

REFLECTIONS ON NEGROES

OLYMPE DE GOUGES

FEBRUARY 1788

I have always been interested in the deplorable fate of the Negro race. I was just beginning to develop an understanding of the world, at that age when children hardly think about anything, when I saw a Negress for the first time. Seeing her made me wonder and ask questions about her color.

People I asked did not satisfy my curiosity and my reason. They called those people brutes, cursed by Heaven. As I grew up, I clearly realized that it was force and prejudice that had condemned them to that horrible slavery, in which Nature plays no role, and for which the unjust and powerful interests of Whites are alone responsible.

Convinced for a long time of this truth and troubled by their dreadful situation, I dealt with their story in the very first work I wrote. Several men had taken an interest in them and worked to lighten their burden; but none of them had thought of presenting them on stage in their costume and their color as I would have tried, if the Comédie Française had not been against it.

Mirza had kept her native language, nothing was more touching; it added a lot to the interest of the play. All the experts agreed, except for the actors at the Comédie Française. But let us not talk about the reception of my play. Now I hand it over to the Public.

Let us go back to the dreadful lot of the Negroes. When will we turn our attention to changing it, or at least to easing it? I know nothing about the Politics of Governments; but they are fair. Now the Law of Nature was never more apparent in them. People are equal everywhere. Fair kings do not want any slaves; they know that they possess obedient subjects, and France will not abandon the wretched in their suffering, ever since greed and ambition have inhabited the most remote islands. Europeans, thirsting for blood and for this metal that greed calls gold, have made Nature change in these happy lands. Fathers have repudiated their children, sons have sacrificed their fathers, brothers have fought, and the defeated have been sold like cattle at the market. What am I saying? It has become a trade in the four corners of the world.

Trading people! Heavens! And Nature does not quake! If they are animals, are we not also like them? How are the Whites different from this race? It is in the color Why do blonds not claim superiority over brunettes who bear a resemblance to Mulattos? Why is the Mulatto not superior to the Negro? Like all the different types of animals, plants, and minerals that Nature has produced, people's color also varies. Why does not the day argue with the night, the sun with the moon, and the stars with the sky? Everything is different, and herein lies the beauty of Nature. Why then destroy its Work?

Is mankind not its most beautiful masterpiece? Ottomans exploit Whites in the same way we exploit Blacks. We do not accuse them of being barbarian or inhuman, and we are equally cruel to people whose only means of resistance is their submissiveness.

But when submissiveness once starts to flag, what results from the barbaric despotism of the Islanders and West Indians? Revolts of all kinds, carnage increased with the troops' force, poisonings, and any atrocities people can commit once they revolt. Is it not monstrous of Europeans, who have acquired vast plantations by exploiting others, to have Blacks flogged from morning to night? These miserable souls would cultivate their fields no less if they were allotted more freedom and kindness.

Is their fate not among the most cruel, and their labor the hardest, without having Whites inflict the most horrible punishments on them, and for the smallest fault? Some speak about changing their condition,

finding ways to ease it, without fearing that this race of men misuse a kind of freedom that remains subordinate.

I understand nothing about Politics. Some predict that widespread freedom would make the Negro race as essential as the White race, and that after they have been allowed to be masters of their lives, they will be masters of their will, and able to raise their children at their side. They will be more exact and diligent in their work. Intolerance will not torment them anymore, and the right to rise up like others will make them wiser and more human. Deadly conspiracies will no longer have to be feared. They will cultivate freely their own land like the farmers in Europe and will not leave their fields to go to foreign Nations. Their freedom will lead some Negroes to desert their country, but much less than those who leave the French countryside. Young people hardly come of age with the requisite strength and courage, before they are on their way to Paris to take up the noble occupation of lackey or porter. There are a hundred servants for one position, whereas our fields lack farmers.

This freedom will produce a large number of idle, unhappy, and bad persons of any kind. May each nation set wise and salutary limits for its people; this is the art of Sovereigns and Republican States. My instincts could help, but I will keep myself from presenting my opinion, for I should be more knowledgeable and enlightened about the Politics of Governments. As I have said, I do not know anything about Politics, and I freely give my observations either good or bad. I, more than anyone, must be interested in the fate of these unfortunate Negroes since it has been five years since I conceived a play based on their tragic History.

