

REWRITING WOMEN'S STORIES:

OURIKA AND THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

I chose the name of the hero in my own novel, The French Lieutenant's Woman, quite freely--or so I thought at the time. It came as a shock, months after my typescript had gone to the printers, to pick up Ourika one day and to recall that Charles was the name of the principal male figure there also. That set me thinking. And though I could have sworn I had never had the African figure of Ourika in mind during the writing of The French Lieutenant's Woman, I am now certain in retrospect that she was very active in my unconscious.¹

Most readers of John Fowles's celebrated The French Lieutenant's Woman, written in 1969, are probably unaware of the debt it owes and the strong similarity it bears to Ourika, a slave story written by a nineteenth-century woman writer, Claire de Duras, in 1823. Not only was Fowles influenced by that early work, but in 1977 he chose to translate it and write a Foreword and Epilogue explaining its importance to literary history and to him as a writer. There exists, then, a small corpus of texts--two novels, a translation, and two commentaries--that merits analysis for several reasons. A comparison of the two novels sheds light generally on both works, especially since Fowles has explicitly commented on the subject of their similarities; and an identification of some of the salient features of Fowles's translation and of his analysis of Duras's work points up significant aesthetic and ideological differences between the two authors. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, these texts provide an occasion for analyzing

how a twentieth-century male writer reads and rewrites the work of a nineteenth-century female writer and thus for providing insight into important differences between feminine and masculine writing. It is true that Fowles highlights the historical issue of women's emancipation in The French Lieutenant's Woman, leading some critics to interpret the novel as feminist.² Others, however, call into question its feminist tendencies, as I will in my comparison of Ourika and The French Lieutenant's Woman and my comments on Fowles's translation of Duras's novel.³ In both cases Fowles often diminishes or at least modifies the salient feminine features of Duras's novel--notably, its treatment of feminine voice, vision, identity, sexuality, and community. These feminine features of Duras's novel will be considered under the rubrics of "male authority" and "the feminine body or self." I argue that Fowles enhances the male authority of narrators or writers that is present, but significantly counterbalanced and controlled, in Duras's novel; and moreover that Fowles is unable to produce the kind of feminine identity found in Duras's novel, an identity that is grounded in physical and social bonds with women.⁴

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Duras's Ourika and Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman provide two significantly different treatments of male authority. Although both works open with authority vested in male narrative figures, Duras's female protagonist Ourika acquires a voice and the means of a competing feminine authority shortly after the beginning of Duras's text, whereas, as will be seen shortly, the central woman character in Fowles's work, Sarah Woodruff, is virtually silenced and remains largely disempowered until quite late in the novel. The difference in the treatment of

narrative structure between the two works corresponds to a difference in the treatment of gender inasmuch as Duras displays a greater interest in and respect for the point of view and the voice of women characters than Fowles.

Ourika opens with the voice of a male frame narrator, an unnamed medical doctor who recounts how he was summoned to cure a young nun suffering from acute melancholy. The control that he exercises through the act of narration is enhanced through the role of the focalizer--“the persona who sees the events of the story”⁵--that he also plays, for it is he who describes the external appearance of the nun to the reader in the opening pages. He recounts that as he and an accompanying sister enter the convent, he was surprised to find that the nun was a black woman: “Elle se tourna vers moi, et je fus étrangement surpris en apercevant une négresse!” [“She turned towards me. I had a strange shock. I was looking at a negress”].⁶ He then elaborates upon her physical appearance:

Son aspect ne confirmait que trop cette triste description de son état: sa maigreur était excessive, ses yeux brillants et fort grands, ses dents d'une blancheur éblouissante, éclairaient seuls sa physionomie; l'âme vivait encore, mais le corps était détruit, et elle portait toutes les marques d'un long et violent chagrin. (28)

[Her appearance only too exactly confirmed this unpromising syndrome. She was excessively thin. The sole things that gave light to her face were her abnormally large and luminous eyes and her dazzlingly white teeth. Her mind still lived, but her body was destroyed. She showed every sign of having suffered from prolonged and acute melancholia]. (14)

With the presumably objective eye of the neutral observer and medical authority, the narrator exercises the authority to dwell on Ourika's physical properties and to describe them in the male

medical discourse of feminine pathology. Interestingly, in translating this passage, Fowles strengthens the male medical discourse by enhancing the clinical tone of the text: thus for example “sa maladie” becomes “her symptoms” rather than merely “her illness”; “cette triste description de son état” is translated as “this unpromising syndrome” rather than “this sad description of her state of health”; “ses yeux brillants et fort grands” turns into “her abnormally large and luminous eyes” rather than merely “her large and shiny eyes”; “un long et violent chagrin” is rendered as “prolonged and acute melancholia” instead of “a long and acute grief.”⁷

The male authority that the frame doctor and focalizer exercises over Ourika is of limited duration, however. After a few short pages, it is Ourika herself, a black woman, who acquires a voice and assumes narrative control over her past life. With the exception of two short sentences by the doctor at the very end, the rest of the novel consists of Ourika's narrating her story to the doctor. We learn that shortly before the time of the French Revolution she is saved from slavery by a French noblewoman, who educates her and raises her in the midst of the aristocratic society to which she belongs. But when Ourika falls in love with her benefactress' handsome grandson, who does not reciprocate her feelings, Ourika realizes the full extent of her social and sexual exclusion as a black woman, excluded, now, both culturally and intellectually from her African compatriots, but equally excluded racially and socially from members of European society. In despair, she enters a convent, where, shortly after telling her story to the doctor, she dies of sorrow at a young age. Notwithstanding the tragic outcome of the story, one can observe that by enabling Ourika to function narratologically both as chief focalizer and exclusive narrator of her story, Duras's novel empowers Ourika as a woman and an African woman.

Ourika also competes with the frame narrator and doctor for control over her medical condition. True, it is the doctor who proposes that she adopt the “talking cure” of understanding

her past in order to regain her health. But although he serves as facilitator by setting the process in motion, Ourika essentially serves as her own doctor for the rest of the novel. Ourika thus takes on the role vis-à-vis herself that French nuns in the nineteenth century typically assumed, not only within the convent but in society generally. According to Jacques Léonard, there was very little separation between science and religion at that time, enabling women to play significant roles in both worlds; regarding religious women, he notes further that at the time, “there was no fundamental difference between their medicine and that practiced by doctors” (Léonard 900). As it turns out, neither the doctor nor Ourika is successful; but whereas Ourika gradually accepts her physical and spiritual limitations, the doctor retains his belief in the power of medicine almost to the end. The last lines of the narrative read: “Je continuai à lui donner des soins: malheureusement ils furent inutiles; elle mourut à la fin d'octobre” (64); [“I continued to attend her, but my science proved sadly unavailing”] (49). Again, Fowles as translator seems to strengthen the medical discourse, enhancing Duras's doctor's more modest claim of “soins” by translating it as “science.”

In contrast to Ourika, The French Lieutenant's Woman illustrates traditional male narrative authority over a female character, as a number of critics have observed: “Since Fowles ostentatiously keeps from entering her consciousness, she remains without subjectivity even when not mediated through Charles” (Goscilo 76); “Sarah is represented through a triple layering of voices which includes Charles, ‘the male narrator,’ and Fowles’ voices. Not only do Sarah’s thoughts remain outside of the realm of the novel, but the perspective offered of Sarah is purely masculine” (Michael 225). The novel begins with the omniscient voice and externally focalizing eye of an unidentified observer, whose presence is felt in statements such as “The local spy might thus have deduced,” “On the other hand he might, focusing his telescope more closely,

have suspected that,” “The eye in the telescope might have glimpsed” (FLW 10). Not only all knowing and male, the “local spy” describes elements in the surroundings as if he were a voyeur or a pornographer fetishistically isolating parts of feminine bodies: “the underside of England's outstretched southwestern leg,” “as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo” (FLW 9-10).

