

H-France Review Vol. 18 (July 2018), No. 149

Anne O’Neil-Henry, *Mastering the Marketplace: Popular Literature in Nineteenth-Century France*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xii + 245 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4962-0198-0.

Review by Bettina Lerner, The City College and the Graduate Center, CUNY.

The adjective “popular,” as Pierre Bourdieu noted, often functions as a kind of “magic epithet” that resists sustained critical analysis. This is perhaps especially true in the French context, where the term *populaire* can evoke affective reactions that are irrevocably tied to the “variable geometry” exercised by its cognate *peuple* and to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion this concept conceals.^[1] We can see some of this ambivalence at work in the notion of *littérature populaire*, or “popular literature,” an unwieldy category that purports to describe a broad range of texts while often obscuring the social and material conditions of their production. Popularity can refer at once to the social origins of a text’s author, to those of its consumers, or to the overall number of consumers it attracts. Critics might place a text in this category for reasons of genre or style; or on the basis of paratextual evidence including packaging and marketing. Indeed, the descriptor “popular literature” may ultimately say more about the classifier than about the text being classified.

In *Mastering the Marketplace: Popular Literature in Nineteenth-Century France*, Anne O’Neil-Henry delivers a clear and nuanced reading of the literary field during the July Monarchy and of the most popular novelists who operated within it, successfully showing how the boundaries of high and low on which the notion of popular literature depends were never as fixed as they seemed to critics, either then or today. Through careful analysis of works by Paul de Kock and Eugène Sue (both best-selling authors who are infrequently read and taught today) alongside a number of texts by Honoré de Balzac (who explicitly sought to distinguish himself from both de Kock and Sue), O’Neil-Henry shows how these writers borrowed and reframed narrative plots and forms in ways that complicate presumed distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” This book is at its strongest when engaging not just with the novels themselves but with the wider print culture in which they were promoted and disseminated. Close readings of the publishing industry’s trade journals as well as printed advertisements from the period provide solid support for her argument and lend depth to her reassessment of materials that are otherwise fairly well known to specialists of nineteenth-century French literature.

Following an introduction that lays out a persuasive argument and establishes a fruitful dialogue with critics including Margaret Cohen, Christine Haynes, and Judith Lyon-Caen, *Mastering the Marketplace* opens with a strong first chapter on the century’s best-selling *physiologies* that

introduces a number of meaningful distinctions into its overview of these money-making panoramic publications. Comparing the “self-consciously commercial” (p. 29) *physiologies* published by Gabriel Aubert and Charles Philipon’s La Maison Aubert to the more upmarket “literary guidebooks” such as *Paris, ou le livre des cent-et-un* (1831) and Paul de Kock’s *La Grande Ville: Nouveau tableau de Paris* (1842), this chapter reveals the inherently unstable and fluid nature of the genre. By drawing on promotional materials, including advertisements that editors placed in daily newspapers and the awkward attempts to classify social panoramas in trade journals like the *Feuilleton du journal de la librairie*, the chapter teases out the moment between 1840 and 1842 when episodic narratives focusing on contemporary mores became recognizable and desirable to readers as belonging to a genre unto itself (albeit one whose exact contours were hard to define). O’Neil-Henry argues that the *physiologies* were thus emblematic of tensions central to popular literature: as half-literary, half-journalistic *mélanges*, they brought together writers like de Kock and Balzac who would eventually come to occupy opposing positions in the literary field.

The opening chapter on *physiologies* lays down the groundwork for the insightful reading of de Kock’s novelistic production that follows in chapter two. De Kock’s name functions as a “Bourdiesian marker of poor taste” (p. 58), yet as O’Neil-Henry points out, he was also recognized by his peers for his success as a novelist whose appeal reached far and wide. As his reputation evolved, de Kock managed to straddle the line between commercial success and cultural recognition by exploiting his readers’ taste for descriptions of contemporary urban phenomena. Although de Kock tried his hand at a number of different literary genres, this chapter focuses on his novelistic production, examining early works like *Mon voisin Raymond* (1827) as well as later ones such as *Un Homme à marier* (1837) and the panoramic *La Grande Ville*, in order to show how de Kock stuck to a winning formula that recycled key formal elements in ways that kept his readers coming back for more.

If de Kock was able to turn his episodic descriptions into a successful but repetitive narrative formula, his contemporary Eugène Sue instead gained popularity by venturing into different kinds of narratives, from the maritime novel to the *roman de mœurs* to the best-selling social novel he is most known for, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1843). While the latter usually commands a lion’s share of attention among nineteenth-century scholars, O’Neil-Henry instead devotes the third chapter of *Mastering the Marketplace* to an exploration of Sue’s earlier works like *Plik et Plok* (1831), and pays special attention to his *roman de mœurs*, most notably *Paula Monti ou l’Hôtel Lambert* (1842), which was serialized almost concurrently with *Les Mystères de Paris*. This reading brings out a side of Sue that is not always acknowledged in recent scholarship: that of a writer who was strategic in choosing to adopt novelistic genres that had already developed well-established readerships and who was later able to transpose elements from these narratives into his best-selling novel about the *bas-fonds* of Paris.

De Kock and Sue both outsold Honoré de Balzac during the July Monarchy, yet it is Balzac, of course, whose legacy has done the most to shape our understanding of that period. O’Neil-Henry closes her analysis of the nineteenth-century literary field with a fourth chapter that examines how Balzac tried to distinguish himself from his rivals while nonetheless employing similar narrative strategies in his own work. After showing how stylized versions of the descriptions of urban social life such as the ones found in social panoramas structure parts of the novellas grouped under *L’Histoire des treize*, this chapter then turns its attention to the 1844 novel *Les Employés*. O’Neil-Henry persuasively argues that this novel, an earlier version of which had appeared as a novella entitled *La Femme supérieure* in 1837, was inflected and ultimately

transformed by Balzac's forays into *physiologies*, and most notably his *Physiologie de l'employé* (1841). This reading sheds light on relatively understudied texts and adds specificity to Balzac's notoriously vexed relationship to the increasing commercialization of literature and of the novel in particular.

The book's conclusion tries to establish parallels between the changing mediascapes of the turn of the twenty-first century and the dynamic literary field in which Balzac, de Kock and Sue made names for themselves almost two centuries earlier. O'Neil-Henry's comparative discussion of three novels published by Gallimard in 2006-07--the translation of the first volume in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Jonathan Littell's critically acclaimed *Les Bienveillantes*, and Muriel Barbery's surprise best-seller *L'Élégance du hérisson*--is thought-provoking and astute, but it is also the only part of her argument that feels less than entirely convincing. O'Neil-Henry is right to point out that Barbery's novel, with its occasional Balzacian undertones, engages a number of different cultural spheres, but *L'Élégance du hérisson* strikes me more as what we might call middlebrow, a term that *Mastering the Marketplace* does not use in its analysis of nineteenth-century novels. This omission is not surprising; indeed, it speaks to the fact that the differences between the literary worlds of the 1840s and the early 2000s are more meaningful than whatever trace similarities one might find between them. Middlebrow tastes have flourished since the post-modern period in which distinctions between high and low--critical categories forged in the moment of cultural flux that O'Neil-Henry explores--have been rendered suspect. If de Kock, Sue and Balzac were able to exploit the instability of nascent cultural categories during the period of their initial emergence, we read them today when these same categories are already in the late stages of being abandoned, questioned or resurrected in new ways and to other ends.

Nonetheless, the book's conclusion doesn't so much detract from the overall argument as reaffirm its core strengths. For, as O'Neil-Henry deftly shows, the nineteenth-century literary field was indeed a uniquely interconnected network of writers whose narrative endeavors both wittingly and unwittingly reinforced the cultural hierarchies that helped to shape modernity. *Mastering the Marketplace* goes a long way toward helping readers navigate the ambiguities and contradictions that make the nineteenth century's many different forms of popular literature so compelling.

NOTE

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, "Vous avez dit populaire?" *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 46:1 (1983): 98-105.

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ISSN 1553-9172