

Sarah and Antislavery

Unique among the writings of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, the novella *Sarah*, first published as part of *Les Veillées des Antilles* in 1821, dwells at length on the topic of slavery. Its protagonists include Arsène, an African who has painfully endured the indignities of capture, transport, and sale; Silvain, an overseer who selfishly practices abusive methods of control; Mr. Primrose, an owner who irresponsibly ignores the conditions on his plantation; and Sarah and Edwin, children who painfully observe and try to respond to the injustices of colonial life. This is not to say that *Sarah* represents the only manifestation of Desbordes-Valmore's interest in slavery: the poem "La Veillée du nŕgre," which appears within the pages of *Sarah*, was also published on four other occasions; a copy of an advertisement for a runaway slave from a Charleston paper in 1827 appears in one of her handwritten albums; a story entitled "La Jambe de Damis" appeared in 1834 in *Le Livre des petits enfants*; and in 1845 a second version of *Sarah* was published as part of *Huit Femmes*.¹ Although these other works can supplement our understanding of Desbordes-Valmore's views on the topic of slavery, *Sarah* alone delves into that topic with a literary and political complexity that merits sustained critical analysis.

In this essay I want to argue that the drama of enslavement and liberation enacted in *Sarah* constitutes an instance of "antislavery" or "abolitionist" writing, terms I use interchangeably to refer to a spectrum of positions that were articulated with varying degrees of directness by writers in early nineteenth-century France. Prominent among those positions in the 1820s were calls for better treatment of blacks and arguments against the slave trade. This essay attempts to make the case for reading *Sarah* as an antislavery work on the basis of its historical context, its association with the literary genre of sentimental writing, its narrative and onomastic structures, and its critique of the patriarchal and paternalistic underpinnings of the system of slavery. I also take into account similarities between *Sarah* and "La Jambe de Damis," as well as some of the changes that were made in the second edition of *Sarah*. That edition was published, significantly, three years before the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1848, a period of increased abolitionist activity including calls for the immediate emancipation of slaves. It is thus not surprising that certain features of the second version will be seen to enhance the antislavery meaning of the text.

One telling argument in favor of associating *Sarah* with antislavery is the date of its initial publication in 1821, at the start of a decade in which negotiations with Haiti were initiated and France's recognition of Haiti's independence took place in 1825. 1821 also coincides with the founding of the philanthropic Société de la morale chrétienne, devoted to helping disfavored members of society: the poor, prisoners, Greeks, Africans, and others. *Sarah* echoes the Société's agenda of promoting better treatment of slaves and dramatizes the consequences of the illegal abduction of Africans. Although Desbordes-Valmore does not adopt the Société's direct, polemic tactics, her concern for the condition of blacks in *Sarah* is congruent with the attention that members of the Société and other enlightened thinkers and writers of her time were according to the issue of slavery. As Gabriel Debien observes, «depuis le retour des Bourbons . . . les publications se multiplient, de polémique d'abord, car ces problŕmes restent de feu, mais aussi paraissent de gros livres d'histoire, de souvenirs et de considérations gŕnŕrales.»² Desbordes-Valmore may not have had an explicit political intention in writing *Sarah*: indeed she only spoke out publicly on political issues on a few occasions, most notably in 1834 regarding the uprising of workers in Lyon. But, as Marc Bertrand cautions, she should not be called

apolitical.³ Bertrand reminds us that her background made her especially sensitive to issues of social inequality: «elle était née du côté du peuple ; si c'est au peuple que vont finalement les inclinations de Marceline, c'est que c'est en lui qu'elle voyait la détresse des bannis, des massacrés, et des pauvres; par sentiment et par expérience, elle était du clan des victimes.»⁴ One can imagine that, standing on the margins of society, she felt a strong affinity for the plight of the downtrodden, including blacks, and that in a period of social and political change she looked at blacks as models of a hybrid subjectivity that was not wholly different from her own.⁵