When later in the novel the reader is introduced to the principal representative of the scientific community, Dr. Grogan, a clear analogy can be drawn between the “local spy” and the doctor, who, from his “cabin” described in Chapter 19, observes his female patients with a large telescope (FLW 123). The omniscient narrator and external focalizer presents Lyme Bay and its inhabitants in much the same way that Dr. Grogan speaks of his patients: with a certain air of detached superiority based on the knowledge gained through this scopic intimacy. Although both Ourika and Sarah are observed and diagnosed by male doctors, it is only Ourika, the former slave, who is able to exercise the healing functions traditionally performed by African women and, as noted above, nineteenth-century French nuns. Ironically, it is Sarah rather than the former slave Ourika who comes to mind when one reads that early in the nineteenth century, “the slaves' desire to run away was still being rationalized as a medical condition” (Gilroy 195); and it is Dr. Grogan instead of the doctor in Ourika who seems to rationalize his patient's condition as if she were a runaway slave.

In addition to Grogan's medical control over Sarah, Charles controls her through his role as a locus of internal focalization and point of view. Like the “local spy” and external focalizer, Charles sees nature in Chapter 10 as a feminine presence to be visually possessed: he observes “the unalloyed wildness of growth and burgeoning fertility,” “the bridal white of densely blossoming sloe,” “the curving lip of the plateau” (FLW 59-60). It is in this context of the

observation of feminized nature that, while pursuing his scientific quest for fossils, Charles discovers the sleeping figure of Sarah as a specimen to be observed and categorized: revealingly, at first he takes her to be a corpse; and then, upon discovering her identity, he proceeds to examine in close proximity, as a medical examiner might do, the minute details of her skin and hair color and her physical features. Since Sarah is asleep when Charles discovers her laying on her back in a state of complete and childlike abandonment, she is literally unable to express herself. Charles views Sarah in much the same way that Dr. Grogan examines his female patients: as an external observer who invades rather than interacts with the object of his interest. Sarah is consistently observed and judged by what others believe to be her reality. She is unable to contribute to their categorization of her, for she is but another specimen under the microscope of masculine figures of scientific and narrative authority.

It is of course also true that the narrator and Charles, like Fowles as author, attempt to provide Sarah with a voice. Indeed, on a number of occasions she does narrate her story--for example, in Chapter 20, where she narrates while seated at Charles's feet. One of the two alternative endings of the novel indeed depicts her gaining her independence and rejecting Charles's offer of marriage. Mahmoud Salami holds that "the narrator focuses on the fact that he is not like the omnipresent, omnipotent Victorian god who dominates every text in his narrative...[Sarah] is able to create her own texts through her resistance to authority and her insistence on freedom" (118). But Salami also recognizes that ultimately Sarah's freedom is illusory. As a male author writing about a nineteenth-century woman's ostracism from society, Fowles reveals himself to be very much a man of the 1960s, who retains an existentialist notion of empowerment that presupposes typically male forms of heroic or artistic achievement. As Bruce Woodcock rightly observes, "though Fowles registers a deep sense of male power as at the

root of what is wrong with modern society, the lever for his analysis is an idealisation of the feminine and the female which itself remains unquestioned” (13-14). In contrast, Duras, a woman writer, envisions empowerment in feminine terms, notably by giving Ourika a voice that enables her to express herself. Sarah is never able to fully express herself because Fowles largely relegates her to silence and consistently presents her as an object of vision for men. Although Fowles, the narrator, and Charles try to distance themselves from absolute authority over Sarah, they often see her the way Dr. Grogan sees Marie de Morell, a medical case history from the nineteenth century. That patient, described by her doctor as suffering from “hysteria... symptoms of a disease or disability in order to gain the attention and sympathy of others; a neurosis or psychosis almost invariably caused, as we now know, by sexual repression” (FLW 232) is, like Sarah, a specimen examined and categorized by the medical profession.

Not surprisingly, problematic features mark Fowles's relation to Duras. In the Foreword and Epilogue to his translation of Ourika, Fowles foregrounds Duras's importance as a neglected woman writer and registers his firm rejection of the conditions that have produced the oppression of women and slaves. By translating and publishing Duras's work, Fowles furthers the distinctly feminist agenda of recovering the neglected works by women writers of the past. But at the same time, it is apparent that he viewed her writing in a traditional, male-centered way. He places Duras completely outside of the strongly feminine intertextual tradition of antislavery literature that originated in such seventeenth-century works as Aphra Behn's Oroonoko and continued in France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kadish and Massardier-Kenney 26-61). Seemingly unaware of this tradition, he identifies Chateaubriand as the primary literary influence on Duras and the source of much of her novel: “one does not have to look much further for the literary origins of the Charles-Ourika relationship” (Ourika 56). He also refers to Chateaubriand

and Duras somewhat patronizingly as “Chateaubriand” and “Claire.” Like Sarah, “Claire” fails to gain the authority that male authorial figures possess in Fowles's fiction and world view.

