

H-France Review Vol. 15 (June 2015), No. 82

Anna Arzoumanov, *Pour lire les clefs de l'Ancien Régime. Anatomie d'un protocole interprétatif*. Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2013. 533 pp. Notes, annex, bibliography, and indexes. 73 € (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-1426-8; 48 € (p). ISBN 978-2-8124-1425-1

Review by Nicholas D. Paige, University of California, Berkeley

In English, we use the French: roman à clef. I don't know why this is, but I'll just go ahead and take the displacement as symptomatic. Reading with keys is something other (bad) readers do, so it's nice that Anglophones have this handy way of suggesting that it's a foreign thing. Historically speaking, do the French have a particular affinity for "keyed" writing and reading? No, if we look to the *Faerie Queene* as an inaugural example; maybe, if we choose instead the *Euphormion* by the French-Scott John Barclay, published in Paris. The fact is that it's hard to tell, because the genre (if it is a genre) hasn't received much in the way of serious historical attention. As I've said, it's a practice that represents the antithesis of serious reading, down there with saying the characters are "relatable" or that they remind you of someone you've loved or hated.

Yet, a first step would be to say that keyed reading has probably *become* the antithesis of serious reading, no doubt over the past two centuries. There's the advent, toward the end of the 1700s, of aesthetic autonomy and what Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe call the literary absolute.[1] Skip forward a hundred years to the first philosophical attempts to theorize linguistic reference, and we have Gottlob Frege segregating literary language from more "natural" forms of discourse on the grounds that unlike the latter, it does not actually refer.[2] At the mid-twentieth-century point, New Criticism, as distinct from an earlier philological tradition, shows no truck with anything remotely biographical, while the *nouvelle critique* gleefully unmasks and denounces the "referential illusion" (Michel Riffaterre) and the "reality effect" (Roland Barthes).[3] To be sure, we all know that history has returned with a vengeance, but not *that* history, not reductive equivalencies by which Real Person A would lurk behind Character X.

No doubt, it *is* silly to think there's much importance in pointing out that Stendhal "based" Julien Sorel on a certain forgotten Antoine Berthot, or that *Breathless's* Michel Poiccard was "in fact" a real-life cop-killer, Michel Portail, whose fate caught the attention of Truffaut and Godard. But it's silly not because of the "nature" of fiction or literature, but for historical reasons. Works like these are operating under a protocol according to which such details are irrelevant, or food only for the specialist interested in reconstructing the artist's work processes. As Anna Arzoumanov demonstrates in the book under review, as an empirical matter, this was not always so. Many works of prose fiction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries actively solicited keyed reading, some even coming with printed keys. Many others still denied that they had any key, but in doing so only seemed to spur the reader to identify the real individuals hidden under the fictional aliases. Of course, many more novels were not designed to be read with keys and were not read that way. Readers looked for many things in their novels, not just for veiled gossip. Nonetheless, it appears that the practice of keys was not in this period the aesthetic no-no it subsequently became—though it was, Arzoumanov shows, a politically subversive act.

Arzoumanov spends considerable time (approximately the first hundred pages of her book) trying to take some measure of the importance of keys in the Ancien Régime. It's not an easy task. One of the earliest researchers on the subject, the nineteenth-century bibliophile Frédéric Drujon, ended up with a catalogue so voluminous that, as Arzoumanov points out, keys come to seem nearly coextensive with literature as such. Indeed, against Drujon, we can probably agree that allusions to contemporary reality don't necessarily make for a roman à clef. It's no doubt true that in *La Princesse de Clèves*, the novelist Lafayette used her description of the court of Henri II as a cover for an indictment of the court culture of her own absolutist day, but who would leap from there and argue that Henri II was keyed to Louis XIV? An additional complication, which Arzoumanov isn't the first to recognize, is a certain continuity between keyed reading and a millennial tradition of allegorical reading (allegorisis). Indeed, some early modern peritextual elements labeled "keys" in fact provide interpretive glosses and not proper names. And there are other obstacles still: books were given unauthorized keys; punctual identifications are often found dispersed in correspondences and miscellanies; authors often hint at the existence of a key but don't provide one.

To bring some order to her inquiry, Arzoumanov limits herself to the key as what she calls *bibliographic object*. Her corpus, in other words, is made up of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works bound with printed keys, or, to be more precise, printed keys whose existence had already been flagged by nineteenth-century bibliophiles like Drujon and which can be found in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Tolbiac and the Arsenal). (Because the bibliophiles were less interested in allegorical keys, the author also developed a second method for fishing for these, though it doesn't seem to have been very productive.) The number of such works, it turns out, is rather small. The author has located 35, though many of these went through multiple editions and some have keys that exist in more than one iteration. (Not all keys, far from it, were issued by the printer of the main text.) Two of these are translations from the English (Manley's *Atalantis* and *Queen Zarah*). A few more accompany new editions of works from other times and places (the Psalms, Petronius's *Satyricon*, Rabelais's works, d'Urfé's pastoral best-seller *L'Astrée*, which was not given a printed key until over a century after its initial publication).

