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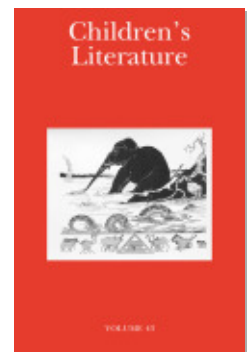
## **“A Toy in the White Man’s Hands”: Child-gifting, African Civilizability and the Construction of French National Identity in Marie Maréchal’s *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa***

Lise Schreier

Children's Literature, Volume 43, 2015, pp. 108-138 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/chl.2015.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.2015.0002)



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## “A Toy in the White Man’s Hands”: Child-gifting, African Civilizability and the Construction of French National Identity in Marie Maréchal’s *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*

Lise Schreier

In 1873, the prominent publishing house Hachette issued for the first time a story that would become a Third Republic-era bestseller: *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* (Ben-Aïssa’s Debt).<sup>1</sup> The novel, written by Marie Maréchal, opens with introductory letters from Captain Hervé de Léry announcing his return from “the most beautiful country in the world” (1): Algeria. In the first chapter, Hervé’s ten-year-old sister Diane eagerly awaits him at the train station, dreaming of the exotic souvenirs she might receive—a gazelle, a cockatiel, a hippopotamus, a camel, or maybe even a crocodile. The officer’s gift surpasses her expectations: he presents her with a Kabyle boy her own age, Ben-Aïssa, who soon becomes the little girl’s favorite “doll” (23). In the subsequent chapters, Diane undertakes her toy’s education, teaching him to eat with a fork, learn the value of work, be a good Christian and disciplined soldier, and ultimately to sacrifice his life for his adopted country during the Franco-Prussian war. The story ends with Ben-Aïssa stoically succumbing to his battle wounds and Diane transformed into an ideal Republican woman. Poised, patriotic, and happily married to the French soldier Ben-Aïssa saved at the cost of his own life, she has let go of her doll and is now presumably ready to use her well-honed child-rearing skills to raise her own offspring.<sup>2</sup>

*La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* appeared at a time when France faced several significant crises. The Franco-Prussian war, which ended with the disastrous loss of Alsace and Lorraine and the demise of the Second Empire, as well as the violent repression of the Paris Commune by government troops, had happened only two years before. Algeria had just been convulsed by a coup in Algiers and a devastating famine and uprising in Kabylia. These two sets of events converge in powerful ways in Maréchal’s narrative, which posits the Kabyle child as both one to be saved and a savior. The novel’s overall message is straightforward: a France that neglected the sacred duty to uplift colonized populations would soon compromise its foundational values and forever lose its

place in the world. The book's novelty lay in its sense of political urgency, proposing that it was now time for French children and, more specifically, French girls to participate in the country's regeneration.<sup>3</sup> The amputation of metropolitan France's eastern provinces made addressing this particular readership all the more imperative: in order to compensate for the loss, a new France must be born overseas. This new France would not only be created in governmental offices, but it would emerge in the domestic realm as well.

In what follows, I argue that Maréchal merged three distinct, time-tested narrative conventions—those of the Christian tale, the doll novel and the exotic-child-as-gift story—in *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* in order to inculcate the principles of the civilizing mission to young French readers. The conflation of these conventions led to an unprecedented way of involving children in the evolving national imperial project, and turned the book into an age-appropriate and timely political read. In addition, I demonstrate that Maréchal's novel fuses these three narrative models in order to convey an overarching message about giving and reciprocity. The story is not only about a soldier presenting a doll to a little girl, or a French family gifting an African orphan with a Western education, it is also about giving back. In exchange for their presents, both Diane and Ben-Aïssa tacitly agree to behave in ways others (mothers, educators, officers) find acceptable. This innovative fusing of reworked genres is thus ideologically significant in that it sought to enlist young readers into the project of republican colonialism in very specific ways—notably by enjoining them to comply with its principles both in the domestic realm and overseas.

The first section of this essay explains how Maréchal enfolded Third Republic colonial ideology in a religion-inflected discourse. In keeping with the central tenets of nineteenth-century children's literature, which, as Bénédicte Monicat pointed out, generally preclude ideological and structural deviations, the book echoes other Christian edifying tales, all the while telling young readers about their central role in France's regeneration. The next section argues that *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* is deeply indebted to the doll novel genre, and echoes other nineteenth-century bestsellers in which dolls were center stage. It posits that the genre was so popular at the time that the young readers' familiarity with its narrative structures shaped their understanding of Ben-Aïssa's value, both as a toy and a colonial subject. The third section shows that Ben-Aïssa is not just a variation of the rosy-cheeked doll so frequently appearing in youth literature at the time: rather, he

is deeply racially encoded. In addition to “Kabyle,” Ben-Aïssa also appears as “Arab” and “black.” As Pierre Pluchon and others have shown, a number of Old Regime stories and paintings portray dark-skinned children presented as gifts to French women and children.<sup>4</sup> Maréchal’s reformulated version of this trope in a late nineteenth-century, colonial ideological syntax allowed her to present the radical (and ultimately lethal) objectification of a North African as a central component of the civilizing mission. The last section demonstrates that Ben-Aïssa’s gift status is central to the novel, and to Maréchal’s political agenda. As we shall see, the Christian tale, the doll novel and the child-gift narrative combine to posit gifting and reciprocity as fundamental in defining a new relationship between French women, France, and their “children.”

*“I will teach him to read, to say his prayers, to hold his fork and knife”*

Maréchal’s text revolves around two Christian principles to be inculcated in French youth: charity and sacrifice. Both virtues are neatly gendered in the novel, as the former was an important marker of upper-class femininity in nineteenth-century France, and the latter a masculine imperative at a time when the country urgently needed soldiers. Yet because Maréchal wanted to further extend her young readers’ responsibilities toward less fortunate others at a time of national crisis, the text is structured around a chiasmus, and opens with a masculine act of charity, to close with a feminine sacrifice. At the beginning of the story, Captain Hervé de Léry attempts to rescue an old Kabyle dying not from the ravages of war but from hunger. Next to the old man lies his daughter, who soon expires in spite of de Léry’s efforts and after pointing to her son, uttering the words: “Good Frenchman” (9). De Léry’s moral obligation is clear: he must rescue the child. The novel ends with Ben-Aïssa’s death. While his demise might have a spiritual connotation (Ben-Aïssa means “son of Jesus” in Arabic), the sacrifice is not so much his as Diane’s, whose ability to accept his passing marks her entry into adulthood, a typical closure for an edifying book. This didactic narrative frame points to the importance of remaining true to Christian codes of conduct during trying times. De Léry could not save Ben-Aïssa’s mother and grandfather, Diane could not save the orphan, but their charitable actions and their sacrifices contributed to the greater good—in this case, France’s glory.

Christian ethos and the urge to civilize are inextricably linked in the novel. Ben-Aïssa’s civilizing process begins in 1860, when Hervé brings the child to Normandy; it is immediately associated with the need to

teach him to behave like a Christian. During his first dinner at the de Lérays' table, the boy takes off his shoes, puts them on each side of his plate, and proceeds to eat roast beef with his fingers. The scene has a profound effect on Diane:

Diane was quite serious, perhaps for the first time in her life. Before going to sleep, she thought for a long time about her new friend. She no longer missed the camel, the gazelle, the hippopotamus, not even the crocodile...

All of her thoughts were of Ben-Aïssa because she was conscious of the importance of the task that befell her. The little Arab boy was hers, all hers: Hervé said so. What a responsibility this up-bringing was!