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The existence of a feminine community provides the context within which Ourika succeeds in creating the kind of feminine identity that is largely denied to Sarah Woodruff in The French Lieutenant's Woman. Near the beginning of Duras's novel, Ourika recounts how she grew up in close physical and emotional contact with Mme. B.: “aimer, pour moi, c'était être là, l'entendre, lui obéir, la regarder surtout; je ne désirais rien de plus” (32). [“For me, “to love” meant to be there, to hear her talk, to obey her--above all to watch her. I wanted no more of life”] (18). It is not only Mme. B. herself, a widow, who provides the nurturing, woman-centered atmosphere in which Ourika thrives physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. That atmosphere derives more generally from the world of the French aristocracy in the eighteenth century which, as Joan Landes explains, was widely viewed as dominated by women: influential women in salons at the time triggered what was perceived to be an aristocratic feminization of the public sphere by feminized courtiers and powerful women (138). It is precisely within this feminized realm that Ourika develops the feminine identity highlighted in the novel's title.

Ourika's happiness in the initial feminine, mother-centered world she shares with Mme. B. is related to her decision to seek solace in the similar woman-centered haven of the convent near the end of her life. It may be helpful to think of Ourika's choice of a conventual life as a

return to a pre-Oedipal phase, marked by a blurring of the distinction between her and the maternal figure of Mme. B. Significantly, Chantal Bertrand-Jennings calls attention to the description of the convent garden as a “berceau”: a word signifying not only “arbour,” as Fowles translates it, but “cradle” as well (51-52). Bertrand-Jennings rightly interprets “cradle” as connoting an emotional and physical return to the comforting feminine refuge of Ourika’s childhood. In addition to the psychological comfort they provided, religious institutions also served the positive function of social refuge in the minds of Duras and other women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who wrote about slavery: Olympe de Gouges, Germaine de Staël, George Sand, Aphra Behn, and Harriet Beecher Stowe are a few well-known examples. For these women writers, injustice to blacks was one piece in the larger picture of issues that humanitarian and evangelical religious groups addressed. It seems clear from Fowles’s translation that he failed to appreciate this role that religion played for women writers of Duras’s time. Thus when the doctor attributes his initial concern that Ourika is a victim of the cloister system to “les préjugés de ma jeunesse” (28), Fowles intensifies that concern by translating the doctor’s comment as the “anticlerical prejudices of my early years” (14). Similarly he adds an anti-religious connotation to the vague malady or “malheur” that Ourika suffers from in the convent by translating the “genre de malheur que je lui supposais” (28) as “the kind of injustice I supposed her to have suffered” (14).

In addition to Ourika’s situation in the woman-centered worlds of the French aristocracy and the convent, Duras enhances the reader's sense of Ourika's feminine identity through her acknowledgment of the young woman's relation to her body. Early in the novel, Ourika is presented dancing la comba, an African dance, in a manner that suggests an awakening of her sexuality: “La danse d'ailleurs était piquante; elle se composait d'un mélange d'attitudes et de

pas mesurés; on y peignait l'amour, la douleur, le triomphe et le désespoir. Je ne connaissais encore aucun de ces mouvements violents de l'âme; mais je ne sais quel instinct me les faisait deviner" (34). ["But the dance was in any case something fresh and different. It consisted of stately steps broken by various poses, describing love, grief, triumph and despair. I was totally ignorant of such violent emotions, but some instinct taught me how to mimic their effects"] (20). Definitions of "piquant(e)," a key word that appears here and in the later discussion between Mme. B. and her friend regarding Ourika's marriage prospects, highlight such notions as "stimulating interest" and "engagingly provocative": notions that are far more feminine and sexual than the neutral and genderless "fresh and different" that Fowles's translation provides. Phrases in the descriptions of the dance such as "on y peignait l'amour" et "ces mouvements violents de l'âme" may be indirect, but they leave little doubt that Duras acknowledges that feminine sexuality is a distinct component of her African protagonist's identity. Moreover, she identifies that component from within Ourika's own experience and not primarily as a function of male desire.

