

Slavery and Orientalism in Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or*

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Abstract

This paper reads Honoré de Balzac's 1834 novella "La fille aux yeux d'or" as the male French protagonist's harem fantasy over a female slave from the West Indies. I argue that Balzac's fiction exposes the late Restoration then the July Monarchy's strenuous efforts of dealing with colonial slavery both as historical legacy and contemporary reality: at a time when the consequences of colonial slavery were the most acutely felt and visible, France seized the possibility of penetrating the Orient to release its anxiety over colonial slavery. My reading will shed new light on the deep-running logic of the emergence of so-called modern Orientalism, precisely: a process of exoticization that tries to construct colonial slavery practiced in the Old Colonies into an Oriental phenomenon, in which the violence inflicted on the Old Colonies is projected as violence by the Orientals.

Keywords: slavery, Orientalism, harem, colonialism

In her study of French Orientalism, Madeleine Dobie sees a process of displacement, which started from Montesquieu and lasted for over two hundred years. Dobie argues that “the *fascination* with the Orient that permeated eighteenth-century French culture was the symptom of a displacement of France’s *interest* in its New World colonies, and, by extension, of a repression of France’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade” (44, emphasis original). For Dobie, Montesquieu in his writings on slavery concentrated on slavery in the Orient in order to avoid thinking about France’s own practice of slavery in the Antilles (45). The nineteenth-century Orientalism that emerged following the 1830 invasion of Algeria, for Dobie, uses Montesquieu’s model of displacement and repression upon a new colonial reality, that of France’s North African colonization, to quote Dobie again: “the aesthetic sublimation sustained an ambivalent relation to French colonialism and deferred the need for a definitive assessment of Europe’s involvement in the Orient. In a broader political frame, it helped to render French foreign policy palatable to the literate public by occluding the more negative aspects of the colonial process and emphasizing instead the timeless attractions of the Orient” (150).

Dobie’s capture of colonial slavery’s conspicuous absence in Montesquieu is truly insightful, but in fact colonial slavery remained a reality for the France of the 1830s as well. Algeria was but one of the two colonial legacies that the July Monarchy inherited from the Restoration: the other was the Old Colonies. Colonial slavery, I want to point out, was something the July Monarchy lived with during the regime’s entirety. Despite efforts for “a gradual phasing out of slavery through legislation” (Cohen 206), and under years of constant international pressure, the regime did not abolish slavery. It was only after the July Monarchy’s demise that the Provisional Republic finally outlawed slavery in the French colonies on April 27, 1848. How did this odd co-existence of colonial regimes bear out in literature? The work I examine here, Honoré de Balzac’s *La fille aux yeux d’or*, published in 1834, uses the harem image to capture the intricate relation between modern French Orientalism and colonial slavery. I argue that by making his male protagonist live a romantic encounter with a woman from the Old Colonies as harem fantasy, Balzac exposes the late Restoration then the July Monarchy’s strenuous efforts of dealing with colonial slavery both as historical legacy and contemporary reality. At a time when the consequences of colonial slavery were the most acutely felt and visible, France seized the possibility of penetrating the Orient to release its anxiety over colonial slavery. My reading will shed new light on the deep-running logic of the emergence of so-called modern Orientalism: a process of exoticization that tries to construct colonial slavery practiced in the Old Colonies into an Oriental phenomenon, in which the violence inflicted on the Old Colonies is projected as violence by the Orientals.

La fille aux yeux d’or marks Balzac’s explicit engagement with his time. While the main plot happens during the Hundred Days, the narrative frame is situated in the early 1830s. The plot presents and encounter between a Frenchman and one or more women from the Old Colonies. To reconstruct the itinerary of the plot: a Georgian-born woman was bought as a slave (421) and taken to the West Indies, where she gave birth to a daughter, Paquita, who was brought up by a male slave Christemio who himself in all likelihood is a mulatto from North Africa. Euphemia, a

European Creole growing up in Havana, buys Paquita from the latter's gambling addict mother. Once married to the marquis San-Real, Euphemia brings Paquita, Paquita's mother and Christemio to Madrid (393). After the French occupation of Spain, San-Real moves to Paris, and the marquise follows, taking the trio with her as well.

