

Writing the Storyteller:  
Folklore and Literature from Nineteenth-Century France to the Francophone World

by

Jennifer Lynn Gipson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

French

And the Designated Emphasis

in

Folklore

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Nicholas Paige, Chair

Professor Debarati Sanyal

Professor John Lindow

Spring 2011



## Abstract

Writing the Storyteller:  
Folklore and Literature from Nineteenth-Century France to the Francophone World

by

Jennifer Lynn Gipson

Doctor of Philosophy in French

And the Designated Emphasis in Folklore

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Nicholas Paige, Chair

Nineteenth-century modernity, according to Walter Benjamin and other critics, kills storytelling. Instead of treating this as a real disappearance, I consider how writers continually reinvent this death to work through historically specific questions about tradition, memory, and cultural transmission. In nineteenth-century France, for example, the recurrent belief in the end of tradition prompted movements for folklore collection—like Napoléon III’s decree for the preservation of *poésies populaires*—as well as broad reflections about the future of cultural expressivity. Nodier, Nerval, Mérimée, and Champfleury, all combined literary creation with folklore study for the eclipse of oral tradition was, paradoxically, the very foundation of modern literature as it was coming to be defined. Thus, Nerval appends to his *Sylvie* a folklore collection so as to mark the distance between the written and the oral, reaffirming literary modernity while mourning tradition. Though far-removed from folklore, Barbey d’Aurevilly’s short stories and fragmented frames that impede narrative transmission also question the very possibility of storytelling. In addition to such formal innovations, writers also revisited earlier storytelling topoi. In the early eighteenth century, when Antoine Galland introduced *Les Mille et une nuits* to the West, Schéhérazade’s life-or-death storytelling stood as commentary on the tyranny of audience demands as the patronage system was breaking down. But nineteenth-century writers returned to this ancient storytelling sultana to think about the demands of newspaper editors, growing readerships, and the transformation of literature into mass market entertainment. Finally, interest in folklore fades on the mainland, but debates about preservation of traditions and ownership of cultural goods—debates once linked to France’s colonial projects—become central to post-colonial Francophone literature. Patrick Chamoiseau and other proponents of *créolité* spotlight the paradox of preserving Creole storytellers’ legacies in writing—or in French. Assia Djebar even intersperses her bloody tale of a modern Algerian Schéhérazade with fragments from Galland’s eighteenth-century text, foregrounding the question of what happens to the voice and to stories after a storyteller dies. In short, folklore has a long history of being a reference point for thinking about the very notions of literature or modernity that supposedly spell its demise. Literary depictions of storytelling tell a story less about oral culture than about literature itself. And concern about who is no longer *telling* stories often reveals a deeper cultural anxiety about who is now writing or reading stories.

*For storytellers everywhere*

## Table of Contents

### **Introduction:**

Writing the Storyteller: Folklore and Literature from Nineteenth-Century France to the Francophone World

**1**

### **Chapter 1:**

Storytellers and Story writers: Schéhérazade's Legacy in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century France

**10**

### **Chapter 2:**

Literature and the Death of Folklore: Nodier and Nerval

**40**

### **Chapter 3:**

The *Conte* and the *Conteur*: Mérimée, Barbey, and the Nineteenth-Century Short Story

**65**

### **Chapter 4:**

Still the Same Old Story? Assia Djebar, Patrick Chamoiseau, and the Death of the Storyteller

**93**

### **Bibliography**

**124**

## Acknowledgements

The sheer number of people involved in making a dissertation possible renders these acknowledgements the most necessarily incomplete part of my work. I begin by recognizing everyone who has ever supported French in the bayous of Louisiana and who made it possible for me to learn—and be proud of—the language I grew up hearing my grandmother speak. I am especially indebted to the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana and to Clint, Liz, Dana, and to everyone at France-Louisiane. *Lâchez pas, mes amis.*

More thanks than I can express are due to my family, including my four-legged family members. Thanks to my mother “MamaLou,” a high school math teacher, who sees her three daughters as her most important work—and taught me to love books before teaching me fractions. Also to her mother, an elementary school teacher whose massive collection of discarded library books fueled my childhood imagination and whose ever-present Larousse dictionary fueled my future intellectual passion and remains one of my favorite memories of her. To my father—who years ago wondered in response to Loretta Lynn’s song “Coal Miner’s Daughter” if anyone would ever say she was proud to be an oilfield tool pusher’s daughter—my thanks for teaching me to respect the land and to never equate schooling with education. And to his mother, who knew how to do business and pick friends and whom I will always remember for her generous giving and merciless wit. To Lowry Martin, my “soul friend” and favorite Texan, whom I think of as family: know that you were the best part of life in California. One would be blessed to have a friendship half of ours. To my “substitute grandmother,” distant cousin, and dear friend, Mrs. Mary-Ingrid Jones, who did not live to see me complete this dissertation as she many times said she hoped she would, but gave me years of prayers, poems, and food containers never returned empty, and, most importantly, a model of the steadfast faith and enduring grace of a true lady.

So many people have encouraged me through my graduate work: France, Margo, Jeff, master of the bell tower, Julien, my littlest friend, and his parents, to name a few. For invaluable guidance throughout this project, I thank my second and third committee members: Debarati Sanyal for her expertise on all things nineteenth-century and John Lindow for his insightful critiques of my work and for his perspectives on folklore study. While I cannot list “honorary committee members” on my signature page, I would be amiss in not naming Ann Smock as such here.

My most heartfelt gratitude to the two teachers and scholars who have most shaped my graduate career. The late Alan Dundes, professor of folklore at Berkeley for over forty years, saw the folklorist in me before I did. The two years I studied with him gave me a reason to keep on in academia—and gave me an intellectual passion that became the basis of my dissertation. His influence lives on in so many Berkeley graduates who were fortunate enough to witness his sheer delight in folklore study. Telling Prof. Dundes a joke he hadn’t heard yet remains one of my greatest victories here. Lastly, my dissertation director, Nicholas Paige, is the finest teacher and mentor I could have ever hoped for, and his rigorous feedback and high expectations have made this project what it is. But I owe you thanks, Nick, for so much more than graciously adding me and my storytellers to your workload: you make hard things easier, and you pay attention to the little things that matter the most. Your example has made me a better scholar, a better teacher, and a better person, and, for that, you will forever have my gratitude.

## Introduction:

### Writing the Storyteller: Literature and Folklore from Nineteenth-Century France to the Francophone World

Long before stories were written, stories were told. Long before there were authors, there were storytellers. In literary practice, however, the written and the oral seldom lend themselves to such neat dichotomies. Folklore, orality, and tradition are not simply the stuff of literature's pre-history; they are on-going players in literary history. Folklore's most obvious role in literature could be likened to that of a library of collective cultural production from which writers from Rabelais to Proust borrow motifs, proverbs, tale types, or other traditional content. But folklore—or at least what writers imagine it to be—is also a reference point for literary production. Especially when the material conditions of print culture or the economics of literary production are in flux, writers rethink their own craft by returning to the archetypal ingredients of narrative exchange: a storyteller, a story, and listeners. The literary manifestations and implications of this are anything but simple. Original material can be presented as traditional or vice versa. Or writers can invoke oral traditions to tell a story about the past—and cast themselves as the future or their literature as an instrument of cultural transmission and preservation. Folklore in literature is, therefore, not just traditional content that can be identified, isolated and extracted from a literary text. The very idea of modern literature, for example, evolves in relation to the notions of “tradition” that emerge from specific historic circumstances.

Perhaps the most obvious of cultural narratives about folklore lie in its seemingly perpetual endangerment. In folklore theory, the devolutionary premise—the recurrent belief that folklore will not survive the present age—shows that even the disappearance of tradition can become traditional.<sup>1</sup> I seek to show how modern literature becomes a bearer of this tradition. In the nineteenth century, examples range from the peasant storyteller's transformation into a literate city dweller in Nerval's *Sylvie* to the fragmented narrative frames of Barbey's *Diaboliques* that call into question whether storytelling is even possible. The present study focuses largely on this historical period in French literature, with a brief introduction to *Les Mille et une nuits* and the storyteller Schéhérazade in eighteenth-century France. But my avenue of inquiry actually stems from my readings of the death of the storyteller in Francophone fiction, the subject of my final chapter.

Assia Djébar's short story “La femme en morceaux” makes the link to earlier storytelling topoi explicit with excerpts from *Les Mille et une nuits* in roman font juxtaposed with passages in italics that tell Djébar's own story about Atyka, a teacher reading *Les Nuits* with her class in the midst of the Algerian civil war. When Islamic militants behead Atyka, her severed head finishes the story. A haunting question projects her storytelling into the future: “Mais la voix? Où s'est réfugiée la voix d'Atyka?”<sup>2</sup> In Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Solibo Magnifique*, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Dundes, “The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 6, no. 1 (1969): 5-19.

<sup>2</sup> Assia Djébar, “La Femme en morceaux,” in *Oran, langue morte* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997), 214.

narrator, who bears the author's name, rejects various models of writing or recording folklore in his search for a way to represent the legacy of the great storyteller Solibo whose mid-story death he witnesses. Djébar and Chamoiseau both tell a story of the storyteller's death, but they also tell a story of what comes after. In short, their texts push to the fore questions that quietly lingered behind the stage of literary production in earlier centuries. Through strategies less visible than Djébar's typographical distinctions, might earlier writers still show the alternation or overlap between old stories and old stories made new again? And, without giving a narrator their name and their profession, might authors still register in a text their own struggles to write in the storyteller's shadow and reconcile artistic expression with cultural preservation? For Djébar and Chamoiseau, the storyteller's silence marks a moment of creative destruction, when what is lost must be remembered, transformed, and transmitted. Writers must rise to the occasion, inventing new literary forms when old ones fail.

In literary scholarship, however, the death of the storyteller figures most prominently not as a cultural anxiety that is translated into the substance of stories but as a contemporary critical metaphor. In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," the German critic Walter Benjamin famously faults the nineteenth century for the downfall of storytelling. The gravity of Benjamin's tone is attributable both to his own place in the war-torn first half of the twentieth century and to the sheer magnitude of the loss he describes. In generic terms, the novel and its isolated readers replace the story and direct communication; but in personal terms, human kind loses nothing less than the very ability to share experiences. Most critics who build on Benjamin's work also treat the death of the storyteller as a real disappearance with a prelude and aftermath that can be traced in literary history. For Peter Brooks, for example, the short story, with its return to "dated" storytelling scenes, manifests a certain nostalgia for ways of the past.<sup>3</sup> Ross Chambers looks at how short fiction develops new strategies of narration—indeed of literary storytelling—in a post-storyteller world.<sup>4</sup>

What interests me, by contrast, is how—and why—writers themselves continually reinvent their oral ancestor's death. In a sense, Benjamin prolongs the stories of loss propagated by some of the very writers or literary forms he references. The newspapers, isolated readers, and industrial livelihoods that Benjamin critiques were many of the same forces of modernity that nineteenth-century writers and folklorists blamed for killing storytelling in their own day.<sup>5</sup> In this light, Benjamin's essay still offers many useful insights about the changing genre of the story or shifts in what it means to read, listen, communicate, live, or die in the nineteenth century. But Benjamin's view is retrospective—a weighing of evidence that faults modernity and the material evolution of nineteenth-century society for the storyteller's death, post-mortem. This leaves unwritten a chapter of literary history about how authors, in the face of the very changes Benjamin highlights, themselves use a purported end of storytelling to generate new ways of positioning the written text *vis-à-vis* orality. What is at stake, therefore, is not so much a real disappearance documented in literature but a frequently revisited metaphorical death that

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brooks, "The Storyteller," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 1, no. 1 (1987): 21-38.

<sup>4</sup> Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83-109.

allows writers to work through historically specific questions about tradition, memory, and cultural transmission.

