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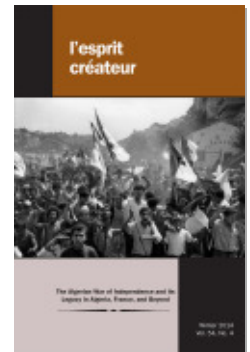
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## Myth, History, and Witnessing in Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's Caribbean Poetics

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# Myth, History, and Witnessing in Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's Caribbean Poetics

Deborah Jenson

**C**RITICS HAVE ALWAYS PAID homage to the startling drama of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's 1802 voyage. As André Beaunier put it with characteristically Eurocentric relish in *Visages de femmes*, "Voilà Marceline, à quinze ans, toute seule, parmi des sauvages terribles, dans le sang et dans l'incendie, toute seule!"<sup>1</sup> For C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, Desbordes-Valmore's voyage correlated to a sort of Romantic requirement for exotic travel, one that put her in remarkably hallowed company as a fellow traveler with Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, André Chénier, François-René de Chateaubriand, and the elegiac Creole poets Evariste de Parny and Nicolas-Germain Léonard:

Une considération me frappe: c'est combien, vers la fin du dix-huitième siècle, il se fit chez nos littérateurs et nos poètes comme un complément d'éducation par les contrées lointaines, par les voyages. Il semblait que l'inspiration et la couleur françaises ne dussent se rajeunir qu'à ce prix. André Chénier est né à Byzance; Chateaubriand visite les savanes: s'il peut se saluer le père de l'école moderne, le rôdeur Jean-Jacques en est à certains égards le grand-père, et Bernardin de Saint-Pierre l'oncle, [...] Bertin et Parny se souviennent trop peu, dans leurs vers, de l'île et de la nature où ils sont nés; ils en ont pourtant gardé quelque flamme. Le poète Léonard est né à cette Guadeloupe où la jeune Marceline va tenter la destinée.<sup>2</sup>

Sainte-Beuve considered Desbordes-Valmore's Caribbean experience to have been a complete poetic education: "Désormais, que lui faut-il? que lui manque-t-il?" (130). Her travels provided her, in effect, with the experience of lack without which the poet is lacking. However, aside from developing this biographical dimension of loss and exoticism in Desbordes-Valmore's work, complemented by the racist evocation of bloodthirsty slaves, critics have shied away (until recently) from contextualizing the works that eventually emerged from the voyage (the novella "Sarah," two poems in a Creole/French hybrid, and numerous poems on slavery) within the history or the poetics of colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

This non-engagement with Desbordes-Valmore's colonial-themed writings fits with a more widespread phenomenon of French 'forgetting' of its colonial debacles in the Revolutionary Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> Yet it cannot be accounted

for entirely in terms of the metropole's memory and amnesia. Desbordes-Valmore herself participated in covering the traces of her specific colonial experiences, notably with a biographical letter to Sainte-Beuve, filled with lacunae and inaccuracies, which provided the gospel for critical accounts of her voyage.<sup>5</sup> It is important to reconstruct both her motivations for this erasure, and, within the limits of the possible, the actual details of the trip, since, unlike Sainte-Beuve's other examples of writers who received a poetic education in foreign lands, Desbordes-Valmore's voyage followed an extraordinary itinerary through the epicenter of the Revolutionary Caribbean events that provided a traumatic historical education on race and revolution for Western observers. She may in fact be the single firsthand literary witness of the Revolutionary Caribbean history which so many of her fellow Romantics depicted—Claire de Duras in *Ourika*, Victor Hugo in *Bug-Jargal*, and Alphonse de Lamartine in *Toussaint Louverture*, among others—even though the nature of her witnessing in *Sarah* is startlingly oblique.

#### **A Colonial Education: Desbordes-Valmore and Lacour**

It was under the rubric of education that Desbordes-Valmore's personal history first intersected, however distantly, with that of the French colonies. In 1797, Marceline's mother, Catherine, left the Desbordes household to follow her adulterous lover, Nicolas Saintenoy. Catherine brought Marceline, alone of her four children, after a departure or expulsion from the conjugal home that Marceline later remembered as violent.<sup>6</sup> In Lille later that same year, a friend who had previously worked as an actress recommended that Catherine seek theatrical work for Marceline. (Saintenoy had suffered reversals of fortune under the Revolution and was nearly penniless.) Marceline therefore came to depend at a very young age on her verbal skills, memory, and performance abilities for her own livelihood and that of her mother. The two women resettled for work purposes in Rochefort in 1799, and it was there that Marceline encountered a young orphan of the Haitian Revolution, Louis Lacour. Louis, born in Paris in 1778, was being tutored by Saintenoy as an extension of his studies at the *École de la Marine* in Rochefort. Seven years earlier, his father had been killed in the first violence of the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue, and his mother had died soon afterward. Marceline became close to Louis, and apparently chose him as her first poetic interlocutor, bringing her fledgling poetic attempts for his approval (*Ambrière* 1:79).

The relevance of details of Louis's colonial background, his possible influence on Catherine's and Marceline's voyage, and the symbolic echo of elements of Marceline's and his relationship in "Sarah" can seem very indirect

unless we jump forward in Marceline's chronology to the later events that confirm his unusual importance in her life. In 1805, when Louis and Marceline were reunited after their respective Caribbean sojourns, they became lovers. In 1806, Louis abandoned the teenaged actress, apparently without knowing that she was pregnant with his child. Marceline's first child, a daughter named Louise Marceline Estelle, died at the age of three weeks, in the care of a wet nurse. Her birth certificate listed Louis Lacour as the father (Ambrière 1:144). This illegitimate birth made it prudent for Marceline to cover the tracks of a relationship that otherwise fills in important lacunae of her account to Sainte-Beuve of the genesis and events of the Caribbean voyage. In effect, Lacour's absence in her accounts of her travels can be taken as a sign of his significance rather than his insignificance in this period of her life.

In her 1833 account to Sainte-Beuve, Desbordes-Valmore asserted that her mother had left Antoine-Félix Desbordes not because of martial discord or a competing relationship, but because her mother had decided to seek assistance from a relative who had made a fortune in the Caribbean: "Ma mère, imprudente et courageuse, se laissa envahir par l'espérance de rétablir sa maison en allant en Amérique trouver une parente qui était devenue riche."<sup>7</sup> But Ambrière was never able to uncover historical evidence of the relative in Guadeloupe. He noted also that Desbordes-Valmore's description of why the relative was not found differed from one account to another. What Ambrière did find was evidence that Catherine Desbordes would have been familiar with the immigration of numerous other actors from the Bordeaux region to the Caribbean beginning in 1800 (1:91). As scholarship by Jean Fouchard and Bernard Camier demonstrates,<sup>8</sup> the vibrant theater culture in the French colonies of Guadeloupe and especially Saint-Domingue during the Revolutionary era provided important opportunities for many French actors.

Any connections Catherine Desbordes had with French actors engaged in Caribbean theatrical work would have been enhanced by her acquaintance with Louis Lacour, who maintained a network of privileged colonial relationships. After his parents' deaths, his guardian was Marie-Anne Courneuve, a friend of the Lacour family who had fled Saint-Domingue in 1791. Courneuve would go on to become the wife of Thomas Millet, who was sent as a deputy to defend the cause of the colonists of Saint-Domingue before the Revolutionary Assembly. Millet arrived in Paris at the time of a 1794 decree by the Convention forbidding former Saint-Domingue colonists of "counter-Revolutionary leanings" (Ambrière 1:81) to enter France, and he was duly imprisoned. But this was a time of elite prison populations, and one of Millet's fellow prisoners was the Martinican Joséphine de Beauharnais, the wife, and

soon to be the widow, of General Beauharnais. For Lacour, this indirect association with the future wife of Napoleon Bonaparte would later open the opportunity to return to Saint-Domingue, even during the Haitian Revolutionary era, when travel to the troubled colony required special dispensation (Ambrière1:83).

