage des noirs* to vindicate herself and her play. She hoped to convince the public that she had not produced an incendiary work in *L'esclavage des noirs*, and, furthermore, that the Colonists and the Comedians had sabotaged her play for financial and political gain. Like all good rhetoricians, Gouges relies upon "emotional persuasion to excite her public to pity, indignation, contempt, horror, and conviction." [1] She makes full use of the melodramatic potential of the contents of her own story in order to establish her rights as a citizen by explaining them to the judges and to the public. It is therefore not at all surprising that Gouges's writing recalls the *mémoires judiciaires* of her day, printed versions of lawyers' defenses of their clients, which developed in the later eighteenth century into a highly popular form of pamphlet literature. [2]

My translation of the *Préface* to *L'esclavage des noirs* emphasizes the legal conventions and the popular style of pamphletism, which influenced Gouges's writings; she herself wrote a number of pamphlets devoted to the Revolution. [3] Whenever possible, my portrait of Gouges stresses the fact that her ideas derive from sensations, a commonplace in an era impressed with Lockean epistemology, and that these sensations are particular to a woman writer and activist who seeks to accord public consciousness with her own experiences.

Key terms in my translation, which relate to legal conventions, include the following: *témoin auriculaire* (earwitness); *en état d'arrestation* (under arrest); *plaider ma cause* (plead my own case); *Tribunal* (Tribunal); *au scrutin des consciences* (a vote of conscience); *pluralité des voix* (majority); *preuve* (proof); and *droits incontestables* (incontestable right). I have maintained the cognate force majeure and inserted terms such as "thereof" and "whereby" to effect a language of contract law, thus underscoring Gouges's bold appropriation of an idiom exercised by professionals openly hostile to women inasmuch as they found women "incapable of covenanting for want of sufficient reason or independence." [4] Certain collocations such as *principes bienfaisants de la nature* (good principles of Nature) and *douces lois* (gentle laws), which convey the ethos of an era heavily influenced by Rousseau's writings on nature and society, were relatively equivalent in English; however, the abstract noun *bonheur*, also reminiscent of Rousseau, and the phrase *belle âme* proved more problematic insofar as their elusiveness suggests a range of possible solutions. My decision to translate *bonheur* as "pleasure," "happiness," or "good fortune" depended upon its context; whereas, I translate *belle âme* as "fair soul" to emphasize the judicious nature of woman, the "fair sex," as presented by Gouges.

In the Preface to *L'esclavage des noirs*, Gouges creates a set of oppositions, which she hopes to resolve in her favor: she contrasts metaphysical observations with personal experience; and men with herself, a woman. Gouges stages her personal drama throughout the Preface, always careful to cast herself as a woman writer, friend of the Truth, whose modest resources are but her soul and her words. She opens the Preface with a comparison between the *siècle de l'ignorance*, the

standard French expression for the Dark Ages, and le siècle le plus éclairé, a so-called Enlightened Age. By not translating le siècle le plus éclairé with the stock phrase "the Age of Enlightenment," I suggest that Gouges herself did not share conventional views about her century, and that the mixture of preconceived notions and originality in her use of language was calculated to shape public opinion to her own ends.[5]

Gouges links questions of gender and race in the Preface by asserting that her works, that is, works written by a woman who does not figure among the Learned (les Savants),[6] bear but the color of human nature (la couleur de l'humanité). Gouges's use of the term "color" to evoke a range of human characteristics, which are observable through personal experience, thus serves two purposes: first, Gouges dissociates the term "color" from a strictly racial context; and, second, Gouges endows her own perspective with universality, a quality heretofore denied her as a woman writer. In this way, Gouges integrates notions of gender and race into what, for her, a French woman writing at the end of the eighteenth century, is a more natural point of view.[7]

My translation takes full advantage of the grammatical aspect of the gender question by feminizing all possessive adjectives and pronouns that relate to abstract notions of justice and compassion. Similarly, I have feminized the construct of Nature, but unlike the Nature of convention, often presented in a feminine guise, Nature in Gouges's writing acquires universally reasonable principles: "[Nature] has placed the laws of humanity and wise equality in my soul." In addition, my translation feminizes the generic term "author," along with the fruits of authorial productivity ("her writings"), in order to strike a clearer difference between Gouges, the writer whose gender here allies her with representations of virtue and goodness; and men, even men of color,[8] when they seek to imitate tyrants or are condemned to servitude by their "Fatherland." I have translated patrie as "Fatherland" rather than "motherland" or "mother country" to emphasize the negative context in this instance.

Of course, Gouges's writings were also subject to literary conventions and influences, and these are felt especially in my translation of the dialogue from the play *L'esclavage des noirs*. The hyperbolic language, strong emotions, and moral polarization, which characterized the melodramatic writing that first appeared in France in the 1750s and 1760s in the drame or genre sérieux of such writers as Denis Diderot, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier,[9] convey the complex interplay of oppression and resistance throughout Gouges's work.

