

Constant, Paule. *Ouregano*. Margaret Miller, trans. New York: Lexington Books, 2005. ISBN 0-7391-1065-9 (Cloth). ISBN 0-7291-1066-7 (Paper)
Constant, Paule. *Ouregano*. Paris, Gallimard, 1980. ISBN 2-0702-0438-3.

Margot Miller's masterful translation of *Ouregano* by Paule Constant, nominated in 2005 for both the PEN translation Prize and the Aldo and Jean Scaglione Prize for the translation of a literary work (MLA) renders Constant's 1980 novel accessible to an Anglophone audience for the first time. Miller's clear prose and retention of local French terms pertaining to life in an African French colony of the 1950s draw the reader into the narrative while imparting a touch of exoticism.

As translator, Miller is occasionally present in the text via elements designed to enrich *Ouregano* for English-speakers. She has judiciously included footnotes providing stylistic, geographical, cultural, and historic explanations. Moreover, her translator's preface, which mentions her own connection to western Africa in the 1960s, enhances the novel's verisimilitude, all the while giving it a personal touch.

Ouregano provides readers (of English) with a fresh look at the final decade of France's colonies in central and western Africa, albeit from an ironic perspective. The novel depicts the French administration of Ouregano, an imaginary Central African country of the 1950s. Often called paternalistic, the colons or colonists portrayed in the novel are seen as childish pleasure-seekers confined to their own circumspect world. Gone is any pretense of governing the native population for its own good. As *Ouregano*'s narrator puts it, « The whites [sic] of Ouregano did not see the blacks [sic] dying ».

The French colonists' inability to perceive anything beyond their parties and other petty, selfish concerns has serious implications for their children's welfare. For example, seven-year-old Tiffany Murano, starved for her parents' affection, is ignored by her mother and father and then blamed for her poor performance at school. Similarly, Judge Bonenfant's sons Jean-Marc and Jean-Louis learn conditional rather than unconditional love from their father. He awaits their misbehavior so that he can lord his superiority over his sons as they ask for his forgiveness. In turn, Jean-Marc and Jean-Louis terrorize the Murano girl by having a leper woman touch her.

By conveying the emotional neglect of the *colons*' children and their cruelty towards one another, *Ouregano* demystifies any notion of the colonial enterprise as a civilizing one. The French adults willingly sacrifice the well-being of their offspring in order to pamper themselves in the manner to which they are accustomed. Neglectful at home, the French colonists behave similarly in the larger community, overlooking the problems of disease, hunger, and poverty in the native population around them. For instance, the chief Administrator visits the nearby towns, but leaves neither food nor medicine to take care of the indigent inhabitants' needs.

In short, it is this picture of French colonial insensitivity that Margot Miller's translation of *Ouregano* brings to readers of English approximately fifty years after the independence of France's former colonies. Miller's work allows Anglophones to contemplate Constant's idea that colonialism in central Africa in the 1950s failed largely because of the French colonists' shortsightedness.

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