Literature is not a transcription service for oral traditions but an imaginative space for depicting them in different ways and for different reasons. As my title *Writing the Storyteller* suggests, literature gets the last word: even when writers may claim to faithfully reproduce tradition, they make these claims as part of their fiction, as part of their concept of literature or the concept of literature they hope to convey. Yet literary scholarship so often leaves the ever-shifting notions of folklore or orality unexamined, inviting implicit assumptions that storytelling in literature provides—or once provided—an archive of lived oral practices. Instead of cataloging what oral practices actually were, literature catalogues how they existed in the cultural imagination. My own thinking on this topic owes a great deal to Nicholas Paige's article "The Storyteller and the Book: Scenes of Narrative Production in the Early French Novel," which traces the decline of the "coterie model" in which stories were exchanged and debated within a group of equals. Paige sees this decline not as a consequence not of changes in oral practices in the 1660s and 1670s but of changes in print culture:

What storytellers encode in their frame tales and embedded narratives is a record of how authors and readers understand their always changing relations to print and how generic conventions are modified by historical conditions that are no longer those that gave rise to the conventions in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Most notably in this period, the rise of the professional writer and an anonymous book market moves storytelling in literature outside of the closed circles where it had long flourished. For example, Madame de Lafayette's famous novel *La Princesse de Clèves* revolves around the exchange of stories, but offers no models for their interpretation. The Princess, herself, in Paige's reading, becomes emblematic of the isolated modern reader who hears stories but never tells them, interprets them independently, and begins to see them as having an informational function, not as providing entertainment or as solidifying social bonds.<sup>7</sup>

This dissertation proposes a similar examination of the evolution of the storytelling figure's function in relation to specific historical and material contexts. Literature continues to undergo profound changes in later centuries. The new book market which Madame de Lafayette's novel reflects grows into a mass market for entertainment. Newspapers not only put stories in the service of information; they put literature in the service of readers' demands: the genre of the *roman feuilleton* emerges and newspapers serialize stories that sell. And while storytelling topoi are not totally absent from nineteenth-century novels, the storyteller becomes a frequent presence in short fiction, a genre typically open to formal experimentation and one that has etymological associations with orality—the "conte"—even at its most written. Yet, the foremost shift in representations of storytelling in the nineteenth-century is not strictly literary: the loss of tradition becomes the object of profound cultural, even political, anxieties. Whereas, for so long, written literature had served as a proxy for the storyteller and narrators repeated what storytellers said, eighteenth- and especially nineteenth-century French literature begin to convey this sense that orality belongs to the past. The storyteller's interest lies in this gradual

---

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Paige, "The Storyteller and the Book: Scenes of Narrative Production in the Early French Novel," *Modern Language Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2006): 143.

<sup>7</sup> Paige, "The Storyteller and the Book," 161.

obsolescence—or even death. Literary history must, therefore, look to discourses on orality and tradition, wherever they may be found.

The need to account for the past is often an unspoken ingredient of modernity. In a review of a new English translation of an early twentieth-century German collection of Chinese fairy tales, Eliot Weinberger remarks:

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a committed modernist had two ambitions: to make something new and to recover something old. In the search for new forms for the new age, it seemed as though everything was inspirational, and that the entirety of human history was rushing into the present: the folk songs and folk tales of European peasants, African and Inuit masks, Japanese haiku, Celtic rituals, Navajo blankets, Etruscan funerary sculpture, the unreconstructed fragments of classical Greek poetry, Oceanic shields and tapa cloths, alchemical drawings... The way into the future and out of the recent past—the perceived straitjacket of nineteenth-century art and mores—was to go back to the distant past.<sup>8</sup>

What Weinberger describes, however, is not a phenomenon restricted to the twentieth century. This same unilinear evolutionary thinking about folklore prevailed in earlier centuries: folklore represented survivals of less-advanced stages of humanity's development. At the end of the seventeenth century, Perrault's *Contes* make Mother Goose's tales a form of domestic exoticism—vestiges of the past that mark the distance that stories and poetry have traveled. But when “progress” takes the form of demand-driven literary production or when recent history has little to offer but a bloody revolution, nineteenth-century French writers and folklorists turn to their own distant past to find the roots of their culture's poetic expression, much like early twentieth century modernist. They look backwards to find a different way to move forward, to position themselves and their take on modernity as the future.