"I will teach him to read, to say his prayers, to hold his knife and fork, because he eats like a real little savage!" (36–37)

Diane's resolutions become her guiding principles. Under her tutelage, Ben-Aïssa does learn to speak French, eat "the French way" (58), read and write, and understand "the most moving precepts of Christianity" (107). From the very first day, the girl's civilizing project is therefore tightly connected to both an act of charity (the boy is hungry) and a desire to convert him (learning to pray is at the very center of her curriculum, between reading and eating).<sup>5</sup>

Ben-Aïssa's conversion to Christianity is the culmination of Diane's efforts and leads to the second phase of the civilizing process. In chapter XVIII, the protagonist decides to become Ben-Aïssa's godmother. She renames him Georges, because he once saved her from a rabid dog—an evocation of the mythical dragon in the mind of the imaginative girl. On the way back from the baptismal ceremony, Diane formulates the organizing principle of the second half of the narrative: "When you become a soldier, I will no longer wish for anything" (172). Naturally, the boy opts for a military career. The girl's plans for her godson make it clear to the readers that becoming a Christian and becoming a soldier go hand in hand. Her decision to rename the boy Georges on the baptismal font confirms this principle later, when the Prussian who attempts to kill Diane's fiancé on the battlefield turns out to be a dragoon (an infantryman; "dragon" means both dragon and dragoon in French). Ben-Aïssa moves from slaying a preparatory enemy (the rabid dog) to doing away with the most dangerous threat facing the nation (a Prussian). He remains, however, at Diane's service, never fighting for his own life or country, but for her husband's and for France. The conversion, while arguably humanizing him, does not change his main

function, that of an educational device. The title of the chapter, “Diane plays the saint” (165), says that much, indicating that *Diane’s* Christian education is the main focus of the episode. What really matters is for the little girl to role-play being a godmother, because this is how she will learn to proselytize and civilize.<sup>6</sup>

The civilizing process for Ben-Aïssa involves not only a Christian conversion, but his successful integration into the disciplinary society of nineteenth-century France as well. School features prominently in this undertaking. After the boy’s baptism, Diane’s mother decides that he must be properly educated—that is, educated by real (male) schoolmasters. The twelve-year-old is therefore sent to public school in Paris, where he goes by his new name Georges and learns to wake up at a specific time, move at the sound of a drum, sit motionless and silent for hours. More importantly, he internalizes the necessity of strict regimentation: “I understand why our teacher does not grant us permission to play around. When one has a contingent of forty or fifty Ben-Aïssas at one’s command, and they must march at the same pace, discipline becomes necessary” (179). What is remarkable here is the extent to which his newfound (and already tenuous) humanity is undermined by the mechanization of his existence. He now lives with forty or fifty of his avatars, following the orders of a schoolmaster whose *modus operandi* likens him to a colonial officer. Significantly, this regimen leads Ben-Aïssa to mention Africa for the first time since he left Kabylia. He writes Diane that “an older pupil, whose father is colonel in Africa, and who knows a bit of Arabic, took [me] under his protection” (180). This older student helps him memorize his lessons and complete his homework, thus becoming a double of the schoolmaster and underlining the connection between the French school system and the colonial army, which both took a number of presumably subservient indigenes under their wing.

Ben-Aïssa’s triumphant return to Normandy after his high school graduation marks another important step in the civilizing enterprise: the boy is about to become a productive member of French society. In a scene mirroring the day of Ben-Aïssa’s arrival, the de Lérys welcome him back to the estate and celebrate his accomplishments: “Two first prizes on the main examination! Eighteen volumes! Not to mention countless regular prizes! . . . All together, about forty beautiful books, gilded on the edges, decorated with laurels!” (200). Ben-Aïssa no longer eats meat with his hands. The family’s mirth no longer has to do with his impropriety, but with his schoolwork. The boy, who was first brought from Africa along with “amber necklaces, palm tree fans, Tunisian lan-

terns, small bottles of oil, oriental shelves, etc." (14), arrives this time with the most civilized of troves: prize books. Not only has Ben-Aïssa become a textbook example of civilizing and Christianizing; the texts he brings back to Normandy are most probably about civilizing and Christianizing as well. Strikingly, by bringing these volumes to the de Lérays, the boy performs publicity for the very type of text *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* is: a prize book. Here the novel produces itself, all the while teaching children to educate colonial others—a surefire way to become award winners too. In this scene, the story strays from a strictly edifying message to manifest its outward commercial ambitions (prize books were hugely profitable at the time). Meanwhile Ben-Aïssa, in the midst of his triumph, becomes indeed productive, but he remains instrumentalized, for he has become not so much an exemplary student, as the perfect educational tool.

Ben-Aïssa's end is the ultimate confirmation of Diane's exemplary Christian behavior, for it underlines the value of her sacrifice. Coming back from the front, the lethally wounded Kabyle goes back to Normandy once more, and expires in peace: as he explains on his deathbed, "I am dying for France, in the midst of those I love, and was able to save a life a hundred times more precious than my own" (249). This life is, as we recall, that of Diane's fiancé Robert. Poignant as it is, this final scene helps young readers understand that civilizing Ben-Aïssa had a purpose. By raising her plaything to become a Christian and a soldier, Diane saved her future husband's life, which will allow her to become a mother. Ben-Aïssa's own sacrifice, while dramatic, is presented as logical. It was his duty as a soldier to fight on the battlefield. In addition, by saving the family Diane is about to start with Robert, the young Kabyle merely paid his debt to the de Lérays, who rescued and civilized him. Ben-Aïssa's last moments remind young readers of what seems to be a central message of the novel, as is indicated by its title, that of its last chapter, "Aïssa pays his debt" (251), and its last sentence, "The last of the Henencha had paid his debt" (252): populations civilized by the French are indebted to them. Charity, debt, sacrifice and colonial ideology are thus interwoven in an interesting manner in this edifying tale. Together, they lead children to understand that everyone must give something away to save the country. Diane forfeits her treasured exotic present; Ben-Aïssa, his life. The Christian-inflected discourse about charity and sacrifice pervasive in the novel thus neatly enfolds a very strong ideological message.

But if the book's last paragraph is characterized by patriotic and Christian pathos, it also emphasizes the limits of Ben-Aïssa's assimila-

tion. The character might have become a “Christian soldier” (248), but his agony ends in his mother tongue:

“Do not cry, I am going to God, to the true homeland.”

Such were Aïssa’s last words.

His end was gentle; he died bravely like a soldier, full of hope like a Christian.

At the last hour, when his spirit seemed to already have left his body, one could hear him unintelligibly whisper a slow and monotonous song.

That is how the old man [Ben-Aïssa’s grandfather, whom Hervé had attempted to rescue at the beginning of the story] died on the desolate plateau at El-Aradja! But more happily than his grandfather, Aïssa died consoled by faith, and reassured by Christian hope (251).

Strikingly, at the very end of the story, Ben-Aïssa’s “homeland” is simultaneously subsumed under God and reaffirmed as Kabylia. Equally importantly, Ben-Aïssa’s speech becomes unintelligible, which points to another fundamental message: the Kabyle was not fully civilized after all, but was rather engaged in an effective and useful project of mimicry.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, on his deathbed, Ben-Aïssa is no longer playing house: what we witness instead might be likened to his own version of Césaire’s “great Negro cry” (134). The emotions expressed with his last breath are fully his. This return of the repressed complicates the boy’s identity and leads to question whether he was mimicking the French by choice, or because he had no other option. While it seems to turn the entire novel on its head, this last scene actually solves a nagging question about Diane’s civilizing enterprise. The Kabyle’s unintelligibility and his death save the narrative from facing the threatening implications of a truly assimilated African and his relationship with a French girl. Instead, a loyal, outwardly civilized but internally indigenous soldier expires defending France.

