

Lee on Gauthier (2018)

Gauthier, Nicolas. *Lire la ville, dire le crime: mise en scène de la criminalité dans les mystères urbains de 1840 à 1860*. PU de Limoges, 2018, pp. 290, ISBN 9782842877736

Susanna Lee, Georgetown University

Nicolas Gauthier's *Lire la ville, dire le crime* is a study of French urban mysteries from the mid-nineteenth century. The corpus starts with Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* and expands to include Sue-inspired series: Paul Féval's *Les Mystères de Londres*, Eugène-François Vidocq's *Les Vrais Mystères de Paris*, Louis-François Raban's *Les Mystères du Palais-Royal*, Clémence Robert's *Les Mendiants de Paris*, and Alexandre Dumas's *Les Mohicans de Paris*.

Gauthier's introduction states that "dans les discours du XIXe siècle sur la criminalité, la frontière entre réel et fiction est trouble" (9). Having thus proposed that crime is a site where reality and fiction blend into one another, he sets out to determine what constitutes a *mystère urbain* and thus, it would seem—since reality and fiction amalgamate—what constitutes the modern city. The author writes that his goal is not to "dégager une acception plus limitée ou contraignante des mystères urbains, mais de mettre en évidence le noyau de leur poétique" (12). That *poétique*, as it turns out, is a composite creature, containing an arsenal of characters, moral quandaries, set pieces, and narrative devices. As Gauthier puts it, "l'épine dorsale des mystères urbains est ainsi l'articulation entre urbanité, criminalité, et exploration sociale" (36). The most engaging part of the book is the tour through the characters of the *mystères urbains*, while the more theoretically sophisticated—but in some sense less thoroughly developed—part examines mystery reading as a code-breaking element of urban existence.

The first chapter of *Lire la ville, dire le crime* chronicles the publication of Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* as well as its reception, from *Mystères*-inspired tourism to *Mystères*-inspired crime fiction. The second chapter provides a genealogy—recipe might also be an appropriate word—for nineteenth-century crime fiction. Ingredients include the Gothic novel, melodrama, the stage character of Robert Macaire, memoirs by criminals and police officers, the works of Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, the rise of sociology, the *presse judiciaire*, and panoramic literature.

In a second section, Gauthier moves into a detailed account of the component parts of the *mystères urbains*. In chapter three, as though he were building a small-scale model of the genre, he inventories the decor, the *quartiers louches*, the *tapis-franc*, and then launches a who's who—almost a concordance—of the character types populating the series that constitute his corpus (and, it would follow, the city in popular imagination). Gauthier had earlier declared an intention to focus the study on the "personnel criminel romanesque" (13), and this character survey is the most satisfying part of the book. It shows us the exotic criminal: the brute, the usurer, and the *criminel d'exception*.

Chapter four then surveys *la criminalité civilisée*, a category that includes *le crime aristocrate*—kidnappers, counterfeiters, and thieves—and *le crime professionnel*—clergy, notaries, doctors. Other curious members of the professional category are *sorciers* and *savants fous*. Then comes a well-written and informative exploration of the law enforcement officer. This entire section of the book is more richly descriptive than analytical, though it does contain some thought-provoking observations: the connection of aristocratic crime to a refusal to abandon Old Regime values, for instance, or the fact that police are shown in the most positive light when they are least present as characters (127). Developing each one of these remarks would be worthwhile, but would have made for an unmanageably long book.

Chapter five is entitled "La Femme et le crime." Using as framework the writings of Jann Matlock, it outlines the roles that female characters play in crime fiction. Sometimes this character is the victim—the *femme malheureuse et persécutée* or the *prostituée vertueuse*—and sometimes she is the criminal. Examples of the latter include the *femme séductrice*, the *gouvernante criminelle*, and the *tenancière de tapis-franc*.

Chapter six examines the figure of the *surhomme*. Its subtitle—"hors des lois, au-dessus des lois?"—encapsulates the ambiguous nature both of the chapter and of the character. This part of Gauthier's study wanders into broader analytical terrain. He starts with descriptions of character sub-outlines and accounts of *épreuves* and *quêtes*, but then moves into the challenges of judging the *surhomme*, and the ambiguous nature of crime itself: "De tels exemples abondent: pour 'réparer' la société, le surhomme doit enfreindre les lois. Le crime est éminemment subjectif..." (195). This idea would seem to deserve further consideration, especially as Gauthier identifies echoes of the *surhomme* in the detective, and also posits connections among the detective, the writer, and the *flâneur*.

The third section—“Le crime de la lecture, le crime et la lecture”—heads in a still more abstract direction. Drawing on the work of Amy Wigelsworth, it discusses how crime fiction announces its own fictionality, guides and instructs the reader, uses notes, titles and prefaces, and encourages multilayered readings. It examines urban mysteries as activating and testing “les compétences” of narrators and readers. This section also explores how crime fiction provides an example of—as well as a place to see descriptions of—reading as a multifaceted and sometimes pernicious activity: “Mettre en scène la lecture de romans comme la cause d’une corruption morale ou d’une perte du sens des réalités fait jouer des résonances déterminantes dans les mystères urbains” (231). It is in this final section that Gauthier talks about “reading the city.”

At various points throughout the book, the author gestures at overarching theoretical frameworks. For instance, he twice mentions Greimas’s *schéma actantiel* as a useful tool, but does not define or develop it. He also cites Foucault, both in discussions of the murderer Pierre Rivière and in state law enforcement. Gauthier’s book points to many more scholarly paths than it follows, but not necessarily to its detriment. It is a useful and often appealing introduction to the stakes of urban crime fiction in the French mid-nineteenth century.

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