Formal folklore study does not emerge in France until the turn of the nineteenth century. Though the word “folk-lore” only surfaces in English until 1846, cultural salvage operations for the preservation of popular traditions were already well underway in England and Germany, as the French were keenly aware.<sup>9</sup> The prolonged and heated debate over the eighteenth-century Scottish poet James Macpherson's famed literary mystification *The Poems of Ossian*, for example, raised enduring questions about authenticity and oral traditions across Europe.<sup>10</sup> For

---

<sup>8</sup> Eliot Weinberger, “The Man Who Wrote Everything,” *New York Review of Books* (November 25, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The word “folklore” was introduced in English in 1846 in the hyphenated form “folk-lore.” The first documented French usage dates to 1877. The word then appears in subtitles of a few 1880s French periodicals, often to explicitly evoke the example of English “Folk-Lore” societies. Some folklorists of the early twentieth century, notably Arnold Van Gennep and his *Manuel du folklore français*, favor the term. Paul Sébillot uses it in his four volumes of *Le Folk-Lore de France* (1904-1907) to designate only immaterial traditions. However, the word is never fully adopted, and other designations persist. (Elisée Legros, *Sur les noms et les tendances du folklore* [Liège: Éditions du Musée Wallon, 1962], 42-47). For clarity, I use the contemporary English “folklore” as well as general nineteenth-century terms like “poésies populaires” to refer to traditional materials and “folklore studies” to refer to the scholarly examination of such materials.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. 67-127. Trumpener does not delve into the historical

nineteenth-century French folklorists and writers, however, *Ossian* also underscored a different, domestic problem: France had no extensive record—real or fabricated—of a glorious oral past. The 1804 founding of the *Académie Celtique*, now hailed as France’s first folklore society, responds in part to the example of neighboring nations: the French had to prove that they, too, had a heritage worth studying. But this was not the only reason the French came to the folklore collecting scene when they did. At a time of territorial expansion, France needed a narrative of national identity and history to rival with Empires of the Ancients. As the *Mémoires de l’Académie Celtique* quite clearly explain:

Le désir de retrouver et de réunir les titres de gloire légués à leurs descendants par les Celtes, les Gaulois et les Francs, a fait naître l’Académie Celtique. Un sentiment tout-à-la-fois aussi noble et aussi naturel a dû se manifester à une époque où les Français se montraient si dignes de leurs ancêtres. C’est lorsque NAPOLÉON les conduit depuis dix ans de victoire en victoires, qu’ils devaient être plus jaloux de prouver que l’amour de la gloire a toujours formé le trait principal de leur caractère. C’est lorsque le plus grand souverain qu’ait eu la France, régénère entièrement ce vaste Empire, qu’il devient plus intéressant de recueillir les faits qui ont illustré ses antiques habitants.<sup>11</sup>

Remnants of Celtic heritage proved that the French were not newcomers to the imperial scene, that they were merely “regenerating” past glories. And, less explicitly, this distant past also had the advantage of quietly circumventing the unfashionable—and still very recent—history of the Revolution.

In France, institutionalized folklore study falls in and out of favor as regimes change, revolutions multiply, and politically-expedient interest in the past takes different forms. The dissolution of the *Académie Celtique* in 1814 in favor of the *Société royale des Antiquaires de France* is only one turn in the tide of “undulating attitudes of devotion and inquisition” that Harry Senn finds in the extreme ups and downs particular to French folklore study.<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence, however, that official support for folklore collecting reemerges in force under a different Napoléon, on the eve of a new empire. On September 16, 1852, the government newspaper *Le Moniteur Universel*, publishes a report from Hippolyte Fortoul, *ministre de l’instruction publique et des cultes*, and a response from Napoléon III, the “Prince-Président,” decreeing the publication of a *Recueil des poésies populaires de la France*. Fortoul, just like the members of the *Académie Celtique* a few decades earlier, sounds the devolutionary alarm: “Malheureusement ces richesses, que le temps emporte chaque jour, disparaîtront bientôt, si l’on ne s’empresse de recueillir tant de témoignages touchants de la gloire et des malheurs de notre

---

context of folklore studies *per se* but shows how questions about oral traditions and national identity influence literary production, even giving rise to new novelistic genres.

