Book Reviews


In the late seventeenth century a young slave known as La Pucelle des Isles, of the French colony of Guadeloupe, refused to marry the male slave her owner had chosen for her because she was "miserable enough as it is without having to bring children into this world to be more miserable" (81). In the early 1840s, the former slave Virginie, also of Guadeloupe, won a protracted court battle to have her children freed as well, but by then her son was dead and her daughter already an adult. These are two of the women whose lives Bernard Moitt reconstructs in Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848. Moitt's thoroughly researched study has two purposes. First, it is an attempt to bring gender to bear in the historical investigation of slavery in the French Caribbean and thus "bring slave women out of the shadows of the slave plantation world and into full view, where they belong" (173). Moitt's second purpose is to stress the resilience, agency, and defiance of slave women and the remarkable strategies they devised to survive in dehumanizing conditions. Moitt sees his book as a "lesson" relevant in "a day and age when the young in particular have a tendency to give up rather quickly" (176).

The eight thematic chapters cover the period from the beginning of French colonization in the Caribbean to the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1848. Moitt first establishes the early presence of African women in the French Caribbean and thus "bring slave women out of the shadows of the slave plantation world and into full view, where they belong" (173). Moitt's first chapters rely heavily on secondary sources and printed reports by plantation owners, government authorities and travellers. The reader is reminded of the inconclusiveness of the data (and the need for inference and extrapolation) by phrases such as "it is likely," "it is not farfetched to suggest," and so forth. The last three chapters, which draw on the richer documentation surviving from the nineteenth century, are the most lively and satisfying. Moitt ably exploits court records to show the physical brutality regularly endured by slave women and their brave attempts to force the authorities to intervene against slaveowners. He explores how women resisted slavery, together with men (armed revolts and maroonage) and in gender-specific ways (poison and indiscipline), and considers the small number of slave women granted freedom by slaveowners or the state.

Moitt, who was born in Antigua, received a PhD from the University of Toronto, and now teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, has largely succeeded in his intention to produce a book useful to specialists and accessible to general readers. A valuable addition to the historiography of women and gender in the early modern period, this book should also inspire historians to continue probing the issue of gender and slavery and serve as a point of reference for comparative studies of slave women's experiences in the entire Caribbean region.

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A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected