

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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# 19. Claire Louisa Rose Bonne, Duchesse de Duras 27 February 1777–16 January 1828

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Fig. 19. Claire Louisa Rose Bonne, duchesse de Duras. Photo by Paola Severi Michelangeli (2011). Wikimedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Claire\\_de\\_Duras.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Claire_de_Duras.jpg), CC BY 4.0.

## *Ourika*

Je fus rapportée du Sénégal, à l'âge de deux ans, par M. le chevalier de B., qui en était gouverneur. Il eut pitié de moi, un jour qu'il vit embarquer des esclaves sur un bâtiment négrier qui allait bientôt quitter le port : ma mère était morte, et on m'emportait dans le vaisseau, malgré mes cris. M. de B. m'acheta, et, à son arrivée en France, il me donna à Mme la maréchale de B., sa tante, la personne la plus aimable de son temps, et celle qui sut réunir aux qualités les plus élevées la bonté la plus touchante.

Me sauver de l'esclavage, me choisir pour bienfaitrice Mme de B., c'était me donner deux fois la vie : je fus ingrate envers la Providence en n'étant point heureuse ; et cependant le bonheur résulte-t-il toujours de ces dons de l'intelligence ? Je croirais plutôt le contraire : il faut payer

le bienfait de savoir par le désir d'ignorer, et la fable ne nous dit pas si Galatée trouva le bonheur après avoir reçu la vie.

Je ne sus que longtemps après l'histoire des premiers jours de mon enfance. Mes plus anciens souvenirs ne me retracent que le salon de Mme de B. ; j'y passais ma vie, aimée d'elle, caressée, gâtée par tous ses amis, accablée de présents, vantée, exaltée comme l'enfant le plus spirituel et le plus aimable.

Le ton de cette société était l'engouement, mais un engouement dont le bon goût savait exclure ce qui ressemblait à l'exagération ; on louait tout ce qui prêtait à la louange, on excusait tout ce qui prêtait au blâme, et souvent, par une adresse encore plus aimable, on transformait en qualités les défauts mêmes. Le succès donne du courage ; on valait près de Mme de B. tout ce qu'on pouvait valoir, et peut-être un peu plus, car elle prêtait quelque chose d'elle à ses amis sans s'en douter elle-même ; et, en la voyant, en l'écoutant, on croyait lui ressembler.<sup>1</sup>

Claire Louisa Rose Bonne, Duchesse de Duras, *née* de Coëtnempren de Kersaint was born in Brest in 1777, daughter of an admiral, and died in Nice in 1828. Present in her youth at her parents' salon, she left France for her mother's properties in Martinique after her father's guillotining with the Girondins on 4 December 1793, traveling on four years later to

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1 Claire Louisa Rose Bonne, *Ourika*, ed. Roger Little (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), pp. 6–7. Spelling modernized by John Claiborne Isbell.

Translation: I was brought back from Senegal, at the age of two, by M. le chevalier de B., who was governor there. He took pity on me, one day when he saw slaves being loaded on a slave ship which was soon to leave port; my mother was dead, and they were carrying me off in the vessel, despite my cries. M. de B. bought me, and, at his arrival in France, he gave me to Mme la maréchale de B., his aunt, the most amiable person of her time, and she who knew how to combine the most elevated qualities with the most touching kindness.

Saving me from slavery, choosing for my benefactress Mme de B., this was to give me life twice over; I was ungrateful to Providence in not being happy; and yet does happiness always result from these gifts of the intelligence? I would rather think the opposite: one must pay for the benefit of knowing by the desire not to know, and the fable does not tell us whether Galatea found happiness after having received life.

I only knew long afterward the story of the first days of my childhood. My oldest memories only retrace for me the salon of Mme de B.; I spent my life there, loved by her, caressed, spoiled by all her friends, flooded with presents, praised, exalted like the wittiest and most lovable child.