It is also relevant to consider that women figure prominently among the writers turning their attention to the subject of slavery in the 1820s. Those women include Claire de Duras, whose *Ourika* is widely read today, as well as others who are lesser known such as Sophie Doin.⁶ Like Desbordes-Valmore, these women link issues of love, marriage, and the family to the condition of blacks. They dwell positively on the maternal care and moral agency provided by black and white women, unlike male authors (Victor Hugo in *Bug Jargal* or Prosper Mérimée in *Tamango*, for example) who foreground the violence perpetrated by slaves, the destruction of white-owned property, or the rivalry between blacks and whites. Together they form a sub-group of white women whose concern with the condition of slaves mirrors that of an earlier generation of both French women writers—most notably Olympe de Gouges and Germaine de Staël—and British women abolitionists.⁷ As Christine Planté explains, writing about moral and social issues was acceptable for women at the time. Such writing deflected attention away from the act of writing itself and enabled women to exercise moral agency in ways that were not threatening to the hegemonic control that male writers possessed.⁸ Although often relegated to the status of minor literature, such writing made a difference at the time of its publication, especially with respect to racial problems in France's overseas possessions, about which the majority of the French public was only beginning to gain awareness:

Décrire l'état de l'opinion métropolitaine en 1822, c'est mettre avant tout l'accent sur un déséquilibre qui rend singulièrement malaisée la lutte contre la traite: d'un côté, la réaction franchement hostile de ceux dont la conscience s'accorde avec les intérêts, et qui lient leur prospérité à la survie du commerce négrier; chez tous les autres, la grande majorité de la nation, une indifférence que rien ne vient troubler; et l'on est si peu informé—ou si mal—que l'on reste encore sensible, à l'occasion, aux vieux thèmes esclavagistes.⁹

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To fully appreciate Desbordes-Valmore's literary approach to antislavery in *Sarah* it is necessary to recognize that the themes that emerge in this work—maternity, paternal authority, filial devotion, romantic love, family bonds—correspond to the thematics of the prevailing French narrative mode of sentimental writing, a mode that often included sympathy for blacks. The discourse of feeling encompasses narratives of misfortune that portray the humanity of suffering heroes and heroines. By propelling the formerly excluded to center stage, sentimental narratives celebrate the humanity of the excluded. Sentimentalism also foregrounds the importance of the voice of the heart and nature, illustrating how essential humanity transcends social hierarchies. By offering a popular audience unreceptive to Enlightenment discourse of reason and argument examples of suffering humanity to follow, it brings readers into the text. By inspiring pity for characters suffering from misfortune, it provides a model with which readers

can identify. Sentimental narratives foreground the misfortune that occurs when a villain causes harm to a member of the family and disrupts a previous state of happiness. They pit virtue against villainy; they oppose innocence and persecution; and they end with a leveling of social classes: “one of the structural requirements of the process of sentimentalization is a more or less explicit denial of the importance of social hierarchy. It is where social barriers are transgressed, when some kind of *déclassement* occurs, when a shift down the social ladder takes place, that true sentimental epiphany is provoked.”¹⁰

The characters in *Sarah* conform well to the model of the sentimental narrative. Arsène stands out as the quintessential member of the excluded class who is propelled to center stage and whose humanity is celebrated. He is the one who rescues Sarah, who sacrifices his freedom for hers, who serves as her substitute mother. His humanity transcends social hierarchies; he sets a virtuous example that readers are invited to follow. Although placed on the lowest rung of society, he ascends morally to its summit. Interestingly, through a number of small but revealing changes in Arsène’s presentation in the 1845 edition, his moral exemplarity takes on more overt antislavery meaning. When Arsène first appears at the Primrose plantation with Sarah, in the second version he bears «l’acte de son affranchissement» (39), whereas the 1821 edition indicates the less specific «gage de sa liberté» (10). He is less hopeful in the later edition, pausing at one point to «“respirer» (45) rather than to «“rAver» and to breathe «un soupir de regret et d’adieu» (46) rather than « un soupir de regret et d’espoir» (15).

In sharp contrast to Arsène, Silvain functions as a villain. Through his greed and resentment, he introduces misfortune into the peaceful world of the Primrose plantation. He causes harm to Edwin, whose love for Sarah he threatens, and to Mr. Primrose, whose fortune he appropriates. In the years preceding emancipation in 1848, more attention was being drawn to the cruelty of overseers who acted with impunity when employers such as Mr. Primrose abdicated their responsibility to supervise their properties. Not surprisingly, then, the 1845 edition depicts Silvain as even more harsh and frightening than he is in the 1821 version. For example, sentences that do not appear in 1821 were added in the later version that reinforce and clarify his evil nature and intentions: «On peut juger de l’affreux sourire que cette idée parvient à faire naître sur ses lèvres qui tremblent» (72-73); «Il croit soupirer, il rugit; il essaie de flatter son maître, quand il voudrait le déchirer dans son fils» (73). And whereas in 1821 Primrose is described as «insouciant sur sa fortune et ses propriétés» (13) for relying unduly on Silvain, the *Huit Femmes* edition calls him the victim of Silvain’s « intelligence mercenaire» (43).

