2010

Translating Slavery, Volume 2: Ourika and Its Progeny

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Translating Slavery

Volume II

Ourika and Its Progeny

Edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney

The Kent State University Press
kent, ohio
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Preface

Doris Y. Kadish

We are publishing this second volume of the revised edition of *Translating Slavery* in response to requests received over the years for paperback editions that would be accessible to students and teachers in the fields of translation and French slavery studies. Because of the proliferation of works devoted to *Ourika* since 1994, we believe that it merits its own volume. In addition to containing the *Ourika* materials originally provided in 1994 (the original text in French, the translation, and two essays), we have added a number of related poetic, theatrical, narrative, and critical works that shed light on the meaning that *Ourika* had in the nineteenth century. In addition, the bibliography reflects some of the most notable developments in studies of Duras over the past fifteen years.

The writing of Claire de Duras follows many of the same mediating patterns observed in the lives, works, and translations of such writers as Olympe de Gouges and Germaine de Staël discussed in the first volume of the revised edition of *Translating Slavery*. Duras too was a moderate who upheld the Girondin politics for which her father, the Admiral de Kersaint, like Gouges’, went to the guillotine. At the same time, her life reveals many of the same kinds of complexities found in the lives of Staël and her contemporaries: she derived her personal fortune from her mother’s properties in Martinique and thus undoubtedly also from the plantocratic system of slave labor. Duras subsequently married a leading member of the conservative Restoration government while continuing to adhere largely to her father’s liberal politics. Similar contradictions mark Duras’ literary works, although in the balance those works display largely liberal attitudes concerning race, gender, and class. To our eyes today *Ourika* may seem far from openly emancipationist and may,
indeed, at times seem highly conservative with respect to slavery. Within its historical context, however, Ourika needs to be seen as a work that sought to mediate between opposing political positions. 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” (quoted in Hermann 21). Such a strongly negative statement helps us understand the historical context in which Duras attempted to bridge the gap between proslavery and antislavery sentiments.

Duras served a further mediating function by acting 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 reconcile 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 Gabriel 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 de Duras’ 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 in many ways a kind of neutral
Indeed, *Ourika* was conceived and circulated and first exercised its influence within the salon.

The chief arena for Duras’ progressive activities was literature, however, and *Ourika* is her most ambitious attempt to bridge the gap between Europe and Africa, between white and black. A number of features of this work are especially helpful for placing it in a 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’ time. Blacks 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. 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 in highlighting Ourika’s feelings toward Mme de B. as going counter to a common stereotype of the time, whereby blacks 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’ 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” (Lenôtre 220). It is perhaps to counter the widely held racial stereotype occasioned by Zamor’s behavior that Duras chose to emphasize Ourika’s gratitude and understanding for Mme de B.

Another feature of *Ourika* is Duras’ sympathetic treatment of an African woman, which marks her novel as strikingly different from such works about blacks by male authors, which were published in the 1820s as Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal* and Mérimée’s *Tamango*.² Whereas those works dwell on stereotypically negative racial traits—violence, unrestrained or menacing sexuality, drunkenness, incompetence, willingness to sell each other into slavery—Duras’...
novel probes the mind and the feelings of its black heroine. Moira 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 text (81), 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’ and Staël’s treatment of African heroines. Their African women are more abstractly idealized constructions than Ourika, who was inspired by an actual Senegalese girl 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 abandoned me, but the Lord took pity on me” [see Lescure xix].) 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 Phillis Wheatley made through poetry and personal testimony. And although Ourika is like other literary works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are, as Ferguson emphasizes, deeply embedded in Africanist discourse and values (82), they constitute noteworthy activities by women writers, which deserve to be acknowledged as part of the historical and literary record of abolitionism.

Interpreters of Duras’ novel have had difficulty pinning down its position regarding slavery. Although generally sympathetic to the plight of oppressed Africans, at times Ourika seems ambivalent about her commitment to their cause, as when the black protagonist refuses to acknowledge the validity of the slave uprisings in Saint-Domingue that led to the declaration of Haiti’s independence. Should we take her words (“I was ashamed of belonging to a race of barbarians and murderers”) at face value, as truly reflecting the position of either the black character who gives voice to them or the white author who penned them? Can the case be made for Duras as an antislavery writer?

