

Boulard on Grossman and Stephens, eds (2015) and on Hugo ed. Scepti and Moncond'huy (2018)

Grossman, Kathryn M., and Bradley Stephens, eds. *Les Misérables and its Afterlives: Between Page, Stage, and Screen*. Ashgate, 2015, pp. 264, ISBN 978-1472440853

Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Edited by Henri Scepti with the collaboration of Dominique Moncond'huy. Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade," 2018, pp. 757, ISBN 978-2070142224

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Tolstoy called *Les Misérables* the greatest of all novels. Its author Victor Hugo wrote: "Je ne sais s'il sera lu par tous, mais je l'ai écrit pour tous." Indeed, readers all over the world have admired the ambition, power, and beauty of Hugo's masterpiece, certainly one of the most popular novels of the nineteenth century. Over the past five years, several new books—the two reviewed here among them—have helped readers better appreciate this epic novel and the writer's prodigious legacy.

The essay anthology, *Les Misérables and its Afterlives: Between Page, Stage, and Screen*, edited by Grossman and Stephens, will engage readers interested in exploring the enduring popularity of *Les Misérables*. Offering analysis of the novel and its adaptations, the volume addresses key aspects of an immensely popular text. For example, Karen Quandt discusses Hugo's vision of nature's boundless energy as a reflection of a restless French society. Fiona Cox shows that frequent invocations of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton incorporate and translate epic tropes, thus molding Hugo's meditation on infinity and revealing his epic ambitions. Briana Lewis explores the ways in which female characters' womanhood defines their sovereignty in the novel.

Questions of reception and adaptation of *Les Misérables* play an important role in the novel's appraisals. As the editors remind us, the connection between *Les Misérables* and audiences "has become ever more entrenched in popular culture thanks to the vast range of adaptations that the book has inspired" (2). Indeed, the book was a universal triumph, to which the number and sometimes the quality of its French and foreign "adaptations" bear witness: since its successful publication over 150 years ago, *Les Misérables* has inspired more than sixty international film and television variations, numerous radio dramatizations, animated versions, comics, and stage plays, as well as the world's longest-running musical, which itself has generated a wealth of fan-made and online content. Without being able to name them all, the book offers up new insights into the development and reception of this celebrated tale of social injustice and personal redemption, which continues to permeate the popular imagination. Particularly interesting are studies by Kathryn Grossman about how *Les Misérables* has captivated generations of Americans and become part of American culture, and Delphine Gleize's examination of how French and American cinema have shaped the understanding of Hugo's story in terms of socio-political fidelity and cultural optimism.

For another intellectually satisfying treatment of the novel's cultural history, the new edition of *Les Misérables* in the Pléiade collection (2018) is *the* book, sure to enthrall French-speaking Hugolian experts as well as anyone wanting to (re)discover the novel. Replacing the previous Pléiade volume edited by Maurice Allem in 1951, this new edition is even more faithful (if possible) to the 1862 Lacroix, Verboeckhoven and Co. edition, considered by Hugo himself as "princeps," and published in Brussels. It is also more complete, containing—in a section called "L'Atelier des *Misérables*" (1423–93)—a rich appendix of drafts, preface projects, and pages removed by Hugo. A very interesting iconographic sequence ("Images des *Misérables*," 1496–1515) includes drawings by Hugo, portraits of the protagonists by Gustave Brion, Edmond Bacot, Gabriel Guay or L. Vasseur; another one includes press cartoons ("Dessins de presse," 1515–32) from 1862 to 1893, and illustrated editions, including notes that trace the history of illustrations and adaptations. The novel's historic success is particularly well highlighted by Dominique Moncond'huy's excellent study of the visual staging of *Les Misérables* (1689–1707), reviewing the avatars of these unforgettable figures—Jean Valjean, Cosette, the Thenardiens, Fantine and Éponine, or the formidable Javert—from engraving and photography to cinema and television.

This new critical apparatus forges links with the rest of Hugo's work and sensitizes twenty-first-century readers to the narrator's depiction of the nineteenth century from 18 June 1815 (Waterloo) to the insurrection of 5–6 June 1832. As Henri Scepti points out in his introduction, this is not only a drama, but "aussi une façon de dire, de figurer l'humain dans les profondeurs du temps et de la conscience" (ix). Recalling that Hugo wrote: "le livre qu'on va lire est un livre religieux" (xxxiii), Scepti chose to focus his long and rich introduction on the grandiose and religious design of a novel in

which Hugo wanted to put “l’infini.” According to Scepi, the three *infinis* are: 1) the infinite of the human heart, love (xxxvii–xlv); 2) the infinite awareness of history and of an unjust society made for progress (xlv–lii); and 3) the infinite ways of God (xxxiii–xxxvii). Each of these three *infinis* is subject to the omnipotence of love.

A religious book it may be, but it is also so truly iconoclastic that it generated many different reactions. In the last part of the introduction, “Athlètes et critiques. Les lecteurs des *Misérables*” (lii–lxii), Scepi recalls how *Les Misérables* shocked the lukewarm reformers (Lamartine), the *faux-bourgeois* (Flaubert), and the supporters of a pessimistic Christianity based on the permanence of sin (Baudelaire, the only one to grasp its poetic splendor). Rimbaud saw in it a poem sparkling with beauty. It is by reading our “contemporains” (Pierre Michon, Michel Butor, Mario Vargas Llosa, Patrick Modiano) that he ends up calling for an emphasis on the “zones d’ombres ou les pans d’incertitudes qui sont l’ordinaire du contemplateur, et que suscitent inmanquablement les ‘problèmes à pic’ et les ‘épaisseurs sinistres’ dans lesquelles l’évêque Bienvenu hasarde un œil intense qui voudrait bien ‘en regardant l’infini, y faire éclore des étoiles.’” (lxii).

In sum, this new edition is essential to today’s reader of *Les Misérables* as it offers what fans of Hugo have long awaited: the promise of a new reading.

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