

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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In his latest contribution to Nerval scholarship, *Nerval: Glanes et miettes de presse*, Michel Brix meticulously investigates references to Nerval in nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals, many of them never before compiled and therefore previously unexamined by researchers. As a result, he develops existing knowledge of Nerval's life and works and corrects some inaccuracies and misconceptions. The book's title is humble, for while it is, indeed, a collection of tidbits or *miettes*, they are so well-developed, connected, and interpreted that they provide a rich overview of Nerval's career, his social and professional milieu, and the reception and influence of his works.

This collection consists of twenty-four unnumbered sections that appear in an order roughly reflecting the breadth of their subject matter: the earlier studies address topics such as the influence of the press and its critics on Nerval and his contemporaries, while the final sections consist primarily of Nerval-related minutiae. Some sections are thus of broader interest to nineteenth-century scholars, whereas others would probably appeal only to the most enthusiastic Nerval specialists.

These studies shed light on a variety of issues important to Nerval's career, from recreating the content of lost texts and chronicling his brushes with censorship, to deciphering Nerval's reactions to pieces written about him and analyzing the veracity of claims published about him after his death. Brix portrays Nerval as a victim of slander and censorship who took these injustices to heart and defended himself, albeit subtly at times, against those who misrepresented him.

The press is nearly as much the subject of this book as Nerval, and one of its prevailing themes is the extent to which Nerval's reputation was manipulated by friends and publishers both during his lifetime and after his death. Brix pays particular attention to Jules Janin, Alexandre Dumas (père), and Arsène Houssaye, writers and editors for *Le Journal des Débats*, *Le Mousquetaire*, and *L'Artiste*, respectively, as the main participators in the Nerval mythmaking machine: their often dubious comments and anecdotes, Brix shows, have been influential in shaping Nerval's legacy. We see that Nerval was troubled by inaccuracies printed about him, and that he felt betrayed and slighted by reports published about his mental health by Janin (in 1841) and Dumas (in 1853).

In the longest and perhaps most interesting section, "Nerval, Janin et l'héritage de Nodier," Brix characterizes Janin's career and reputation as a critic (a "gros petit homme qui mord tout le monde," according to Balzac [28]) and Nerval's interactions with him both before and after Janin reported Nerval's mental breakdown and hospitalization. The assumption is that Janin embellished his portrait of Nerval as a mentally unstable poet unable to function successfully in bourgeois society ("à qui pas un bourgeois ne voudrait donner en mariage même sa fille borgne et bossue," wrote Janin [37]) in order to intrigue the public and sell more newspapers. Janin's description of Nerval's condition, exaggerated or not, certainly contributed to the creation of the myth of Nerval as the archetypal bohemian poet, apparently oblivious to material needs and content to live from inspiration and genius. Nerval took offense to these comments and also to the fact that Janin cited the poet's inability to separate imagination from reality as

evidence of his madness, whereas he praised Nodier (of whom Nerval considered himself a disciple) for the same qualities without suggesting that he was mentally unstable.

In another section, Brix calls Houssaye one of the most prolific, yet unreliable, sources of information on Nerval's life, and he provides a good deal of evidence as to why Houssaye should not be completely trusted. Brix itemizes a number of instances where Houssaye published pieces under Nerval's name that Nerval clearly did not write, as well as examples where Houssaye signed his own name to works written by Nerval. Some of this activity took place during Nerval's life, though most of it was posthumous. Nerval was unlikely to turn down any request of Houssaye's, since he needed his support to get his work published, and Houssaye was eager to align himself with Nerval to enhance his own reputation.

Further sections reveal new information about some of Nerval's lesser-known theatrical efforts, specifically vaudeville plays he coauthored (the previously unpublished text of one appears in the appendix). The most attention is given to *Une Nuit blanche: fantaisie noire* (1850), a one-act play that was performed at the Théâtre de l'Odéon and was shut down early by censors. Since the text of this play no longer exists, Brix quotes from (positive) reviews to recreate as best possible the content, and in so doing shows how overzealous the censors were, since there is not much offensive content. The play is set in Haiti, and was likely censured because of satiric allusions to Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte through the character of Haiti's emperor, Faustin Soulouque. Nerval was bitter about the shortened run of this play, and outspoken in his anger over the end of his friend Pierre Bocage's career as director of the Odéon and subsequent destitution. Brix calls 1850 "la période républicaine de Nerval" (177) based on these reactions, his critiques of totalitarianism in *Les Faux Sauniers*, and the fact the *National* was publishing much of his work.

This book is overwhelming in its thoroughness, as is the author's vast knowledge of everything Nerval. Brix has undertaken some impressive detective work by following leads pertaining to Nerval in order to uncover new texts, recreate conversations played out in the press, and decipher connections that had not been made beforehand. The resulting work revises and resolves some formerly open questions, and in the process uncovers new ones.