The approach to answering these questions adopted in this volume is to place Duras’ novel in the context of several of the works that it inspired. In comparison with those works, especially those written by men, Duras’ Ourika stands out as remarkably liberatory with respect to both blacks and women, although it may not be directly abolitionist, as are the works of Sophie Doin,
discussed in volume 1. Ourika is more sympathetic to the salon culture in which it was first read aloud and the ancien régime setting in which it is set—hence, undoubtedly, Louis XVIII’s well-known description of it as an “Atala of the salon” (Lescure vii). Duras and Doin do not, however, represent two opposing poles on the spectrum of social and political attitudes regarding race in the 1820s. Instead, they must be viewed as occupying positions between the extremes on that spectrum. Factors that come into play include notions of patriarchy and aristocratic privilege, historical conditions of slavery, and French foreign policy in relation to Haiti. Taking such factors into consideration and calling attention to the political limitations of Ourika in no way diminish Duras’ achievement. On the contrary, adopting a broader perspective opens up her work to the historical context in which her work was written and thereby enriches our understanding of it.

Part 1 (Novel) includes the translation of Ourika that appeared in the 1994 edition of Translating Slavery. The two analyses related to that translation—Françoise Massardier-Kenney’s “Duras, Racism, and Class” and Doris Y. Kadish’s “Ourika’s Three Versions: A Comparison”—appear in part 4. We have also chosen in this edition to include in part 1 a translation of the conclusion of The New Ourika, or The Advantages of Education, a novel written in 1824 by Mme Dudon. Sidestepping race almost altogether—her heroine is almost white in appearance and lineage—Dudon presents a bourgeois corrective to Duras’ novel, defending the case for education as a vehicle for the upward mobility of the nonelite classes. Women in particular are presented as empowered by education. If trained, they can enter the public sphere of work and social recognition on the same footing as men. Dudon’s heroine becomes a painter whose work is accepted for a salon at the Louvre. Her masterpiece depicts a moment in France’s granting of freedom to the oppressed. Eventually, however, she finds her true vocation as a wife and mother of a boy. This example highlights the numerous factors that contributed to the construction of feminine identity in relation to the example of Ourika. In this case, Dudon’s bourgeois class and seemingly liberal politics are the determining forces. Empowerment for women ultimately takes second place to empowerment for deserving members of the middle and lower classes, and abolitionist sentiment disappears altogether.

Part 2 includes three poems. “Ourika the African,” by Gaspard de Pons, is a model of the racist, sexist discourse that T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting calls the “Black Venus narrative.” In contrast with Duras’ Ourika, which
Sharpley-Whiting calls a “sympathetic and insightful critique of race, sex, and class politics in eighteenth-century France” (57), Gaspard de Pons constructs the African woman as inherently lascivious, jealous, and primitive. This stereotypical African becomes the “subjugated ‘Other’ who will affirm French identity, culture, and normativity” (55). Sharpley-Whiting’s attention to Gaspard de Pons’ poem enables us to measure the wide gap between masculine and feminine constructions of black women. No women represented black women in the sexualized manner found in Gaspard de Pons’ poem: for example, in the expression of Ourika’s erotic feelings about Charles, feelings that are then generalized as applying to all women, including slaves:

I know—do you, Charles?—what joys, for love’s use,
Your haughtiness rejects! Alas! You spurn
The flames that, ever unsuspected, burn
To pleasure you, and to be my excuse.

Locked in aloof tyrant’s embrace!... Ah! This is
Black woman’s fate! Sold to the white man’s lust,
Her transports well up midst her own disgust,
Making him drunk with rapture’s seething kisses!

By attributing to a young woman like Ourika the “flames that . . . burn to pleasure you,” or describing the slave woman whose “transports well up midst her own disgust,” Gaspard de Pons “rhapsodizes on the historic uses and abuses of black women by Europeans during the slave trade. . . . Rape is romanticized and sexual coercion erased” (Sharpley-Whiting 59).

