

H-France Review Vol. 18 (May 2018), No. 118

Atkinson, Juliette. *French Novels and the Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. X + 426 pp. Bibliography, index. \$100.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780197266090

Review by Juliette M. Rogers, Macalester College.

Over 100 years after the famous 1836 “French novels” article was published by John Wilson Croker, denouncing the immorality of French novels, critics continued to repeat the notion that Victorian readers, because of their prudish values, rejected the promiscuous or licentious literature being published across the Channel in France. However, there has also been a competing view of 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature as one that is immersed in French literature. Atkinson, in her book *French Novels and the Victorians*, seeks to explore the validity of these competing claims.

One of the main goals of Atkinson’s study is to explore the complicated responses of British readers to French literature during the Victorian era, and specifically the years 1830 to 1870. This time period has remained less studied than the *fin-de-siècle* or the earlier Romantic eras. Yet, as Atkinson argues, it is a pivotal time period because it witnessed, “simultaneous public recrimination and private consumption of French novels” (p. 6).

The three parts of the book are divided equally: in the first part, Atkinson examines who was reading French novels, and which texts they were reading the most frequently. The second part focuses on the “immorality” of French novels and the attempts made during the time period either to censure books or to dissuade the public from reading them. The last part examines the influence of French literature on its British counterpart.

Atkinson’s research for Part I of the book dives deep, starting with an exploration of the archives of the London Library, as well as several other libraries located in London at the time. By doing so, she uncovers the fairly generous acquisition policies of circulating libraries, allowing French novels by a variety of writers to be included in their collections. Atkinson also examines the loan records over this 40-year period and has traced hundreds of specific texts borrowed by specific patrons, both men and women, from the aristocratic, middle-class or artistic classes. In addition to libraries, Atkinson also explores the inventory maintained by a variety of booksellers in London, including the most well-known foreign bookstores Dulau, Delaporte, Rolandi and Jeffs, and the periodicals that published French novels in serial form. Together, these explorations into the archives offer discoveries that help to overturn the general notion that Victorian society was insular and that French literature was not available to British readers.

The second chapter of Part I focuses on “networking” in its various forms during the Victorian period, with sections devoted to patrons of French literature, translators, and editors and critics who promoted the works of French novelists in England. In each section, Atkinson investigates a specific example to serve a larger thesis. For example, she gives detailed information from the correspondence of literary patrons Alfred d’Orsay and Marguerite Blessington, French and Irish aristocrats respectively, who were instrumental in bringing together French writers and their British admirers. In the section on translators, Atkinson examines not only the trio of translators responsible for the English versions of many George Sand novels, but also the efforts of an actor, a critic, and a politician to serve as go-betweens for Sand and these unconventional translators who “annoyed” Sand (p. 108). The final section, on editors and critics, explores the importance of articles written about French authors for the dissemination of French literature. Atkinson here studies the transnational efforts of editors and critics based not only in London but also in Paris, examining, for example, *La Revue des Deux Mondes* as well as *The Atheneum* and the *London Review*.

Part II, titled “The danger of French novels”, begins with an in-depth look at the legacy of John Wilson Croker’s landmark sixty-seven page article from 1836 that put French literature “on trial” (p. 147). Atkinson researches how Croker’s article was interpreted both in England and in France, explaining that, “The curious legacy of Croker’s article starkly illuminates the extent to which certain French critics shared his views” (p. 157). This first chapter also examines the thoughts of readers of “immoral” novels, with a look at the correspondence between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Mary Mitford, for example, to unpack their strategies for discussing their consumption of French novels. Atkinson also examines a famous case of actual censure in this chapter: the theatrical version of Dumas *filis’* novel *La Dame aux camélias*, which was banned both in France and England. Atkinson analyzes the surprising effects of the British ban: “one of the most destabilizing aspects of the controversy is that it revealed the hypocrisy of the British public. It was hard to avoid the suspicion that the men and women who flocked to the comparatively harmless *La Traviata* [the opera based on *La Dame aux camélias*, but that was not banned] were not also privately consuming the novel” (p. 186).

The second chapter in Part II switches the focus to that of fictional readers in Victorian novels who are portrayed as indulging in the promiscuous or scandalous activity of reading French books. Atkinson divides this chapter into sections on fictional portraits of women readers, “wealthy idlers” and hybrid Anglo-French readers, all of whom devour “French novels,” whether by a specific author (Balzac, Rousseau, Kock are most frequently mentioned), or by the general term. The last section, on “hybrid” readers, includes fascinating analyses of very different novels by Mary Ashford Owen, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Emma Robinson and their characters who read French fiction.

Part III of Atkinson’s study lays out not only the French influence on certain genres of English literature, but also the cultural competition that existed between the two nations. We begin with a detailed examination of the French influence on sensation novels published in England, but also the hesitance to avow it: “novelists themselves were often rather coy in publicly admitting to the influence. Intriguingly, both Wilkie Collins and Mary Braddon celebrated their French influences before a French audience, but withheld these sentiments in England” (p. 251). Atkinson also offers a detailed examination of Balzac’s influence in England, including the presence of a book with Balzac’s name on its spine in Augustus Egg’s well-known painting from the era “Past and Present No. 1” (p. 267). Atkinson finishes this chapter with an in-depth

---

investigation of British plagiarism of French plays and novels, in particular by two authors, Mary Braddon and Charles Reade.

The last chapter in the book, on cultural competition, provides an excellent examination not only of the number of books published in each country, but also of the import and export of books between France and England. Atkinson again delves deep into the archives to explore the different types of impact that Alexandre Dumas *père* and Eugène Sue had on British readers of the 1840s, pushing some British critics to protest that French literature was making a cultural invasion. Atkinson explains: “The craze for French novels coincided with, and exacerbated, a period of anxiety regarding the vigour of English fiction” (p. 298).

However, Atkinson explains that there was a major shift in British opinion during the period, from the critiques of immorality in the 1830s, to worries about cultural invasion and “industrial” French literature in the 1840s, to a general feeling in the 1850s and 1860s that French literature demonstrated an artistic maturity and superiority that English literature might be lacking. For example, Atkinson quotes an article from 1851 in *Fraser’s Magazine* that states, “Whatever sins against taste or morality may be chargeable upon French novels, it cannot be denied that they possess in a high degree the power of fascinating the attention” (p. 332).

This last section of the book also focuses on the influence of Hippolyte Taine’s *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863-64), and the comparisons and distinctions that he makes between the two national literatures, French and English. Atkinson argues that “Taine’s history did not originate the debate but focused it and encouraged critics on different sides of the issue to state their position” (p. 340). Their statements transcend or refute the stereotypical view that Victorians in general disdained French literature as unfit and immoral.

Atkinson’s ability to see the complexity of the situation may at times overwhelm the reader with so much detail, yet her work also clearly demonstrates the many layers that need to be included in order to properly study this subject matter, including library circulation records, correspondence between writers, and close readings of individual novels. One of the more intriguing aspects of Atkinson’s interdisciplinary approach is that it draws on information from both French and British sources, seeking to show that authors, publishers, and readers in both countries were working out their responses to the “dangers” of French novels. In this respect, Atkinson’s work is truly original in that it does not focus only on Victorian England, but also on the attitudes and assumptions circulating in France during this time period. Ultimately, *French Novels and the Victorians* provides readers with an innovative study of this 40-year period and offers new perspectives on how French literature was consumed and discussed, both in England and in France.

Juliette M. Rogers  
Macalester College  
[jmrogers@macalester.edu](mailto:jmrogers@macalester.edu)

Copyright © 2018 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

---

redistribution/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