In short, basic to the structure of the novel is the opposition between Arsène and Silvain: an opposition that pits black against white, good against evil, sacrifice against selfishness, African against colonial, devotion against ingratitude. Desbordes-Valmore’s use of such oppositions, grounded in the logic of the sentimental narrative, takes on a distinctively antislavery meaning which is present in 1821 and further accentuated in 1845. By attributing the positive moral and spiritual attributes traditionally reserved for whites to a black man, and by placing Africa above the degraded colonial world, Desbordes-Valmore uses the sentimental genre to give literary embodiment to abolitionist notions.

Further compelling textual evidence of the antislavery nature of *Sarah* can be found in the work’s complex narrative structure. It is in relation to that structure that the reader ultimately perceives the commonality between Sarah and Arsène and their shared capacity to achieve moral superiority. *Huit Femmes* opens with a prefatory section entitled “Mon Retour en Europe” (I, 1-9) in which an unnamed frame narrator recounts how her mother died in the Caribbean

islands, how she strove to return to Europe, and how she listened to (or, she suggests, she may just have imagined) stories told to her about natives of the colonies. One of them is the story of Sarah (II, 25-212). The frame narrator in “Mon Retour en Europe” describes herself in a way that points toward the “real” author. By thus providing personal information in literary form, Desbordes-Valmore deepens her connection with the story of slavery recounted in *Sarah* and renders it more poignant and compelling as a slave narrative. Both the frame narrator and the author were in the same place (Pointe-B-Pitre, Guadeloupe), at the same time (1802), under the same circumstances («après la révolte et mon deuil», I, 2). Sarah’s story is recounted by the frame narrator’s companion, a young girl named Eugénie, who inhabits the island of Saint-Barthélemy where the story is set. A multipartite narrative and authorial pattern is thus set in place. It reaches from the “real” author through the semi-autobiographical frame narrator to the fictional embedded narrator Eugénie. Inaugurating the novel with this series of young girls, Desbordes-Valmore places authority firmly in feminine hands, as opposed, for example, to *Ourika*, which in a more traditional way invests the authority in a male frame narrator, a male doctor. An especially important result of the multipartite narrative structure in *Sarah* is that it prepares the way for the reader to see the central character Sarah as an extension of the series of feminine figures in the frame.

Within the novel, another narrative participant emerges: the former slave, Arsène, serves as the narrator of his and Sarah’s past lives. The thematic bonds among the frame narrator, Sarah, and Arsène are strong. All three have lost their mothers, and that loss is the primary cause of the alienation and estrangement from which they suffer. Displaced geographically at a young age, the three are forced to adapt to life among strangers. Their stories place them on or near water: the frame narrator en route to Guadeloupe, Sarah on the boat that brings her to the Primrose plantation, Arsène transported from Africa. The result of these thematic bonds is again that meaning passes along the narrative chain; and, through association, all of the narrative participants are linked to each other and to Arsène’s condition as a former slave. Revealingly, the frame narrator compares herself to a black in describing her desire to flee the colonies immediately after her mother’s death: «j’aurais tenté ce qu’un petit nIgre de la maison voulait entreprendre pour me suivre: je me serais jetée B la mer, croyant, comme lui, trouver dans mes bras la force de nager jusqu’en France» (I, 4). In addition to such associations with slavery, antislavery positions are developed through and in some cases directly by Arsène. Reflections such as the following, assumed to derive from his status as an eye witness to the horrors of slavery, present the kind of testimony that abolitionists sought to provide to the public:

Ses souvenirs couraient dans sa mémoire; ils réveillaient en lui ce qui n'est jamais qu'endormi dans le coeur, l'amour d'une patrie, le besoin de la liberté. Du haut de la montagne, il plongeait ses regards dans l'île oø les Blancs s'enferment avec tant de soin pour éviter les rayons perçants du jour. Ses yeux erraient sur les bords de la mer, oø quelque nIgre, traînant un fardeau B l'ardeur du soleil paraissait y succomber comme lui, et comme lui, peut-Atre, envoyer B sa patrie absente un soupir de regret et d'adieu. Il plaignait l'esclave, tous les esclaves (45-46).

