

Are They Mad? Nation and Narration in *Tous les hommes sont fous*

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ABSTRACT: *All Men Are Mad*, by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin and Pierre Marcelin, is set during the antisuperstition campaign in Haiti, which was led by the French Catholic Church during the 1940s. The Marcelin brothers' novel was not only a devastating critique of religious persecution but also a pithy commentary on the structure of the nation-state, meaning all nation-states, not only the polity of Haiti. The text was consequently misread by literary critics whose stereotype of Haitians and belief in nationalism influenced their mean-spirited dismissals of the novel. This paper rereads the Marcelins' prescient novel and addresses its critics in light of critical theory and ethnography.

Introduction

Pierre Marcelin and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin are the authors of, among myriad other works, four novels: *Canapé-Vert* (1944), *La bête de Musseau* (1946), *Le crayon de Dieu* (1952), and *All Men Are Mad* (*Tous les hommes sont fous*) (1970).¹ The common thread between these four novels is the Marcelins' almost lyric preoccupation with religion and their often disturbing but all-too-real depiction of violence at all levels of Haitian society, from the personal to the collective and from the literal to the imaginative. It is, in fact, a reinterpretation of this violence, in the last of the novels by the Marcelins, *All Men Are Mad*, which comprises the main concern of this article. For despite literary critic Edmund Wilson's praise for the novel in his introduction to its English translation as "a most distinguished work of literature" comparable

1. Philippe Thoby-Marcelin and Pierre Marcelin, *Canapé-Vert* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1944); *La bête de Musseau* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1946); *Le crayon de Dieu* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1952); *All Men Are Mad*, trans. Eva Thoby-Marcelin, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). Since *All Men Are Mad* was first published in English, we refer to the text by its English title.

to the likes of Maupassant and Anatole France,² *All Men Are Mad* has received little critical attention; and the few critics who have engaged the text either treat the work as exhibiting broad and universally applicable themes, such as man versus nature, man versus God (or the gods, in this case), or male versus female, or they dismiss the novel as little more than a melodramatic and unfairly negative depiction of Haitian society.³

What these kinds of analyses ultimately offer us remains an avenue of interpreting the novel along the binaries of culture and nature, male and female, black and white, Protestant and Catholic. And we might call these “folk” models of interpretation, that is, folk models of European post-Enlightenment classification.⁴ These analyses rely much too heavily on sharp distinctions—distinctions like male and female, or black and white—in a text that is constantly asking us to reevaluate these very distinctions. In fact, much of the novel, as this essay hopes to demonstrate, exposes the hypocrisy of those who authorize and police the boundaries that make up the very core of these distinctions. Daniel D. Driskell and Douglass Radcliff-Umstead, for example, write, “In the four novels, Haitian society seems to be fundamentally founded upon an incessant tension of racial, linguistic, religious and governmental binary oppositions.”⁵ Yet, these “racial, linguistic, religious and governmental” tensions cannot be understood along the lines of strict binary relationships, especially when we consider that even among members of the same household, particularly in *All Men Are Mad*, we have Catholics and Protestants, Vodouists in name only coupled with the truly devout; we also have domestic servants (*restavèk*) who are family members, the rich interspersed among the poor, and Creole speakers struggling to gain approval through academic French. The point is that it remains increasingly difficult to consider binary oppositions (such as French versus Creole) in this text, since even those who should be aligned, such as Eudovia and her husband Mayor Origène,

2. Edmund Wilson, introduction to *All Men Are Mad*, xi–xii.

3. See, for example, Daniel D. Driskell and Douglass Radcliff-Umstead, “La mort dans le roman afro-haïtien,” *Présence francophone: Revue littéraire* 11 (1975): 119–32. Commenting on the metaphors of death and violence in the works of the brothers Marcelin, Driskell and Radcliff-Umstead contend that one of the overarching themes in these novels remains that of death as it is presented through an “eternal struggle between culture and nature,” and taking a naturalist approach to Haitian literature, they find that a “sense of fatality haunts the strange world that the brothers Marcelin have painted in their works” (119). For Driskell and Radcliff-Umstead, the works of the brothers Marcelin remain wholly characterized by a sense of fatalism, in which people are not so much actors as they are pawns in nature’s system of degeneration and regeneration. According to this analysis, it is the *lwa*, then, who serve as symbolic reminders of the powerlessness and futility of human beings to make great changes in a world they have not made.

4. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

5. Driskell and Radcliff-Umstead, “La mort dans le roman afro-haïtien,” 119; “La société haïtienne dans les quatre romans semble être fondamentalement édifée sur une tension incessante d’oppositions binaires aux niveaux racial, linguistique, religieux et gouvernemental.”