

Chained by Class: The Dynamics of Power in *Angélique*

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In Lorena Gale's *Angélique*, social hierarchy plays a vital role in shaping the relationships between individuals, with class and power dynamics influencing every interaction. Set in 18th-century Montréal, the story follows Angélique, a Black woman who becomes infamous for allegedly setting fire to her master François's home. Under François's ownership, Angélique forms relationships with two other men: César, a fellow slave, and Claude, an indentured worker. Each of these men represent a different social position and fulfill different roles within her life. *Angélique* is not only a story of resistance against the constraints of colonialism and slavery, but also an exploration of how the pursuit of freedom and self-determination can be both a personal and collective struggle. François, César, and Claude embody the varying levels of authority and agency in Angélique's world, and their interactions show off the ways that love and resistance are shaped by the oppressive forces of 18th-century Montréal.

François, as Angélique's master, embodies the oppressive power structures that dictate her life, using his wealth and status to manipulate and control her. However, his abuse sparks a stronger desire for autonomy in Angélique, leading her to begin plotting her escape from her situation. François Poulin de Francheville is a man who enjoys flaunting his money and success at every opportunity and when presented a new way to feel "powerful," he purchased a Black slave from New France who his wife named Angélique (Gale 4). Historically, African slaves were brought into Montréal in the early seventeenth century and remained there until slavery was abolished in the early eighteenth century (Bird 388).

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François's lust for Angélique was instantaneous, as what he first noticed about her was "her chestnut skin" and her "large ebony eyes" (Gale 5). These features that he observes are race related, which demonstrates how his gaze went directly into recognizing what sets her apart from the other women that he has seen. The goal of this purchase was to make his wife happy, but it quickly turned into something to make him feel power over another person (4). He tries to win Angélique's affections by gifting her expensive and "valuable" gifts that she could not afford otherwise and then orders her to stand before him so he could "take a good look" at her (10). The ability that François has to be able to force her to stand there while he takes stock of her demonstrates the power and dominance he has over her. His status and power as her master and a man in society allowed him to force her to "obey" him and to not "fight" him off her when he sexual assaults her for the first time (10). François does this many times throughout the play and has a signature call to beckon her for his pleasure: "Angélique....? Angélique...?" (9). This call was also used by a "Voiceover" in this play, which symbolizes how François is just one example of how white men viewed slaves. Repeating her name in this way to lure her is a way for François to draw her under his power, demonstrating that she holds no power in this relationship and all the cards are in his hand. Although Angélique's attempted little rebellions towards François demonstrate the resistance of a de-colonized mind, which fuel her drive to have a better life (Gale, *Writing Angélique*), ultimately, François's treatment of Angélique not only reinforces his role as a symbol of oppressive power but also serves as the catalyst for her increasing defiance. His manipulation and abuse awaken a fierce desire in Angélique to reclaim her autonomy, igniting a drive for liberation that becomes the foundation of her resistance. François's actions, rather than breaking Angélique's spirit, only deepen her resolve to

challenge the power structures that seek to control her, setting the stage for her eventual quest for freedom.

In contrast, César represents the passivity and acceptance of a life defined by oppression, offering Angélique a relationship devoid of passion and ambition, which only deepens her frustration with her enslaved state. César is a fellow slave who holds a differing view to his situation than Angélique. He aims to find joy in any aspect that he can, despite everything, and states his intention to “take what happiness [he] can get (Gale 29). This type of mindset strongly contrasts to that of Angélique, as she is very shocked that César does not have any desire or hope to be his “own man” and just wants to “accept what life has put before [him]” (29). Upon meeting in an unusual “blind date” situation, Angélique learns that her body had been offered up by her master, who had just assaulted her himself, so that César would have his wish of a partnership granted. These two are only put together due to their circumstances as being slaves to masters who are business partners. César asked his master to set him up with someone, unaware that his and Angélique’s fornication would be a form of entertainment for both of their masters to watch. César was looking for anyone, “someone” to satiate his need for connection with people that looked like him and Angélique. Although they end up spending nights together and creating children, their relationship is passionless and one-sided. Angélique does not devote much time to him and does not feel committed to their partnership, which is evident when she begins spending more time with Claude and tells César that, “the only reason [they are] together is our masters say so” (46). She further demonstrates her lack of interest in César once she is no longer forced to be with him. Throughout the play, Angélique grows more resentful towards her state as a slave and even tells César of the plan