Although Lacour was no longer in Rochefort at the time of the Desbordes women's departure for Guadeloupe, he may have been involved in the formation of Catherine Desbordes's initial plan to establish a footing for herself and Marceline in the Caribbean. It was in 1800 that the "chaste idylle" (1:84) of "les deux amoureux," as Ambrière designated Lacour and Desbordes-Valmore, came to a close when Lacour returned to Saint-Domingue, where he ascended rapidly in the ranks of military administration, becoming chief of the *bureau de subsistances militaires* in Port-au-Prince (1:107). He remained in this position until the defeat of the Napoleonic military expedition to regain colonial control of Saint-Domingue in late 1803, at which point he left the tumultuous island and engaged in naval commerce elsewhere in the Caribbean until his return to France in 1805.

During his lessons with Catherine Desbordes' lover, Saintenoy, Louis Lacour may have been transmitting to Marceline far more than his appreciation of her early poetic attempts: he may have been introducing her to the complexities of colonial cultural identities and opportunities. In "Sarah," shared lessons are central to the fictional relationship between the eponymous protagonist and Edwin, the motherless son of the colonist Mr. Primrose. Sarah, just 13 in the novella, as was Marceline when she met Louis in Rochefort, notices that Edwin seems to spend the lessons that are so carefully ministered by his father chafing for free time with her:

Mais comment retiens-tu ces leçons? À peine tu les écoutes. Je devine souvent que tu veux courir, car tu me regardes! tu voudrais que je fusse moins à mon livre. Tes pieds brûlent de m'entraîner avec toi; je t'entends respirer plus vite comme pour avancer l'heure.<sup>9</sup>

Edwin, transfixed by the sight of Sarah, initially retains nothing of the paternal discourse. Sarah notes, "Tu me demandes tout ce qu'a lu ton père" (104). Mysteriously, from her summary, he comes to retain the lessons better than she does. Edwin explains that there is a kind of creative symbiosis in his retention of what Sarah says:

—Oui, Sarah! Je retiens tout ce que tu dis: tes moindres paroles me jettent dans l'âme une foule d'idées nouvelles qui s'y développent et la remplissent, comme quelques grains jetés au hasard font éclore de la terre mille fois plus qu'elle n'a reçu. Oui! mes idées naissent des tiennes. (104)

Sarah translates Mr. Primrose's lessons into a subjective inquiry bound only by the limits of imagination. Tutoring and studying become an intimate and fertile exchange, and paternal didacticism is transformed into youthful—and feminine—love of ideas. An important part of the ideas that Sarah and Edwin share is the conviction that Sarah's protector, the former slave Arsène, deserves to be free as much as Sarah does. Edwin, like Sarah, rejects the very word "slave": "—De quoi se plaint cet esclave, dit-il? On le ménage, votre père le protège.—Et je l'aime, répartit Edwin, car il nous a donné Sarah; mais ne dis donc pas qu'il est esclave, je ne t'aimerais plus" (102).

This ideal of an intuitive communication between two young people who reject the category of the slave in "Sarah," subverting repetitious lessons delivered by a high-minded but utterly complicit slave owner in the person of Edwin's father, Mr. Primrose, does, however, contradict the colonial lessons that Louis may have been imparting to Marceline. Perhaps in the spirit of fidelity to and even vengeance for his parents, Louis was—at least early on—an unhesitating supporter of a traditional right to colonial and racial dominance. As an adolescent, he had published a high-minded tirade against what he viewed as the mistakes of the French government in responding to the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue: "Encore un mot, un seul mot aux hommes d'état sur les îles à sucre françaises." Addressed to the *Comité du salut publique* in year III of the Revolution (1794, when he would have been fifteen or sixteen years old), the pamphlet berates the Revolutionary government for its abandonment of the colonists to the violence of the slave revolt. It also claims that the former slaves, now "the masters," had been ignored by the French to the point that they would inevitably turn to the English:

Je prouverois enfin que des mesures législatives, prématurées et par cela dangereuses, dictées par la faction de l'Angleterre, ont porté dans les îles à sucre françaises le ravage, la dévastation, l'incendie, et ont aiguisé le poignard avec lequel les Nègres révoltés ont égorgé la population blanche; c'est-à-dire les Français, les seuls Français. Qu'en est-il résulté? [...] Les Africains et leurs descendans, restés les maîtres, se sont livrés à la première puissance qui s'est présentée en force; c'est-à-dire, l'Angleterre.<sup>10</sup>

The pamphlet ends by threatening that the one paltry aid that the Revolutionary government had sent to the colonists—bayonets for self-defense—might be used in the future by the colonists against the French themselves: "Retournez vers les Législateurs de la France, et dites-leur qu'on ne fait pas de loi, pour un pays qu'on ne connoît pas. Grand merci néanmoins de vos Instituteurs et vos armes. Nous sommes bien assurés maintenant de résister aux Français [...] songez aux baïonnettes dont vous nous avez armés" (8). In a

response to Lacour's incendiary proposals in the same collection, a writer signed Louchat furiously addresses Lacour as a "skin-deep aristocrat," the racial royalty of the colonies: "Tu es un colon, *Lacour*; tu es un de ces *aristocrates de l'épiderme*, un de ces *princes* incroyables!"<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the ideological perspective of "Sarah" differs so dramatically from that of this "skin-deep aristocrat" who was not only a kind of co-student but also Desbordes-Valmore's first 'teacher' about the colonies is a sign of the independence of opinion that was a hallmark of her political orientation throughout her career. Desbordes-Valmore's approach to slavery in "Sarah" also symbolically responds to the events she witnessed directly and indirectly during her time in the Caribbean.

### **The Explosions of History**

In all fairness, it is conceivable that Lacour also may have had a Caribbean reawakening during his time in the French army in Saint-Domingue, which had become, by the early years of the Consulate, a highly hybrid organization, with an elite leadership dominated by former slaves including the 'French' generals Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Slavery, after all, had been abolished in Saint-Domingue since 1793, and in all the French Caribbean colonies since 1794. This was the historical era in which the paradox articulated in Laurent Dubois' title *A Colony of Citizens*<sup>12</sup> was operative: in the French Caribbean colonies, the colonized—really the enslaved and their free relatives of mixed race—had become free French citizens. Lacour would have experienced an era in which the colonial hierarchies that had seemed guaranteed in his childhood had been undone.

It was not until the final months of 1801 that Napoleon Bonaparte, offended by the constitution issued independently by Toussaint Louverture in Saint-Domingue, took steps to regain control of these colonies in which the definition of Revolutionary rights had been so radically extended. He assigned General Leclerc (the husband of his sister Pauline Bonaparte) to lead a powerful military expedition that arrived in Saint-Domingue in the last week of January, 1802. This was precisely the time of the voyage of Catherine and Marceline, and the beginning of a nine-month period in which Marceline's trajectory seemed to map the most significant events in the colonial history of the time.

