

On Beauty

by Voltaire

ASK A TOAD what beauty is, he will answer you that it is his toad wife with two great round eyes issuing from her little head, a wide, flat mouth, a yellow belly, a brown back. Interrogate a Guinea negro, for him beauty is a black oily skin, deep-set eyes, a flat nose. Interrogate the devil; he will tell you that beauty is a pair of horns, four claws and a tail.

One day I was at a tragedy near by a philosopher. "How beautiful that is!" he said.

"What do you find beautiful there?" I asked.

"It is beautiful," he answered, "because the author has reached his goal."

The following day he took some medicine which did him good. "The medicine has reached its goal," I said to him. "What a beautiful medicine!" He grasped that one cannot say a medicine is beautiful, and that to give the name of "beauty" to something, the thing must cause you to admire it and give you pleasure. He agreed that the tragedy had inspired these sentiments in him, and that there was the beauty.

We journeyed to England: the same piece, perfectly translated, was played there; it made everybody in the audience yawn. After much reflection he came to the conclusion that beauty is often very relative, just as what is decent in Japan is indecent in Rome, and what is fashionable in Paris, is not fashionable in Peking; and he saved himself the trouble of composing a long treatise on beauty.

There are actions which the whole world finds beautiful. Two of Caesar's officers, mortal enemies, send each other a challenge, not as to who shall shed the other's blood with tierce and quarte behind a thicket as with us, but as to who shall best defend the Roman camp, which the Barbarians are about to attack. One of them, having repulsed the enemy, is near succumbing; the other rushes to his aid, saves his life, and completes the victory.

A friend sacrifices his life for his friend; a son for his father. . . . The Algonquin, the Frenchman, the Chinaman, will all say that that is very beautiful, that these actions give them pleasure, that they admire them.

They will say as much of the great moral maxims, of Zarathustra's-"In doubt if an action be just, abstain . . ."; of Confucius'-"Forget injuries, never forget kindnesses."

The negro with the round eyes and flat nose, who will not give the name of "beauties" to the ladies of our courts, will without hesitation give it to these actions and these maxims. The wicked man even will recognize the beauty of these virtues which he dare not imitate. The beauty which strikes the senses merely, the imagination, and that which is called "intelligence," is often uncertain therefore. The beauty which speaks to the heart is not that. You will find a host of people who will tell you that they have found nothing beautiful in three-quarters of the Iliad; but nobody will deny that Codrus' devotion to his people was very beautiful, supposing it to be true.

There are many other reasons which determine me not to write a treatise on beauty.