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Xavier Bourdenet, *L'Écriture de l'Histoire chez Mérimée: L'archive et l'archè*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022. 752 pp. Appendix, bibliography, and index. €98.99 (hb). ISBN 9782406128052; €59.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406128045.

Review by Corry Cropper, Brigham Young University.

Xavier Bourdenet has achieved what I thought impossible in today's publishing world: he has produced a single-author volume devoted exclusively to Prosper Mérimée with little mention of operas and no discussion of Bizet. His focus, as the title makes clear, is to look at the role of history in Mérimée's fictional works *and* to study how the former *Inspecteur de monuments historiques* approached history in his academic essays. Bourdenet explains the stakes in his introduction: "Nous retiendrons davantage l'œuvre proprement historique ou *historienne* de Mérimée. Presque ignorée de la critique, elle est pourtant abondante et, c'est ce qu'on essaiera de montrer dans ce livre, en écho direct avec l'œuvre fictionnelle" (p. 14).

Bourdenet's study explicitly builds on a 1999 essay by Antonia Fonyi in which she posits Mérimée's obsession with the *archè*—the primitive, disordered, and violent world that lurks just under the surface in his fiction. Bourdenet brings the *archè* into dialogue with the "archive," pointing to Mérimée's rigorous archival work and its influence on both his fiction and his historical studies. He proposes studying the historical impulse across the genres in which Mérimée worked: *scènes historiques*, the novel, novellas, and historical essays (he studies each of these in four separate parts of the book, detailed below). He theorizes that Mérimée's fiction "s'installe dans l'énigme, ne conclut jamais vraiment," whereas his history "ne cesse jamais de poser des thèses, les plus vraisemblables possibles, pour approcher d'une vérité qu'il s'agit de dire explicitement" (p. 45). Broadly speaking, while Mérimée's historical essays venture tentative conclusions built on extensive archival research, his fiction allows exploration of the *archè*, of the inexpressible narratives that get at what Mérimée would call in an 1839 letter "la pure nature de l'HOMME" (quoted in Bourdenet, p. 42). Bourdenet explains that Mérimée's history "n'a pas de dimension 'résurrectionnelle'" (p. 22), but "faire *revivre* le passé suppose chez lui la fiction" (p. 24).

Part one, "Mérimée dramaturge," studies the genre of *scènes historiques*. This part taken alone is almost certainly the longest study of Mérimée's *La Jacquerie* ever published. For Bourdenet, *La Jacquerie*, a play about a peasant revolt during the Hundred Years' War, is "le résultat d'une 'conviction' de Mérimée non attestée ni vérifiée par le sources" (p. 83). Unlike Walter Scott's novels, Mérimée's play has no historical characters, so he can study the *mœurs* of the fourteenth century and arrive at a fragmented truth about mentalities of the time without being bound to follow well-documented historical figures. In other words, fiction allows Mérimée to triangulate

the social imaginary of a time in a way that a strict reliance on archives would not. Or, to misuse Pascal's famous aphorism and apply it to Mérimée, "l'histoire a ses raisons que les archives ne connaissent point."

Part two studies Mérimée's only full-length novel, *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*. Bourdenet notes that while contemporary critics were not kind to Mérimée, they read his book as a conventional historical novel. Bourdenet makes a compelling case for the *Chronique* as an anti-novel: Mérimée refuses to include portraits of famous historical figures, tends to highlight the comical and the ironic, engages in overt conversations with the reader, and neglects a conventional dénouement. "La condamnation de la *Chronique* comme mauvais roman s'appuie prioritairement sur le constat d'une composition éclatée, secondairement sur l'absence de 'héros' et de développement psychologique, notamment dans le domaine amoureux. Or, cette déstructuration est le fait de toute la tradition de l'anti-roman" (p. 192). What's more, Bourdenet shows Mérimée's novel about the wars of religion to be decidedly uninterested in faith: "Dans ce roman où la religion est partout, on parle finalement peu de Dieu" (p. 217). He adds that the novel "vise... à placer délibérément le lecteur dans une position d'inconfort. A lui faire expérimenter le doute" (p. 253). This doubt, Bourdenet explains, is not limited to the reader's religious belief, but also spreads to their belief in the general narrative of historical events surrounding the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and, by extension, all past historical conclusions.