After anchoring at the island of Saint-Barthélemy, Desbordes-Valmore and her mother remained there for the rest of February, March, April, and the first week or two of May (while the war of the French against the insurgent blacks raged in Saint-Domingue, where Lacour was located). Because of its neutrality during the upheavals of slave rebellions and the Napoleonic wars,

Saint-Barthélemy was a center of Caribbean trade at this time. Their stay was long enough for Marceline to make friends with young Creoles, some of whom were probably refugees from the violence on other Caribbean islands, very likely including the island of Saint-Domingue. As her two later poems in a French/Creole hybrid demonstrate, her friends taught her the rudiments of their Creole dialect(s), and probably of their oral traditions, in the form of songs and stories, as well.<sup>15</sup>

On May 6, the arrival in Guadeloupe of General Richepanse, sent by Napoleon to reestablish French authority, heralded the end of the embargo, and sometime shortly thereafter Marceline and her mother left their Caribbean idyll on Saint-Barthélemy. Richepanse initially was received cooperatively by Pélage, but hostile overtures by the partisans of Lacrosse, combined with the news of the imminent reestablishment of slavery on the island, quickly ignited violent conflicts between the French and the former slaves. Catherine and Marceline were thus admitted to Guadeloupe precisely as it erupted into crisis.

This turmoil was recounted later in the *Moniteur universel* by the French officer Gobert. Gobert asserted that a “grande insurrection” by the former slaves was so quickly suppressed by the French that the remaining resistance could have been regarded, in Gobert’s opinion, as a slightly more dangerous manifestation of the tradition of “les anciens nègres marrons” or escaped slaves.<sup>16</sup> But Richepanse, indignant at any lingering resistance, refused to stop pursuing the blacks, despite their retreat into woods that Gobert characterized as “immenses et impénétrables.” The mulatto officer Louis Delgrès and his troops positioned themselves strategically in the mountain fort Matouba. But when the French persisted and succeeded in surrounding them, Delgrès despaired of maintaining his freedom and that of his troops. He then took the extreme step of lighting the powder kegs in the fort, killing himself, hundreds of his own men, and the French; Gobert simply noted, “Delgrès, le commandant général et les chefs les plus déterminés, qui avaient échappé à nos coups, se font sauter en l’air.”

These literally and figuratively explosive happenings in Guadeloupe were widely noted in the U.S. media in the form of published letters from Caribbean observers to American maritime colleagues. A May 29 letter noted that the fighting had been intense not just in the mountains and in Basse-Terre, but also in Pointe-à-Pitre, where Marceline and her mother were lodged. “On the 25th, in Point a Petre [sic], there was a very severe and decisive battle. The negroes to the number of 4000 were on the point of entering the city, and they would have succeeded, had not a division, which the General sent for our protection, arrived in season.”<sup>17</sup> There were public spectacles of this violence in



the cities: "Ignace was killed, and his head carried through the streets at the end of a pike." Deaths of white civilian prisoners of the blacks were known: "Delgrès, with 300 of his adherents, have blown themselves up in their magazine at Matouba; among them were several white people prisoners [sic]." This count did not include the French soldiers who died in the explosion: "It cost the whites 500 men killed and wounded." The letter writer also noted the court martial and execution of large numbers of blacks in Pointe-à-Pitre: "At Point Petre two days past, they shot 150 negroes taken under arms."

Biological ravages compounded the interracial terror: a yellow fever epidemic had broken out in Pointe-à-Pitre, and Catherine fell ill. Desbordes-Valmore related having witnessed slaves shut up "in an iron cage" (cited in Ambrière 1:103) in this period of her mother's mortal illness. Approximately three months after their arrival in the Antilles, which is to say in the third or fourth week of May, Catherine Desbordes died of yellow fever. Since it normally took seven to ten days for the disease to take its course, she probably had come down with the horrific symptoms of the epidemic in the first days after their arrival. Desbordes-Valmore says oddly of her mother's illness, in the autobiographical letter to Sainte-Beuve, "Elle ne porta pas ce coup. Son réveil, ce fut de mourir à quarante et un ans!" ("Mme Desbordes-Valmore, 1833," 100). Her mother's "réveil," which recalls the "Réveil créole"<sup>18</sup> in Desbordes-Valmore's oblique poem of that name, was the awakening of death.