Duras's novel not only acknowledges Ourika's sexuality and its denial in a patriarchal society in which feminine desire is stifled by the forces of race and gender. The novel also acknowledges the important relation between feminine desire and maternity. Having been made to understand that no man in a white, aristocratic society will fulfill her physical and emotional needs, she evokes the fulfillment that she would have obtained through children had she remained in Africa: "j'aurais un compagnon de ma vie, et des enfants de ma couleur, qui m'appelleraient: Ma mère! Ils appuieraient sans dégoût leur petite bouche sur mon front; ils reposeraient leur tête sur mon cou, et s'endormiraient dans mes bras!" (58) ["I should have . . . a partner in life, children of my own race who would call me their mother, who would kiss my face

without disgust, who would rest their heads against my neck and sleep in my arms”] (43). Duras evokes here the mother’s fulfilling sensual and maternal experience of hearing herself named and feeling the bodily contact of her children. Fowles diminishes both of these experiences, changing the children’s direct address (“Ma mère!”) to an indirect form (“children . . . who would call me their mother”), and rendering the children’s kiss (“appuieraient . . . leur petite bouche sur mon front”) less concrete and sensual (“would kiss my face”). He thus diminishes the maternal pleasure that modern feminists reclaim for women and that Julia Kristeva and others oppose to such subservient traditional social and religious roles as the relationship of mother to son under Christianity.⁸

Sarah Woodruff, in contrast, leads her life far removed from the woman-centered contexts of the eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century French salon and convent in which Ourika’s feminine identity is formed and sustained. Indeed, as the title of The French Lieutenant's Woman makes clear, Sarah’s existence is determined by male patriarchal figures and institutions, and thus she exists largely as an object defined in relation to masculine subjects rather than a subject in her own right. As Patricia Waugh rightly observes, “although she appears to be the carrier in the novel of existential meaning and the possibility of freedom, she functions predominantly as the romantic ideal object of Charles’s own quest for self-identity” (68). Along similar lines, Margaret Goscilo notes the importance of the ending in which Sarah appears as a model for the Pre-Raphaelite artist Gabriel Rossetti. Rather than achieving in this capacity the independence and emancipation that the novel opposes as an alternative to marriage to Charles, Goscilo argues, Sarah merely plays the same role that working-class models and lovers typically did in Rossetti’s circle, that is, the role of the passive female object inspiring or enabling a male act of artistic creation. This critic further observes that the frequent depiction of Sarah as being

asleep is very much in keeping with late nineteenth-century images that combined “nature, supineness, sleep and childlike vulnerability” and that served to fuel “the ultimate fantasy of passive, even helpless, female availability to male sexual dominance” (77).

In addition to Sarah’s role as object of male desire, it is significant to note that her sexuality consistently takes on the stereotypical racial connotations apparent in the Freudian notion of woman as the dark continent. Unlike the former slave Ourika, whose awakening sexuality is expressed in images of dance and motherhood, Sarah--whom Fowles sees as a slave of sorts in the British society of the time⁹--is consistently depicted as the sensual, lower-class, darker-skinned alternative to the virginal, upper-class, white Ernestine. Thus for example when Charles looks down at Sarah sleeping outside, he observes: “The skin below seemed very brown, almost ruddy, in that light, as if the girl cared more for health than a fashionably pale and languid-cheeked complexion” (FLW 62). Indeed, Fowles reveals in the Foreword to his translation of Ourika that the foremost feature of Duras’s heroine that affected his original conception of Sarah Woodruff was color: he explains that the seed of his creation came “in a half-waking dream and consisted of an image of a woman standing with her back to me. She was in black, and her stance had a disturbing mixture of both rejection and accusation” (Ourika 8). Later in the Epilogue, a similar conjunction of race and feminine sexuality recurs, in this case attributed to Duras herself: “I am certain one reason Claire was able to enter a black mind was that she saw in that situation a symbolic correlative of whatever in her own psychology and beliefs had always prevented her from entering into a full relationship with Chateaubriand” (Ourika 56-57). Despite his respect for Duras as a writer, Fowles still tends to think of her and her heroine largely in relation to romantic or sexual relationships with men.