Submission rather than sexuality is the theme developed in “Ourika: Elegiac Stanzas,” by Pierre-Ange Vieillard. Although Ourika herself speaks in the poem, she mimics the words and attitudes of white masters: slavery is her lot in life; her face is not only black but “soiled” and represents a “symbol of woe and frightful shame.” Her duty is to remain bound to Charles, for although he has rejected her love, she states, “You own my very life.” Although a lesser example of racist and sexist attitudes than Pons’ poem, Vieillard’s work nonetheless contrasts with the empathetic outlooks of the women authors considered in both volumes of Translating Slavery.

In Delphine Gay’s “Ourika Elegy,” for example, the emphasis is placed on women’s sentiments, empathy, and religion, instead of seduction, sexuality,
or submission. Gay’s Ourika thinks of her own absent mother (“Ripped from my cradle and my land, pity alone was my life’s destiny. I knew no mother’s guiding hand”) and depletes her own inability to be a mother. She regrets being deprived of the closeness of a child, even the white child, who “sees my brow’s color, looks, and—unbeguiled—runs off!” She is able to see her situation from the point of view of both Charles, who is blind to her feelings, and her rival, who recognizes Ourika’s pain but feels no compassion. At the end of the poem, she turns to religion, as does Ourika in the novel and as did Duras at the end of her life. Revealingly, however, Gay’s Ourika seeks her salvation without forgetting the African religion from which her cultural identity derives: “On my paternal ground, subject of other gods, I might have found mere happiness... Here, Christian shall I die!” Perhaps Marylee Susan Crofts (147) is right that the last line of the poem is ironic in its suggestion that Christianity has not yielded happiness. At the very least, it relativizes religious practices and, like the reference to her mother, uncovers profound traces of her earlier African life. Moreover, it emphasizes Ourika’s feminine experience of religion. Valorizing religion from a woman’s perspective is a thoroughly appropriate homage to Duras’ novel and to the life of the real Ourika. Ourika’s retreat to the feminine space of the convent at the end of the novel has indeed been read by various critics as a feminine act of resistance: a retreat from the patriarchal social realm that Charles, the male descendant of Ourika’s benefactress, and his son now control, and a reentry into the woman-centered sphere like that of the aristocratic salon in which the African girl was raised. In addition to the psychological comfort of the convent, religion more generally was viewed by religious women who wrote about slavery, such as Duras and Staël, as serving a positive social function. For these women writers, injustice to blacks stood as one among many issues that humanitarian and evangelical religious groups addressed.4

Part 3 (Theater) includes two plays. Ourika, or The African Orphan Girl, by the playwrights Merle and de Courcy, sheds an interesting comparative light on the construction of black and white women’s identities in Duras’ Ourika. The comparison between the two works shows the extent to which identities formed in and through the character of Ourika are firmly rooted in class as well as race and gender, and it provides a useful reminder that meanings produced in an elite context did not function in the same way in the public, more popular world of the theater. Barbara Cooper, whose essay on theatrical adaptations of Ourika is included in part 4, observes that when
the actor playing Charles dressed up for the meeting with his fiancée in fine embroidered, gilded clothing, the audience responded negatively to what they perceived as a visual reference to the ancien régime. Regarding gender, few traces remain of the rhetorical strategies used in the novel to convey a sense of feminine empowerment. The maréchale, who has raised Ourika, is upstaged in the play by her more rational, pragmatic cousin M. d’Orvilliers, who brought the African girl to France but never suspected that she would be raised as anything above the rank of a servant. Ourika herself is similarly outranked by M. d’Orvilliers’ African slave Zago, who gets to the heart of the problem upon first meeting her, asking whether she is a slave or the mistress, and implying, thereby, that there is no middle ground between those two positions in society. No ambiguity surrounds women’s traditional domestic roles in the play: marrying Zago is clearly presented as the “natural” solution that Ourika, tragically, is too well educated and Europeanized to be able to accept. At the end of the play, Ourika is not allowed to retreat to the feminine comfort of the convent and the spiritual empowerment of religion, perhaps because censorship did not allow the portrayal of religious figures on stage. Instead, she drowns herself, as do other colonial feminine literary victims of the period: Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Virginie in *Paul et Virginie* and George Sand’s Noun in *Indiana* are among the best-known examples.