My translation of the title *L'esclavage des noirs* (Black Slavery) represents the moral polarization in Gouges's play: on the one hand, her play asserts that the concept of slavery itself is reprehensible; on the other, it shows that the enslavement of blacks in the French colonies serves a particular financial and political purpose. By transposing the French noun noirs and the English adjective black, I am able to connote the evil consequences of slavery, as well as the fact that Gouges is a European writer who does not truly individuate black slaves as characters in her writing, but rather, uses them as vehicles for the expression of her ideas. At the time, it was not uncommon, in fact, to find a certain misrepresentation everywhere in anti-slavery writing as is suggested by the British habit of calling yellow, brown, or red people "black." [10] The usage of

the term "black" now has a long history that is sometimes tainted by racism; however, I have opted to use the term "black" in my fairly literal translation of Gouges's play because I do not believe that its effect in the eighteenth century was racist.[11]

Expressions and terms that indicate the historical moment in which the play was written provide other instances of moral polarization. My translation of *étranger* depends, for example, on varying perceptions of difference: "stranger" connotes sensitivity to a character's otherness; whereas, "foreigner" indicates a situation in which political distinctions prevail. Similarly, the general terms used to designate the protagonists (*ce bon Français* [this good Frenchman]; *camarades* [comrades]; *semblables* [fellowmen]; *habitants* [planters]; *esclaves* [slaves]; *cultivateurs* [farmers]) position the characters one against the other depending upon who is addressing whom. When the term *espèce*, pronounced by Mirza and Zamor, the two slaves, is translated as "kind" or "species," it is meant to be both objective and, for the modern reader or spectator, somewhat reminiscent of Darwinian genetics. In this way we see that Mirza and Zamor differentiate between themselves, people of color, and the Europeans and Planters whose advantage over them is clearly racist. I have translated *Nègresse* as *Negress*, though considered pejorative in current parlance, to show the bias and confusion regarding people of color in late eighteenth century France. When Valère, a Frenchman, attempts to flatter Mirza, a slave from the Indies, by saying "*Je n'ai pas vu de plus jolie Nègresse*," it appears that he conflates Africans and Indians.

In order to elicit the range of strong emotions called for in Gouges's play, I have relied especially upon the translation procedure of componential analysis, namely, "[the comparison of] a source language word [in this instance, in French] with a target language word [in English], which has a similar meaning, but is not an obvious one-to-one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components." [12] My translation of *malheureux* as "wretch," "wretched creature," "wretched man," "unfortunate," and "unhappy"; and of *supplice* as "punishment," "torment," and "torture" can illustrate this procedure. I use the term "wretch" in situations in which an empathetic speaker's social status is superior to that of those he or she addresses; the pejorative connotations of "wretch" in twentieth-century English underscore differences in social class. "Wretched creature" and "wretched man" are used similarly; however, they exact greater emotional intensity from the speaker and are allied with the speaker's sense of responsibility toward the victim. Both Sophie and M. de Saint-Frémont, her father, refer to the slaves in this manner. Sophie's description of Zamor and Mirza to M. de Saint-Frémont, "wretched creatures," recalls the themes of nature and natural rights associated with female personae throughout the play; whereas, M. de Saint-Frémont's use of "wretched man" when addressing Zamor, one of his slaves who has just pledged undying loyalty to him, his master, suggests that to treat Zamor as anything less than a man greatly pains M. de Saint-Frémont.

My use of "unfortunate" and "unhappy" as translations for "malheureux" shifts emphasis from the more corporeal aspects of wretchedness to those aspects that relate to the heart or soul, the seat of feelings or sympathies. When Sophie declares that she had no trouble interesting Mme de Saint-Frémont on the slaves' behalf, she states that Madame is "so fair, so sensitive to the

troubles of the unfortunate." Likewise, Mirza is "unhappy Mirza" when she confides to Zamor that her love has rendered him guilty.

In translating *supplice* as "punishment," "torment," or "torture," I have been especially attentive to the function of the word in the line as well as to the emotional tone that it conveys. Generally speaking, the move from "punishment," to "torment," to "torture" marks an increase in emotional intensity either on the part of a character or on the part of the reader or spectator. Characters may be reacting to a specific situation or to a series of situations that have accumulated during the course of the play, while the reader or spectator is then incited to react in turn. Thus, Mirza speaks to Zamor, her lover, of the "same torment that reunites [them]"; M. de Saint-Frémont tells Valère that he should not let Sophie witness "this frightful torture"; and the Judge observes, without passion, that Sophie only makes "their punishment more terrible." By act III, "torture" has become the most frequent translation for *supplice* despite one instance in which I substitute a legal convention for the expression: "Monsieur, suspendez, je vous prie, leur *supplice*." (Monsieur, grant a stay of execution, I beg of you.)

