
H-France Review Vol. 13 (December 2013), No. 192

Doris Y. Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves. Women Writers and French Colonial Slavery*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012. 196 pp. \$89.96 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1846318467.

Review by Madeleine Dobie, Columbia University.

Doris Y. Kadish's book examines French women's writing on colonial slavery in the early nineteenth century, a period marked by the turbulent aftermath of the French and Haitian revolutions, the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by the Congress of Vienna, and the collapse and resurgence of the French abolitionist movement. It builds on Kadish's earlier co-edited volume, *Translating Slavery: Gender and Slavery in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823* (1994, 2009) and on her more recent editions of nineteenth-century French narratives bearing on colonial slavery: Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah* (with Deborah Jenson) (2008); Charles de Rémusat's *Saint-Domingue Plantation* (with Norman R. Shapiro) (2008); Charlotte Dard's *La Chaumière africaine* (2005) and Sophie Doin's *La Famille noire suivie de trois Nouvelles blanches et noires* (2002).^[1] Collectively, these publications represent an important contribution to research on the history and literature of race and slavery, the interconnections of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and the emergence of transcontinental francophone culture.

Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves examines the lives and work of five women who wrote about slavery in genres including fiction, poetry, political essays, travel narratives and memoirs. Three of them (Germaine de Staël, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Claire de Duras) are well known literary figures, or at least writers whose work has become widely known as a result of the "canon revision" undertaken by feminist scholars. The other two (Charlotte Dard and Sophie Doin) are more obscure. Each had some kind of personal connection to the colonial world. Dard, Doin and Desbordes-Valmore's stories in particular capture what Linda Colley has called the 'underbelly of empire': the hardships and traumas experienced by settlers from the lower social orders.^[2] Dard, for example, was a survivor of the notorious wreck of the *Medusa*, which ran aground off the coast of West Africa in 1816 while transporting people and goods for the recolonization of Senegal (the colony was seized by the British in 1809 but returned to France in 1815). She ultimately spent several years in West Africa, where she put in strenuous physical labor on a cotton plantation and later became a teacher. At sixteen the poet Marceline Desbordes-Valmore spent a short and traumatic few months in Guadeloupe, where she traveled with her mother, an actress who hoped to find work in the colonial theater. They arrived in 1802 in the midst of both a slave uprising and a yellow fever epidemic to which her mother quickly succumbed, leaving her to return across the Atlantic alone. Later, Desbordes-Valmore translated her Caribbean experience into literature. She wrote "Creole" poems, imitating songs she had heard during her travels. Claire de Duras, the liberal aristocrat and influential salonnière who wrote the powerful novella *Ourika* (1823), also traveled to the Americas as a young woman. In the wake of her father's execution during the Terror, she accompanied her mother to Philadelphia. The two women reconnected with her mother's Saint-Domingue family and reclaimed a portion of their colonial inheritance.

These various stories make for fascinating reading and illustrate the value of integrated approaches to colonial, metropolitan, and literary history. Kadish performs a valuable task in bringing them to light and inviting further reflection on French women's involvement with empire and slavery. She also deserves credit for bringing early nineteenth-century French women's writing about slavery and race

into dialogue with the perspectives of colonized writers. Adopting Edward Said's principle of "contrapuntal reading," she reads Staël's *Caractère de M. Necker* alongside the *Mémoires d'Isaac Louverture, fils de Toussaint*, two works of filial piety in which hostility to Napoleon is an important thread.^[3] She considers how contemporary writers from the Caribbean, e.g. Daniel Maximin and Maryse Condé, have responded to texts such as *Ourika*.^[4] As these paired readings illustrate, colonial slavery created the conditions for a decentered and creolized francophone literary tradition that flourishes today.

But while there is much of interest in this book, there are also some significant weaknesses. These include an overall lack of historical and intellectual contextualization—works are read individually, without much attention to the ways in which they express or depart from wider cultural and political currents—and inadequate conceptualization of the project's feminist approach.

As the book's title suggests, Kadish foregrounds the role of father-daughter relations in shaping nineteenth-century French women writers' response to slavery. Several of her subjects were extremely close to their fathers and wished either to emulate their political example, including their antislavery leanings, or to defend them against criticisms and accusations. At the same time they rejected what they saw as illegitimate patriarchal authority, including, in some instances, the power exercised by colonial officials. As gender theory and psychoanalysis have shown, it is important to consider how social/political issues are entwined with personal and family dynamics. Nonetheless, this form of interpretation also calls for caution. There is, for one thing, a well-known tendency to focus more on personal factors when considering female writers and historical figures. Could we imagine a parallel study on how abolitionist men felt about fathers (or for that matter mothers)? Since the focus on paternal influence goes, at least on the surface of things, against the grain of a feminist approach, one might anticipate a robust defense of this methodology. Instead, Kadish invests in the opposition between "good" and "bad" fathers—antislavery fathers who should be emulated (as Staël perceived her father, Necker) and authoritarian figures whose power and influence should be overturned (Staël's view of Napoleon). This polarity, however, overlooks essential issues such as the limitations of benevolent paternalism as a framework for opposition to slavery.