Emphasizing love of country, the need for freedom, and solidarity with other blacks through their common oppression are important elements in an African perspective on slavery. And associating that perspective with the viewpoints of the frame narrator and Sarah gives added weight and authority to the slave’s testimony, just as American slave narratives were typically endorsed and authorized by white sympathizers and sponsors.

Another strategy characteristic of slave narratives is what Henry Louis Gates has named “signifyin’,” a rhetorical pattern whereby “double-voiced texts . . . talk to other texts” and “tropes that have been memorized in an act of communication and its interpretation” are diverted to other, resistant uses.¹¹ I see similarities between this strategy and Desbordes-Valmore’s subversive use of names. Through names, the author of *Sarah* hints at a range of antislavery topoi and conveys subtle messages about the oppression of blacks in French colonial society. Consider for example the fact that, like slaves, both Arsène and Sarah have only first names. In the case of Arsène, who was once a real slave, that is understandable since slaves were stripped of their African names upon arrival in the colonies and were forbidden to bear the family name of their owners. But in Sarah’s case, the failure to identify the family name of her father is surprising and serves to emphasize the analogy between Sarah and Arsène. The thematic association of Sarah with slavery through her lack of a family name is reinforced in Arsène’s attribution of a symbolic slave status to her father: «Dès qu’il eut avoué qu’il la voulait pour femme et ne voulait qu’elle, son père le traita sans pitié, comme il traitait les nègres»; «Il eut, peu de jours après, la barbarie de faire conduire son fils sur un vaisseau destiné pour l’Europe, et le fit si bien garder jusque là qu’il ne semblait pas moins esclave que nous» (119, 121).

Other uses of names in *Sarah* function in a similarly surreptitious manner to convey subtle meanings about slavery. Sarah’s mother Narcisse also lacks a family name, symbolically placing her near the locus of slave identity while ironically signally, through a first name that is also the name of a white flower, that social status in the colonies was a function of class as well as race. As for the name of the story’s heroine, “Sarah” exists as a variant of “Sahara” at the time when Desbordes-Valmore was writing. In a series of poems entitled “Mila” by the Haitian writer Coriolan Ardouin, one reads « La vie est le Sarah, l’amour, c’est l’oasis.»¹² Sarah, the emblematic slave, is thus associated metonymically with the land of the Sahara, Africa, the place from which slaves originate. Another possible association is with the woman named the Hottentot Venus, Saartje Baartman, most often referred to as Sara. This woman was taken from Southern Africa, and then exhibited as a freak across Britain in the first decade of the nineteenth century before being taken to France in 1814 as the object of scientific and medical research on black female anatomy and sexuality.¹³ Although I can produce no evidence that Desbordes-Valmore knew about Sara Baartman, the name of the Hottentot Venus was widely recognized at the time when *Sarah* was written and could thus have been intended to reinforce the protagonist’s association with slavery and Africa. As for Sarah’s benefactor in the novel, Mr. Primrose, his name recalls the Mr. Primrose who is a protagonist in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, published in 1766. Desbordes-Valmore’s use of a British name in *Sarah* metonymically associates her character with Britain’s abolitionist attitudes toward blacks. Significantly, Primrose provides Sarah with the education that beneficent owners often gave to talented slaves on plantations. Like *Sarah*, Goldsmith’s novel, which also contains a character named Edwin, tells a tale of misplaced trust, resulting in the loss of the protagonist’s wealth and property; it too ends with the villain discovered and the family restored to financial health and happiness. And as a final onomastic observation, the contrast between Arsène and Silvain is underlined by the opposing associations of their names: Arsenius was a saint of Egyptian origin; Silvain connotes the forest and its fauna. Their opposition can be summed up in the symbolic meanings of their names: on one side, that which is good, spiritual, and African; on the other, the uncontrolled forces of nature, materiality, and bestiality in the colonies.