Questions of gender and race are formulated in the hyperbolic language of melodrama that Gouges uses throughout her play. The redundant qualifiers, exclamatory comments, and affected *a-parte* represent an eighteenth-century melodramatic style whose very awkwardness attests to its emotional poignancy. Though all the characters speak in the same register, be they slave, governor, or French citizen, class differences based on race and gender are made apparent by means of social titles, a common practice of the period. In most cases, I have kept the French title, Monsieur, Madame, Monseigneur, etc. to reflect the original context; however, I have been careful to use a juridical language in instances where the social relationship emphasizes its contractual nature as, for example, when I have translated *époux* or *épouse* by "spouse" rather than "husband" or "wife."

Thomas Holcroft's translation of *Coelina* (1800) by Pixérécourt, the first play to be designated a *bona fide* melodrama, provided me with a parallel text or model in English for the many stock phrases, exclamations, and terms of endearment scattered throughout Gouges's play.[13] Though I do not use exactly the same expressions found in Holcroft's translation, my solutions approximate the affected tone of his language, which has a slight biblical tinge. I use such apostrophes as "Divine Providence!", "Almighty God!", "Ah! Gods! Hey!" as well as the more secular "Dear Spouse! O half of myself!" and "O Louis! O adored Monarch!", plus the phrases "Adieu, dear authors of my days" and "our happiness runneth over." While I continue to represent Nature as female and compassionate ("Benevolent Mother!"), I have female characters blur gender distinctions in their speech. In the last two scenes of the play, for example, when Mme de Saint-Frémont entreats her husband to act judiciously and pardon Mirza and Zamor, she calls him "mon ami," which I translate quite literally as "my friend" although it usually means "my dear" in a domestic context.

Of the many qualifiers in Gouges's play, her use of *sauvage* is among the most interesting. Each time she uses the word *sauvage*, she recalls nature and the origins of liberty and equality. Similarly, my translation of *sauvage* recalls nature with the epithet "rude," that is,

primitive or natural. I only use the cognate "savage," which connotes bestiality, to emphasize misunderstood racial tensions: "Compassionate being to whom I owe my life and my spouse's life! you are not a Savage; you have neither the language nor the manners of one. Are you the master of this Island?" (Valère to Zamor, [I, 6])

My aim in the translations of *Réponse au champion américain* (1790) and the last section of *Déclaration des droits de la femme* (1791) is to emphasize the connection between knowledge and equality for women. Although the occasion for Gouges's writing *Réponse* is, of course, the slave trade, as she tells us herself: "It is not the philosophers' cause, the cause of the Amis des Noirs, that [she] undertake[s] to defend; it is [her] own." Likewise, in *Déclaration des droits de la femme*, Gouges feels compelled to "say a few words about the public disturbances supposedly caused by the decree in favor of men of color on our islands"; however, she closes her document with the image of man and woman "united, but equal in strength and virtue."

It is arguable that in both *Réponse* and *Déclaration des droits de la femme* Gouges moves from abolitionist remarks regarding the plight of slaves to analogous remarks concerning women's situation. In the one instance in *Réponse* in which Gouges uses the term *espèce*, my translation generalizes the slaves' plight by using the word "class" to designate them as a group rather than a race that has been "tyrannized with cruelty for so many centuries." In this way, it becomes easier to identify women as another group that has been similarly oppressed.

Throughout *Réponse* Gouges is keen on demonstrating the apparent contradiction of a situation in which one would accuse her of being well informed but not at all learned. In order to highlight the illogicality of her circumstances, I juxtapose the two contrary notions of knowledge and ignorance in the same line: "One day, perhaps, my memory will be well-known because of my ignorance." There is, in fact, a pattern of alternating images in which Gouges insists that she has learned nothing from anyone and that she must enlighten her opponent on this matter, which my translation would stress. In the line, "Since I have the courage to sign this written document, do likewise to show you are my equal," I introduce the principle of equality into a literate context.

In 1792, a year after Gouges's *Déclaration des droits de la femme*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* would champion women's rights and women's education. Though Wollstonecraft's and Gouges's political views differ considerably, they share similar opinions concerning a woman's right to prove herself intellectually equal to men.[14] Thus, it is helpful to compare Wollstonecraft's prose with Gouges's despite the fact that Wollstonecraft was supposedly unaware of her contemporary.[15]