What to make, then, of the Christian lexicon deployed in this final episode, and more generally of the Christian narrative model Maréchal so consistently used to depict the civilizing process? As we recall, Ben-Aïssa’s conversion was presented as a defining moment in Ben-Aïssa’s upbringing, but also as a defining moment in Diane’s. Yet in this last scene, “Aïssa [dies] consoled by faith, and reassured by Christian hope,” which seems to indicate that the boy has indeed become Christian. But this final depiction of the boy might also mean that he is consoled and reassured by the de Lérays’ faith and hope, not his own. Furthermore,



Ben-Aïssa dies "like a soldier," "like a Christian" ("comme un soldat . . . comme un chrétien"), one step away from dying "as" a soldier, "as" a Christian (*en soldat . . . en chrétien*). At the end of the story, the Kabyle is therefore depicted as almost civilized, almost Christianized, but not quite, while the de Lérays fully inhabit their charitable selves. Such an ending might be regarded as too ambiguous for a children's book. Is Ben-Aïssa Christian, in the end, or not? The novel becomes less open to interpretation once we realize that Maréchal used another narrative strategy to show that Ben-Aïssa is indeed locked in mimicking mode until his death, and that in spite of his baptism he is not quite as human as other characters. As we shall see, Maréchal's deft appropriation of some of the doll novel characteristics reinforces her main message that colonial subjects are a means, not an end, to the rebuilding of the French Empire—that they are, to quote Fanon, but "a toy in the white man's hands" (BSWM 140).<sup>8</sup>

*"It's a doll dressed as an Arab woman"*

In France, texts featuring dolls were printed in large quantities throughout the nineteenth century. At a time when dolls were becoming more and more sophisticated and were beginning to be seen as pedagogical tools, publishers issued countless novels and magazines teaching girls how to take care of them. These extraordinarily popular products were geared to all ages, and many focused on "raising" dolls. Vetted by educators, mothers and doctors (some of whom authored doll novels themselves), they became prominent on many a girl's bookshelf. By the second half of the century, some doll narrative scenes were so pervasive that they even occasionally blended implicitly with another prevalent *topos* of nineteenth-century children's literature: that of the orphan. In the widely read *Mémoires d'un âne*, first published by the Countess de Ségur in 1860, for instance, a young protagonist finds an abandoned pauper on the side of the road, takes her home and bathes her, dresses her and calls her "my daughter," handling the child as if she were her plaything. Young readers opening Maréchal's novel and learning that Diane received a doll therefore already had a good idea as to how the book would unfold.

Marie-Françoise Boyer-Vidal has identified a number of recurring scenes in French nineteenth-century doll novels. While there are other paradigms constitutive of this very large and complex corpus, her analysis helps us grasp the extent of Maréchal's allegiance to the genre.<sup>9</sup> According to Boyer-Vidal, a significant number of doll novels

include the following events: upon receiving a doll, often as a reward for good behavior, a little girl is first delighted by its appearance and its costume. After undressing and redressing it, she gives it a name and decides to educate it. Most of them resist their young educators' efforts, and are depicted as lazy. Good dolls get laurel wreaths and prize books, and bad dolls are punished. Dolls are also socialized and taught to integrate religious, social, and moral codes of femininity. Naturally, educating the doll teaches both the protagonist and the reader their own responsibilities in society. While doll novel endings vary greatly, many epilogues depict the moment when a girl must separate from her plaything. The protagonist's betrothal can precipitate the event. The doll is either married in preparation for the actual wedding, or the girl lets go of her doll, often by donating it. This sacrifice is the girl's first significant charitable act, a sign of marriageability in French bourgeois society. In an emotional scene, the child comes to understand that the doll has fulfilled its role and must be disposed of. Her mother is the one to help her transition into the feminine realm, as fathers are conspicuously absent from such narratives.

Diane's first encounter with Ben-Aïssa is fashioned on a scene already familiar to young readers: she receives the doll as a gift. Hervé (who conveniently goes back to Africa after a few days, thus freeing the narrative of what would have been a strong masculine presence) steps out of the train, first asks whether his sister is "well behaved" (22), then offers her what he had described as "the surprise" (15) in his letters:

"Well, can't you guess, darling?"

—Oh yes, brother... It's a doll dressed as an Arab woman, I am sure of it now.

—You're getting warm, my dear, you're getting terribly warm!"

And the captain went back to the railcar, followed by Diane, who let out a cry of joyful astonishment.

The surprise was in front of her, standing on the track. It was a little Arab boy of about ten years old, who was staring at her in a manner at once savage and shy. Hervé had him dressed in new clothes to introduce him to his family. He wore a loose pair of pants made of red wool fabric that ended at his knee; his *sodria* (vest) of blue wool was buttoned from top to bottom with little metal buttons that held back black braids; his jacket, the color of a pistachio, was embroidered with gold. Nothing was missing! Not the red skullcap placed on his shaved head, not the light white

silk *haïck*, not the *brima*, rolled into a turban around his head, not the *sobbate* (yellow leather shoes), not the red morocco greaves.

Diane was lost in deep admiration. She held her hand toward her magnificent doll in a welcoming manner, but the doll rolled its timid eyes and stepped back as the little girl moved forward (22–23).

Maréchal's enumeration of the boy's garments borders on the nonsensical: Ben-Aïssa could not have worn two headdresses simultaneously, nor could he have dressed in short pants, a vest, a jacket *and* a *haïck* (a large garment typically *covering* the entire body) all at the same time. But this irrational description is precisely what fixes the boy's status as a doll, as it indicates how he could be dressed and undressed, the way a little girl could first enjoy him. Likewise, the fact Diane does not accurately gender Ben-Aïssa—she mistakes him for "a doll dressed as an Arab woman"—signals that she will be able to shape her plaything's identity in any way she wants.<sup>10</sup>

Bertall, the famous artist commissioned by Hachette to illustrate the novel, underlined the importance of Ben-Aïssa's dress in the story's economy, and used it to reinforce the boy's doll condition throughout the text. While nine of his engravings represent the Kabyle in "Oriental" garb (fig. 1), only three depict him wearing Western garments (fig. 2, 3, 4). Strikingly, the boy is only portrayed in European clothing after he becomes Christian—after he has transitioned from "doll" to "adopted brother." The first communion suit, the schoolboy ensemble—complete with the traditional student cap—and the military uniform each mark a stage in the civilizing process. These French outfits are so formulaic, however, that one cannot help reading them as another set of doll costumes, which suggests that Ben-Aïssa's baptism was just a game. Importantly, Ben-Aïssa is consistently shown wearing these Western garments when he is *about to*, but not actually *living* a major event. In Bertall's illustrations, he is on his way to church, school or war, but not on the baptismal font, on a school bench, or on the front. Diane, in other words, seems to be playing dress-up with her plaything until the very end of the novel, and Ben-Aïssa's purpose remains the same after his conversion: he is here to help the girl get ready for real life, as dolls are wont to do. Bertall's interpretation of Maréchal's narrative becomes all the more clear with the last illustration of the novel, which depicts Ben-Aïssa on his deathbed (fig. 5). In this case, the Kabyle does not wear any garment at all. Playtime is over: a naked doll is ready to be discarded.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1. Bertall, "The little Arab was looking at Diane's toys."



Figure 2. Bertall, "The old priest had finished the good deed so naively begun."

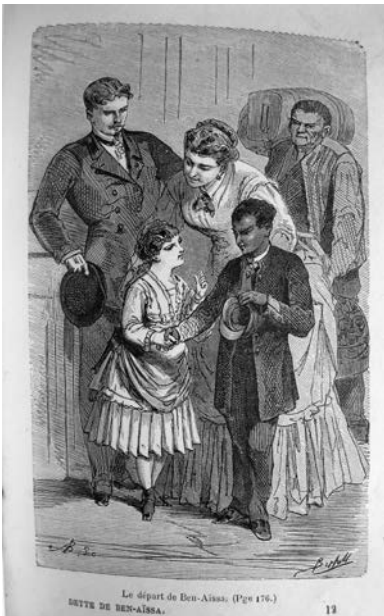


Figure 3. Bertall, "Ben-Aïssa's departure."



Figure 4. Bertall, "Ben-Aïssa has finished his studies with great distinction."



Figure 5. Bertall, "Diane enters, holding a bouquet."

Another quintessential component of the doll novel genre, the laborious education of the plaything, further objectifies Ben-Aïssa. In the second chapter, "Where Diane starts to discover the challenges of educating her doll" (25), the protagonist realizes that the boy does not want to play school. In keeping with the genre, Diane's persistence is noted in Chapter VII, entitled "Diane starts to *bravely* implement her theories of education" (61, my emphasis). In spite of her efforts, Ben-Aïssa remains defined by "his old sins: laziness, carelessness and open rebelliousness" (151) for months. Young readers (who, as children, presumably had their own experience of being accused of these sins) were asked to identify with Diane, a child-turned-educator, whose difficulties with (or as) an uncooperative pupil were familiar to them. Dolls' laziness was such a common challenge for girls at the time that publishers issued booklets specifically designed to help them teach their "daughters" the alphabet. Striving to teach them to read and punishing them if they resisted even became a common motif in advertisements during the Third Republic (fig. 6 & 7). Ben-Aïssa's reluctance thus further solidified his status as a toy. In this case, however, his laziness is not just a character trait confirming that he is indeed a doll. It is also



Figure 6. "Galeries Lafayette. The doll's day: study time, ten o'clock."



Figure 7. "The scolding." (The Bon Marché, Montluçon)

one of the characteristics of colonial subjects in the colonizer's mind, as Albert Memmi famously pointed out.

Diane's determination to educate her reluctant plaything is all the more commendable that she is in charge of *two* students, Ben-Aïssa and a cockatiel, another present from Hervé. The bird's rapid progress indicates that Ben-Aïssa's poor performance is not due to his young teacher's pedagogical skills, but to his own limitations:

She worked, with tireless zeal, on both the lessons she gave to her cockatiel, and on the daily grammar drills for Ben-Aïssa.

The cockatiel's education went perfectly. It was a great pleasure for the little girl each time the handsome green bird pronounced a new word . . . Fatma showed a real aptitude for languages. She already knew how to say many things in French, English, and Arabic (91–92).

A counterpoint to Ben-Aïssa, the bird is given a human name. Unlike the boy, it has a knack for languages, and is given lessons ("leçons"), while the child endures mindless drills ("répétitions"). In a striking inversion, the boy, already reduced to a doll, becomes the parrot of the two playthings, as his skills are limited to repetition whereas Fatma's are defined as knowledge.

Maréchal multiplies such doublings in order to further consolidate Ben-Aïssa's toy condition, and in so doing locate his place in the de Léry household. After Diane's initial encounter with the young Kabyle at the train station, for instance, the girl attempts to approach him again by presenting him with various playthings. She intuitively understands their educational value and spreads them in front of him "as if to use them as interpreters" (26). A mute Ben-Aïssa finally reacts to a "chubby blonde baby doll" (29):

The two young children had already gotten acquainted, thanks to the baby doll with the enamel face. The little Arab boy now knew how to pull its springs, and he let out roars of guttural laughter each time the baby doll, obedient to command, opened its eyes, closed them, joined its hands, and said, "papa, maman," in a very clear manner. "Papa, mama," the boy would repeat, and he laughed even harder, revealing his white teeth (29).

Thanks to Diane, the "chubby blond baby doll," whose (albeit relative) mastery of the spoken word, fair skin tone, and propensity to adopt a praying position likens him to other members of the de Léry clan,

becomes a communicating device and teaches the boy his first (French) words. The Kabyle's language education has begun. But in this scene, Ben-Aïssa's blond mechanized counterpart also teaches him that in the de Lérays' home, playthings are "obedient to command," and that mimicry is the only way to be accepted. Furthermore, the blond doll leads him to understand that the household is extremely hierarchical, and that he is at the bottom of the ladder, below the baby doll and of course below Diane.

Ben-Aïssa's first efforts to mimic the blond doll underline Diane's resourcefulness—she managed to make the boy "speak"—but they also prefigure his struggles with the mandate to imitate. Here, "papa, maman" becomes "papa, mama," foreshadowing the Kabyle's difficulty with language learning, a process explicitly associated in the novel with mimicry (which in turn brings to mind both children's role-playing and colonized people's survival strategies). Ben-Aïssa becomes more proficient as time goes by, but he is always depicted as second best. In this inaugural scene, he cannot accurately repeat the words modeled for him, showing that he cannot even master "doll language," a deficiency that reveals that he is even less competent than another toy. Then his laziness prevents him from learning to repeat words in French, English and Arabic as quickly as the cockatiel Fatma. After his baptism, he becomes more studious, but his language skills are now unfavorably compared to Robert's, Diane's fiancé. At the end of the two boys' first year at Saint-Cyr, the most prestigious military school in the country, Robert is first of their class, while the Kabyle only graduates in third place, for the following reason:

Without the grade in German, they said, he would have certainly been first. But Aïssa did not have a taste for foreign languages.

"There are only two beautiful languages after Greek and Latin, he said . . . Arabic and French. I leave English and German to horses and birds." Montesquieu could not have said it better! (203–04).

This time Ben-Aïssa is neither incompetent nor lazy. By modeling himself on Montesquieu and professing his distaste for English and German, he has demonstrated that he has become the perfect subaltern subject, both loyal to France and aware of his second-grade position in society.<sup>12</sup> Not only has he internalized that he must forever be locked in imitating mode, he now understands the connection between imitation and subordination. In other words, he has become what the blond doll



modeled upon his arrival at the de Lérays': an obedient member of the de Léry household. He has managed to satisfy both Diane's requirements and those of the French Empire.

Ben-Aïssa's conversion, already discussed in the previous section, must be mentioned again here to show how even one of the clearest signs of humanity one can find in French edifying literature—baptism—does not fundamentally alter the boy's doll status. After the ceremony, which only happens in the last third of the story (on p. 168 out of 262), Ben-Aïssa is no longer explicitly characterized as a plaything. This lexical (and presumably ontological) change serves the important purpose of having young readers discover new binary relationships. To child/toy, upper-class French family/starving African orphan, girl/boy, teacher/student, they can add civilizer/civilized, housewife/war hero, living French woman/dead indigenous soldier. But Ben-Aïssa's conversion does not invalidate the impact of the doll novel strategies used by Maréchal during the first two thirds of the narrative. *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* does depict a trajectory, from animated plaything to obedient colonial subject to unintelligible being, but the doll narrative dimension of the text is so prevalent that the novel is also strikingly static in its characterization of the Kabyle character. In spite of the changes nominally brought by Ben-Aïssa's baptism, the important events in his new life can still be read like the first two thirds of the novel: via the doll narrative lens. Ben-Aïssa's laurels, for instance, point to his assimilation, but they also recall those given to good dolls, and his death echoes numerous doll novel epilogues in which girls let go of their cherished toy. This is not only because the boy's baptism was presented as one of Diane's role-playing games. The perpetuation of Ben-Aïssa's plaything status also has much to do with the fact that the character is a colonial subject.

All this to say that Maréchal's use of the doll novel genre to depict the civilizing of a young Algerian has significant ideological consequences. By replicating the set narrative of a doll novel, she facilitated the collapse between human and plaything that constitutes the heart of the text. She did so by relying on young readers' propensity to function within a literary system, a structuring ability that forms what Jonathan Culler calls their literary competence (131). A child's comprehension of a given text depends on her understanding of the genre to which it belongs; it is by penning hyperidentifiable scenes that Maréchal most skillfully reduced Ben-Aïssa to a toy, and thus established a difference between playing with a younger brother and playing with a colonial

subject. Young readers dehumanized the Algerian boy at the beginning of the novel not because he is not French, nor because he is explicitly designated as a doll (dolls have feelings too, according to little girls), but because he follows a very particular script with which they were already familiar. Explicitly labeling Ben-Aïssa a doll was thus not Maréchal's most powerful objectifying strategy; rather, it was her systematic use of known sequential actions that effectively and inexorably turned him into a plaything. In other words, little girls' understanding of the genre is what led them to construct (and enjoy) Ben-Aïssa's inferiority; it is what led them to internalize racial constructs constitutive of French imperialism. A powerful genre was henceforth politicized, as cause and consequence conflated in a simple "truth:" Ben-Aïssa is not quite as human as Diane, as North Africans are not quite as human as the French.