A second problem lies in the presumption of congruence between the experience of women subordinated to paternal authority and the lives of people enslaved in French colonies. In her previous book, *Translating Slavery*, Kadish and her co-authors argued that women writers were more sensitive to the plight of slaves and more open to human diversity than their male counterparts because they had themselves experienced marginalization and oppression. This claim is called into question by Christopher L. Miller, who argued in his 2007 book, *French Atlantic Triangle*, that French women did not write earlier or more about slavery than male authors and that the work of Staël and other female antislavery writers manifested the same Europeanizing and assimilationist tendencies as that of men.^[5] Though a short response to Miller is included in the 2009 re-edition of *Translating Slavery*, Kadish does not comment further on this issue in *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves*. This is surprising given that in this study she argues not only that women felt empathy for slaves but also that they experienced similar forms of domination. She states at one point, for example, that "The life of Marceline Desbordes Valmore provides a striking instance of the congruence of fathers, daughters and slaves" (p. 80). At another she comments (perhaps more ambiguously) that "It says something about the condition of women that it has been so easy for critics to put an aristocratic woman such as Duras in the place of the slave!" (p. 107).

Kadish states in the book's Introduction that the texts she examines "remind us of the imperative for ever-renewed gender and feminist research in the colonial archive" (p. 1). It is clearly important to consider how gender impacts both historical situations and scholarly practices. But it is also necessary to reflect critically on the deployment of gender. Scholars including Jennifer L. Morgan have argued that gender is not always a useful category of analysis to apply to slavery.^[6] In company with scholars in many other fields, she points to Liberal feminism's propensity to approach gender as a stable and

uniform category, thereby erasing differences of class, culture, religion and racial identity. This tendency is unfortunately much in evidence in *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves*. In the chapter on Claire de Duras, for example, Kadish explains that she wants to show “what we can learn from listening to the voices of women and blacks, while also measuring the significant extent to which patriarchal authority remains intact in Duras’s world” (p. 104). Should the voices of “blacks” and “women” automatically be placed on the same footing (assuming, contra Spivak, that the voices of enslaved subalterns can in fact be heard)?^[7] Did French women across various social classes share the same concerns with regard to patriarchal authority as slaves? Though the issue of marriage and slavery is certainly a legitimate topic of historical research, I feel uncomfortable with Kadish’s claim that Duras’s protagonist Ourika escapes the fate of patriarchal marriage that was forced upon French women (p. 116). Since Ourika dies feeling unloved and unlovable, believing that her black skin makes marriage and a family impossible, it seems hard to view her as an embodiment of feminist escape from matrimony.

Although several of the core concepts deployed in *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves*, including “sentimentality” and “empathy,” have been subject to intense scrutiny, the difficulties associated with them are not accorded much attention. Kadish follows Naomi Schor and Margaret Cohen in arguing for a reevaluation of “sentimental” writing, which, since the mid nineteenth century, has been widely associated with women writers and largely dismissed as aesthetically insignificant.^[8] Acknowledging the gender politics of literary history does not, however, evacuate questions about the use of the sentimental register in representations of slavery. In fact, both men and women used sentimental narrative to draw attention to the plight of the slave. It was typically imbued with a paternalistic outlook that emphasized the benevolence of white Europeans while neglecting the capacity for agency of slaves themselves. We hear echoes of this attitude near the end of Kadish’s book, when she observes that a portrait of Staël standing next to a bust of Necker conveys “The message of sentimentalism, benevolence, and empathy that this book has sought to illustrate: she is a mother and defender of those below her including slaves. Above all, she is a daughter” (p. 159). Several scholars have argued that sentimental antislavery writing should not be read on its own terms. Jonathan Lamb, for example, proposes that sentimentality and poignancy operated less as contestations of the injustice of slavery than as justifications of the sentimental slave owner and the affective bond between owner and chattel.^[9] In my own work on sentimentalism and slavery, I argue that sentimental depictions of slaves, whether authored by men or by women, were consistently interwoven with a Liberal economic outlook that condemned slavery while promoting renewed colonial expansion in Africa, a vision is exemplified by Staël’s short story, *Mirza* (published in 1795 but written before the Revolution).^[10]

Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves explores a fascinating corpus of texts that straddle French and colonial history. It contains many wonderfully narrated passages that convey Kadish’s commitment to telling the story of empire “from below,” that is, from the point of view of female actors and witnesses who were on many levels obscure and vulnerable. But it would have benefitted from greater analytical and historical precision and from an effort to engage with current scholarship on feminism and social and cultural difference.

NOTES

[1] Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney eds., *Translating Slavery: Gender and Slavery in French Women’s Writing, 1783-1823* (Kent, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1994, 2009), Sophie Doin, *La Famille noire, suivie de trois Nouvelles blanches et noire*, ed. Doris Kadish (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002); Charlotte Dard, *La Chaumière africaine*, ed. Doris Kadish (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005); Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Sarah*, eds. Doris Y. Kadish and Deborah Jenson (New York: Modern Language Association, 2008); Charles de Rémusat, *Saint-Domingue Plantation, or, The Insurrection*, eds. Doris Y. Kadish and Norman R. Shapiro (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

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- [2] Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002).
- [3] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).
- [4] See Maryse Condé, *La Parole des femmes* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1979) and the same author's *La migration des cœurs* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1995); and Daniel Maximin, *L'Isolé soleil* (Paris : Seuil, 1981).
- [5] Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- [6] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
- [7] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
- [8] Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- [9] Jonathan Lamb, "Modern Metamorphoses and Disgraceful Tales," *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (2001), 133-166.
- [10] Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

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ISSN 1553-9172