Critics used to see the geography in *La fille aux yeux d'or* as too wild to be true, a loose conglomeration of heterogeneous elements: "L'Asie, l'Orient comprennent à la fois dans l'esprit de Balzac l'Extrême et le Proche Orient, l'Afrique, l'Inde, les pays tropicaux" (Saint-Amand 334, note 9). All of the places, however, were covered by the enormously mobile Napoleonic Empire. The seemingly eclectic and fanciful scenario in *La fille aux yeux d'or* is, in fact, firmly anchored in history. At the turn of the 19th century, Napoleon engaged with both the Old and the New Worlds. The Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801), for example, preceded the Saint-Domingue expedition (1802-1804). Because Napoleon's ambitions were turned both ways, East as well as West, the Old Colonies and the Orient became so intertwined that the one could not be looked at without the other's spectre being evoked. It was in searching for a maritime route to India for, among other things, gold, that Europeans reached America. Slave trade and slavery flourished when sugar became a huge source of gold. Paquita the person is made a surrogate of the real metal (Henri comments on the golden color of Paquita's eyes: "un jaune d'or qui brille, de l'or vivant, de l'or qui pense, de l'or qui aime et veut absolument venir dans votre gousset!" 400). Although Paquita is from Havana, Saint-Domingue/Haiti is lurking in the background. Balzac makes colonial subjects from slave colonies cross the seas to meet a metropolitan Frenchman. Not any ordinary Frenchman, but France's future leader: Henri de Marsay becomes prime minister under the July Monarchy. Through the fictional encounter between a French leader in training and subjects of the Old Colonies at a transitional moment in history, Balzac shows late Restoration and the July Monarchy's treatment of the Old Colonies. The French character becomes interested in women from slave colonies, and in so doing reenacts colonial slavery — not in actuality, however, but within the space of sexual fantasies.

Henri de Marsay conceptualizes his relationship with Paquita as an Oriental harem scenario. Henri de Marsay "trouva dans la Fille aux yeux d'or ce sérail que sait créer la femme aimante et à laquelle un homme ne renonce jamais". In an initial misunderstanding of the situation, Henri's friend Paul de Manerville talks about the marquise as if she were also a harem concubine (400-01). Paquita is closely watched over by the female guard Dona Concha, the male servant Christemio, and Paquita's own mother. The asexual Christemio, who uses his superior physical strength to execute every order from his mistress, offers the image of a eunuch. It is he who guides Henri into the secret interior of Paquita's chamber, leading him to physical intimacy with Paquita. The much feared sire San-Real, who never appears in person and who jealously hides his young and beautiful wife like an Oriental despot belongs to that same fantasy of an Oriental tale.

Thus, in framing his sexual experience as an adventure located in a harem, the Frenchman has turned colonial slavery, a French institution, into an Oriental practice. Paquita has a slave

mother, is herself a slave and confined by her master the marquise. But Henri insists on not seeing Paquita as a real slave, but only as an erotic slave, an exotic curiosity to be exploited for his sexual pleasure. By subjugating Paquita's body and mind, Henri effectively partakes, in the metropole, the ongoing slavery in the colonies. Henri's infatuation with Paquita assimilates him to white masters attracted to mulatto women in the French Caribbean (Sharpley-Whiting 44). Henri sees in Paquita an "assemblage de tout ce qu'il avait aimé en détail" (408), a "corps parfait où tout était volupté" (412), that is, the stereotype of the mulatto woman as consummate lover: "Tout ce que la volupté la plus raffinée a de plus savant, tout ce que pouvait connaître Henri de cette poésie des sens que l'on nomme l'amour, fut dépassé par les trésors que déroula cette fille dont les yeux jaillissants ne mentirent à aucune des promesses qu'ils faisaient." Sentences like these could come straight out of Moreau de Saint-Méry's writing on mulatto women of Saint-Domingue. "There is nothing that the most inflamed imagination can conceive, that she has not foreseen, divined, accomplished. Charming all senses, surrendering them to the most delicious ecstasies, and suspending them by the most seductive raptures: that is her sole study" (Garraway 231). The pornographic aspect of Henri de Marsay's adventure has been sensed, but no one has linked it to colonial slavery. Joan Dayan posits that the marquis de Sade "brought the plantation hell and its excesses into enlightenment Europe," and suggests that one living model for *Les Cent vingt journées de Sodome* written in 1789 is slavery in the French Antilles (Dayan 212-13). Dayan's insights shed light on the Balzacian text: the figure of Sade is lurking in the background as when Henri alludes to *Justine*, in speaking of a "livre qui a un nom de femme de chambre" (429). In Paquita, Henri enjoys occasions for abuses provided and sanctioned by slavery in the colonies.

The harem fantasy is also Henri's way of not recognizing as such the racial mingling produced by colonial slavery, that the physical presence of colonial subjects in France displays before his eyes. However, it is exactly through his pursuit of colonial subjects that the metropolitan Frenchman sees his own presumed racial purity and Frenchness collapse. In *La fille aux yeux d'or*, Henri de Marsay is a mixed blood, son born out of wedlock of an Englishman, Lord Dudley, and a Parisian woman. Paquita's master, the marquise San-Real, is daughter of Lord Dudley with a Spanish woman. It turns out that if Henri gets to go near Paquita in the first place, it is because his identical look to that of the marquise attracts Paquita's attention at a moment when the marquise is away in London. The novel does not make explicit reference to Henri's physical traits, but those of the marquise are described to Henri by his friend Paul de Manerville:

— Ah ! l'autre ! Mon cher de Marsay. Elle vous a des yeux noirs qui n'ont jamais pleuré, mais qui brûlent; des sourcils noirs qui se rejoignent et lui donnent un air de dureté démentie par le réseau de ses lèvres, sur lesquelles un baiser ne reste pas, des lèvres ardentes et fraîches; un teint mauresque auquel un homme se chauffe comme un soleil; mais, ma parole d'honneur, elle te ressemble...

— Tu la flattes ! (400-401)

Given the marquise's "teint mauresque," and that Henri and she have identical looks to the point of being undistinguishable, Henri's phenotype is open to interpretation. Thus, as Balzac makes clear, the Frenchman who zealously sets himself as the opposite of the Creole, *métis*, alien colonial subjects is himself not only of mixed blood, but also dark-skinned for knowing eyes. Therefore, the harem fantasy backfires. What seems to be exotic is not so exotic, and what seems to be French not that French.

In Henri de Marsay, Balzac presents his vision of France as a nation transformed by blood and racial mixing through colonial and intra-European contact during the revolutionary and imperial years. It was through successive marriages that Henri's mother secured her son an aristocratic name and served her own desire for social ascension. Henri's trajectory incorporates the destabilization and also opportunities that the turmoil of history brought to personal fortunes, including parentage. At a time when the July Monarchy's legitimacy complex makes bloodline a national concern,¹ Balzac reveals the fragile and fictive nature of purity in terms of race, blood or lineage. The name of Henri could be Balzac's tongue-in-cheek comment on the myth of the unbroken French royal bloodline.² France is always, already, "mixed up." Giving multinational dimensions to his male character's biological and cultural make-up, Balzac refutes both French purity and European purity, and subverts the racial opposition to render Europe at once unified, uniformly white, and necessarily and normatively free, a tendency that is already there in late Restoration's position in the Greek War of Independence, and that will undergird the new colonial project, in which the colonizers are not to be united socially and racially with the colonized, but instead mark themselves off clearly from the latter.

For Henri, who is to be among promoters and even leaders of the new colonial project for France, it is vital to maintain the myth of the colonizers' racial purity and difference from the colonized. In fact, the more precarious their status as pure Frenchmen, the more eager they seem to establish the boundaries, no matter how artificial. The community of colonial subjects from the Old Colonies, through the contact of which Henri's own history of blood or racial mixing is exposed, has to be purged from the metropole. And so it is. But the moment of apparent completion of the purge is also the moment at which the Frenchman endorses the legacy of colonial slavery to the fullest.

¹ Historically, Louis XIV married several of his bastards into the branch of his younger brother, the Duc d'Orléan. As a result, Louis-Philippe effectively had closer blood-tie to Louis XIV than to his nominal ancestor. While Louis-Philippe's father voted for the beheading of Louis XVI, Louis-Philippe bore a startling physical resemblance to the Sun King and was obsessed about it. For a detailed account of Louis-Philippe's genealogy, see Guy Antonetti, *Louis-Philippe*, 9-25.

² There are four kings named Henri in French history, one direct Capetian, two Valois and one Bourbon. When the last Valois Henri III died without progeny, it was the Protestant Henri III of Navarre who converted to Catholicism and became Henri IV.

Upon finding out that he is but a “fill-in,” Henri plans to kill Paquita. While he prepares, the marquise comes back from London, finds out Paquita’s “betrayal” and stabs her to death. When Henri arrives, he witness the gruesome scene of Paquita’s last moments :

La Fille aux yeux d’or expirait noyée dans le sang. [...] Cet appartement blanc, où le sang paraissait si bien, trahissait un long combat. Les mains de Paquita étaient empreintes sur les coussins. Partout elle s’était accrochée à la vie, partout elle s’était défendue, et partout elle avait été frappée. Des lambeaux entiers de la tenture cannelée étaient arrachées par ses mains ensanglantées, qui sans doute avaient lutté longtemps. Paquita devait avoir essayé d’escalader le plafond. Ses pieds nus étaient marqués le long du dossier du divan, sur lequel elle avait sans doute couru. Son corps, déchiqueté à coups de poignard par son bourreau, disait avec quel acharnement elle avait disputé une vie qu’Henri lui rendait si chère. Elle gisait à terre, et avait, en mourant, mordu les muscles du cou-de pied de madame de San-Real, qui gardait à la main son poignard trempé de sang.

[...] ils purent ainsi se contempler tous deux face à face. [...] En effet, deux Ménechmes ne se seraient pas mieux ressemblé. Ils dirent ensemble le même mot: — Lord Dudley doit être votre père?

Chacun d’eux baissa la tête affirmativement.

— Elle est fidèle au sang, dit Henri en montrant Paquita.

— Elle était aussi peu coupable qu’il est possible, reprit Margarita-Euphémia Porrabénil [...]

(450, 451-452)

Significantly in this passage, a European is designated as a “bourreau” who admits having taken the life of a colonial slave “aussi peu coupable qu’il est possible.” Balzac’s text lays bare, both literally and figuratively the true nature of slavery: an institution in which the master can be butcher of the slave. The image of cannibalism further breaks down the difference between civilized and savage. In the colonial discourse of the time, indigenous people were accused of cannibalism, their native bodies became sites of violating desire and charges of sexual depravity gave Europeans license to enslave and slaughter. While Paquita looks like a cannibal, in that she covers the marquise’s body with bites in her struggle for life, Paquita’s mutilated, almost dissected body in the hands of the marquise turns the latter’s deed into an instance of cannibalism as well. In fact, Henri de Marsay’s thirteen-member gang, which he brings on site with him for the occasion, is called “les Dévorants.” Through forms of moral and economic cannibalism applied to the metropole, Balzac gestures rather towards the Old World, reversing France’s vision of itself as an imperial nation, of its colonial doctrine, and of its role overseas.

