

A Legacy of Silence

by COURTNEY BAKER. 1996

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"She was silent and submissive. This was very appropriate, after all, since she had no soul, and she was of a race of slaves. She was lazy and stupid."
— Camille Mauclair, 1927

"... it is the penchant for misery that kept him near the emaciated body of Louchette, and his love for 'the hideous Jewess' that is like a prefiguration of what he would later bring to his relationship with Jeanne Duval..."
— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, 1946

"Jeanne, the black witch, symbolized his damnation; Appollonie, the white angel, his salvation."
— F.W.J. Hemmings, *Baudelaire the Damned: A Biography*, 1982

Jeanne Duval, Charles Baudelaire's black mistress, has been an unavoidable subject in Baudelaire's biographies. Yet despite her obvious importance in Baudelaire's life and work (it was she who inspired the Black Venus cycle, arguably the most poetically significant poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*), very little is actually known about her. Historians and philosophers such as Sartre and Jean Prevost have searched through letters and other writings by Baudelaire and his contemporaries in an attempt to reconstruct something of Duval's identity and the quality of her nearly twenty-year relationship with the poet. What they have gleaned from these anecdotes is that the two endured an extremely tempestuous relationship, and that Duval was largely responsible for their domestic difficulties. The majority of musings on Duval during the one hundred and fifty years of Baudelairian criticism have portrayed her as ignorant, malicious and manipulative —

figuring as little more than an obstacle to the artist's genius. These pronouncements may be read as being shaped by the historical contexts of the Baudelaire's critics, contexts which themselves are intertwined in the history of race.

In embarking upon a study of the critical reception of Duval, one might reasonably expect to encounter hideously racist statements like that of Mauclair, or of Dr. Arthur Kraetzner who described her, in 1950, with shocking confidence as a bad, inferior and annoying woman, citing only her race as the basis of her inferiority. But the frequency of such comments coupled with their intensely offensive nature soon become numbing, and Duval, the biographical figure, becomes alienated and more distant.

The actual Duval is hidden, silenced by critical projection. Duval appears as Baudelaire's foil: she is the demon; Baudelaire is the saint. She is the greedy animal; he is the generous, yet tortured soul. However, it is not only the critics who silence her, but Baudelaire as well.

Duval was a woman living in nineteenth century Western society — a fact which could culturally preclude her from maintaining an identity separate from her male companion and benefactor. Moreover, Duval was a *black* woman: an exotic foreigner by sight. She never managed to achieve the same fame or social renown as Madame Sabatier (Appollonie) another of Baudelaire's muses, who maintained a popular literary salon. Although Duval is frequently compared to Sabatier, the juxtaposition is framed so that it may reveal the contrast between the dark, earthy Duval and the light, spiritual Sabatier. If for the critics Madame Sabatier represented the ideal woman, then Duval represented a woman's tragic fall from grace.

In response to the critical precedents, Lorraine O'Grady presents an alternate view of Duval and her involvement with Baudelaire. Asserting that their relationship was in fact complex and authentic. O'Grady has invented a language that situates Duval as a cultural hybrid living in colonial and sexual exile. In doing so, it acts to complicate the discussion of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and the "histories" surrounding their relationship.

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