*"The little Arab boy was hers, all hers"*

Yet if Ben-Aïssa is not really a doll, he *was* really a *gift*, and as such evoked another important trope in French visual and literary culture: that of child-gifting. Maréchal's use of doll narrative principles cannot fully explain how she could so comfortably merge the inanimate and the living. Hervé could have brought back an actual doll from Africa.<sup>13</sup> Instead he offers his sister what he specifically presents as a child *and* as property: "The little Arab boy was hers, all hers: Hervé said so" (37). Placing the book in conversation with other works in which young Africans are offered as travel souvenirs shows that reducing an African child to a plaything was neither an unusual story for the French reader nor merely an imaginative fictional conceit. In fact, *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* is but one of a large body of texts and images featuring commodified young Africans as refined gifts. Significantly, the trope is neither limited to children's books, nor to Third Republic France. Numerous European engravings, paintings, travelogues, memoirs and correspondences indicate that a number of actual children brought from Africa and given away as travel souvenirs, as well as fictionalized accounts of their lives, became the centerpieces of complex representational systems linking education, race, and patriotism long before the 1870s.<sup>14</sup> Thus the gifting of Ben-Aïssa is connected with a domestic habit of rewarding well-behaved French youth and a colonial practice of objectifying African children.

Maréchal's readers' first encounter with Ben-Aïssa distantly mirrors other interactions between young Africans and Europeans. In France,

such young human gifts were used and represented in many different ways at least since the seventeenth century. These children were at the center of an actual practice: they were seen as valuable possessions, functioning primarily as fashion accessories highlighting the fair complexion of their owners. They also inscribed upper-class women in a discourse that linked luxury and femininity with power and colonialism, as white women's beauty was fused with their control over black bodies. Numerous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fashion plates portrayed exoticized youngsters as the epitome of elegance and taste, and portraiture used them as highly legible signs of colonial wealth. *Mémorialistes* commented on their status as pets in salons and drawing rooms, and gift-children feature in novels almost two hundred years before *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa's* publication. Representations of these children did not disappear after the Revolution: some fictionalized accounts of their lives became wildly popular in the Restoration period, as the success of Claire de Duras's *Ourika* (1824) exemplifies. These narratives did not vanish after the abolition of slavery either. Representations of non-Western playthings persisted after 1848 and became the center of a colonial rhetoric of good intentions that characterizes Maréchal's bestseller.

While pre-Revolutionary gift-children were mostly offered to women, as numerous Old Regime correspondences indicate, they also delighted a number of French youngsters, which means that the fictional subjection of a non-European child to his French counterpart described by Maréchal mirrors a centuries-old, if discontinued practice. For instance, the chevalier de Boufflers, who brought back many toddlers from Senegal and famously offered *Ourika* to Mme de Beauvau in 1788, also sent a child to Mme de Sabran, "[who] delighted Elzéar and Delphine, became their *toy*, and made the whole household happy" (qtd. in Chalaye 39, my emphasis). The prodigious de Boufflers additionally offered a boy and a girl to the young French *dauphin*. Ben-Aïssa's fabricated vicissitudes therefore echo the documented existence of dozens of other commodified children. Although we do not know much about the "educational" outcome of such encounters with these young Africans, we can assume that their objectification instilled early on in generations of French children an unwavering sense of superiority. From real Senegalese babies to a fictional Algerian, from the *dauphin's* chambers to the benches of the Third Republic, this tale of subjection and power had an enduring presence in French literature and visual culture that has yet to be fully analyzed.

The nineteenth-century fictionalization of this real practice in edifying literature has two intriguing ideological ramifications. First, it indicates that an ostensibly new phase of the French colonial conquest was presented to children via an Old Regime *topos* related to the slave trade. *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* seemingly complicates the child-gifting trope's genealogy, however, for it openly condemns slavery. Before Ben-Aïssa goes to war and meets his fate, for instance, Maréchal disentangles herself from possible ethical complications by defining his status in the household once more. Eighteen-year-old Diane, obligated to stay home with her mother and work on her embroidery, complains of being neglected by Ben-Aïssa, who visits factories. Madame de Léry's reaction is scathing: "You are unfair and unreasonable, my poor girl. . . . Did you think that you could always keep him next to you like a slave?—Well, he definitely knew how to break his chain, Diane added quietly" (205). Diane's mother is horrified by her daughter's selfishness: "Aïssa is neither a tied-up dog nor a galley slave. He is a good boy, full of devotion and gratitude" (205). Madame de Léry teaches the protagonist—and the readers—a fundamental lesson: civilizing is the opposite of enslaving. Ben-Aïssa's appreciation and his willingness to go to war ought to make it perfectly clear. According to this logic, the story is not about one gift, but two: a plaything offered to a little girl, and freedom granted to a deserving colonial subject.

Maréchal's mention of slavery is not as surprising as it seems. After 1870, most children's books authors started advocating for the eradication of slavery in Africa, and made it one of the most widespread arguments for justifying the civilizing mission in youth literature. As Bertrand Jahier pointed out, however, if these writers denounced slavery, they blamed Africans for enslaving Africans, not Europeans. This reflects French literature's amnesia regarding France's own role in slavery, and explains why so many children's stories described *razzias*, violent attacks led by "Arab bandits" (Deschaumes, qtd. in Jahier 7) who kidnapped defenseless people to sell them to slave merchants in exchange for guns, rum, and other goods. By writing about a child-gift who became civilized enough to be interested in factories, Maréchal did not signal the end of a continuum; instead, she used the trope to spread France's "humanist" message. By the time Ben-Aïssa is ready to battle the Prussians, he is no longer compared to a "monkey" (Maréchal 44), "lion cub" (45), "dog" (46), "cat" (50), or "squirrel" (79), no longer categorized as "savage" (43), "coon" (48), or "Chinese" (62). He has become (if not for Diane, for her mother) a "good boy." In this sense Madame de Léry's lecture about slavery is a striking example of the

ideological power of edifying literature: the deeply objectified Kabyle is presented a prime example of a character set free by the French.

But the most crucial part of Ben-Aïssa's transformation, the most interesting twist in the slavery trope, is not the character's promotion to "good boy." It is the fact that by the end of the novel, he is not only *not* a slave, but he has not become a slave *trader*, either. Left to his own devices, Ben-Aïssa might have followed his instincts, and become one of those "Arab bandits." Maréchal makes this clear at the very beginning of the novel. When dinner is served upon Hervé and Ben-Aïssa's arrival in the castle, the boy takes Diane's toys to the table:

Ben-Aïssa carried out a full *razzia*. He did not want to leave behind in the living room the toys that he regarded as his, and he dragged in tow dolls, tea sets, and illustrated books.

"We will give him guns and trumpets, said Hervé's kind uncle. I think this little savage will quickly develop a liking for our civilization!" (33).