<sup>11</sup> Éloi Johanneau, “Épître Dédicatoire à sa Majesté l’Impératrice et Reine,” *Mémoires de l’Académie Celtique* 1 (1807): no pagination.

<sup>12</sup> Harry A. Senn, “Gaston Paris as Folklorist (1867-1895): The Rise and Decline of French Folklore Studies,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 12, no. 1 (1975): 47. For a general history of French folklore studies, see Harry Senn, “The French School of Folklore to 1935” (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 1972). For a historian’s perspective on intersections of folklore and history, see Charles Rearick, *Beyond the Enlightenment: Historians and Folklore in Nineteenth-Century France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974). For a more general account of folklore studies in Europe from an anthropological perspective, see Nicole Belmont, *Paroles païennes: mythe et folklore* (Paris: Imago, 1986).

patrie.”<sup>13</sup> Members of the *Académie Celtique* had been historians, linguistics, architects, and writers, among them, the early Romantic Charles Nodier. They had studied material artifacts, ancient inscriptions, as well as surviving traces of oral traditions: “anciens romans de chevalerie,” “anciens contes de fées,” and “proverbs,” all conceived “sous la dictée de la tradition,” as the secretary Éloi Johanneau explains.<sup>14</sup> The mid-nineteenth century was not disinterested in material history: one only need think of Prosper Mérimée’s stint as *Inspector des monuments historiques* or Violet-le-duc’s restoration of Notre Dame of Paris. But, under Napoléon III, French folklore collecting focuses on stories and songs, poetry broadly defined as *poésies populaires*.

Literature—or an attempt to redefine the concept of literature through a new relation between poetry and the oral—is at the heart of this drive to save French folklore. Napoléon III hopes to demonstrate the inherent poetic genius of the French by assembling songs and stories that has been passed down through generations. And his government officials, like many writers, hope folklore collection will be a boon to literary production, often seen as constrained by artificial models. *Poésies populaires* would offer writers inspiration and example, and literature could preserve the traces of French traditions would otherwise vanish. Though no massive publication of French folklore was ever realized, Napoléon III’s decree spurred debates about *how* to collect folklore and, more importantly for literature, about *what* to do with it. A government committee under the direction of Jean-Jacques Ampère published a set of *Instructions relatives aux poésies populaires de la France*. Ampère dedicates several of the opening paragraphs of his *Instructions* to giving examples from Montaigne onward of writers who recognize the poetic value of *poésies populaires*.<sup>15</sup> Literary interest in folklore was more than a simple symptom of Romantic longings for the past. Ampère gives his own version of literary history to justify his folklore collecting enterprise. Nerval’s decision to add “Chansons et légendes du Valois” to the end of *Sylvie* comes precisely at this moment. And Champfleury, now known as a great realist critic, was also a committed folklorist who considered the documentation of *poésies populaires* not an ancillary pursuit but an integral part of his realist project. In short, the question was not if writers had a place in folklore study, but rather what this place was. Were writers, with their poetic sensitivity, best equipped to collect and study *poésies populaires*? Were they under a larger obligation to make literature a monument to oral practices whose very memory would otherwise vanish?

Questions like these, so pressing for authors and even government officials, rarely surface in histories of French folklore study. This is not to say that the presence of writers in French folklore study goes unmentioned, only that it goes largely unexamined. Such unturned stones are fairly easy to explain. In the modern American academy, folklore study straddles the humanities and social sciences. But folklore study in France has tended more towards

---

<sup>13</sup> Fourtol’s letter and Napoléon III’s response that originally appeared on the front page of *Le Moniteur* on September 16, 1852 were read before the *Comité de la langue, de l’histoire, et des arts de la France* in November of 1852. The text then appeared in the committee’s *Bulletin*, now reproduced in Jacques Cheyronnaud, ed., *Instructions pour un recueil général des poésies populaires de la France, 1852-1857* (Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1997), 51-53.

