

Enz on Reybaud, ed. Curtis (2013)

Reybaud, Fanny. *Quatre nouvelles antillaises: Marie d'Énambuc, Les Épaves, Sydonie, Madame de Rieux*. Ed. Lesley S. Curtis. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013. Pp. 145. ISBN 978-2-343- 02624-4

Molly Krueger Enz, *South Dakota State University*

Madame Charles Reybaud, née Henriette-Étiennette-Fanny Arnaud, was a prolific Romantic French writer who nearly fell into oblivion in the twentieth century. Lesley S. Curtis's critical edition, *Quatre nouvelles antillaises*, promises to regenerate interest in this important author who deserves more critical attention. The collection is divided into a twenty-three-page introduction followed by a bibliography of Reybaud's works, a list of critical studies on the author, and finally her four short stories *Marie d'Énambuc*, *Les Épaves*, *Sydonie*, and *Madame de Rieux*.

The thorough and well-written introduction contains a myriad of scholarly references and integrates Curtis's insightful research on Reybaud as well as race and gender in the nineteenth century. As a result, Curtis effectively frames Reybaud's fiction within the historical and cultural context in which it was written, thus facilitating a better understanding of her œuvre. For example, in the section "L'auteure, la femme et sa réception," Curtis presents the 1830s as a "moment de transition pour le champ littéraire français" (ix) characterized by an increased number of women writers. Curtis describes Madame Charles Reybaud's use of androgynous pen names such as Claude Ahlvan and H. Arnaud. She argues: "Même le nom de Madame Charles Reybaud rend hommage à son mari qui lui ouvre les pages du *Constitutionnel*, dont il est rédacteur en chef" (ix–x). Curtis carefully examines the question of gender as it relates to the "limites imposées aux auteurs de l'époque et de l'attention particulière que Reybaud prête aux femmes dans ses écrits" (xi). She adds that in Reybaud's literature, the author depicts powerful women "qui ne font que représenter les mœurs de leur pays" (xi).

The adjective "antillais(e)" is employed in the title and repeated throughout the introduction to describe the author's works. Although the four texts in this collection are set in France's former Caribbean island colonies, they were written in the author's homeland of France. At first glance, the reference to the stories as "Antillean" has the potential to be confusing for those unfamiliar with Reybaud. However, at the end of the introduction's first section, Curtis reminds her readers of the clear link between the four novellas in this collection. "Le passé colonial de la France ainsi que la présence de la femme française aux Antilles sont des thèmes qui relient les quatre nouvelles présentées dans cette édition" (ix). Curtis explains that *Marie d'Énambuc* (1840) opens the edition because the story is set in the mid-seventeenth century at the beginning of France's intervention in the West Indies. Reybaud relies on the history of Martinique to frame her characterization of Marie d'Énambuc as well as the overall story that explores the economic implications of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial system.

Les Épaves (1838) continues in Martinique but now in the eighteenth century. The female protagonist, Cécile, falls in love with Donatien—a man of mixed race living on the former d'Énambuc plantation. The latter is an "épave," defined by Reybaud as "un nègre ou un mulâtre qui n'appartient à personne et qui n'a pourtant aucun titre de liberté" (87). The question of Donatien's liberty becomes paramount when Cécile's uncle, M. de la Rebelière, attempts to sell him due to a lack of freedom papers. He cites the *Code Noir* as justification, and the issue of who "owns" Donatien becomes a primary concern for all of the characters. The next novella, *Sydonie* (1846), takes place in Saint-Domingue at the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, a pivotal moment in colonial history. Reybaud portrays the diverse population of the former French colony comprised of white colonists, black slaves originating from various parts of Africa, and "gens de couleur" who possessed a combination of European and African roots. The final story in the collection, *Madame de Rieux* (1839), begins in France and includes a transatlantic voyage. Shortly after an arranged marriage to her older cousin, Christine de Rieux leaves the *métropole* with her father and spouse in search of lost treasure and property in Haiti. However, she encounters tragedy when her husband perishes en route to the New World, her father faces difficulties recovering the family's fortune, and she ultimately commits suicide after being denied the possibility of a union with the man she loves. Curtis argues that Christine's lack of power and inability to marry a respectable man puts an end to "cette histoire rêvée de la femme française aux Antilles" (xxviii).

Lesley S. Curtis's critical edition of Fanny Reybaud's Caribbean novellas brings warranted attention to a neglected but important author and her works, expands the nineteenth-century canon of French literature, and therefore makes a significant contribution to the field of French and Francophone studies. The novellas could easily be paired with other female-authored nineteenth-century texts that treat intersections of race and gender such as Claire de Duras's *Ourika*, Sophie Doin's *La Famille noire*, *Noire et Blanc*, and *Blanche et Noir*, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah*, and George Sand's *Indiana*. Furthermore, the excellent introduction helps the reader better understand Reybaud as well as France's relationship with its former

Caribbean island colonies, and the detailed bibliography provides useful sources for further reading and research. In conclusion, *Quatre nouvelles antillaises* serves as an invaluable resource for scholars working on Reybaud, on nineteenth-century French or Francophone fiction, and on literary representations of race and gender.

Volume: 43.3-4

Year:

- 2015