

# DIALOGUE

*ENTRE MON ESPRIT,*

LE BON SENS ET LA RAISON,

OU CRITIQUE DE MES ŒUVRES.

*Dialogue Between my Wit, Common Sense and Reason, or a Critique of my Works.*<sup>1</sup>

WIT.

For the first time I would be willing, Mister Common Sense, and you Mistress Reason, to ask for your advice.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, despite my genius, I have listened to you and you have seriously led me astray but I have also noticed, too often, that by not consulting you I made extremely foolish mistakes. Look, consider, and judge what levels of glory await me.

COMMON SENSE.

Say, rather, that you await them yourself and that you are very far from obtaining them.

REASON.

Why pronounce it with such scepticism. Quick wittedness makes great strides in a short time, while your cold wisdom often fails to catch up.

COMMON SENSE.

I am resting, and solidly holding on to my position.

WIT.

That is well thought through but boredom will take hold of me if you cannot offer me better arguments.

REASON.

But be patient. There is no point consulting us if you then send us packing.

WIT.

I know, Mistress Reason, that you love long speeches, but let us get to the point and do try and be less talkative than usual with Common Sense and me; I do not want to cede to him unless he materially demonstrates that I have no common sense.

COMMON SENSE.

That I will not find too difficult.

WIT.

I beg you, however, to keep this experiment for you final argument.

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<sup>1</sup> Written in 1788 and included in some examples of her newly published *Oeuvres* this piece presents the author's creative workings and literary engagement with customary humour and lack of pretension; by voicing a form of inner dialogue she addresses her critics – and perhaps her own insecurities – head on. The text hints at the social and political engagement that will appear in her works within a few months following the Assembly of the Notables in Versailles in November 1788.

<sup>2</sup> The 'characters' of Wit, Common Sense and Reason are written in accordance with their gender in French grammar i.e. Wit and Common Sense are male and Reason is female.

REASON.

Such petulance! You, Mister Wit, believe yourself entitled to say anything, to do anything, with impunity. If that is the case, why are you asking us for advice?

WIT.

Goodness me, let us abandon, merciless Reason, our mutual claims and discuss my works where you both shine.

COMMON SENSE.

As for myself, I am not seen there very often.

REASON.

I do not say that, and I play a great role in all his productions.

COMMON SENSE.

Yes, I know, my very dear sister, that you reason on everything; you often fatigue those who listen to you; you have become as common as wit; you make those who never think use their reason and we will see if, in these circumstances, you will agree with the wisdom that Wit did not consider necessary to consult.

WIT.

Wisdom was all I needed to bury me alive. The two of you are quite enough to take away my will to write and be printed, without adding to my inaction an eternal ennui, a lethargic sleep; I am already too afraid of your prudent advice. Eh! What would become of me if wisdom took hold of me? Ah! I would rather die a thousand times. I would rather not exist than to live buried in the midst of a society where I see so many mediocre minds with no talent forge a brilliant career where I have made no impression despite being blessed with a similar aptitude; I can say nonetheless that I have not started too badly.

COMMON SENSE.

Eh! God knows how you will finish.

REASON.

It is not yet time to say.

WIT.

*The Unexpected Marriage of Chérubin* sparkles with my sallies.<sup>3</sup>

COMMON SENSE.

Poor wit! Can one direct a Theatre Play with you alone?

REASON.

Why not? *The Marriage of Figaro* is proof of it.

COMMON SENSE.

A plague on the chatterbox, that is well reasoned. So it is this work that you credit for *The Unexpected Marriage of Chérubin*. Neither drama nor comedic intent govern it as much as the characters. That is what irritates me about this work and its Author.

<sup>3</sup> Written in 1784, published in 1786 and included in the 1788 *Oeuvres*, this was de Gouges's second play. Written as a form of homage to Beaumarchais's *The Mad Day, or the Marriage of Figaro* she presents the future lives of that play's characters. Although Beaumarchais was not impressed de Gouges's play was well received in print though never performed in part due to his negative influence.

REASON.

But I have not seen such severe pronouncements against this production as your judgement.

COMMON SENSE.

Indulgence towards the sex is so great that wit can be easily lead astray.

REASON.

It has frequently been the case. But are you yourself not wrong on this occasion? You are too rigid my dear Common Sense for I, who reason on all things and am irritated by nothing, I am ready to quarrel with you. But Wit appears to be shattered...saying not a word.

WIT.

In faith, he has silenced me and I am ready to surrender to him.

REASON.

So thanks to his caricature you judge your *Chérubin* to be detestable.

WIT.

In faith, I have to admit that at present I do not find him very pleasing. Are you aware that the decency with which I clothed him has made him very boring?

REASON.

But not too much. It seems to me that all the Characters have, in general, perfectly maintained their personalities.

