

McCready on Musset, ed. Castagnès and Lestringant (2009)

Musset, Alfred de. *Contes*. Ed. Gilles Castagnès and Frank Lestringant. Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2009. Pp. 391. ISBN: 978-2-8124-0032-2

Susan McCready, University of South Alabama

Published just before the bicentennial of Alfred de Musset's 1810 birth, the new critical edition of the *Contes* edited by Gilles Castagnès and Frank Lestringant for Garnier's *Bibliothèque du XIXe Siècle* joins a spate of recent work (colloquia, editions, essays) celebrating the *enfant terrible* of French romanticism. Musset's short fiction has long been overshadowed by his plays and poetry and has largely been dismissed by scholars as a literary footnote. In his erudite preface, Lestringant calls for a reexamination of the *Contes* within Musset's *œuvre*, arguing that the *Contes*, although composed in the dark decade of the 1840s when the author was weakened by alcoholism and illness, are a logical development in Musset's aesthetic--a swan song and not merely a death rattle. The received wisdom, based on the authority of Paul de Musset in his 1884 biography of the poet, would have it that Alfred turned to short prose because it required less effort than verse or drama. Lestringant rightly questions the underlying assumption that short prose is somehow easier to write and argues persuasively for Musset's contributions to the development of the short prose genre(s) in the nineteenth century. "Tout un pan de l'œuvre de Musset obéit au tropisme du conte" (9), he claims, citing, among other aspects of his work, the fairy-tale atmosphere of *À quoi rêvent les jeunes filles* and *Fantasio* and the influence of *La Fontaine* on *Namouna*.

Lestringant concedes that the constraints of short fiction were useful to the notoriously-dissolute Musset. Deadlines provided him with structure; the brevity of the pieces did not overtax his waning energy and the regular income eased some of his pecuniary cares. Even the limitations he accepted on the content of his work in contributing to anthologies such as Hetzel's *Scènes de la vie publique et privée des animaux* and *Le Diable à Paris* seemed to work rather in his favor. His two most widely-read stories are "Histoire d'un merle blanc" from the former and "Mimi Pinson" from the latter. Still, despite the diminished scope of Musset's work from this period, Lestringant demonstrates that Musset's prose explores the same themes that color the rest of his *œuvre*: nostalgia, loss and a fantasy of escape. Lestringant's rather dithyrambic prose tends to become tiresome (he refers to the *Contes* as "un bouquet de fleurs" of which "La Mouche" is a "rose d'automne exquise" [27]), but in the end, he does make his case for the literary merit of this overlooked part of Musset's *œuvre*.

The significance of this volume lies not in the presentation of the texts themselves, which are widely available, but in the well-written scholarly introductions to each story by Castagnès and in its appendices, which include a discussion of two stories that are sometimes incorrectly attributed to Musset, and a short essay on the legacy of "Mimi Pinson" in popular culture and in the *chanson française*. The editors have also compiled an impressive dossier that includes previously unpublished letters between Hetzel and Musset in the 1840s and from Hetzel to George Sand in the 1850s. These letters as well as two short and decidedly unflattering portraits of Musset, one by Hetzel and one by Poulet-Malassis offer a glimpse into the publishing world at mid-century, a feeling for George Sand's reaction to the publication of Paul de Musset's *Lui et Elle* in 1859 and a sense of Alfred de Musset's standing as an author and literary figure in the years following his 1857 death. This alone makes the volume essential reading for scholars of Musset, of Sand and of the publishing business in nineteenth-century France.

Castagnès and Lestringant have indeed made an important contribution to nineteenth-century French studies with this volume. The preface, the notices and the appendices frame a fascinating portrait of Musset *conteur* that, along with the undervalued stories themselves, merits serious attention.

Volume: 42.1–2

Year:

- 2013