Over the succeeding months of the summer of 1802, the orphaned and penniless Marceline slowly made her way back to France, traveling first (on June 18) from Pointe-à-Pitre to Basse-Terre by ship, as she recounts in "Mon Retour en Europe" (*Les Veillées des Antilles* 216). Ambrière argues, based on meticulous research of maritime voyages from Guadeloupe to France that summer, that her route subsequently must have included a layover in Saint-Domingue: "Everything leads us to believe that the orphan had not completed her Antillean odyssey in Basse-Terre, and that she went to Saint-Domingue before finally embarking for her native land on the *Eagle*, commanded by Captain Allemand" (1:106). Ambrière believes that Marceline left Basse-Terre for Cap Français (Saint-Domingue) shortly after June 18 and finally departed Cap Français for Brest (France) on July 7. This itinerary, undocumented since Marceline, who was unable to pay for her voyage, did not figure on passenger lists, would have given her approximately two weeks in Saint-Domingue. Ambrière surmises that Louis Lacour may have had a role in helping Marceline to find the means to return to France (1:107).

In the summer of 1802 in Saint-Domingue, the Haitian Revolution was at a critical point. Toussaint Louverture, who had worked out a tenuous power-

sharing arrangement and cooperative government with the French métropole, had been seized from retirement by Napoleon's forces on June 7. He was initially taken to the port of Gonaïves, where he uttered a line that quickly became famous: "In overthrowing me, they have felled in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back because its roots are deep and numerous."<sup>19</sup> Transferred subsequently to the port of Cap Français, Toussaint was transported on board the *Hero* to the French port of Brest, arriving in mid-July. From Brest, Toussaint was transferred to the dungeons of the Fort-de-Joux in the Jura, where he died of disease and neglect in April of 1803. The kidnapping of Toussaint and his family, and his imprisonment in France, were well known to the European public. The British poet William Wordsworth composed a sonnet to Toussaint Louverture in August 1802, less than a month after Toussaint's arrival in France, in which he urged "the most unhappy of men" to "take comfort": "There's not a breathing of the common wind / That will forget thee."<sup>20</sup> If Ambrière is correct, Desbordes-Valmore's itinerary retraced precisely the legendary trajectory of Toussaint from Cap Français to Brest, one month later.

The summer of 1802 also saw the arrival in Saint-Domingue of the news of the re-establishment of slavery in Guadeloupe, which the remaining Haitian revolutionary leaders took as a cue to fight the forces of Napoleon to the death, countering their earlier demonstrations of willingness to share colonial power. Implausibly, over the next year and a half, they succeeded in defeating Napoleon's army. The former slaves proclaimed their independence from France on January 1, 1804. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the leader of this new, early nineteenth-century postcolony, proclaimed in their declaration of independence, "Nous avons osé être libres sans l'être, par nous-mêmes et pour nous-mêmes."<sup>21</sup>

Desbordes-Valmore never spoke of a sojourn in Saint-Domingue, and literary critics therefore may have assumed, even after reading Ambrière's account, that it was of little importance. But her intimate relationship with Louis Lacour, and the illegitimate child produced by that union, would have motivated Desbordes-Valmore to keep silent concerning her knowledge of revolution-torn Saint-Domingue. Ultimately, readers can best trace the explosions of history in Desbordes-Valmore's Caribbean experiences not in forthright historical description, but in "Sarah"'s representation of the changing stakes of slavery, and the protagonist's internalization of them.