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Duras and Fowles exemplify some of the ways in which feminine and masculine writing differs. Important features include the acquisition of an independent feminine voice, identity, and sexuality; freedom from male control of the self and the body; acknowledgment of the role of feminine institutions and practices--the salon, the convent, women's antislavery writing, etc. How should we interpret these differences? To my mind, it is not a question of blaming Fowles or thinking of the differences in terms of his particularly limited view of women or women's writing. On the contrary, as noted earlier, the fact that he chose to translate and write about Duras's work indicates an interest in women's issues, as does his treatment of the history of women's emancipation in The French Lieutenant's Woman. Fowles is a product of his time, as we all are; and his writing bears the mark of the inevitable ideological limitations of his class, his gender, and his period. The same can and should be said for Duras. As Maryse Condé has observed,

While we have to admire Mme de Duras for having openly risen to the defense of blacks at a time when some writers proclaimed that they had little more value than animals, we also have to underline the limitations of a narrowly Eurocentric outlook--which was shared by Schoelcher and other abolitionists. The negro had no virtues or personal value. He had to acquire them, that is, to die as himself in order to acquire the "universal civilization" defined by Europe. In reality, Ourika's interior beauty is a mutilation (26).

Just as Fowles can be accused of having "revoiced" Duras in certain ways, Duras can be similarly accused of having revoiced the young African woman who served as a model for Ourika and whose spoken and written words form a faint echo in the historical record of her

time.¹⁰ In both cases, Fowles's and Duras's, we must conclude that there is no clear or uncontaminated access to the other's voice, and that the best that critics as well as authors can do is to be attentive to the subtle ways in which that voice becomes stifled, misrepresented, or mistranslated over time.

NOTES

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1 . Fowles, Ourika 7. Subsequent references to Fowles’s translation containing his Foreword and Epilogue are indicated as Ourika; references to The French Lieutenant’s Woman are indicated as FLW.

2 . See for example Deborah Byrd, “The Evolution and Emancipation of Sarah Woodruff: The French Lieutenant’s Woman as a Feminist Novel,” International Journal of Women’s Studies 7. 4 (1984): 306-21.

3 . See for example Magali Cournier Michael, who writes of “the novel’s internal contradiction: it wants to assert the theme of feminism and yet fails as a feminist novel” (Michael 225).

4 . I wish to express my appreciation to Susan Crampton who assisted me in various aspects of the research and writing of this article.

5 . Following Gérard Genette, Susan Sniader Lanser distinguishes between voice (who speaks) and vision (who sees). She observes, “The persona who ‘sees’ the events of the story need not be the persona who speaks, because the narrator can cede to the perceptual sphere of a character without giving up phraseological control” (Lanser 37).

6. Duras, 28; Fowles, Ourika, 14. Subsequent page numbers following quotations in the text refer to these editions. In the French quotations, I have changed archaic spellings with -oi (françoise, connoître, écrivoit, etc.) to the modern spelling with -ai.

7. For a more detailed analysis of Fowles's translation, see Kadish and Massardier-Kenney 217-28.

8. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in The Kristeva Reader, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 160-86. Although the passage quoted above in which Ourika imagines holding her children in her arms may evoke the Madonna for some readers, I tend to read that passage in the more feminine and sexual way that Kristeva proposes.

9. Fowles quotes Marx's Das Kapital to highlight the extent to which women employees like Sarah had replaced domestic slaves under nineteenth-century capitalism (FLW 36).

10. Mme de Beauvau, the model for Mme B., states in her memoirs that upon the untimely death of the young Senegalese girl she had raised, a handwritten passage was found, bearing the words "my father and mother abandoned me, but the Lord took pity on me" (Kadish and Massardier Kenney 50).