Paquita’s death leads to the self and mutual recognition of her double masters. In Paquita’s killing, Henri lost to the marquise only because he has come too late. He would have done the same had he arrived ahead of the marquise. In fact, previously Henri already attempted murder: hearing Paquita call the marquise’s name during their love-making, Henri reached for the dagger which happened to be locked, then tried to strangle Paquita, who escaped only thanks to Christemio’s arrival (446). In Paquita’s murder, the half-brother and sister play complementary roles in an unholy alliance. The two siblings’ uttering and nodding in unison gives their family

reunion an almost ritualistic aspect, and assimilates Lord Dudley to an object of cult: Lord Dudley, the ultimate empire builder, is not only their biological father, but also their ideological father. The image this scene offers, of Spanish and French siblings united in criminal rivalry recognizing in each other their British father, constitutes a powerful critique of Europe's exploitation of the world through competitive cooperation.

Over Paquita's dead body, Henri and the marquise dutifully perform their role of master. Henri's comment that Paquita "est fidèle au sang" rehearses most banal slave master fantasies. Whether he means, narcissistically, that Paquita is loyal to the blood he and the marquise share in common, or in an essentialist way, that Paquita is faithful to her own kind, he sees in Paquita a creature born enthralled or born wicked. Their calm and indifference about Paquita's death, the easiness with which Henri pardons his half-sister ("Henri la pren[d] dans ses bras et lui donn[e] un baiser" 453), and the *désinvolture* Henri shows later when reporting Paquita's death ("—Elle est morte [...] de la poitrine" 453) are typical attitudes of slave masters vis-à-vis their slaves' suffering. With equal composure the marquise tells Henri why she does not fear revenge from Paquita's mother: "Elle est d'un pays où les femmes ne sont pas des êtres, mais des choses dont on fait ce qu'on veut, que l'on vend, que l'on achète, que l'on tue, enfin dont on se sert pour ses caprices, comme vous vous servez ici de vos meubles." (452). The most explicit vocabulary of slave trade and slavery in the speech contrasts with the most blatant blindness of the speaker, who seems completely unable to relate it to herself: the marquise talks about Georgia, or the West Indies. But haven't the marquise and Henri disposed of Paquita like a piece of furniture? Hasn't Paquita just met her death — in Paris? Barriers between "here" and "there" are blurred, and the ideal of French civilization is demolished and replaced with a vision of moral regression and colonial venality.

With physical signs of the Old Colonies out of sight, Henri's apprenticeship is completed, he goes on to become pillar figures of the July Monarchy and play an important role in the country's domestic and colonial affairs. Once when talking about getting away with Paquita, Henri suggests that they go to the Indies:

— Allons aux Indes, là où le printemps est éternel, où la terre n'a jamais que des fleurs, où l'homme peut déployer l'appareil des souverains, sans qu'on en glose comme dans les sots pays où l'on veut réaliser la plate chimère de l'égalité. Allons dans la contrée où l'on vit au milieu d'un peuple d'esclaves, où le soleil illumine toujours un palais qui reste blanc, où l'on sème des parfums dans l'air, où les oiseaux chantent l'amour, et où l'on meurt quand on ne peut plus aimer... (445)

Despite its sunshine-filled imagery, Henri's speech carries a chilling message. By putting these words into the mouth of a July Monarchy prime minister-to-be, Balzac conveys his perception of the underside of the regime's colonial project. The solemn rhetoric of civilizing the world covers up a desire to conquer and dominate. The new destination of French colonialism, be it Africa or Asia, is to be fashioned in the image of the Old Colonies in the sense that the colonizer will still rule over a "peuple d'esclaves." Not chattel slaves this time, but who nevertheless have to be

