

LITERATURE OF SLAVERY: FRENCH LITERATURE

The French reading public became increasingly aware of the injustice of slavery in the eighteenth century. Fueling the interest sparked by Du Tertre, Labat, and other seventeenth-century chroniclers of French colonization, popular philosophical works of the Enlightenment such as the baron de Montesquieu's L'Esprit des lois (1748), the abbé Raynal's Histoire des deux Indes (1770), Louis-Sébastien Mercier's L'An 2440 (1771), and the marquis de Condorcet's Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres (1781) made slavery one of the most significant social and literary topics of the time. Those works highlighted the cruelty and injustice of slavery, warned of marronage and slave revolts, and pleaded for more enlightened colonial policies and enforcement of the Code noir, instituted in 1685 under Louis XIV to assure humane treatment of slaves but never strictly observed. Committed to preserving European property, the inefficiency of the slavery system notwithstanding, writers took the moderate position of advocating ameliorating the slaves' lot instead of abolition. In novels and short fiction also the French turned their attention to slavery following the immense popularity of Oroonoko, written by the English novelist Aphra Behn and first translated in 1745. That novel began the current of littérature négrophile, in which black characters were depicted as possessing heroic qualities. The idealized, exotic image of Africans that resulted appears in such eighteenth-century works as Jean-François Saint Lambert's Ziméo (1769), Joseph La Vallée's Le Nègre comme il y a peu de blancs (1789), and Germaine de Staël's Mirza (1795). Olympe de Gouges's L'Esclavage des noirs, performed at the Comédie-Française in 1789, and numerous other dramatic works, mainly melodramas, contained this idealized image of slaves, which appealed greatly to mass audiences. The depiction of slaves as tragic heroes reflected pre-Romantic trends

of sentimentalism or exoticism and expressed new literary themes of alienation or exclusion. Works about slavery declined sharply, however, after the slave uprisings and massacres of whites in Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe in the 1790s. Those events also effectively silenced the abolitionist movement for several decades.

In the nineteenth century the subject of slavery reflected trends towards Romanticism and socially committed literature. De La Littérature des nègres (1808) by the Abbé Grégoire was one of the few works addressing injustices towards slaves during the era of Napoleon, whose negrophobic policies Staël opposed in several short essays. The subject regained popularity in 1823, when the French Academy proposed slavery and the slave trade as the subject for the prize in poetry, which was won by Victor Chauvet for his poem “Néali, histoire africaine.” Another significant poem from this time is Marceline Desbordes-Valmore’s “La Veillée du nègre” (1825). Victor Hugo’s Bug-Jargal (1826), Prosper Mérimée’s Tamango (1829), and other works in prose, poetry, and theater of the Romantic period continued to dwell on slavery as an expression of themes of melancholy, social injustice, exile, and rebellion. In Ourika (1823) Claire de Duras provided a sympathetic treatment of an African woman whose plight echoes Duras’s own alienation as a woman. George Sand also addressed injustice toward subjects of oppression: in Indiana (1832) she showed how oppression similarly affects women and persons of color; in an influential review in La Presse in December 1852, she praised Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, thereby contributing to the great popularity of Stowe’s novel in France. Other nineteenth-century works such as Eugène Sue’s Atar Gull (1831) and Lamartine’s play Louverture (1850) recounted the horrors of the transatlantic passage or deplored the condition of slaves. In the few works published by persons of color in the nineteenth century--for example, short stories by the New Orleans writer Victor Séjour and novels by Alexandre Dumas such as

Georges--the complex nature of mulatto identity is explored. Emeric Bergeaud's Stella (1859), the first Haitian novel, recounts life under slavery and the quest for independence.

Considerations of slavery in twentieth-century French Caribbean literature focus on themes of heroism, national identity, and gender. Efforts to assert black identity during and after the "negritude" movement have led to numerous works on leaders of the Haitian Revolution: Toussaint Louverture is the subject of works by Aimé Césaire (1960) and Edouard Glissant (1963); Henri Christophe figures in Césaire's play La Tragédie du Roi Christophe (1963). Other works--Simone Schwarz-Bart's Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, Daniel Maximin's L'Isolé soleil (1981), Patrick Chamoiseau's Texaco (1992), Raphaël Confiant's Eau de Café (1991)--delve into the past to restore a collective memory and contribute to healing what Caribbean authors see as the traumas of alienation and oblivion resulting from slavery. Still other works foreground the role of women: their lives under slavery in Maryse Condé's Moi, Tituba sorcière (1986); their neglected role as revolutionary heroes in André Schwarz-Bart's La Mulâtresse Solitude (1972); and their forgotten contributions to culture and society in Marie Chauvet's La Danse sur le volcan (1957).

Doris Y. Kadish

University of Georgia

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Antoine, Régis. Les Ecrivains français et les antilles des premiers pères blancs aux surréalistes noirs. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1978.

Dayan, Joan. Haiti, History, and the Gods. Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1995.

Hoffmann, Léon-François. Le Nègre romantique. Paris: Payot, 1973.

Kadish, Doris Y. and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, ed., Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women Writers, 1783-1823. Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1994.