

Claire de Duras

Adapted from Translating Slavery: Gender & Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823

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To look at the example of Claire de Duras is to discover many of the same mediating patterns observed in the lives and works of Gouges and Staël, including translation, as will be seen later in chapter 9. She too was a moderate who upheld the monarchist, Girondin politics, for which, like Gouges, her father the Admiral de Kersaint went to the guillotine. At the same time, her life reveals many of the same kinds of contradictions found in the lives of Staël and her contemporaries: she derived her personal fortune from her mother's properties in Martinique, where Duras lived for several years and where her mother died following Kersaint's execution in 1793; Duras subsequently married a leading member of the right while continuing to adhere largely to her father's liberal politics. Similar contradictions mark Duras's literary works, although in the balance those works display largely liberal attitudes to race, gender, and class. To our eyes today *Ourika* may seem far from openly emancipationist and may, indeed, at times seem highly conservative, even reactionary, with respect to slavery--for example in the black heroine's unqualified denunciation of the revolt in Santo Domingo. Within its historical context, however, it needs to be seen as a work that sought to mediate between extreme positions on the left and right. That it was not viewed as conservative or reactionary in its time is evidenced by the fact that Duras was excoriated by the colonists, as Gouges had been in her efforts at mediation several decades earlier. *Ourika* was received very negatively in Martinique where, according to a French naval officer,

the colonists see every newly arrived Frenchman as a negrophile, and the clever and generous author of *Ourika* is constantly accused of having succeeded in her detestable novel in making readers interested in a negress, who does not even have the advantage of being a creole negress.¹

Such a strongly negative statement helps us to understand the historical context in which Duras attempted to mediate between proslavery and antislavery sentiments.

Duras fulfilled a further mediating function by serving as a focal point of moderate, liberal politics. Like Staël, whom she knew and admired, Duras respected and maintained the principles of her father, Kersaint, who resembled Staël's father Necker in actively promoting political reforms, denouncing social privileges, and supporting emancipatory, egalitarian principles. Duras also followed Staël's example in other ways. One was in attempting to mediate between French attitudes and the political and cultural attitudes of various other nationalities, especially the English, whom she knew well from having lived in London during the emigration. Another was in exerting her mediating influence from within the sphere of the salon, which served as an especially active center of political, social, and cultural activity during the 1820s. As G. Pailhès explains, her salon, the most influential and prestigious during the Restoration, was frequented by writers, artists, intellectuals, diplomats, nobles, and persons of all political positions.

It was the meeting point where the old and the new France met and learned to know one another. . . . The nobility learned how to be more open there, to follow the lady of the house who, always faithful to the liberal traditions she inherited from her father as well as to the dogmas of the hereditary monarchy, set the example of how to be more conscious of the new times. . . . The duchesse of Duras's salon was naturally monarchist, but with strongly marked nuances of English constitutionalism and French liberalism. Thanks to the generous and highly literary mind of the woman who constituted its very soul, it formed a kind of neutral territory in many ways where great inequalities of fortune and opinion, of ranks and highly diverse talents, were brought together.²

Indeed, *Ourika* was conceived, circulated, and first exerted its mediating effect within the salon.

The chief arena for Duras's mediating activities was literature, however; and her most ambitious attempt at mediation was trying to bridge the gap between white and black in *Ourika*, which will be translated and discussed in detail in chapter 10. For now it will suffice to call attention to a number of features of this work that are especially helpful for placing it in an historical context. One is the strong and reciprocal feelings between *Ourika* and her benefactress, Mme de B. Rather than pitting white against black, Duras highlights the shared experiences between the two women and their concern for one another's welfare, a concern that goes counter to a number of the unfavorable practices and racial stereotypes of Duras's time. Servanne Woodward observes that Africans like *Ourika* were commonly acquired by aristocrats as "pets" and signs of prestige but were later unfeelingly placed in domestic service by their former benefactors.³ It is perhaps against the backdrop of this practice that Duras chose to highlight Mme de B.'s enlightened and humanitarian behavior. It is also relevant in this context to highlight *Ourika*'s feelings toward Mme de B. as going counter to a common stereotype of the time whereby former slaves were unreliable, ungrateful, and potentially dangerous. That stereotype was rooted in the notoriety surrounding Zamor, the "pet" belonging to Mme du Barry, the mistress of Louis XV. (Gouges's choice of Zamor as the name of her black hero may well have derived from this historical figure). At the time of the Terror, Zamor denounced his former benefactress, and his denunciation led to her execution in 1793. He is reported to have said that "if the beautiful countess took him in and raised him, it was to make a toy out of him; she allowed him to be humiliated in her home, where he was incessantly subject to mockery and insults."⁴ It is perhaps to counter the widely held racial stereotype occasioned by Zamor's behavior that Duras chose to emphasize *Ourika*'s gratitude toward and understanding for Mme de B.

Another feature of *Ourika* that helps to place it in an historical context is Duras's sympathetic treatment of an African woman, which marks her novel as distinctly different from such other works about blacks by male authors published in the 1820s as Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* and Mérimée's *Tamango*. Whereas those works dwell consistently on stereotypically negative racial traits--violence, unrestrained or menacing sexuality, drunkenness, incompetence, willingness to sell each other into slavery--Duras's novel probes the mind and the feelings of its black heroine. Ferguson has recorded the example set by a woman writer as early as the middle of the seventeenth century of giving a voice to a black woman by projecting her reality through a white woman's text⁵; and it is this significant example of narrative and cultural mediation that Duras follows in *Ourika*. In doing so she continues but also goes beyond Gouges's and Staël's treatment

of African heroines. Their African women are more abstractly idealized constructions than Ourika, inspired by an actual Senegalese girl who was raised in the lofty aristocratic home of the Maréchale de Beauvau. (Historical records even provide a trace of Ourika's own voice: Mme de Beauvau states in her memoirs that at the time of the girl's death a handwritten passage was found, bearing the words "my father and mother abandonned me, but the Lord took pity on me."⁶) By focusing on Ourika's voice and her intellectual accomplishments, Duras uses the novel to make much the same argument in the realm of fiction about the intelligence of black individuals that Grégoire made in essay form and that Wheatley made through poetry and personal testimony. And although, admittedly, Ourika is like other literary works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which are, as Ferguson emphasizes, deeply embedded in Africanist discourse and values,⁷ they constitute noteworthy activities by women writers that deserve to be acknowledged as part of the historical and literary record of abolitionism.

¹ Claudine Hermann, "Introduction," in Claire de Duras, Ourika (Paris: Editions de Femmes, 1979), 21.

² G. Pailhès, La Duchesse de Duras et Chateaubriand (Paris: Perin, 1910), 389, 405.

³ Servanne Woodward, "Definitions of Humanity for Young Ladies by Mme Le Prince de Beaumont: 'Beauty and the Beast,'" Romance Languages Annual (Spring 1993).

⁴ G. Lenôte, Paris révolutionnaire, vieilles maisons, vieux papiers (Paris: Perrin, 1900), 220.

⁵ Moira Ferguson, Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 81.

⁶ M. de Lescure, "Notice," in Claire de Duras, Ourika (Paris: Jouaust, 1878), xix.

⁷ Moira Ferguson, Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 82.