subjugated for the colonizer's occupation of land and exploitation of resources. In *La fille aux yeux d'or*, it is Henri, the future colonizer, who plays the role of an Oriental despot, who "exerçait le pouvoir autocratique du despote oriental" (425), "qui ne savait pas pardonner" (447), who usually "condamnait froidement à mort l'homme ou la femme qui l'avait offensé sérieusement" (425). In the end, the Oriental despot is Henri's creation in his own image. For the same reason the new colonialism is a self-fulfilling prophecy: a people of slaves will be found because no matter what they were before the arrival of the colonizer, they will be turned into slaves by the colonizer. Henri pronounces these words to Paquita in a moment of intimacy, his dream comes true only with Paquita's annihilation as a precondition. Over Paquita's dissected body drenched in blood, the man and woman who killed her are now on their way of a new imperial journey. The opening section of *La fille aux yeux d'or* compares Paris to a vessel:

LA VILLE DE PARIS a son grand mât tout de bronze, sculpté de victoire, et pour vigie Napoléon. Cette nauf a bien son tangage et son roulis; mais elle sillonne le monde, y fait feu par les cent bouches de ses tribunes, laboure les mers scientifiques, y vogue à pleines voiles, crie du haut de ses huniers par la voix de ses savants et de ses artistes:
— En avant, marchez! Suivez-moi! (386)

As Paul Gilroy points out, the metaphor of ships occupies a prominent place in description of colonialism (4). The mast in this passage alludes to the column on the Place Vendôme. Louis-Philippe put it up in 1833, and during the July Days unveiled the new statue "Napoleon the Caporal" by Emile Seurre. As became clear, the July Monarchy tried hard to shape the interpretation of Napoleon to its advantage, by exerting careful control over the iconography and symbolism associated with Napoleon. The king exploited this source of national glory as a means of buttressing his claim to the throne, not in a dynastic sense but in the national development of French political institutions. The July Monarchy reappropriated Napoleon's conquest, but in the service of its new colonialism: it thus reinvented the invasion of Algeria as a second Egyptian expedition. In the same year of 1833, the first *bureau arabe* was established, and in 1834 the occupied territories were officially proclaimed *Possessions françaises dans le nord de l'Afrique*, thus confirming the French intention to stay in Algeria.

While the indigenous Algerians would, in Albert Boime's words, "be compelled to pay the price for raising the hopes as well as the standard of living of the average French person," (309), the bloody conquest of Algeria was to be kept out of sight of the metropolitan population, a function largely assumed by the new Orientalism. In the same year of 1834, more than thirty paintings with Orientalist themes were exhibited at the Salon (Boime 365). Images of slave markets and seraglios in Near Eastern and North African settings became omnipresent, available to the general public. In *La fille aux yeux d'or* a typical owner of a "petit commerce" (374), a "mercier," is eager to have a taste of such images:

Il se trouve à l'Opéra, prêt à y devenir soldat, Arabe, prisonnier, sauvage, paysan, ombre, patte de chameau, lion, diable, génie, esclave, eunuque noir ou blanc, toujours expert à produire de la joie, de la douleur, de la pitié, de l'étonnement, à pousser d'invariables cris,

à se taire, à chasser, à se battre, à représenter Rome ou l'Égypte; mais toujours in petto, mercier. (376)

With the help of props, the petty bourgeois is “to become” a variety of characters and things and “to produce” various sentiments. He can now enjoy his own harem fantasy, as pure spectacle and entertainment. Orientalism feeds him with representations of the Orient in theater, so that he does not concern himself with what is happening on the North African war theater.

Early on in the 1830s, when a seemingly aestheticizing and escapist Orientalism was in the making, Balzac's fiction perspicaciously captured the hidden link between the Old Colonies and the New Orient. Henri de Marsay's Orientalism is not a passive “turning away” from the Old Colonies, but an active construction. Through a process of exoticization, Henri tries to make something familiar alien, to disavow colonial slavery as French practice. At the same time, however, Balzac allows the tension between the Frenchman's fantasy and his actual endorsement of slavery to build up to the point at which the fantasy is no longer sustainable and the violent expulsion of the colonial subjects becomes the only solution.

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