COMMON SENSE.

They are sometimes nasty, and very often quite bad.

WIT.

I never thought so in this case. What! You actually find that this Play lacks merit?

REASON.

Some are more detestable.

COMMON SENSE.

I agree, and they are even performed successfully, but not everyone is happy and the example of M. Figaro is a very bad genre to follow.

WIT.

I insist that there is not a better one.

COMMON SENSE.

For profit's sake.

REASON.

What of it, so long as one makes a fortune.

WIT.

That is man's greatest virtue in this present century.

COMMON SENSE.

You have a very poor opinion of humankind; be persuaded that there are still men who are virtuous.

REASON.

Not so many.

COMMON SENSE.

However that may be we have to live with humans. The universe is perverse, it will not change. Thus let us see our own faults without judging those of others.

WIT.

In faith, Mister Common Sense, you have never appeared to me so noble in your actions; usually you refer everything back to your own interests.

COMMON SENSE.

I have been, am and always will be the same; unlike you, Mister Wit, I am not changeable, you are a spoilt child. People seek you out whilst I am shunned. If you listened to me a bit more frequently, you would be no less pleasing, and you would not make so many silly mistakes.

REASON.

I quite believe it for he would never reveal himself. And the one who does nothing is nothing.

WIT.

Let us come to my *Generous Man*, for I only want to mention my known works.<sup>4</sup> What do you think of that one, my redoubtable Common Sense?

COMMON SENSE.

There are good points and drama in this Play; but its great faults swallow up all its worth.

REASON.

According to you, this work is still not worth anything?

WIT.

To please Common Sense, we must offer him masterpieces. Let us consider *Zamore et Mirza*, perhaps this Drama can offer some delights to suit his taste?

COMMON SENSE.

Ah! What are you saying? I already have the shivers.

REASON.

Of pleasure no doubt.

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<sup>4</sup> *L'Homme Généreux*, de Gouges's third play, published in 1786, was well received as a literary work but never performed in public. *Zamore et Mirza* mentioned a few lines later was de Gouges's first play, written in 1784, and is an abolitionist work that places a black slave on the stage as the hero despite his having killed his overseer to prevent the man raping his female companion. Renamed *L'Esclavage des Noirs* (*Black Slavery*) it was eventually staged in late 1789 but was only performed three times before outraged slave traders and colonists managed to close it down. Her description of the play's eventual reception was unfortunately prescient.

COMMON SENSE.

Ah! Say rather of well founded despondency and fear.

WIT.

What nonsense! A Play that the Comédie Française has received with emotion, and will make all Paris flock to it.

COMMON SENSE.

The first time, not doubt. Curiosity will encourage a crowd on that day.

REASON.

Do you not think it will have at least two performances?

COMMON SENSE.

It would be a fine thing if it had even half of one, and if it can sustain itself for three-quarters then that would be a great deal.

WIT.

What a detestable prediction! My word, Mister Common Sense, you are unbearable, and this time I am going to cut all ties with you.

REASON.

Have patience, you must try and convince him. But, the novelty of the subject, the consistency of the twofold interests, so well sustained, create the beauty of this work, whereas our great Masters have spoilt their masterpieces by using the same means.

WIT.

My talent pushed me beyond my experience. I saw a superb plan, I acted upon it without fear of danger, and just as I flatter myself that I will be immortalised you come and poison my sweet reveries.

COMMON SENSE.

What delirium! Rock yourself, and may you put the Audience to sleep so that it is in a fit state to listen to you peacefully; I really fear you will have a rude awakening.

REASON.

But I only see an agreeable dream that will rejoice the Author; for my part, that is all I can predict.

WIT.

Never have I found Reason so pleasing.

COMMON SENSE.

When Wit dominates her she is easy to subjugate but I, who can do without you, do not share her thoughts, I only like to follow well beaten paths; whoever strays from them can be mistaken, even lost.

REASON.

But Theatre is a Lottery where one often succeeds thanks only to foibles.

COMMON SENSE.

Luck is sometimes favourable, but very often pernicious.

WIT.

Eh, who told you I would not succeed?

COMMON SENSE.

Me, me, I tell you, and my experience that has never let me down.

WIT.

So what would you do in my place?

COMMON SENSE.

I would offer this Play to the Public and tremble, or I would modestly take back this Drama.

WIT.

The great remedy of becoming a coward, or an object of pity! Truthfully, Mister Common Sense, you are talking gibberish my friend. I would not be risking anything with such good cards in my hand; even if I fall flat on my face like so many others I want to run the risk, and I will be performed by hook or by crook.

REASON.

That is to act properly. When one has advanced so far one cannot go back. Expect the worst, Mister Wit, so that your fall will seem less hard and less unfortunate.