As we have seen above, Gouges's writing is a mixture of received notions and originality, and she uses language to shape public opinion to her own ends. There is a parallel tendency in Wollstonecraft to rely on "personal observation, repetition, forceful comparisons (especially metaphors from ordinary life), and use of autobiographical reference, in a sentimental mode." [16] If Wollstonecraft and Gouges were both accused at times of poor literary style and sometimes faulty grammar, closer inspection of their images reveals an urgency of conviction

that transcends lack of formal education and the stress under which they wrote. In *Réponse*, for example, in reply to her challenger, Gouges modifies the standard expression *tomber dans l'erreur grossière* to turn it in her favor: "But if I imitate you, Sir, . . . I stray a bit too far from my aim and blunder into the same gross error as you with respect to me." Since Gouges insists that she is a student of simple nature, and that nature alone has enlightened her, I translate references to her own work with images drawn from the material world whenever possible. I have, at times, used figures of conception, birth, and generation to feminize Gouges's political and creative activities: "May this revolution regenerate the spirit and the conscience of men, and reproduce the true French character!" Similarly, the changes that Gouges made to her play "generated widespread interest."

Recent attention to Olympe de Gouges's work and her life has prompted new editions of her oeuvre, including an English translation of *Déclaration des droits de la femme* by Val Stevenson.[17] I have not hesitated to borrow from Stevenson's excellent translation; however, my translation of the last line of Gouges's text is significantly different from the Stevenson translation. In keeping with my aim to emphasize woman's natural rights in Gouges's view of the world, I translate *pour faire un bon ménage* quite literally as "in order to live happily together" rather than "in perfect marriage," which is Stevenson's solution, because I do not want to subject Gouges's figure to what was at the time a socially repressive institution for women. It is well to remember that Gouges compares the executive and legislative powers of the French Empire to a "man and woman who must be united, but equal in strength and virtue."

NOTES

- [1]. For a discussion of emotional persuasion in France in the eighteenth century, see Sarah Maza, "Domestic Melodrama as Political Ideology: The Case of the Comte de Sanois," *The American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1256.
- [2]. Maza, "Domestic Melodrama," 1252-1253.
- [3]. See Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 214.
- [4]. Maza, "Domestic Melodrama," 1261.
- [5]. For a discussion of the emergence of a concept of "public opinion" that increasingly served as a surrogate for divine-right authority, see Mona Ozouf, "L'Opinion Publique," 419-434 (qtd. in Maza 1250).
- [6]. Some argue that Gouges's own statements about her lack of culture and literary skill would have been readily dismissed as a mere "topos de modestie" in a man, but have been maintained for over two centuries simply because Gouges was a woman. See Gouges, *Théâtre politique*, ed. Gisela Thiele-Knobloch (Paris: Côté-femmes, 1991), 9.
- [7]. For a discussion of le droit naturel and Gouges's fight for the rights of women and blacks, see Gouges, *L'esclavage des noirs*, ed. Eléni Varikas (Paris: Côté-Femmes, 1989), 10.
- [8]. There is perhaps another element which can illuminate the ambiguity in Gouges's thoughts on abolitionism. She had a horror of violence, of all violence be it exerted by noblemen, colonists, black insurgents, or revolutionists: Varikas, *L'esclavage des noirs*, 24.
- [9]. Maza, "Domestic melodrama," 1257-1258.
- [10]. See Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 106. In *L'esclavage des noirs*, in fact, Gouges confuses American Indians and Africans; I have retained these inconsistencies in the translation for reasons of historical interest and accurate representation of Gouges's perceptions regarding people of color.
- [11]. For an enlightening discussion of Black Semantics see, Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1977), 35-43. See also, Serge Daget, "Les mots esclave, nègre, Noir, et les jugements de valeur sur la traite négrière dans la littérature abolitionniste française de 1770 à 1845," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 60, no. 221 (1973): "Because Noir is neither sullied with prejudices nor already a stereotype, it pleads against alienation and contributes to the foundation of an abolitionist ideology: it thus arises from an innovation," 518.

[12]. For an intelligent discussion of the use of componential analysis in translation, see Peter Newmark, *A Textbook of Translation* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), especially 114-124 (citation in text from 114).

[13]. See Thomas Holcroft, *A Tale of Mystery* (London: R. Phillips, 1802).

[14]. One obvious difference between Gouges's and Wollstonecraft's political attitudes can be seen in that "Wollstonecraft makes Marie Antoinette the emblem of what the revolution had to sweep away" (Donald P. Siebert, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* [Detroit: Gale Research, 1991] 104: 356); whereas, Gouges dedicates *Déclaration des droits de la femme* to the French queen.

[15]. In the textual introduction to a critical edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Troy, N.Y.: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1982), Ulrich H. Hardt states: "From the authorities [Wollstonecraft] does cite in *Rights of Woman* we must conclude that she was not familiar with the writings of Mary Astell, "Sophia," Olympe de Gouges, or Condorcet, all of whom had fairly recently written about the education of women and women's rights," 7.

[16]. Siebert, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 352.

[17]. Olympe de Gouges, *The Rights of Woman*, trans. Val Stevenson (London: Pythia Press, 1989).