I have only one piece of advice to give to the actors of the Comédie Française, and it is the only favor I will ask of them, that is to wear the color and costume of the Negro race. Never has the occasion been more opportune, and I hope that the Play will have an effect in favor of these victims of Whites' ambition. The costume will contribute greatly to the interest of this Play, which will inspire the pens and the hearts of our best writers. My goal will thus be attained, my ambition satisfied, and the Comédie Française will be honored rather than dishonored by the issue of color.

My happiness would be too immeasurable if I were to see my Play performed as I wish. This weak sketch would require a poignant group of scenes for it to serve posterity. Painters ambitious enough to paint the tableau would be considered Fathers of the wisest and most worthwhile Humanity, and I am convinced that they would favor the subject of this small Play over its dramatic expression.

So, Ladies and Gentlemen, act out my Play, it has waited long enough. As you have wanted, it is now published. I join every Nation in asking for its production, and I am convinced they will not disappoint me. This feeling that could be considered self pride in others, results from the impact which the public outcry in favor of Negroes has had on me. Any reader who appreciates my work will be convinced of my sincerity.

Forgive me these last statements; they are painful to express, but therein lies my right to them. Farewell Ladies and Gentlemen, act my play as you see fit; I shall not attend the rehearsals. I turn over all rights to my son; may he make good use of them and protect himself from becoming a Writer for the Comédie-Française. If he believes me, he will never pick up a pen to write Literature.

Notes

My translation of Olympe de Gouges's "Réflexions sur les hommes nègres" is motivated by the desire to expose contemporary readers to the themes and thoughts of an enlightened and observant writer whose reflections are germane to modern society. I attempt to reconstruct the mood and feeling in her piece, rather than to render a literal translation. My aim, then, is to produce a text that affects the reader in the same powerful way that Gouges did in her own time: to incite readers to question current prejudices that stifle human expression, namely to remove biases of race and gender.

In order to modernize Gouges's "Réflexions" and make it more accessible to the late twentieth-century reader, I have substantially modified the syntax with its attendant punctuation, and, to a lesser extent, the lexicon. The following examples should suffice to illustrate my approach. My decision to translate the fairly lengthy, single French sentence, "Revenons à l'effroyable sort des Nègres; quand s'occupera-t-on de le changer, ou du moins de l'adoucir?" with two sentences in English ("Let us go back to the dreadful lot of the Negroes. When will we turn our attention to changing it, or at least to easing it?") strives to emphasize in a separate phrase Gouges's disapprobation of the condition of the Blacks. In another instance, however, I have translated the expression "les hommes nègres" with the word "Blacks" because I want to point out the optimism in the situation and feel that the term "Negroes," in current parlance, would have too negative a connotation. In general, though, whenever the term "hommes" was used by Gouges in "Réflexions," I translated it either as "people" or "race," which I perceive to be two neutral terms, in order to avoid masculine specific references. In this way, my translation gives voice to Gouges's political struggle for equality among the sexes as well.

Given that my intent as translator was to have a powerful effect upon the reader, I have solved any difficulties in the translation with this in mind. The French expression "un commerce d'hommes" suggests a number of possible solutions in English, "a commerce of men" being one among them. However, I have opted to use the expression "trading people" to shock the reader with the reprehensible situation created by the juxtaposition of two perfectly acceptable notions: trade and people. Sometimes, I have omitted words in my translation for purposes of effect and clarity: "Why do blonds not claim superiority over brunettes who bear a resemblance to Mulattos?" By eliminating the adjective "fade" ("Blonde fade"), I rid the color system that was in place of affective qualifiers and present difference as an objectively observable, rather than a subjectively experienced, phenomenon. Sometimes, I have added words to Gouges's piece for today's reader who would not necessarily understand the theatrical or political context of her day. Gouges's talent for championing human rights needs to be read against her struggle to persist as a dramatist: "This weak sketch would require a poignant group of scenes for it to serve posterity. Painters ambitious enough to paint the tableau would be considered Fathers of the wisest and most worthwhile Humanity, and I am convinced that they would favor the subject of this small Play over its dramatic expression."