### **To Be or Not To Be A Slave**

In "Mon Retour en Europe," Desbordes-Valmore explicitly challenged historiography's privileged connection to the real: "Est-on plus sûr de rester

dans le réel en croyant écrire de l'histoire?" (218). The historical real in "Sarah" is recast as a question of fidelity to ghosts haunting the "souvenirs des passagers d'autrefois" and to the "nouveaux fantômes, vrais ou imaginaires, qui le sait?" (218) that passed before her eyes as she moved from ship to ship on her return voyage. "Sarah" presents the ghostly vortex of the history into which Desbordes-Valmore was plunged by examining slave status, its perverse justifications, and the intense emotion of reversals in individuals' understandings of their slave or non-slave status. These reversals symbolically mirror the history she witnessed, directly or indirectly, in the Caribbean, where not only the former slaves in general, but charismatic and articulate leaders such as Louis Delgrès and Toussaint Louverture contested the attempts of the Napoleonic government to restore the racial power relations that had been naturalized under the *ancien régime*.

"Sarah" thus does not resemble the twentieth-century 'epic' francophone Caribbean novels that employ a clearly delineated colonial/postcolonial historical spectrum, including the explosions of history in Guadeloupe in 1802, to frame the life stories of individual characters. The Guadeloupean author Daniel Maximin's 1981 novel *Lone Sun (L'Isolé Soleil)* is a prime example of this overt historical representation of the stakes of slavery, as is the Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau's 1992 *Texaco*. In "Sarah," with its unforgettable figuration of the black male former slave, Arsène, as a metaphorical 'mother' for the orphaned white heroine, history operates arguably more as it does in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 *Jane Eyre* (or in Jean Rhys's 1966 "prequel" to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*). In *Jane Eyre*, the Creole madwoman in the attic symbolically tropes the closeting of colonial brutality in Western domestic consciousness. Desbordes-Valmore's casting of Arsène as Sarah's 'mother' combines with the plot of his resistance to his potential re-enslavement to evoke Desbordes-Valmore's personal association of the endangered mother with the endangered freedom of the former slaves. The related plot line of uncertainty over whether the heroine Sarah herself may be a slave further signals the historical contingency of the identities of slaves and masters.

The metaphor of paper on which either freedom or slavery is inscribed dramatizes the arbitrariness of slave status in "Sarah." The shipwrecked stranger who turns out to be Sarah's father is compelled to identify the paper in Sarah's hands that could be the documentation either of her purchase as a slave or of her legal status as an heir: "En voici la preuve, ajouta-t-il, en prenant des mains de Sarah le papier qu'elle cachait en tremblant; et ce n'est pas un acte d'esclavage, mais celui d'une reconnaissance légitime" (140-41).

Similarly, although Mr. Primrose serenely assures Sarah that he would never consider Arsène a slave and that “il n’est pas au nombre de ceux que j’ai vendus avec mes biens,” Sarah insists on reading the sales transaction with her own eyes: “Sarah, interdite, ne savait que répondre, et parcourait des yeux les noms des esclaves vendus par Sylvain. — ‘Voici le nom d’Arsène, dit-elle, il est avec les autres’” (134).

The theme of contingency in slave status figured here in some ways echoes the contingent reversals of status in Hegel’s 1807 master-slave dialectic, a paradigm that was also influenced by the contemporaneous events of the Haitian revolution.<sup>22</sup> In “Sarah,” the paradox of the slave’s male maternity turns out to be the counterpart of the paradox of the enslavement of the free woman, in a story that turns on confusion—historical and philosophical confusion—over who is and who is not a slave. The novella stands as a veiled act of witnessing of events that challenged Europe’s self-identification as—like Mr. Primrose—the ‘good’ slave master.