WIT.

Your are most consoling, Dame Reason, but both of you must realise that I am already consoled. I only want to say a few words to you about my *Supposed Cuckold*, my Novel and my Prefaces.<sup>5</sup>

COMMON SENSE.

My censure would be too cruel if I were to examine in detail these latest works. Yet more verbosity, couplets with no rhyme or reason.

REASON.

Ah! As for that, stop right there Mister Common Sense: you are not fit to decide on what concerns me. I am perfectly established in Romance and Vaudevilles. As for rhyme and reason, it is true that they are not very well observed, as his Bookseller has told him, yet by an inconceivable strangeness one finds perfect rhymes in his prose and pure prose in his verses.

WIT.

I admit that I do not look at these bagatelles too closely but I will not go back in order to learn about them. A letter to the Public will excuse this trifle.

COMMON SENSE.

Eh! Will you justify yourself in the same way as all those you accuse in your Preface. If you had followed my advice you would have forgotten and despised those you deemed despicable.

REASON.

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De Gouges wrote her five-act play *Le Philosophe corrigé ou le Cocu supposé* (*The Philosopher Corrected, or the Supposed Cuckold*) in 1787. Never performed it was published along with her other works in her 1788 three volume *Oeuvres*.

That rule is good, but rarely applied.

WIT.

All the harm I have done in my life is to take my revenge on the wicked in public.

COMMON SENSE.

So likewise the wicked will boo you publicly.

REASON.

They would have done it anyway. Generous actions do not disarm these course grovelling souls.

COMMON SENSE.

One has to blush in silence to have met such vile creatures.

WIT.

Where are the honest people who can claim never to have found any along the way. Good people are the prey of the wicked.

COMMON SENSE.

But you are clever enough to avoid such situations.

WIT.

I will admit that I can only be fooled once unsuspectedly.

REASON.

Eh, how many times have you been duped despite suspicion.

WIT.

Let us not mention my bonhomie, which has so often led me to be taken in.

REASON.

What candour to admit to it.

COMMON SENSE.

That is his strength and his weakness.

WIT.

You toss epigrams at me, my dear Common Sense; is that how you thank those who treat you well. You become familiar, indiscreet and even a despot. Ah! Gently, Mister Censor, it will not be said that you subjugate me. Since time immemorial Wit has laid down the law so your sad methods will not win over the amiable advantages that I have over you.

REASON.

Yes, but it is a serious shortcoming to think so highly of one's own superiority.

COMMON SENSE.

Let him get carried away, overexcited and rise up and soar above me. I want to see him one day embarrassed, disabused of his lapses and his pride, coming to solicit and beg for my advice and my promise to never abandon him again. That is where I will wait for him.

WIT.

My word I will leave that as long as I can and I doubt that we will ever be well matched.

REASON.

For my part I will place a wager on it. But nothing is resolved and I can see that we will never be called three heads under the same hat.<sup>6</sup>

WIT.

That is very satisfactory for the peace of the world for if we were all three perfectly agreed the universe would have only one master.

COMMON SENSE.

You speak like a young man who offers his ideas to the Public for the first time.

WIT.

That is too much, and to punish both of you for having infuriated me, read the first volume of my works.

COMMON SENSE.

Mercy! What a penance! That is the only fault that you were lacking, to augment the numbers of Authors that are never read, the Grocers' shops, the Apothecary, the Tobacconists, the .... You understand me fully; that is the fate of all those who have, like you, the presumption to offer to an enlightened Public their obscure works, their plays that are never performed anywhere, who ruin themselves by going into print without enriching any library. My dear Wit, if you placed all these resources in a still you would draw off only clear water.

WIT.

So be it, but it will never be said that in all my writings I have not found drinking water.

REASON.

That is how Wit saves himself, with a bon mot, with a play on words. For my part I am abandoning the task; I am, your very humble, servant.

COMMON SENSE.

Dame Reason, I will follow you for I have no more to say.

WIT.

Farewell, once and for all, and I wish you a pleasant journey. You are by nature very self-interested but with me you have wasted your time. Wit makes more silly mistakes than good transactions and with him one gets slim pickings. Farewell, until we meet again.

POSTFACE.