Ben-Aïssa's misreading of the situation is stunning. He is under the impression that he can take possession of Diane's toys (a girl's toys!) the very day he becomes one of *her* playthings, in so doing confusing gifting and appropriating, proprietor and property. More importantly, however, his *modus operandi* is the *razzia*. The word is not translated in the text, which indicates that its meaning has already become familiar to young readers acquainted with slave traders' narratives.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Ben-Aïssa's *razzia* is what leads Hervé's uncle to posit guns and bugles as metonymic for civilization. The episode depicts the intersection between race, gender confusion, and violence constitutive of Ben-Aïssa's behavior before the civilizing process begins. It also puts forward a trajectory from savage, who steals guns and enslaves people, to colonial soldier, who frees France from the Prussian enemy. Thus the type of antislavery discourse pervasive in children's literature becomes, in Maréchal's novel, a militaristic trope, and the nineteenth-century iteration of the child-gift paradigm turns the exotic plaything into colonial cannon fodder. Offering an African boy to a French girl, however, is still justified by the same centuries-long rationale: the orphan would have fared much worse in his homeland.

The gifting of Ben-Aïssa has a second ideological ramification, to be connected to the ways in which Kabylia was both conceptualized and conquered by the French in the nineteenth century. Between the late 1830s and 1870, Kabyles were singled out by the French as the "true" indigenous population of Algeria, a characterization that pitted them

against Arabs and facilitated the divide-and-rule policy of the first decades of the conquest. Deemed almost Western because of their supposed descent from the Romans, Kabyles were depicted as natural candidates for assimilation and conversion to Christianity. They were also often thought of as white. This narrative, known as the “Kabyle myth,” was a powerful argument for the civilizing mission until the end of the Second Empire.<sup>16</sup> In 1870, the Crémieux decree naturalized Algerian Jews of northern cities and towns and relegated both Arabs and Kabyles to an inferior legal status, which facilitated the appropriation of Kabyle land by French colons hitherto prohibited by Napoleon III. The ensuing Kabyle uprising of 1871 led to more repression and land sequestration. In metropolitan France, the Kabyle revolt was used as an argument by the Right, which sought to minimize involvement in the imperial project and wanted to focus on France’s recovery after the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. The Left contended that displaced *Alsaciens* and *Lorrains* ought to settle in Kabylia, which was both seen as being similar to France’s countryside, and open for appropriation. The fact that Maréchal chose to tell the story of a “good” Kabyle a mere year after the French army brutally crushed the Kabyle revolt and allocated more than 100,000 acres of Kabyle land to Alsatian settlers is remarkable.<sup>17</sup> It is almost as if Captain Hervé de Léry’s exotic gift to his sister echoed another gift from the colonial army to the French, a gift that amounted to much more than a doll.

Maréchal’s narrative reveals much about her own position on the uses of colonization as internal political strategy. By telling the tale of a French family saved by a grateful, Prussian-abhorring Kabyle, Maréchal pointed to what she saw as Kabylia’s potentially key role in France’s regeneration. In addition, by presenting the Kabyle as an object gifted to a French character, she showed that France should not have any qualms about using North African territories to recover her lost prestige. Such a position was groundbreaking for an early Third Republic children’s book author. After 1871, many texts written for young readers centered on *La Revanche* (the Revenge). *Le Journal de la Jeunesse*, which first published *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*, also issued *Les Braves gens*, centered on sacrifice, the same year, and printed no less than three other stories about France’s lost provinces the following year. But children’s books only started connecting the painful loss of Alsace and Lorraine to the conquest of new territories overseas more than a decade after *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*.<sup>18</sup> Thus Maréchal not only relocated the civilizing mission at home; she also pointed to its ability to help France recover from The

Terrible Year (as 1871 was called) long before other children's literature authors. On top of that, she was the first such writer to designate Kabylia as the best hope for the recovery process.

This strong ideological take explains one last significant characteristic of Ben-Aïssa's: the boy is coded not as a white Kabyle, but as black. Maréchal's numerous depictions of the "little black creature, frizzy-haired and shy" (7) signal that she did not rely on the "Kabyle myth" to argue for the civilizing mission—that she very much broke away with pre-1870s French conceptions of Algeria. Ben-Aïssa's skin color indicates that he is not "almost" Western, that he is not a "natural" candidate for assimilation and conversion to Christianity. Unlike the Kabyles constructed as whites that preceded him in the French imaginary, he is and will forever remain essentially other.<sup>19</sup> This racial otherness is thus yet another objectifying strategy. It is also a striking example of the way some nineteenth-century colonial narratives allow for historical collapse, as Ben-Aïssa's blackness evokes both pre-Revolutionary child-gifting practices connected to the slave trade, and post 1870 thoughts about the strategic importance of North Africa. The political implications of such a racial construction were most probably lost on the youngest of Maréchal's readers. Surely, the contrast between the famished black boy and the "chubby blond doll" (my emphasis) would not have brought to their minds the 500,000 Algerians (a fifth of the population) who died of famine, disease and French military violence between 1866 and 1872.<sup>20</sup> But Maréchal's central message was clear enough: orphaned, hungry, destitute, dark-skinned people were a gift to the French. Not only that, they were a gift to French girls.

*"Mothers are like husbands, they are always right"*

The Christian-inflected civilizing discourse, the doll novel structure and the child-gift *topos* converge in Maréchal's text to lend its full weight to its central proposition: Ben-Aïssa, famished child, spoils of Empire, social product, political sign, is above all a gift. As Marcel Mauss famously pointed out, however, gifts must by their very nature be *reciprocated*. Offering a Kabyle boy to a French girl implies that she has the obligation to give something in return. Maréchal makes it clear that what is expected of Diane (and by extension of her young readers, who were gifted something as well: this prize book) in exchange for her plaything is a specific type of behavior that will benefit both domestic and colonial spheres.

In the text, such a behavior is connected with the imperative to marry. Much like other novels penned by Maréchal, *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* teaches girls to find the way to the altar. The book is quite specific about what to expect of marriage. Diane and Maréchal's young readers are explicitly told that relations between adults and children resemble relations between husband and wife. Not only that, Ben-Aïssa's presence in the de Léry household helps them understand that they also resemble relations between France and the uncivilized world. The novel consolidates this principle by having Diane form a very proper endogamic union with the son of her uncle's old friend de Tressan, whose main utterance summarizes what might be the most pervasive proposition of early Third Republic edifying literature: "Mothers are like husbands, they are always right" (217). In the de Lérys' perfect lifestyle, which successfully integrates an exotic element, young readers are given a blueprint for both domestic and colonial stability, as hierarchic ordering in the home offers them an operative model for hierarchic ordering beyond the Mediterranean—and vice versa. Diane's duty is thus perfectly clear: she must get married. Not only that, Ben-Aïssa's function is to prepare her for what will be a subaltern role. In sum, what Diane is expected to offer in exchange for her gift is her compliance to a system that places her under the authority of others, whether her mother or her husband.

It should come as no surprise that Diane does not marry Ben-Aïssa. Still, Maréchal makes the impossibility of such a union unambiguous. During the Kabyle's graduation celebration, Madame de Léry's uncle points out to his niece that the boy, now eighteen, might be ready to look for a wife:

—He is now an accomplished horseman . . . and if he did not have the charming flaw of being too young, we would not need to go far to find a husband worthy of Diane.

—As you say, my dear uncle, he is too young, far too young; fortunately neither one nor the other has thought to exchange the title of brother and sister, and of godson and godmother, for that of husband and wife. It is all for the best, and we can let them freely enjoy this fraternal friendship (194–97).

Not only would it be practically incestuous for Ben-Aïssa to marry Diane; his perpetual youth, a euphemism for "uncivilized," suggests that the "boy" will never fully assimilate, and thus could not possibly marry a French woman and have French children. Never mind the fact that



both protagonists are, in fact, the same age: the point is to instill a sense of order in young readers. To each his and her place in French society, whether one is a colonial subject or a French girl.