A further argument for *Sarah* as an antislavery work rests on its critique of both the

patriarchal and paternalistic underpinnings of the system of slavery. Patriarchy can be understood as an ancien régime mode of control built on “obedience, discipline, and severity.”¹⁴ Although in principle patriarchal rule carried with it obligations of protection and guardianship, in practice, especially in the context of the plantation economy, it led to egregious acts of injustice and abuse. The vulnerability of both women and slaves under patriarchy is illustrated in *Sarah* through the figure of Sarah’s paternal grandfather. Although we learn little directly about abusive acts he performed toward his slaves, we can surmise how he dealt with them from his heartless treatment of his own son. Desbordes-Valmore chooses, significantly, to recount the sad story of Sarah’s father and his beloved Narcisse from the perspective of Arsène, a slave on the grandfather’s property until Sarah’s father frees him from bondage. By recounting the tragic consequences of patriarchal tyranny from a slave’s viewpoint, Desbordes-Valmore reveals both her antislavery sentiments and her general political outlook. Marc Bertrand finds it amazing that «une toute jeune fille ait eu si nettement . . . la vision historique exacte des sources d’une colonisation»; and he explains this vision of colonialism by observing that «elle s’est . . . constamment méfiée des ‘rois’, qu’il faille entendre par là les souverains au sens strict, ou, plus figurativement, le pouvoir absolu, la tyrannie avec son cortège répressif».¹⁵

In addition to her critique of patriarchy in a colonial context, Desbordes-Valmore calls attention to the problems surrounding paternalism. According to Philip D. Morgan, paternalism grows out of patriarchy but is a gentler ethos based on the sentimentalism that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He sees in the shift to paternalism connections with the development of a more affectionate family life, the growth of romanticism, and the increase of humanitarianism.¹⁶ That Desbordes-Valmore attributes the newer paternalistic outlook to Mr. Primrose, an Englishman, is not surprising since England served as a model for French liberals at the time on numerous literary and political fronts, including antislavery. When Arsène arrives with Sarah and offers to surrender his freedom to secure her safety and future happiness, Mr. Primrose responds in a characteristically paternalistic way that not only shows respect for Arsène’s status as a freedman but extends that respect to all blacks on his plantation: «Sois au nombre de mes serviteurs; je ne les appelle pas mes esclaves; j’ai besoin d’en Atré aimé» (40). His devotion to his son parallels the concern that he professes for his workers; and the enduring love he feels for his deceased wife Jenny illustrates his capacity for profound sentimental attachment.

Foremost among the points that *Sarah* seems to want to convey regarding slavery concerns the right and wrong practices of paternalism. The drama surrounding Sarah’s fate stems from the conflict within Mr. Primrose between the forces of paternalism, which correspond to his true nature, and those of patriarchy, which he feels bound by tradition to obey. Aimée Boutin observes that Sarah is reduced to the status of a non-person, not only in the eyes of Silvain but in the eyes of Mr. Primrose as well, owing both of them “une obéissance aveugle qui fait affront à son humanité et à son individualité.”¹⁷ Mr. Primrose also errs by allowing Silvain to usurp his paternal role, thereby abrogating the responsibilities that form the foundation of plantocratic societies. He thus joins the ranks of the numerous plantation owners in the colonies, most notably absentee proprietors, who failed to administer their land holdings and watch over the well-being of their black workers. Other planters professed enlightened views but failed to reconcile those views with the harsh reality of plantation life.¹⁸

That the need for responsible paternalism illustrated in *Sarah* mattered to Desbordes-Valmore is apparent in her short story *La Jambe de Damis*, which appeared in the 1834 edition

Le Livre des petits enfants.¹⁹ In that story, a spoiled white child demands capriciously to throw Damis, a little slave boy, out the window. His mother, like Mr. Primrose, declines to exercise the necessary parental authority: “Jetez, ami, dit la mΠre indolente en le regardant faire” (71). However, his father intervenes and subjects his son to the same treatment as the slave: «‘Va panser ton esclave!’ dit ce singulier philanthrope, en le lançant par le mΛme chemin» (71). The contrite child is saved from becoming a tyrant by his father, who emancipates the slave and sends the two children to receive an equal education in France. The end of the story affirms the author’s faith in the paternal exercise of authority and benevolence: «Damis, guéri et grandi, s’appela un jour le Sauveur des blancs. Le jeune planteur, préservé de l’influence fatale d’une mΠre trop faible et d’un pΠre trop violent, fut depuis estimé sous le nom d’un philanthrope que nous n’osons signaler ici . . .» (72). Paternalistic authority here coincides with the principles that antislavery advocates promoted: compassion, the just exercise of authority, education, belief in the future happiness of both blacks and whites.