But the treatment of race in *Ourika, or The African Orphan Girl* is a mixed one. Although censorship prohibited actual mention of the French colonies, the play for the most part treats racial issues more directly than does the novel. Ourika has retained a clear recollection of M. d’Orvilliers taking her from the ship on which she was about to be transported as a slave to America. She is even able to produce a drawing of the spot where this took place. Her memory is jogged by plants that have been brought to her and that she personifies, treating them as metonymic stand-ins for her African identity: “And you, you precious flowers... stay here with Ourika in this, your new land! Born in Africa, like me... now this is our home!” As Cooper observes, “However reductionist and stereotypical the portrait of this Senegalese slave may be, though, we would be remiss if we did not take into account the play’s embryonic ‘ethnographic’ references to African music and dance, to the organization of slave life and colonial exploitation, and to the geographical and botanical features of the Senegalese landscape.” At the same time, however, it is undeniable that the didactic purpose of the play is in clear opposition to whatever liberatory meanings with regard to race Duras’ novel conveys.
Speaking in the Europeanized creole language commonly called petit nègre, Zago again gets to the heart of the matter in response to her claim that she is happy in France: “No! Better black live with black, white live with white.” Hybridity and feminine empowerment are subtle, liberal notions that have no place in popular boulevard theater. In their place, one finds the articulation of conservative principles: the races must remain separate; the reason for that separation is nature, not social prejudice, as in the novel; miscegenation must be disallowed at all costs.

The second play, Mélesville and Carmouche’s Ourika, or The Little Black Girl, contains many of the negative features noted in other works. When Charles’s fiancée, Anaïs, is first introduced to Ourika, she professes friendship but shrinks from kissing her hand. Even Ourika’s beloved benefactor, Charles’s uncle M. Franville, finds her race to be a problem: “But with all that charm, all that talent, that good sense... There’s one thing she can never change. Her face!... A very nice face, I’m sure... But like all the other ones you see in Senegal.” Ourika herself is appalled by her blackness. When she has succeeded in reconciling Charles and Anaïs after a quarrel, and while she helps Anaïs prepare for the wedding, we read in the stage directions: “As the music continues in the background, Ourika steps forward and arranges a nosegay in Anaïs’s hair then suddenly stops, horrified at the sight of her black hands against Anaïs’s fair skin. She gives a start in obvious dismay and moves quickly aside.” At the end of the play, Ourika confesses to Franville that she feels “abandoned and forgotten.” And although, in a supreme gesture of paternalism, Franville offers to adopt her as his daughter, she understands that she still would have no place in the white society in which she was raised.

In the final scene, the wedding party is dismayed to see from a distance that Ourika has chosen to leave: “A small bark with a single sailor can be seen making its way slowly through the water, from right to left. Ourika is standing against the evening sky, the picture of dejection.” In light of the precariousness of the vessel she has boarded and her despairing state of mind, it is hard to imagine her departure positively as having a happy ending or as an affirmation of feminine agency or a return to African culture. Instead, it seems like a choice of death over life—and, what is more, a death without the religious consolation that Duras and Gay granted their Ourikas.

To conclude, in order to understand the complexity of Ourika, readers must be able to situate it in the spectrum of social and political attitudes regarding race at the time of its publication, and we hope that the materials contained
in this volume will contribute to this understanding. As we noted earlier, *Ourika* does not represent the most militant work on the subject of race by a woman writer from the 1820s. But it is a liberatory work in many ways, as the comparisons discussed in this preface and illustrated in this volume indicate. It is also, perhaps, the most complex and interesting work on the subject of race produced in nineteenth-century France. Duras’ major role in French literature, which has been increasingly acknowledged in recent decades, thus warrants the careful consideration provided here of both *Ourika* itself and the ideologically and aesthetically diverse progeny that it produced.