

H-France Review Vol. 17 (May 2017), No. 74

Amy Wigelsworth, *Rewriting "Les Mystères de Paris": The "Mystères Urbains" and the Palimpsest*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2016. xii + 232 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-909662-36-0.

Review by Adam Cutchin, Barnard College.

On December 28, 1848, the Théâtre Historique premiered Paul Féval's *Les Mystères de Londres, ou Les Gentilshommes de la nuit. Drame en cinq actes et dix tableaux*, a self-adaptation of his 1844 novel *Les Mystères de Londres* (p. 165). This dramatization of a narrative text is one of many case studies that Amy Wigelsworth examines in her valuable contribution to a rapidly growing body of scholarship on the sizable corpus of imitations, avatars, spin-offs, parallel series, parodies, and plagiarisms inspired by, and published in the wake of, Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (*Le Journal des Débats*, 1842-1843). Wigelsworth centers her measured study of the mysterious and the urban, and of the relationship between the text and the city, around a post-structuralist conception of the palimpsest as a critical lens, underscoring the cultural and literary implications of variation and transformation of texts through rewriting. In her three "contextualizing chapters" (respectively devoted to the three elements of the book's subtitle: mystery, the city, and the palimpsest), Wigelsworth explains that in her study, she puts aside the "story" of the diegesis and the "literariness" of the urban mystery (just as she explicitly sets out to study the action of the plays she includes in her corpus, rather than their staging or reception in chapter eight). In this way, she is able to demonstrate how the self-consciousness of the text—bound up with "the tantalizingly incongruous marriage of the notions of erasure, destruction, and suppression to those of superimposition, preservation, and creation" (p. 41)—emerges as a defining feature of the rewritings she studies.

Although Wigelsworth chooses her examples well, they do not necessarily constitute "a broad representative sample" (p. 3), as she claims, especially when one considers the sheer number of texts produced during the time frame in question (roughly from the publication of Sue's *Mystères de Paris* to the early aughts of the twentieth century). Nevertheless, it bears repeating that Wigelsworth's corpus serves her arguments well, allowing her to methodically examine geographical and temporal transformations, serialization and theatrical adaptation, and parody in turn. Given that even Eugène Sue's archetypal *Mystères de Paris* cannot be said to be widely read, Wigelsworth's decision to give summaries of the *mystères urbains* she analyzes, intercalated with chapters that proceed thematically rather than chronologically, is an admirable way of structuring this analysis of arguably obscure texts used as case studies. These texts—all French and almost all set in France—include Edmond Rochefort and Achille d'Artois's 1844 parodic play, *Les Mystères de Passy*; Paul Féval's *Les Mystères de Londres* (from the same year) along with his theatrical adaptation of the novel (mentioned above), *Les Mystères de Londres* (1848); "Paris dévoilé ou les Mystères Sus" (1852), a parodic, illustrated review of the *Mystères de Paris* by Amédée-Charles-Henry de Noé (pseud. Cham); Pierre Zaccone's *Les Mystères du vieux Paris* (1854); Aurélien Scholl's *Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* (1866-1867); the *chansonnier* Aristide Bruant's (prose) *roman-feuilleton*, *Les Bas-fonds de Paris* (1897); and two works by Jules Lermina (writing as William Cobb), *Les Mystères de New-York* (1874) and the fascinating "Mystère-ville" (1904-05).

Systematically declining to make binary distinctions, between literary and “popular” or “paraliterary” texts, for example, Wigelsworth attempts to rehabilitate not only the serial form, but also the genres characteristic of nineteenth-century popular fiction, by tracing their connections to the “modern” novel, rather than to their literary antecedents. In this way, Wigelsworth marshals the palimpsest as a metaphor for hypertextuality into the service of her demonstration of the transformations the authors of her chosen corpus carry out following Sue’s *Mystères de Paris*. The use of formulaic, fill-in-the-blank titles by authors of the texts examined points to a variation-on-a-theme practice that contributes to making these diverse “rewritings” deceptively coherent. As Gerald Prince puts it in his foreword to the English translation of Genette’s *Palimpsestes*, “[a]ny text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms; any writing is rewriting; and literature is always in the second degree.”[1] Wigelsworth, in turn, underscores the relationships between texts, preferring openness to closure, and therefore rightly points to the “risk of treating Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* as a sort of starting point par excellence for a series of hypertextual transformations, without considering the various influences that shaped the hypotext itself” (p. 85). For this reason, although Sue’s novel is ever present in this study, the focus quite rightly remains on the judicious selection of hypertexts from the July Monarchy through the beginning of the twentieth century.

Wigelsworth is at her best in her discussions of the relationships between the cities where (as well as by and about which) the *mystères urbains* were produced, and of theatrical adaptation and parody. In tracing the theme of rewriting through geographical and temporal transpositions, serial form, theatrical adaptation, and parody, the author shows exactly how the self-consciousness of the text is “nowhere more inevitable, pronounced, and pre-programmed than in the *mystères urbains*” (p. 210).

