

Scott on Manet (2014)

Manet, Jenny. *Maïotte: roman martiniquais inédit*. Ed. Jacqueline Couti. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014. Pp. xl + 212. ISBN: 978-2-343-03194-1

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Jacqueline Couti's presentation of Jenny Manet's *Maïotte* is an important rediscovery of an author largely ignored by critical studies of nineteenth-century Martinican literature. It includes a contextualized introduction, a presentation of the novel, which originally appeared in the newspaper, *Les Colonies*, as a *roman-feuilleton*, a selection of articles from *Les Colonies*, and a glossary of Creole words.

Couti's introduction is both an excellent reference in its contextualization of *Maïotte* in the specific socio-political and temporal frames of the work, and a thoughtful analysis of the place of Manet in Martinican, Caribbean, and nineteenth-century studies. Couti suggests that Manet has largely been "forgotten," in part, because the *roman-feuilleton* is a genre that receives little critical respect (viii). However, Couti defends the importance of this genre, insisting that "ces documents historiques illustrent pourtant la complexité et la richesse de la culture antillaise et permettent de reconsidérer la reconstruction du passé chez les auteurs antillais contemporains" (x).

Appearing in *Les Colonies* from January 2 to March 10, 1896, *Maïotte* is the story of a love triangle between the eponymous young white Creole woman, Maïotte Bonnemain, a Frenchman new to Martinique, Gilbert Dorel, and a black servant, Popotte. While the plot of the story is by no means novel—Gilbert and Maïotte are kept apart by hazards of fate, and ultimately find their way back to each other, only to be torn apart by disaster—and the characters are, in large part, reduced to stereotypes—Gilbert, the naïve French visitor; Maïotte, the angelic white Creole; and Popotte, the manipulative, hyper-sexualized black servant—Manet's depictions of Martinican landscape, language, and social and racial dynamics provide what Couti refers to as "la valeur documentaire" of this text (viii). Furthermore, in her depiction of the hurricane that concludes the text, Manet participates in the long tradition of disaster writing in the Caribbean, years before the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902 and a century before the Haitian earthquake of 2010.

The depictions of the landscape were striking to the Martinican reader at the time, in part because Manet herself was European, not Creole. One reader described her work: "C'est là un vrai paysage lamartinien [...] Il y a là plus que de la vérité, il y a là de la poésie" (187). In addition to this high praise of the poetics of her work, locals were impressed by the accuracy of her description of the natural environment in the work. As opposed to her contemporary Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote from Martinique toward an American audience, Couti argues that, through this dedication to an accurate depiction of the landscape, Manet was unique writing about Martinicans, for Martinicans (xii). This explains, in part, the positive reception from the Martinican public.

The eleven articles added in an appendix to the story are especially intriguing and encourage further study of the writings of Manet. Couti includes the newspaper's conclusion to *Maïotte*, where, reflecting on the response of the readership, P. de B. congratulates Manet on her use of language, writing, at times, with "la vraie langue martiniquaise" (187). Insisting that this language is not Creole, he continues, "c'est du français et même du français correct, mais ce n'est pas du français de la France" (187). This defense of the local use of language reflects a desire to protect Creole culture, or "créolité," long before the "créolistes" of the 1970s and 80s, Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau (xxxi). This attention to language as cultural expression, Couti argues, encourages us to think twice about the way critics consider the history of Martinican writing today.

Couti also includes articles written by Manet herself. While some of these articles engage with her readers' reactions to *Maïotte*, others reflect more generally on the position of women. For example, Manet vigorously defends woman's potential for "genius," and argues that if a woman has not yet produced a "chef d'oeuvre," it is because she has been held down so long by men (192–94). Such articles, judiciously appended by Couti, though without comment, offer an insight into Manet's views on women in Martinican society in the late nineteenth century, an insight that would make a fascinating subject for future study.

From the authoritative and instructive introduction, through the enlightening articles in the appendix, Couti presents an important study of a little-known author. This edition will serve nineteenth-century, Caribbean, and post-colonial scholars alike in its exploration of representations of race, gender, and sexuality, offering new implications for these fields, and encouraging

“la relecture des textes coloniaux comme prétextes, contextes et intertextes et de leur influence dans la littérature contemporaine” (xxxv).

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