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#### Notes

1. André Beaunier, *Visages de femmes* (Paris: Plon, 1913), 267.
2. Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, “Mme Desbordes-Valmore (1842)” in *Portraits contemporains* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), 130.
3. For more on the relationship of “Sarah” to other texts and literary tendencies of the Romantic era see the Introduction to “Sarah” in the MLA Texts and Translation Series by Deborah Jenson and Doris Y. Kadish (forthcoming 2008). Parts of the literary and historical analysis provided in this essay appear in that Introduction as well.
4. On the phenomenon of French cultural amnesia concerning the Revolutionary Caribbean, see Christopher L. Miller, “Forget Haiti: Baron Roger and the New Africa,” *Yale French Studies*, 107 (2005), 39-69.
5. Barbara Johnson commented on the poetic rather than factual nature of Desbordes-Valmore’s autobiographical statement to Sainte Beuve, “Gender and Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore,” *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1998), 108.
6. Biographer Francis Ambrière notes that “En 1836, dans une lettre à Antoine Latour, il est échappé de Marceline un mot qui donne à réfléchir: elle dit qu’elle a quitté Douai ‘violemment,’” *Le Siècle des Valmore: Marceline Desbordes-Valmore et les siens*, 2 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 1:65.
7. Sainte-Beuve, 100.
8. See Jean Fouchard, *Le Théâtre à Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l’État, 1955) and *Artistes et répertoire des scènes de Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l’État, 1955), and Bernard Camier, “Minette, situation sociale d’une artiste de couleur à Saint-Domingue,” *Généalogie et histoire de la Caraïbe*, 185 (October 2005), 4638-40, and “L’Opéra-comique à Saint-Domingue à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, une diffusion paradoxale,” in *Actes du colloque “L’Opéra-comique à l’époque de Boieldieu”* (Rouen: Presses Universitaires de Rouen, forthcoming).
9. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, “Sarah,” *Les Veillées des Antilles*, Aimée Boutin, ed. (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006), 104.

10. Louis Lacour, "Encore un mot, un seul mot, aux hommes d'état, sur les îles à sucre françaises," au Comité du salut public ([Paris]: Imprimerie de Laurens, an III de la Révolution [1794]), 3.
11. Louchat, "Vous êtes orfèvre, M. Josse!", au Comité du salut public ([Paris]: Imprimerie de Laurens, an III de la Révolution), 9.
12. See Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004).
13. "Proclamation, le contre-amiral Lacrosse, capitaine-général de la Guadeloupe et dépendances, aux habitants de cette colonie," dated 16 Thermidor an X [August 6, 1802], published in *Le Moniteur universel*, 23 vendémiaire an XI [October 23, 1802].
14. "Proclamation by the three undersigned Magistrates, nominated by the First Consul of France to compose the government of Guadeloupe and its dependences; to the governments or powers in friendship, or allied to the French Republic; to all Admirals or Commanders by sea and land; to all captains of ships, or vessels of war of the different nations stationed in the neighboring colonies or navigating these Seas," *Newburyport Herald*, February 12, 1802.
15. See my brief discussion of these poems in their Caribbean literary context in "Polyphonie sociale dans la poésie créole de Saint-Domingue (Haïti)" in *Langue et identité narrative dans les littératures de l'ailleurs*, Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux and Michel Bertrand, eds. (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2005), 171-96.
16. Report by Gobert, Basse-Terre, 18 fructidor an X [September 7, 1802], published in the *Moniteur universel* in a series of articles on Guadeloupe on 28 vendémiaire an XI [October 28, 1802].
17. "Extract of a letter from Basse-Terre, dated May 29, 1802," *The Federal Galaxy*, July 5, 1802.
18. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Les Poésies complètes de Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*, Marc Bertrand, ed. (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1973), 2:585.
19. There are many accounts of the scene in which this quote was produced, including the following narrative by Pamphile de Lacroix: "He addressed these memorable words to the division chief Savary, commander of the vessel: 'In overthrowing me, they have only knocked over in Saint-Domingue the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back by the roots, for they are deep and numerous'" (*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Saint-Domingue* [Paris: Pillet aîné, 1819], 2:203.
20. "To Toussaint Louverture" was published on February 3, 1803. William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, Jared Curtis, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1983), 160-61.
21. This quote is from a manuscript version of the Haitian declaration of independence, by Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the creators and co-signers of the document, conserved at the Centre historique des Archives nationales, AF III 210.
22. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, J. B. Baillie, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), and Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry*, 26:4 (2000), 821-65.