The tone of this society was enthusiasm, but an enthusiasm from which good taste knew how to exclude all that resembled exaggeration; one praised all that lent itself to praise, one excused all that lent itself to blame, and often, by a still more amiable address, one transformed defects themselves into qualities. Success gives courage; one was worth, near Mme de B., all that one could be worth, and perhaps a little more, since she lent something of herself to her friends without suspecting this herself; and in seeing her, in hearing her, one thought to resemble her.

the United States, Switzerland, and finally London where she married Amédée Bretagne Malo de Durfort, Duc de Duras in 1797. Returning to Paris in 1800, she obtained her husband's removal from the list of émigrés in 1807. At the Restoration, Chateaubriand's friendship opened doors, though it was she who later furthered his political career. She was also the friend of Staël and of Rosalie de Constant, Benjamin's cousin. Her husband was admitted to court, and their salon became a major center for Parisian literary and social life. Duras had no interest in a career herself, and it was at Chateaubriand's insistence that she published *Ourika* anonymously in 1823, one of the three brief novels she produced, along with *Édouard* (1825) and *Olivier ou le Secret*, written in 1822. When Duras chose not to publish *Olivier*, Latouche brought out a version he attributed to her. *Les Mémoires de Sophie* and *Amélie et Pauline* appeared in 2011, while *Le Moine du Saint-Bernard* remains unpublished. As Sainte-Beuve notes, Duras often presents oppressed and marginalized protagonists, whose race or social origin makes happiness impossible for them. Tragedy recurs. Discounted for some time after her death as an author of brief sentimental romances, Duras has been reassessed by modern theory as a postmodern theorist on the question of identity. One might surmise that she had been systematically misread.

*Ourika* is narrated by a young woman saved from enslavement in Senegal, brought to Paris and presented to a friend as a gift. At fifteen, she discovers prejudice, which her society education had not previously revealed to her. Her beloved, who is born French, marries a Frenchwoman and *Ourika* retires to a convent to die young. *Édouard* meanwhile is the story of a love made impossible by social difference, and in *Olivier ou le Secret*, first published in 1971, the protagonist is impotent. Duras in short is interested in star-crossed lovers and the obstacles that separate them. Let us look then at this passage, in which the protagonist is not only a Black woman, but also the narrator. This is quite radical in 1823 and is apparent from her opening words. "Je fus rapportée du Sénégal," the novel begins after a brief framing preface; it appeared in a society where the slave trade continued, premised upon the treatment of human beings as objects. Staël similarly gives Mirza a voice in her eponymous tale of 1795; but Mirza's voice remains mediated throughout by a European narrator. Duras has gone one step further on the path of empathy, that same Romantic path of empathy that led

Hugo to give voice to Quasimodo, or Blake to give voice to his chimney sweep. Finally, we might note that Boufflers brought two slaves back from Senegal in 1786, not one, and Staël's 1795 tale uses the name of the second, Ziméo, for her heroine Mirza's beloved.

Slavery was abolished by the first French republic in 1794. It was reinstated by Napoleon in 1802—Joséphine was from Martinique—which cost France Haiti as Toussaint Louverture led the island to freedom. He was captured by the French in their ill-fated expedition to reconquer the island—they failed—and died in a Pyrenean prison. In Fort-de-France, Martinique, a public statue of Joséphine, decapitated when I visited in 1997, has since been torn down. Staël worked with Wilberforce to end the French slave trade at the Congress of Vienna in 1814, and it was banned north of the Niger; but the trade continued, like the institution of slavery itself, until the Second Republic banned both in 1848. That is Duras's context. It is worth noting the particularity that Chateaubriand, who encouraged Duras to publish, lived in a château (Combours) paid for in part by slave trade money.

This extract spends some time flattering the woman and family who received Ourika as a gift in 1786. That is all well and good, and the Beauvau family, like Ourika, were real people and still present in Paris in 1823, when this tale was published. But the tale is not all sweetness and light; it is star-crossed, and Ourika's love for Charles cannot be fulfilled. The novel *Édouard*, where the obstacle is class, attracts less attention these days—it seems less radical—but the unpublished *Olivier ou le secret*, where the obstacle is impotence, does attract attention, not least because of its curious place in a French tradition Margaret Waller retraces in *The Male Malady* (1992). It is unclear what made so many French heroes in this period so paralyzed; they do resemble René, as Chateaubriand noted, but the tradition starts earlier, and it continued beyond Austerlitz and the burning of Moscow.

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