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# MEMNON,

ou

LA SAGESSE HUMAINE.

1750

Préface de l'Éditeur

Longchamp dit que *Memnon* est de 1746; mais on a vu que c'était d'abord sous ce titre qu'avait été imprimé *Zadig*; et il est à croire que Longchamp, qui n'a rédigé ses *Mémoires* que long-temps après, aura confondu les deux ouvrages. Par la raison même que Voltaire avait donné en 1747 un *Memnon*, il est à présumer que ce n'est pas immédiatement après qu'il aura publié un autre ouvrage sous le même titre. En admettant la nécessité de l'intervalle entre deux ouvrages différents du même auteur, mais ayant le même titre, cet intervalle ne peut s'étendre au-delà de 1750, puisque c'est la date que porte le tome IX de l'édition de Dresde des *Oeuvres de Voltaire*. C'est sous la même date qu'a été publié le *Recueil de pièces en vers et en prose, par l'auteur de la tragédie de Sémiramis*, 1750, in-12. P. Clément, auteur des *Cinq Années littéraires*, dit dans sa quarante-sixième lettre, datée du 13 janvier 1750, qu'il n'y a pas quinze jours que le petit conte de *Memnon* est échappé à son auteur.

## AVERTISSEMENT DE L'AUTEUR[1]

Nous tromper dans nos entreprises,  
C'est à quoi nous sommes sujets;  
Le matin je fais des projets,  
Et le long du jour, des sottises.

Ces petits vers conviennent assez à un grand nombre de raisonneurs; et c'est une chose assez plaisante de voir un grave directeur d'âmes finir par un procès criminel, conjointement avec un banqueroutier[2]. A ce propos, nous réimprimons ici ce petit conte, qui est ailleurs; car il est bon qu'il soit partout.

[1] Voltaire, dans la quatrième partie de ses *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, en 1771, avait un article : CONFIANCE EN SOI-MÊME, qui n'était autre chose que le conte de Memnon, précédé de quatre vers et de quelques lignes de prose, que les éditeurs de Kehl ont intitulés: *Avertissement de l'auteur*. B.

[2] Billard, et l'abbé Grizel, fameux directeur de consciences. K. — Sur ces deux personnages, voyez la note des Stances à Saurin (dans les Poésies). B.

# MEMNON,

ou

LA SAGESSE HUMAINE.

Memnon conçut un jour le projet insensé d'être parfaitement sage. Il n'y a guère d'hommes à qui cette folie n'ait quelquefois passé par la tête. Memnon se dit à lui-même: Pour être très sage, et par conséquent très heureux, il n'y a qu'à être sans passions; et rien n'est plus aisé, comme on sait. Premièrement je n'aimerai jamais de femme; car, en voyant une beauté parfaite, je me dirai à moi-même: Ces joues-là se rideront un jour; ces beaux yeux seront bordés de rouge; cette gorge ronde deviendra plate et pendante; cette belle tête deviendra chauve. Or je n'ai qu'à la voir à présent des mêmes yeux dont je la verrai alors, et assurément cette tête ne fera pas tourner la mienne.

En second lieu je serai toujours sobre; j'aurai beau être tenté par la bonne chère, par des vins

délicieux, par la séduction de la société; je n'aurai qu'à me représenter les suites des excès, une tête pesante, un estomac embarrassé, la perte de la raison, de la santé, et du temps, je ne mangerai alors que pour le besoin; ma santé sera toujours égale, mes idées toujours pures et lumineuses. Tout cela est si facile, qu'il n'y a aucun mérite à y parvenir.

Ensuite, disait Memnon, il faut penser un peu à ma fortune; mes désirs sont modérés; mon bien est solidement placé sur le receveur-général des finances de Ninive; j'ai de quoi vivre dans l'indépendance: c'est là le plus grand des biens. Je ne serai jamais dans la cruelle nécessité de faire ma cour: je n'envierai personne, et personne ne m'enviera. Voilà qui est encore très aisé. J'ai des amis, continuait-il, je les conserverai, puisqu'ils n'auront rien à me disputer. Je n'aurai jamais d'humeur avec eux, ni eux avec moi; cela est sans difficulté.

Ayant fait ainsi son petit plan de sagesse dans sa chambre, Memnon mit la tête à la fenêtre. Il vit deux femmes qui se promenaient sous des platanes auprès de sa maison. L'une était vieille, et paraissait ne songer à rien; l'autre était jeune, jolie, et semblait fort occupée. Elle soupirait, elle pleurait, et n'en avait que plus de grâces. Notre sage fut touché, non pas de la beauté de la dame (il était bien sûr de ne pas sentir une telle faiblesse), mais de l'affliction où il la voyait. Il descendit, il aborda la jeune Ninivienne dans le dessein de la consoler avec sagesse. Cette belle personne lui conta, de l'air le plus naïf et le plus touchant, tout le mal que lui faisait un oncle qu'elle n'avait point; avec quels artifices il lui avait enlevé un bien qu'elle n'avait jamais possédé, et tout ce qu'elle avait à craindre de sa violence. Vous me paraissez un homme de si bon conseil, lui dit-elle, que si vous aviez la condescendance de venir jusque chez moi, et d'examiner mes affaires, je suis sûre que vous me tireriez du cruel embarras où je suis. Memnon n'hésita pas à la suivre, pour examiner sagement ses affaires, et pour lui donner un bon conseil.