<sup>14</sup> Éloi Johanneau, “Discours d’ouverture,” *Mémoires de l’Académie Celtique* 1 (1807): 19.

<sup>15</sup> A term that Ampère speculates may originate with Montaigne himself. See Cheyronnaud, ed., *Instructions*, 85.

anthropology, a discipline in which the French have an illustrious record.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, histories of French folklore study, like several excellent works by Nicole Belmont, tend to situate nineteenth-century folklore collecting within anthropological or ethno-musicological currents, not literary movements or evolving notions of the poetic.<sup>17</sup> Though our own disciplinary boundaries tend to obscure this fact, literature, simply put, was a formative force in French folklore studies, and discourses on folklore and tradition were a formative force in literature. Each of my chapters constitutes a small step towards filling in a few of these blanks in literary history.

My first chapter, “Storytelling and Story Writing: Schéhérazade’s Literary Legacy in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century France,” begins with Antoine Galland’s *Mille et une nuits*, which appeared in twelve volumes from 1704 to 1717. Galland inherits an age-old storytelling frame: the sultana Schéhérazade leaves a story unfinished each morning to convince her murderous husband to let her live another day. Galland frames his take on the ancient Eastern folklore of the *Arabian Nights* tradition with eighteenth-century French ideas about culture and its representation in artistic expression. In *Les mille et une nuits*, he appeals to his readers’ interest in exotic oral traditions and casts his literary project as their exclusive passkey to distant cultures and their narrative riches. Furthermore, unlike in most versions of the *Nights*, Galland makes no mention of Schéhérazade giving the sultan heirs to the throne or the sultan having her tales written down after her pardons her. In Galland’s hands, the sultan, while still reminiscent of the monarch, reflects the decline of the patronage and the emergence of a more anonymous book market.

It perhaps less Schéhérazade’s stories and more the dramatic situation of her storytelling that makes her memorable—and ripe for rewritings. Writers continue to return to Schéhérazade’s storytelling model, even when their own work is seemingly worlds apart from her nightly narrative labors. Crébillon has Schéhérazade’s descendants debate the generic evolution of the eighteenth-century *conte* in *Le Sopha*. In 1803, Isabelle de Montolieu rewrites the conclusion of *Les mille et une nuits* to make Schéhérazade a faltering storyteller who succeeds only when her audience, the sultan, likes a story that she considered bad. But her pardon is conditional: the sultan wants children and a written record of Schéhérazade’s for the purposes of his own archives and his own glory, a move reminiscent of some nationalistic folklore collecting at the time. But perhaps the clearest illustration of Schéhérazade’s productivity for thinking about concrete changes in literature is her popularity in a mid-nineteenth-century debate about serial fiction in newspapers, now dubbed the *querelle du roman*

---

<sup>16</sup> Even the lexical variation in modern French labels for folklore study illustrates a lack of disciplinary identity and stability: “La substitution d’*ethnographie* à *folklore* n’est pas sans inconvénients, car le premier terme renvoie l’étude au niveau universitaire parmi les disciplines relevant d’une faculté des Sciences, et non d’une faculté des Lettres et des Sciences humaines” (Legros, *Sur les noms et les tendances du folklore*, 47).

<sup>17</sup> For a general history of French folklore studies, see Senn, “The French School of Folklore to 1935” or Harry Senn, “Folklore Beginnings in France,” in *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Alan Dundes (London: Routledge, 2005), 66-75. For a historian’s perspective on intersections of folklore and history, see Rearick, *Beyond the Enlightenment*. For a more general account of folklore studies in Europe from an anthropological perspective, see Belmont, *Paroles païennes: mythe et folklore*. On the *Académie Celtique*, see Nicole Belmont, *Aux sources de l’ethnologie française: l’Académie celtique* (Paris: Éditions du C.T.H.S., 1995).