Bourdenet examines Mérimée's novellas in part three, with particular focus on *Vision de Charles XI*, *Enlèvement de la redoute*, *La Vénus d'Ille*, and *Carmen*, again showing how these texts build on or undermine archival evidence and how they reveal the archè. The reading of *Enlèvement de la redoute*, a tale about a violent skirmish between Napoleonic and Russian troops in the lead up to the battle of Shevardino, is particularly compelling. Bourdenet reminds readers that the history of the Napoleonic wars primarily became codified through the numerous memoirs written by eyewitnesses. *Enlèvement* follows in the tradition of these memoirs while also underscoring how unreliable they can be. Bourdenet explains, "A une époque où la mémoire tend à s'imposer comme le registre essentiel du rapport au monde, ces deux brèves fictions de Mérimée [*Vision de Charles XI* and *Enlèvement*] montrent une aporétique du témoignage. Mystification, artéfact littéralement in-vraisemblable (*Vision*), ou récit forcément troué, renvoyé à un inconnaissable et marqué d'une essentielle incomplétude (*l'Enlèvement*), la mise en scène mériméenne du témoignage sape la confiance dans les pouvoirs authentifiants de la transmission mémorielle" (p. 339). Mérimée consistently undermines grand historical narratives and calls into question preconceived ideas about textual reliability. This explains, in part, why Mérimée excelled in staccato short scenes, novellas, or essays, rather than novels or memoirs: he viewed history as a series of somewhat random, only loosely connected events that were best examined separately and that could rarely be rendered entirely coherent in any definitive way.

In this same part of the book, the chapter "La fiction archéologique" leads Bourdenet to theorize a difference between Viollet-le-Duc and Mérimée, even though the two frequently and successfully collaborated. Viollet-le-Duc sought to restore buildings (e.g. Notre Dame de Paris, château de Pierrefonds), completely reconstructing them even if that reconstructed edifice never existed in such a state before. Mérimée preferred to maintain whatever fragments remained, uneasy about supposing what had existed around the fragment or what it had been like when it was freshly completed. This helps explain why the narrator of *La Vénus d'Ille* is so reluctant—unable even—to assign definitive meanings and origins to the bronze statue of Venus, whereas the local host has constructed an entire origin story, complete with unlikely etymologies, for the

statue. Or why the narrator of *Carmen*, in search of the true location of the “Bataille de Munda,” never seems to find it and remains skeptical of contemporary theories about the site’s location.

At 250 pages long, Bourdenet’s study of “Mérimée historien” in part four could be a stand-alone book. I found the section detailing Mérimée’s personal participation in—and reaction to—the revolutions of 1848 particularly gripping and important. Though Mérimée’s early writing tended to be sympathetic toward revolution and resistance, his experience in 1848 caused him to see revolutionaries and reactionaries as self-serving—justifying storming government buildings or engaging in violent, destructive acts with platitudes about social change and liberty. Mérimée would write in July that the events of 1848 discouraged him, adding, “J’ai vu assez d’horreurs pour prendre en grippe toutes les révolutions. Ce qu’il y a de plus affligeant, c’est la bêtise et la lâcheté générales” (pp. 607, 615). This part of the book dissects Mérimée’s historical writings, showing how they resist the trend exemplified by Michelet, Guizot, and Tocqueville who fit history into broad dramas that reflect political agendas. Instead, Bourdenet concludes that Mérimée represents a proto-positivist approach to history in that he explores multiple sources and proposes a thesis only when there is incontrovertible evidence to support it. Even these conclusions, however, are often tentative, tempered by phrases such as *peut-être* and *il semblerait que*.

While I understand that my one criticism of the book could justifiably be considered beyond its stated scope, in 750 pages of analysis I wish Bourdenet had spent some time on themes that are currently capturing our field’s attention. He does discuss virility in passing and occasionally mentions psychoanalysis, but does not discuss race, gender, or colonialism in any deliberate way, even though these topics are repeatedly raised by Mérimée himself. These issues are relevant to Mérimée’s historical perspectives: his views on religion, on race, on social class (which Bourdenet does examine), on gender, and on nationalism are influenced by his position of power as a white, wealthy Frenchman with significant political appointments. In her recent book, Nelly Furman pointedly calls Mérimée’s *Carmen* a work of “racism and misogyny.”[1] It could be argued whether Mérimée warrants defending, but not examining and contextualizing these issues is an opportunity missed.

This book impressed me on many levels. It provides a master class in close reading and historical analysis. It fleshes out Mérimée’s approach to history in a way that will help future scholars when they study any of his works. And it offers original and convincing readings of a number of Mérimée’s fictional works, contextualizing them alongside his many historical essays.

NOTES

[1] Nelly Furman, *Georges Bizet’s Carmen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 74.

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