It is to you redoubtable, though nonetheless indulgent and in general fair, Public that I tremblingly submit my works and my thoughts. I may have quipped about my fate in my prefaces and dialogue like a young impetuous chap who tears himself from the arms of his family to fly to war, exalted by glory, he sees no peril, no danger; the battlefield offers him a vast career which he speedily considers. Finally he arrives amid the battalions; barely have his eyes registered the two formidable armies than astonishment takes hold of him

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase 'trois têtes dans un bonnet' suggests that those under the same hat share similar opinions.



and with time to pause and reflect he begins to recognise his mediocrity and all of his shortcomings. What, he says to himself, can those laurels placed on a million heads make me appear triumphant in the world? And those great men whose almost half century of labour and struggles have crowned them with victory's prize make him yearn for his peaceful life and his quiet hearth. Likewise I regret at this moment my enterprise yet cannot persuade myself to reconsider it. To depict manners, to paint characters one needs other brushes than mine. And you, Public, for whom I prepare laughter or from whom I may incite pity, condemn or criticise my destiny but its ruling, stronger than your arguments, has driven me to an Author's vocation, that of an Author with no art and no culture, and yet blessed with an imagination indispensable for composition. The sterile Writer who is beholden to a rich Library is sure of his progress; in all ways methodical, in all ways working within the rules, he never need fear going astray: the one on the contrary who is only guided by his imagination can be carried away, often beyond the pale. For myself, who blindly strays off the beaten path, I should be more excused than most but I know that the Public is not satisfied with such justifications: amuse me, it says, or stop writing. Nothing is easier than to resolve such a problem; nothing is more difficult than to follow such wise advice. So in my turn I suggest that one must bear what one can destroy, and that you must, oh redoubtable Public, indulgently receive all my efforts to seduce you. Meanwhile a more praiseworthy aim in our eyes, was to unmask the wicked people that an unfortunate destiny placed in my path. Molière, in his *Tartuffe*, as I have already mentioned in my *Generous Man*, seemed to have stifled those perverse men who proliferate among us; but vice is always the same, it has only changed its shape. Today, with an air of candour and truth a liar, an impostor, cheats and fools the Public and even makes it laugh if it has a quick mind. It is hard to describe these characters. Molière himself, with his creative genius, would find it difficult to depict them. It is easier to represent a Sneak or Hypocrite than an open and naive spirit; meanwhile the two types of men have the same vices and it would therefore be up to the immortal Author alone, if he could rise again, to handle this new form of hypocrite. I dared to attempt it, without daring to add anything of my own; how I saw it in Society is how I revealed it. This feeble sketch nevertheless drew down upon me, similarly to that great man [Molière], the calumny of the wicked. The world alleges that I am a dangerous woman, unforgiving of everyone, who places all the Universe in a Comedy. Therefore I admit to the Public that this great Universe upon which I exercise my feeble talents might well shut itself up in the Hôtel de la Force or some other harsher place of correction if the law were my rod but I only have that of literature which has been used before my time with greater vigour, and has not produced a better effect.<sup>7</sup> The only person who informs on these crimes is the Writer; he becomes redoubtable and himself a suspect for wanting to unmask the wicked; but their calumny is stronger than all his efforts, and often it is only after his time that his virtuous purpose is recognised. But, what am I saying? Oh severe Public, the immortal works of great men speak better than all my observations and I am satisfied just to encourage you to adopt those that concern me. I must try even harder, I must obtain from you total clemency for all my mistakes that are serious rather than insignificant; language mistakes, composition mistakes, style mistakes, knowledge mistakes, consequence mistakes, humour mistakes, genius mistakes, and following our holy Religion may my prayer be granted. Perhaps your strength will fail when it comes to forgiving my versifying mistakes. This is where I must, on my knees, make amends for having dared to print the Couplets and Romances in my *Philosopher Corrected*. In my Preface I engage a Man of Letters to take charge of the Poetry; but that Shark of a Printer did not intend to spare me; he assured me that I could not avoid writing the Vaudevilles which are in context. My problem is not to compose them but to be

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<sup>7</sup> The Hôtel de la Force was built in the sixteenth century as a large private residence; it was converted into a prison for debtors in 1780. In 1785 it was renamed the Grande Force when a part of it, named the Petite Force, was set aside for female prisoners.

successful at it, and my Muse is a barbaric Muse. Never mind M. Cailleau, as you insist, you will print them by the yard for I promise you, I never do them by the foot, the inexactness of the rhyme is very least fault of this supposed Poetry but in the last couplet of the romance in the third act, where I wrote such a pompous verse that expresses France's support, the sense is hard to grasp and I admit that I cannot grasp it more than anyone else; but I would cite on this occasion one of the great Corneille's moments. An Actress given a role in one of his Plays, having reflected on a very brilliant monologue, could not fathom its aim so she said to Corneille, while praising his superb verse, that she could not understand its meaning. My word, Mademoiselle, replied the great man straightforwardly, I no more understand it than you, but speak it anyway as it will be applauded. A lesser mortal assures us that what is not worth speaking aloud can be sung today. I therefore exhort the Actresses to sing my couplets, if the Play is performed, then the Public need not read them.

I have the honour of being, respectfully and obediently, the most zealous and ardent of Authors.

THE END.