In the person of Sarah’s father, Desbordes-Valmore provides a more developed illustration of the same kind of benevolent colonial model that Damis’s father represents. I would call this model “maternalistic,” not in the sense that Claire Midgely gives to this term in a British context, meaning benevolent white women who complacently offer help to powerless, victimized blacks, but in the sense of combining a “maternal” ethic of caring with paternal authority.²⁰ That maternal ethic stands against what HélΠne Cixous describes as the masculine ethic of the “propre,” which forms the conceptual common ground of both propriety and property: «tout ce qui assure la société et ses propriétés, tout ce qui la fonde, lois et codes. Toute son économie politique, en fait, comme toute son économie psychique tient aux conventions qui doivent distinguer le tien du mien, le moi du non-moi, le vrai du faux, le propre du non-propre.»²¹

Desbordes-Valmore rejects the “propre,” relegating the patriarchal notions of possession that underlie possessing slaves to the villain, Silvain. In contrast ArsΠne functions as Sarah’s substitute mother, embodying a feminine ethic of caring which ultimately prevails over Silvain’s masculine ethic of proprietariness. Similarly Sarah’s father has no desire to possess either land or the labor that is needed to farm it in the colonies. His gift of his property to his daughter is not what Cixous calls the masculinist gift of reciprocity which is associated with debt, with paying back for a gift. Instead, it is a feminist one of generosity, confidence, love, and commitment.²² The fact that Sarah’s father lacks a “proper” name takes on additional symbolic meaning in this context. As Boutin explains, Desbordes-Valmore rejected “the permanence of the proper name, as well as the inheritance, even the unified identity, it promised.” In a stanza of a poem often considered to be her intended epitaph, to indicate how little she values her name, and the fame that attaches to it, she expresses the wish to give it to a pauper, “a ‘disinherited’ individual like herself.”²³ It is true that at the end of the novel Sarah will marry Edwin, whose father bears a “proper name.” But it is also a name that has been stripped of the “property” that formerly legitimized its privilege. It is with the inheritance of her nameless father, who has disavowed his own lineage and privileged social status, and with the nurturing that the slave “mother” ArsΠne has provided, that Sarah and Edwin face their future as members of a new benevolent and just colonial class.

In relation to other feminine-authored texts of Desbordes-Valmore’s time, *Sarah* represents a progressive, if not overtly abolitionist, text. Consider, as points of comparison, the short story “Noire et blanc,” by Sophie Doin and *Ourika* by Claire de Duras. Like *Sarah*, “Noire et blanc” depicts a girl who lives through the revolutionary uprisings in the French colonies, is

educated by a benevolent white man, and is the subject of class and race prejudice. *Ourika* also resembles Desbordes-Valmore's story in presenting a protagonist who is orphaned and abandoned, educated by a wealthy person whose male descendant she loves, and subject to feelings of isolation, exile, and rejection. The three works—*Sarah*, “Noire et blanc,” and *Ourika*—dwell on the competing forces of paternalism and patriarchy, with kindly whites being forced to reconcile their benevolent impulses with the harsh realities of patriarchal social conventions. Doin stands as the most overtly antislavery of the three writers, advocating intermarriage among blacks and whites, as did the celebrated French abolitionist Henri Grégoire.²⁴ Duras, who lived and wrote in the context of the aristocratic salon, represents a more conservative position, specifically ruling out the mixing of the races. But Doin never calls paternalism into question in her writings, as Desbordes-Valmore does; and Duras ultimately shows the difficulty if not impossibility of escaping the patriarchal status quo, a defeatist position that the author of *Sarah* eschews. What is perhaps most significant about Desbordes-Valmore's approach to slavery is her awareness of the interrelated aspects of race, class, and gender. Although she may not have advocated the most advanced abolitionist positions available at the time, she called into question the privilege on which all practices of oppression—against persons of color, against the lower classes, and against women—were and continue to be based.