La dame affligée le mena dans une chambre parfumée, et le fit asseoir avec elle poliment sur un large sofa, où ils se tenaient tous deux les jambes croisées vis-à-vis l'un de l'autre. La dame parla en baissant les yeux, dont il échappait quelquefois des larmes, et qui en se relevant rencontraient toujours les regards du sage Memnon. Ses discours étaient pleins d'un attendrissement qui redoublait toutes les fois qu'ils se regardaient. Memnon prenait ses affaires extrêmement à coeur, et se sentait de moment en moment la plus grande envie d'obliger une personne si honnête et si malheureuse. Ils cessèrent insensiblement, dans la chaleur de la conversation, d'être vis-à-vis l'un de l'autre. Leurs jambes ne furent plus croisées. Memnon la conseilla de si près, et lui donna des avis si tendres, qu'ils ne pouvaient ni l'un ni l'autre parler d'affaires, et qu'ils ne savaient plus où ils en étaient.

Comme ils en étaient là, arrive l'oncle, ainsi qu'on peut bien le penser: il était armé de la tête aux pieds; et la première chose qu'il dit fut qu'il allait tuer, comme de raison, le sage Memnon et sa nièce; la dernière qui lui échappa fut qu'il pouvait pardonner pour beaucoup d'argent. Memnon fut obligé de donner tout ce qu'il avait. On était heureux dans ce temps-là d'en être quitte à si bon marché; l'Amérique n'était pas encore découverte, et les dames affligées n'étaient pas à beaucoup près si dangereuses qu'elles le sont aujourd'hui.

Memnon, honteux et désespéré, rentra chez lui: il y trouva un billet qui l'invitait à dîner avec quelques uns de ses intimes amis. Si je reste seul chez moi, dit-il, j'aurai l'esprit occupé de ma triste aventure, je ne mangerai point; je tomberai malade; il vaut mieux aller faire avec mes amis intimes un repas frugal. J'oublierai, dans la douceur de leur société, la sottise que j'ai faite ce matin. Il va au rendez-vous; on le trouve un peu chagrin. On le fait boire pour dissiper sa tristesse. Un peu de vin pris modérément est un remède pour l'âme et pour le corps. C'est ainsi que pense le sage Memnon; et il s'enivre. On lui propose de jouer après le repas. Un jeu réglé avec des amis est un passe-temps honnête. Il joue; on lui gagne tout ce qu'il a dans sa bourse, et quatre fois autant sur sa parole. Une dispute s'élève sur le jeu, on s'échauffe: l'un de ses amis intimes lui jette à la tête un cornet, et lui crève un oeil. On rapporte chez lui le sage Memnon ivre, sans argent, et ayant un oeil de moins.

Il cuve un peu son vin; et dès qu'il a la tête plus libre, il envoie son valet chercher de l'argent chez le receveur-général des finances de Ninive pour payer ses intimes amis: on lui dit que son débiteur a fait le matin une banqueroute frauduleuse qui met en alarme cent familles. Memnon, outré va à la cour avec un emplâtre sur l'oeil et un placet à la main pour demander justice au roi contre le banqueroutier. Il rencontre dans un salon plusieurs dames qui portaient toutes d'un air aisé des cerceaux de vingt-quatre pieds de circonférence. L'une d'elles, qui le connaissait un peu, dit en le regardant de côté: Ah, l'horreur! Une autre, qui le connaissait davantage, lui dit: Bonsoir, monsieur Memnon; mais vraiment, monsieur Memnon, je suis fort aise de vous voir; à propos, monsieur Memnon, pourquoi avez-vous perdu un oeil? Et elle passa sans attendre sa réponse. Memnon se cacha dans un coin, et attendit le moment où il pût se jeter aux pieds du monarque. Ce moment arriva. Il baisa trois fois la terre, et présenta son placet. Sa gracieuse majesté le reçut très favorablement, et donna le mémoire à un de ses satrapes pour lui en rendre compte. Le satrape tire Memnon à part, et lui dit d'un air de hauteur, en ricanant amèrement: Je vous trouve un plaisant borgne, de vous adresser au roi plutôt qu'à moi, et

encore plus plaisant d'oser demander justice contre un honnête banqueroutier que j'honore de ma protection, et qui est le neveu d'une femme de chambre de ma maîtresse. Abandonnez cette affaire-là, mon ami, si vous voulez conserver l'oeil qui vous reste.