But Maréchal did not just write a book intended to shape French children's theoretical understanding of their position in society, for she also produced, as we know, a doll novel, and in so doing invited them to *perform* the roles of woman and colonizer. Young doll novel readers did more than simply read about dolls, they also staged with their own playthings many of the narratives given to them. That such narratives prompted performance was looked upon favorably by educators and mothers. Children were encouraged to reproduce sequential actions scripted for them, in the hope that it would appropriately structure their play and shape their behavior. More important still, the repetitive (and undoubtedly pleasurable) physical engagement with dolls led girls to internalize suitable modes of interacting with two essential types of people—servants and husbands. Much like any other doll novel, *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* must have inspired various types of role-plays. By impersonating Diane, who is learning in a practical manner both about respectable femininity and about the civilizing process, readers almost empirically learned how to turn unruly girls into eligible brides and "savages" into proper colonial subjects. In so doing, they developed what Robin Bernstein designates as "performance competence" (75)—the unspoken understanding of how to behave according to various social circumstances—with the added twist of getting used to blending the domestic and the colonial. Specific ways to reciprocate were thus impressed upon children not only via reading, but via playing as well.

By aiming to develop literary and performance competence in their young readers, doll novel authors aimed to regulate female behavior. The doll novel confirmed to a little girl that she was properly playing the social part assigned to her. But the child/doll relationship narrative, which mirrored the mother/daughter relationship, also had an impact on mothers. Maréchal undoubtedly had them in mind when she wrote *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*. Mothers were, after all, edifying literature's first consumers, as they vetted their offspring's books. Interestingly, *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* provided them a guide to raising an obedient daughter. In other words, it showed them how to perform motherhood. Madame de Léry's educational strategy is so clearly laid out in the novel that it is practically an invitation for mothers to engage in an adult version of role-playing in order to successfully bring up their own daughters. For instance, Diane's mother immediately understands that civilizing

Ben-Aïssa will benefit her child at least as much as the young Kabyle. At the beginning of the story, the girl's manners leave much to be desired. Diane's mother at once subsumes the civilizing process under her daughter's socialization, and only decides to keep Ben-Aïssa under her roof once she becomes convinced that the boy can help her domesticate her own misbehaved child:

She observed [Ben-Aïssa] as best she could, with the help of that perceptive eye that God gives to mothers, firmly settled on not sharing in Hervé's generous work unless the little girl had nothing to lose. But, quite on the contrary, Diane improved each day; she scrutinized herself with scrupulous care, for fear of being a bad example to her pupil (62).

Under Madame de Léry's watchful gaze, both children are civilized. Maréchal could not have produced a better role model for Third Republic mothers. Neither could she have formulated more clearly that children and colonial subjects need the same type of guidance, and that Africans are only worth civilizing if the French get something in return.

Naturally, Maréchal did not literally advocate child-gifting. The story is not really about offering an actual child to a little girl, it is about constructing and performing French national identity, and about the replication of the parent/child relationship for a larger narrative of growing and improving the Empire. This is, in the end, what Hervé's gift is really about. Remarkably, these two objectives would later become crucial in Jules Ferry's schools—which explains why the story was still read forty years after it was first published. *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* is thus a piece about actual *and* metaphorical childhood: that of young French citizens, which is temporary, and that of colonial subjects, which is everlasting. And it is the child-gift trope that made the combination of these elements so appealing to Third Republic readers. Ben-Aïssa, as a doll, is as malleable as he is harmless: the perfect educational device. Yet precisely because Ben-Aïssa is not *really* a doll, the triangular relationship between mother, daughter and doll mentioned above expands into another, between France, her citizens, and her colonial subjects. The hyperregulated sphere of bourgeois domesticity thus becomes a striking metonymy for the entire nation. In much the same way that edifying literature “allows for the glorification of a social milieu, that of the bourgeoisie, which uses the doll novel as a tool of self-promotion” (Chaffin 106), *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* valorizes a system of culture centered on the urge to civilize others for France's benefit,

and insists that regulating female social performance is the best way to save the Empire. More striking still, it teaches little girls self-regulation and abnegation for the greater good of the nation.

While it is impossible to know to what extent Maréchal's readers understood the Maussian dimension of the story and its ideological ramifications, we can assume that they had the capacity to assign Ben-Aïssa's tale different degrees of meaning. We have seen how the author capitalized on the literary and performance competence children had acquired by reading doll novels. Although these little girls' ability to read both literally and figuratively is harder to assess, the fact that role-playing with dolls familiarized them with fluctuating circulations of meanings suggests that they could simultaneously construe Ben-Aïssa as a child and as a toy. This simultaneity is precisely what makes the narrative so powerful. One of the most thrilling aspects of the story must have been to fancy oneself in Diane's shoes and dream of taking possession of the most desirable plaything imaginable. It is, after all, a toy *and* it is alive. Ben-Aïssa's legibility inevitably changed when it came to adult readers. But mothers, teachers, and committee members in charge of selecting prize books must also have ascribed several degrees of meaning to the character. They, too, had the competence to read Ben-Aïssa as both an object and a trope; as a luxury good, at once educational and disposable; as an idea, encompassing a people (Kabyles), a place (Algeria), and a political practice (colonialism); as both metonymy of Africa and metaphor of the civilizing mission. But as numerous as they were, all these iterations led to Maréchal's main organizing principle: Ben-Aïssa serves but one purpose, that of stabilizing sociopolitical knowledge. In the end, the Kabyle character is the consummate literary trope for the production and circulation of an ideology that does not allow for individual decision-making, or unscripted rapprochements between the French and their colonial subjects. In other words, he is a priceless gift to the nascent Third Republic.

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By complicating the distinctions between person and thing, text and play, fiction and script, *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* sheds light on important aspects of nineteenth-century edifying literature. It reminds us that children's books were not necessarily built according to a single generic formula, but rather on innovative confluences of several models. It exemplifies the pervasiveness of literary tropes, the hidden structural oppres-

sion of colonial narratives, and their impact on young readers. It also helps us understand how books and material objects such as dolls were jointly used as cultural prompts to produce meaning and choreograph behavior. The story's impact on minds and bodies alike is all the more significant that it led readers to intertwine political performance with gender performance. Maréchal's public was encouraged to perform both the act of colonizing and the simulacrum of proper bourgeois femininity, thus internalizing the necessity of civilizing both Africans overseas and girls at home. *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*, in other words, is not just emblematic of a literary genre, it is testimony to a powerful practice aimed at regulating childhood, gender, race and national identity.

The evolving relationship between Diane and Ben-Aïssa provided youngsters with a blueprint for navigating a complex set of encounters. The vignettes centered on Ben-Aïssa's progress seem to exemplify what is expected of a 1870s French child: he gets baptized, goes to school, becomes a patriot. Yet Ben-Aïssa never becomes French, not least because these episodes *also* exemplify a type of dehumanizing and objectifying that Aimé Césaire would later call "thingification" (21). Ben-Aïssa, completely disconnected from his own culture, utterly malleable, is reduced to "an instrument of production" (21) that only serves the purpose of the colonizer—in this case, the production of knowledge for the benefit of a young French citizen. *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* thus exposes thought processes pervasive at the time and demonstrates how children's literature displayed them, a deployment that turned books into political tools. In the end, the trove of ideological knowledge delivered by the novel and its ability both to lead children to reenact the breakdown between the inanimate and the living, and to internalize complex rules of interactions in the domestic sphere and overseas, help us understand how French citizens were called upon to become active participants in the civilizing mission at a much younger age than previously thought.

#### Notes

I would like to thank the editor of *Children's Literature* and the anonymous readers for their advice and support. This article was written with the support of a Fordham Faculty Fellowship.