French antislavery writers can be placed on a spectrum which an analysis of *Sarah* helps to explore. Too often in recent years Duras's *Ourika* or Victor Hugo's *Bug Jargal* have been assumed to be the only or most representative depictions of blacks from the first half of the nineteenth century. Among the many others that exist, *Sarah* merits special consideration, as the salient antislavery features examined above show. They include the reversal of the standard sentimental model of pitting virtue against villainy by promoting a slave to the position normally occupied by a white; the use of a frame narration that links white and black perspectives on slavery; the rhetorical practice of naming characters to convey subtle messages about practices of oppression; and the vision of an alternative to paternalism that would ensure the well-being of blacks and women. Although in the nineteenth century Marceline Desbordes-Valmore did not figure among the ranks of active or avowed abolitionists, it is important that we today recognize the fascinating panoply of subtle literary means she used to argue the antislavery cause.

NOTES

1. Aimée Boutin, “Présentation,” *Les Veillées des Antilles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), x, xviii-xx; Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Contes*, ed. Marc Bertrand (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989), 71-72; *Huit Femmes*, II (Paris: Chendrowski, 1845). Unless otherwise indicated, references to *Sarah* in this essay are to volume II of this 1845 edition. (Another edition, which contains minor modifications of the original text, was edited Marc Bertrand and published by Droz in 1999). Those references that are indicated as pertaining to the 1821 version are to

volume II of *Les Veillées des Antilles*, II (Paris: Chez François Louis, 1821).

2. Gabriel Debien, “Un Roman colonial de Victor Hugo: *Bug Jargal*, ses sources et ses intentions historiques,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*,” 52, 3 (1952), 300.

3. Bertrand, *Une Femme B l’écoute de son temps: Marceline Desbordes-Valmore* (Lyon: La Cicogne, 1997), 6.

4. Bertrand, *Les Oeuvres poétiques de Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*, I (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble), 8.

5. For more on the author see the Introduction to *Sarah* in the MLA Texts and Translation Series by Deborah Jenson and Doris Y. Kadish. Parts of the literary analysis provided in this essay appear in that Introduction as well.

6. Claire de Duras, *Ourika* (NY: MLA, 1994); Sophie Doin, *La Famille noire suivie de trois Nouvelles blanches et noires*, Présentation et étude de Doris Y. Kadish (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002). Other women from the 1820s who wrote about blacks include Charlotte Dard, M.-A. Dudon, Delphine Gay, and Aurore Cloteaux.

7. See Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, eds., *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women’s Writing, 1783-1823* (Kent: Kent State UP, 1994); Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (NY: Routledge, 1992) and Claire Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London: Routledge, 1992).

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8. Christine Planté, *La Petite Soeur de Balzac* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 175, 182.
9. Yvan Debbasch, “Poésie et traite: l’opinion française sur le commerce négrier au début du XIX^e siècle”, *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, 48 (1961), 312-313.
10. David J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 2-16, 72-81, 90-96.
11. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (NY: Oxford UP, 1988), xxv, 84.
12. Coriolan Ardouin, *Poésies* (Port-au-Prince: Ethéart, 1881), 74.
13. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).
14. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 258-59.
15. Bertrand, *Une Femme Bl’écoute de son temps*), 101, 114. Boutin also notes that “an antipatriarchal spirit was appealing in an historical period inaugurated by parricide and repeatedly faced with the prospect of failed fatherhood”: *Maternal Echoes: The Poetry of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Alphonse de Lamartine* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 14.
16. Morgan, 259.

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17. Boutin, "Présentation," *Les Veillées des Antilles*, xxx.
18. A critique of the disparity between word and deed among plantation owners at the time is provided in Charles Rémusat's 1825 play *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1977).
19. I am grateful to Christine Planté and Aimée Boutin for calling my attention to this short story.
20. Midgely, 102; Boutin, *Maternal Echoes*, 80.
21. Hélène Cixous, *Prénoms de personne* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 53.
22. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?", *Signs* 7, 1 (1981), 48, 50.
23. Boutin, *Maternal Echoes*, 90-92.
24. Henri Grégoire, *Considérations sur le mariage et sur le divorce, adressées aux citoyens d'Haiti* (1823).