Following Christopher Prendergast, Wigelsworth argues that much as the city must be understood (and read) according to its fragmented nature, the serial novel must also be read, indeed consumed, according to its own inherently (and possibly, apparently desultory) fragmented form. In other words, she likens the coherence and unity of the panoramic view of the city to the wholeness and closure of the book edition of a text. For this reason, once a novel published *en feuilleton* is published *en volume*, “the very features which were constitutive of meaning in the original” are “ironed out” (p. 146). As pleasing as it may be not to be obliged to wait another day, for another newspaper, to continue reading, without having arrived at the (erased!) famous line, “La suite au prochain numéro,” so is the panoramic view of the city whole, coherent, and reassuring. But such a panoramic, totalizing view of the city, and knowledge of it, as Prendergast explains, “is linked to death.”[2] With this in mind, Wigelsworth uses her central metaphor of the palimpsest—an inherently literary trope—to make the connection between the *mystères urbains* and the city. With its implications of layers, erasure, and rewriting, the notion of the urban palimpsest would seem to most readily bring to mind (for *dix-neuviémistes*, especially) Haussmann’s transformations of the city during the Second Empire. Wigelsworth writes that “The *mystères urbains* use urban space as a constitutive part of the text, rather than a simple ‘setting’; this function of urban space reinforces the capacity for the city to be “a source of mystery and disorder, and yet also the antidote to that disorder” (p. 34).[3] With this opposition between the labyrinthine, fragmented city and the panoramic view of it from on high, Michel de Certeau’s “rhétorique piétonnière” is implicit in much of Wigelsworth’s demonstration of the myriad connections between the texts she studies and the city where, and by which, they were produced. As Prendergast writes, “what is seen from on high are mere ‘cadavres,’ a spectral parody of the real thing” (p. 209). Construction and destruction, writing and rewriting, conservation and transformation: these are the themes Wigelsworth traces throughout her study of “Americanizations” of *mystères urbains* and serial form, and they are equally at play in the theatrical adaptations and parodies she expertly analyzes in the last chapters of her study.

The dramatization of narrative texts has a long tradition, notably including medieval mystery plays adapted from the Bible, which fits nicely with Wigelsworth’s sustained consideration of the mystery and

the city in the hypotext as well as in the hypertextual transformations it inspires. Wigelsworth takes the example of two texts by the stalwart, prolific *feuilletoniste* Paul Féval. By considering his *Mystères de Londres*, published just about a year after the end of the serialization of *Les Mystères de Paris*, along with Féval's theatrical adaptation of work, Wigelsworth convincingly shows how the familiar and the mysterious—in terms of both the hypotext and urban life—are paradoxically re-inscribed and demystified at once. “Dramatizations of the *mystères urbains*,” she writes, may “be seen as a sustained analogy of the balance between familiarity and variation which characterized all transformations of Sue's text” (p. 176). In a similar fashion, Wigelsworth by and large reads parody in terms of its metatextual function, that of “laying bare” the way in which the hypotext functioned” (p. 197). The “paradox of parody,” as Wigelsworth explains (following Margaret Rose, Linda Hutcheon, and Daniel Sangsue), is that parody at once preserves and destroys, (re)inscribes and erases, and explicitly and implicitly critiques the hypotext, “refunctionalizing” it, as the Russian Formalists would put it. Here, we can readily see how a parodic work of theater is at once palimpsestuous and self-conscious, not only perpetuating that which it purports to denigrate, but also simultaneously carrying out processes of destruction and superimposition with respect to the hypotext. As Wigelsworth demonstrates, in the case of Edmond Rochefort and Achille d'Artois's play *Les Mystères de Passy* (1844), carnivalesque parody serves to highlight the “flawed logic of the hypotext” (p. 190), that is, Sue's ultimately conservative socialist prescriptions that so famously excited the ire of Karl Marx in *The Holy Family* (1845).

Whom would this book interest most? Most broadly, scholars of nineteenth-century French cultural studies. Since the author conscientiously attends to the metatextual functions of a coherent but varied selection of hypertexts, *Rewriting “Les Mystères de Paris”* will also be of great use to those with more explicitly literary interests, particularly those interested in the practice of rewriting and its connections to seriality, openness, and closure—to the “erstwhile *feuilleton* aficionado” (p. 212), as Wigelsworth describes herself. Lastly, and perhaps self-evidently, this study will greatly appeal to those with interests related to the urban mystery phenomenon and crime fiction. Wigelsworth's study is a welcome, French (and Paris) focused complement to both Stephen Knight's largely anglophone-oriented study, *The Mysteries of the Cities*, and Dominique Kalifa's historically and culturally oriented book, *Les Bas-fonds: Histoire d'un imaginaire*.^[4]

Notes

[1] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, foreword by Gerald Prince (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. ix.

[2] Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 209.

[3] Those interested in the relationships between urban space (particularly subterranean space) and crime fiction will find useful resonances between Wigelsworth's writing on the *bas-fonds*, the city and historicization, and David L. Pike's well known study, *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London, 1800–1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), as well as Andrea Goulet's recent book, *Legacies of the Rue Morgue: Science, Space, and Crime Fiction in France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). See also chapter four, “Paris Underground,” in Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 74–101.

[4] Stephen Knight, *The Mysteries of the Cities: Urban Crime Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2012); and Dominique Kalifa, *Les Bas-fonds: Histoire d'un imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

Adam Cutchin
Barnard College
acutchin@barnard.edu

Copyright © 2017 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 Review*. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172