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to “run,” which he just laughs off (29). Evidently, César does not think that their freedom is worth any type of fight, especially because he believes that it is a fight that they have very little chance on winning. Although Angélique does not explicitly state that her relationship with César does not interest her, his mindset towards “tak[ing] what happiness [he] can get” is obviously not enough for her and she is attracted to Claude’s passion for upwards advancement and independence (29). This stark contrast between César’s acceptance of his circumstances and Angélique’s yearning for change deepens her sense of dissatisfaction and underscores her rejection of a life defined by passivity. While César chooses to endure his oppression by seeking fleeting happiness, Angélique’s determination to break free and pursue her own agency drives her further away from him, ultimately revealing the incompatibility of their relationship and her longing for a more meaningful connection grounded in resistance and hope for a better future.

Claude offers Angélique the possibility of escape and freedom, representing a partnership based on shared goals and desires for independence. His willingness to act and plan their escape ignites in Angélique a sense of agency and hope for a life beyond the confines of enslavement. Claude Thibault, an indentured worker bound to serve François for three years, is yet another person trapped under François’s control, though he too longs for freedom. Indentured workers like Claude were responsible for various tasks for the colonists who brought them to Montreal, positioning him as another person over whom François held authority (Cuder-Comínguez). From the moment he enters the Francheville home, Claude dreams of escaping, a desire that resonates deeply with Angélique. Their first interaction, where he offers her a drink from his flask, marks Angélique’s first act of defiance against her masters. By accepting the “Eau de Vie” or “water of life,” Angélique

takes a symbolic step toward freedom, a small but significant act of resistance that contrasts with her oppressive existence (Gale 12). After a trip to New England with François, Claude learns of “free blacks” in the area and offers Angélique a way out, telling her, “Any time you want out... I know the way” (33). This promise marks the beginning of their relationship, as Claude represents a tangible path to freedom, one that Angélique has yearned for but never truly believed was possible and was told only of horror stories. As their love affair deepens, Claude begins planning their escape, fully aware that they have “only one stab at it,” and that failure would mean certain death (54). During this planning, Claude’s cryptic comments about the changing weather (“it is certainly warming up” [54, 58]), suggest that he may have been involved in the fire that destroys the Francheville home. When the fire erupts, Angélique looks to Claude, knowing that the moment she has been waiting for has arrived. Claude’s understanding of her plight and his willingness to act on their shared dream of freedom create a deep, passionate bond between them, which gives Angélique a taste of liberation for the first time in years. The fact that their story still ends in betrayal, however, suggests how unlikely success was in her goal of freedom.

Angélique by Lorena Gale offers an exploration of how deeply entrenched social hierarchies shape personal relationships, where class, power, and survival often intertwine with love, resistance, and betrayal. Through the contrasting figures of François, César, and Claude, Gale highlights the ways in which individuals navigate the brutal constraints of colonialism and enslavement, each revealing different responses to oppression and differing levels of agency. François, as a symbol of systemic power, represents the abuse of control, while César exemplifies the passive survival mechanism in the face of oppression. In contrast, Claude’s willingness to act on a shared dream of freedom illuminates the

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possibility of resistance and escape. Angélique's journey, marked by betrayal and fleeting moments of liberation, demonstrates that while the struggle for autonomy in the face of such deeply ingrained societal structures is challenging, it is also an inherently human pursuit. By giving voice to those oppressed, *Angélique* not only underscores the devastating effects of power imbalances, but also celebrates the resilience, courage, and unwavering desire for freedom that define the fight against them. Ultimately, the play leaves the reader with a distinct reminder of how love, identity, and resistance are shaped by the intersections of power, and how the journey for freedom transcends time and place.

Works Cited

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