The remaining two parts of the study aim to exploit this corpus. Arzoumanov devotes part two to a description of the bibliographic object: the materiality of keys (their printed appearance, integration with respect to the main text) and their linguistic functioning and taxonomy (from the basic "A is X" variety to more informationally rich possibilities). It's only in part three that Arzoumanov really develops her thesis, which is that starting in the mid 1600s, keys became inseparable from politically subversive satire and the world of clandestine publishing. After an illuminating and incisive section on seventeenth-century debates about the role of naming in satire (focused on Boileau and La Bruyère), the author proceeds first by showing that keyed satire constituted very much a genre (dubbed, here, *libelle diffamatoire crypté*), then by proposing four case studies around some of the best-known examples. Arzoumanov makes the convincing point that keys seemed to move from a *galant* culture of snarky gossip (represented by texts such as the *Histoire des amours du Grand Alcandre* and Bussy's *Histoire amoureuse de Gaules*, both from the 1650s and 60s) to a more properly political, anti-monarchist form of satire (the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de Perse*).

Anyone interested in keyed reading will make good use of this book, really the first of its kind. It's a hard book to "just" read, however. The wind-up, as I've hinted, is quite long, constituting the introduction and the first two parts, or just over half the total text. (Even the crucial statement that she'll be attending to keys as a bibliographic object doesn't appear until page 82.) There's also a feeling of repetition. The corpus is justified and then rejustified, individual works are revisited from slightly different angles in different sections, and even the four case studies, the meat of the book, appear to lead to roughly the same point about the way an apparently "erudite" interest in secret history (often called the *chronique scandaleuse*) shades over into satire.

Adding to the feeling of repetition is the fact that out of thirty-five texts, only a relative few come in for sustained treatment. These are the (or some of the) satirical texts. The rarer allegorical and non-satirical texts are evoked only in the taxonomic sections of the book. For a study that put its selection of its corpus front and center, this is ironic. Why spend so much time and space defining the corpus and defending its coherence, only then to privilege a subset of the works? The answer is in one respect perfectly clear. The study started as a French dissertation, and as such had to meet certain expectations. Still, the book would have been much more effective as a focused study of keys and their historical relation to political satire—because that’s what it has become anyway—only diluted by material that is never analyzed. Had the study been more focused from the beginning, Arzoumanov would have had more time to put her findings into substantive dialogue with work on seditious literature more generally. (Robert Darnton is referenced, and seems to be an inspiration, but the author doesn’t really engage his work.[4]) And though I imagine we all can identify with the predicament of a researcher faced with an object of study that is too expansive, I can’t help but wonder if it’s possible to draw a line between narrative satires possessing printed keys (included here) and many others that don’t (for instance, Bonafon’s *Tanastès*, analyzed by Darnton, and mentioned only briefly). So, we have here a corpus that’s been painstakingly and logically isolated, but it’s also one that on a more analytical level may not be as coherent an object of study as the author might hope.[5]

Still, keys are a great subject, and one whose interest shouldn’t be limited to scholars of satire. After all, even if the number of printed keys isn’t huge compared to the novelistic output of the period, countless other novels were rumored to have keys, as when novelists assured readers that names had been changed to protect the innocent. Keys were part and parcel of a dominant referential mode of the early novel, one that predicated its appeal on the (purported) literal truth of the stories it told. Anna Arzoumanov’s work is a valuable step in understanding how integral “true stories” may be to the true story of the novel.

NOTES

[1] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’Absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

[2] Gottlob Frege, "On Sinn and Bedeutung," in *The Frege Reader*, ed. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 150-71.

[3] Michael Riffaterre, "L’illusion référentielle" (1978) in *Littérature et Réalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 91-118; Roland Barthes, "L’Effet de réel" (1968) in *Le Bruissement de la langue: Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 167-74.

[4] Arzoumanov cites specifically "Vies privées et affaires publiques sous l’Ancien Régime," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 154 (2004), 24-35. A number of his books figure in the bibliography, but are not discussed.

[5] Arzoumanov will surely not be surprised, but it’s also a corpus that isn’t complete. Just for the record, a few printed keys held by the BNF have apparently escaped her attention while coming (by chance) to mine: *Floridor et Dorise* (Du Bail, 1633); *Florinie ou l’illustre veuve persécutée* (Pique, 1645); *Le Convoy céleste de Martin* (Anon, 1654); *Le Roman des oiseaux* (Boucher, 1661). While I’m showing off, I might as well mention also *La Fausse Clélie* (Subligny, 1669), whose only copy with a printed key quite fortuitously seems to be in the library of my home institution.

University of California Berkeley
npaige@berkeley.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172