<sup>1</sup>*La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* first appeared in serialized form in Hachette's widely distributed *Journal de la Jeunesse* between September and December 1873. Issues containing Maréchal's text numbered 176.210 (not counting bound volumes of the gazette produced in time to become New Year's presents to children). Hachette subsequently published four editions of the novel in the prestigious *Bibliothèque rose* between 1875 and 1891. The first edition was strikingly popular: its 5,000 volumes were issued in December of 1875;

by November of 1876, the second edition was already for sale. Each subsequent edition generated another 5,000 volumes (the same number as the most famous Hachette authors, except Zénaïde Fleuriot and the Countess de Ségur whose print runs could reach 8,000 volumes), and was advertised every year in Hachette's catalogues until 1906. The fact that the novel became a prize book contributed to its wide dissemination. An 1876 edition of the novel bears the stamp of the modest *paroisse de St-Barthélémy-Lestra*, whereas an 1890 edition was part of the prestigious *Lycée Fénelon* library collection, which indicates that the story appealed to a wide range of educators, from the rural, Catholic teachers of a small Loire village to the urban secular staff of the first high school for girls in Paris. For more information regarding Maréchal's contracts and agreements with Hachette, see *Fonds Hachette, Institut de la Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine*, HAC 83, HAC 32.19. Subsequent references to the novel refer to the 1876 edition. All translations are mine (unlike other works by Maréchal, *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa* was never translated into English, German or Spanish).

<sup>2</sup>During her short literary career, Maréchal (1831–79), who never married, produced thirteen edifying books, the endpoint of which was generally matrimony. *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*, her third novel, was written at the Lycée Charlemagne, where she lived and presumably taught. While a necrology published in *Polybiblion* describes her as "A woman who had conquered a distinguished position in literature with her talent, her elevated mind and the Christian spirit that gave life to all her works" (173), her family stated at the time of her death that she was unemployed. Her birth and her death certificates reveal that her father and her brother were respectively "cavalry captain" and "retired officer" (*Archives départementales de Seine-et-Marne*, 5MI7677. De 1830 à 1832 [vue 137]; *Archives de Paris Décès*, 5e arr. 22/01/1879. V4E 3071), which might explain *La Dette de Ben-Aïssa*'s enthusiastic portrayal of the military.

<sup>3</sup>According to Sandrine Lemaire, Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel, colonial culture only became ingrained in public opinion *after* 1871, when the French became "not so much colonials in the sense of agents of colonization (these only constituted an extremely small minority) nor in the sense of conscious partisans of colonialism; but rather colonials by dint of the often unconscious incorporation of imperial discourse, norms, attitudes, indeed of a *habitus* into the collective mentality and psyche" (5). Involving children in the constitution of this new *habitus* was thus an innovation.

<sup>4</sup>For information on the presence of these children in eighteenth-century France, see Mary Bellhouse, Pierre Boule, Sylvie Chalaye, Roger Little.

<sup>5</sup>The fact that Diane decides to civilize Ben-Aïssa when they first sit down for dinner is significant. The episode brings to mind numerous nineteenth-century instruction manuals defining faulty table manners as telltale signs of children's animality (Tholozany). It should be noted that in the countless edifying tales where bourgeois and upper-class youths take poor children under their wings (starting with Arnaud Berquin's 1794 "Clémentine et Madelon"), their little charges do not make it to the dining room. Ben-Aïssa's presence at the table, a notable exception, underscores his status as educational toy. Diane's mother allows her daughter to take her plaything to the table because she understands the pedagogical benefits of such an indulgence. But this scene also brings to mind Fanon's depiction of the hungry native's dream "to sit at the settler's table" (WE 39). As I indicate in the third section of this essay, Ben-Aïssa is not just a random "savage," he comes from famine- and war-ravaged Kabylia. Having him sit at the settler's table is thus ideologically loaded.

<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, Ben-Aïssa's story echoes the fate of hundreds of orphans collected by the Catholic Church in Algeria in the late 1860s, right when Ben-Aïssa's family would have died of starvation. Some of these children toured France with members of the clergy and raised money during a much-publicized campaign that included public speeches and press interviews. According to Christian Taithe, these Christianized Arabs, "models of hybridity" (252), were expected to lead their countrymen to embrace France's civilizing enterprise with the help of the French clergy. One cannot help but wonder whether Maréchal used this story as a starting point for her novel.

<sup>7</sup>The concept of mimicry in colonial discourse was most notably explained by Homi Bhaba.

<sup>8</sup>Fanon's depiction of the colonial subject's psychological destruction helps one understand Ben-Aïssa's plight, as well as the hidden structural oppression that characterizes the story: "On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object" (BSWM 112).

<sup>9</sup>For more information on the doll novel genre, see, among others, Valerie Lastinger, *Bénédicté Monicat*, Laurence Chaffin.

<sup>10</sup>Of course it is Hervé who first shapes Ben-Aïssa's identity by having him dress in such a fashion. Diane's brother soon makes this clear when he explains that the child used to be barefoot, and that one must give him time to get used to his purple shoes, "resembling the shiny boots of the Caesars of Byzantium" (34).

<sup>11</sup>Bertall also chose to depict the adult Ben-Aïssa as a foot shorter and much frailer than the other men of the story, suggesting that Ben-Aïssa is but a reduced-size simulacrum of a Frenchman.

<sup>12</sup>This episode provides two other pieces of information about the type of mimicry Ben-Aïssa performs in the novel. His performance is characterized as being in between that of animals and that of Frenchmen, which reflects his status in the novel's economy once again. Second, Ben-Aïssa mentions Arabic as one of the "worthy" languages. Because Ben-Aïssa is Kabyle, however, Arabic is not his native tongue. Here Ben-Aïssa does not only perform being a good French colonial subject who disdains England and Prussia, he performs being an Arab, which he is not (I further discuss Ben-Aïssa's ethnicity in the next section of this essay).

<sup>13</sup>Exotic dolls are rare enough in nineteenth-century French literature written for children that it would have been a novelty. See for instance Julie Gouraud's *Les Deux enfants de Saint-Domingue*. After the young protagonist arrives in France with her "popote" (black doll), she must exchange it for a "French" (white) doll.

<sup>14</sup>The multifaceted articulation of the child-gifting trope is the topic of my forthcoming book. For another example of the enduring presence of this trope in nineteenth-century French culture, see Lise Schreier, "Zamore 'the African' and the Haunting of France's Collective Consciousness, 1815–1914." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts, an Interdisciplinary Journal* 38.1 (2016).

<sup>15</sup>For more on the pervasiveness of *razzia* narratives in children's literature, see Jahier. For more on the complex attitudes towards slavery in the French colonies after the abolition, see Martin Klein.

<sup>16</sup>On the "Kabyle myth," see Charles-Robert Ageron, Marnia Lazreg, Patricia Lorcin, Paul Silverstein.

<sup>17</sup>The confiscated lands distributed to Alsacians amounted to one fourth of the territories appropriated by the French after the February 1872 crushing of the uprising. In all, the military confiscated 446,000 hectares belonging to Kabyles. For more on this topic, see Silverstein.

<sup>18</sup>According to Jahier, *Les Enfants de Marcel* (1887), which takes place in *Petite Alsace*, Algeria, is the first children's book to state explicitly that the conquest of Algeria was the surest way for France to regain its supremacy in the world. For more about the changes in edifying literature after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, see Michele Ann May.

<sup>19</sup>For a contrasting example, see Léon-Louis Buron's *Le Kabyle ou l'influence des vertus chrétiennes* (1854), in which a young man from Kabylia travels to Paris, settles with a French family, converts to Catholicism, and dies within a few months. For a post-1870 example of dark-skinned Kabyles in edifying literature, see *Les enfants de Yamina, Conte kabyle* (probably 1900), in which a childless French woman, moved by the miserable life conditions of two Kabyle children, buys them from their brutal father with the hope of raising them in France. Whether she succeeds in turning them into civilized adults

is not discussed in the book. The story ends when the protagonist's husband surprises her with a gift: he secretly purchased the children's mother, who will sail to France with them and presumably become the nanny.

<sup>20</sup>For more information on famine and French military violence in nineteenth-century Algeria, see Vladimir Lutsky.

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