Memnon, ayant ainsi renoncé le matin aux femmes, aux excès de table, au jeu, à toute querelle, et surtout à la cour, avait été avant la nuit trompé et volé par une belle dame, s'était enivré, avait joué, avait eu une querelle, s'était fait crever un oeil, et avait été à la cour, où l'on s'était moqué de lui.

Pétrifié d'étonnement et navré de douleur, il s'en retourne la mort dans le coeur. Il veut rentrer chez lui; il y trouve des huissiers qui démeublaient sa maison de la part de ses créanciers. Il reste presque évanoui sous un platane; il y rencontre la belle dame du matin, qui se promenait avec son cher oncle, et qui éclata de rire en voyant Memnon avec son emplâtre. La nuit vint; Memnon se coucha sur de la paille auprès des murs de sa maison. La fièvre le saisit; il s'endormit dans l'accès, et un esprit céleste lui apparut en songe.

Il était tout resplendissant de lumière. Il avait six belles ailes, mais ni pieds, ni tête, ni queue, et ne ressemblait à rien. Qui es-tu? lui dit Memnon. Ton bon génie, lui répondit l'autre. Rends-moi donc mon oeil, ma santé, ma maison[3], mon bien, ma sagesse, lui dit Memnon. Ensuite il lui conta comment il avait perdu tout cela en un jour. Voilà des aventures qui ne nous arrivent jamais dans le monde que nous habitons, dit l'esprit. Et quel monde habitez-vous? dit l'homme affligé. Ma patrie, répondit-il, est à cinq cents millions de lieues du soleil, dans une petite étoile auprès de Sirius, que tu vois d'ici. Le beau pays! dit Memnon: quoi! vous n'avez point chez vous de coquines qui trompent un pauvre homme, point d'amis intimes qui lui gagnent son argent et qui lui crèvent un oeil, point de banqueroutiers, point de satrapes qui se moquent de vous en vous refusant justice? Non, dit l'habitant de l'étoile, rien de tout cela. Nous ne sommes jamais trompés par les femmes, parceque nous n'en avons point; nous ne faisons point d'excès de table, parceque nous ne mangeons point; nous n'avons point de banqueroutiers, parcequ'il n'y a chez nous ni or ni argent; on ne peut nous crever les yeux, parceque nous n'avons point de corps à la façon des vôtres; et les satrapes ne nous font jamais d'injustice, parce que dans notre petite étoile tout le monde est égal.

[3] C'est d'après les éditions de 1750 que je rétablis ici les mots *ma maison*. B.

Memnon lui dit alors: Monseigneur, sans femme et sans dîner, à quoi passez-vous votre temps? A veiller, dit le génie, sur les autres globes qui nous sont confiés: et je viens pour te consoler. Hélas! reprit Memnon, que ne veniez-vous la nuit passée pour m'empêcher de faire tant de folies? J'étais auprès d'Assan, ton frère aîné, dit l'être céleste. Il est plus à plaindre que toi. Sa gracieuse majesté le roi des Indes, à la cour duquel il a l'honneur d'être, lui a fait crever les deux yeux pour une petite indiscretion, et il est actuellement dans un cachot, les fers aux pieds et aux mains. C'est bien la peine, dit Memnon, d'avoir un bon génie dans une famille, pour que de deux frères, l'un soit borgne, l'autre aveugle, l'un couché sur la paille, l'autre en prison. Ton sort changera, reprit l'animal de l'étoile. Il est vrai que tu seras toujours borgne; mais, à cela près, tu seras assez heureux, pourvu que tu ne fasses jamais le sot projet d'être parfaitement sage. C'est donc une chose à laquelle il est impossible de parvenir? s'écria Memnon en soupirant. Aussi impossible, lui répliqua l'autre, que d'être parfaitement habile, parfaitement fort, parfaitement puissant, parfaitement heureux. Nous-mêmes, nous en sommes bien loin. Il y a un globe où tout cela se trouve; mais dans les cent mille millions de mondes qui sont dispersés dans l'étendue tout se suit par degrés. On a moins de sagesse et de plaisir dans le second que dans le premier, moins dans le troisième que dans le second, ainsi du reste jusqu'au dernier, où tout le monde est complètement fou. J'ai bien peur, dit Memnon, que notre petit globe terraqué ne soit précisément les Petites-Maisons de l'univers dont vous me faites l'honneur de me parler. Pas tout-à-fait, dit l'esprit; mais il en approche: il faut que tout soit en sa place. Eh mais! dit Memnon, certains poètes[4], certains philosophes[5], ont donc grand tort de dire que tout est bien? Ils ont grande raison, dit le philosophe de là-haut, en considérant l'arrangement de l'univers entier. Ah! je ne croirai cela, répliqua le pauvre Memnon, que quand je ne serai plus borgne.

[4] Pope. B.

[5] Platon, Shafiesbury, Bolingbroke, Leibnitz. B.

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