*feuilleton*. The 1830s and 1840s hosted a revolution in how literature was produced, who read it, and what influence these readers had on its content. Faced with a new demand-driven literary market, *feuilleton* writers, newspaper editors, and literary critics found a surprising reference point in Schéhérazade who also had to keep her audience's attention over an extended period. The ancient sultana's daily storytelling marathon becomes a way of spotlighting the conditions of narrative production which many nineteenth-century writers, even those who live off of the newspaper market, vocally lament. Théophile Gautier's "Mille et Deuxième Nuit" develops this wide-spread analogy between the storyteller Schéhérazade and the French *feuilleton* writer in a short story. Schéhérazade, having exhausted the traditional repertoire, travels via magic carpet to beg a Parisian *feuilletoniste* for an original text. He obliges, likening his readership to Schéhérazade's sword-wielding sultan. But the written fails to translate into a pleasing oral tale, Schéhérazade dies at the hands of her husband.

In the nineteenth century, writers imagine Schéhérazade's silence or death at the same time they imagine the demise of innumerable anonymous storytellers on French soil. My second chapter, "From Folkloric Devolution to Literary Creation: Nodier, Nerval, and the Death of the Storyteller," examines the role of writers in early folklore study and the impact of movements for the preservation of *poésies populaires* on literature. Nodier and Nerval show that folklore collecting could be intrinsically linked to literary creation and provide more than materials and models to writers. For, the supposed eclipse of oral tradition was, paradoxically, the very foundation of modern literature as it was coming to be defined. For Nodier, literary models of the past hold the key to the mutual confidence of storytellers and audiences that is lost with the nineteenth-century's isolated readers. In his fantastic tales, in particular, Nodier seeks to reproduce this poetic exchange. Nerval, on the other hand, emphasizes the distance between the written and the oral to fashion a notion of modern literature as mindful of the storyteller's legacy but different from an irrevocably lost past. The folklore collection he appends to *Sylvie* is more than one last plea for poets to seek inspiration from the popular. It is an illustration of the state of folklore as Nerval sees it—dependent on writing—and an illustration of the need for literature to structurally evolve to accommodate its new mission as keeper of the storyteller's memory. In *Sylvie*, for example, prompts for storytelling go unanswered. Only in the folklore collection the gaps are partially filled in. Stories and songs are formally displaced from the narrative frame of Nerval's fiction into an appendix that evokes the very real context of nineteenth-century folklore study.

Indeed, discourses on orality influence not just the content of literary works but also their form, a point I explore at greater length in my third chapter "The *Conte* and the *Conteur*: Mérimée, Barbey, and the Nineteenth-Century Short Story." In short stories by Barbey and Mérimée, storytellers are not necessarily dying physical deaths nor is there any explicit evocation of folklore studies. Instead, these authors manipulate generic conventions to destabilize, silence, or interrupt the storyteller, calling into question the very existence of stories. An early pioneer of the nineteenth-century French short story, Mérimée was no stranger to folklore study. But his work rarely uses conventional storytelling topoi. Instead, his stories can seem incomplete only to become a story of an incomplete telling. Or, Mérimée often his narrators scholars of history or linguistics who go in search of stories or cultural artifacts. But their quests, their motivations, and the limits of their own knowledge overshadow any actual moment of discovery. And, as Barbey's recurrent use of high-society storytelling shows, those storytellers farthest removed from Mother Goose's hearth are often freest to explore age-old tensions between the written and

the spoken in new ways. Literature can artfully evoke the oral—instead of artificially claiming to reproduce it.

My final chapter, “Still the Same Old Story?: Assia Djébar, Patrick Chamoiseau, and the Death of the Storyteller,” looks at how interest in folklore, which fades on the mainland, plays out in the post-colonial world. In the nineteenth century, Ampère wanted to recuperate for French purposes and publish in French folklore collections materials collected from colonies or former colonies: “On pourra s’adresser même à des populations françaises qui n’appartiennent plus à la France, quand elles auront conservé des chants populaires qui remontent à une époque antérieure à leur séparation de la mère patrie.”<sup>18</sup> But nineteenth-century folklorists do not get the last word. Their concerns about the preservation of traditions or the ownership of cultural goods resurface on the other side of the colonial fence in the work of Francophone writers like Patrick Chamoiseau and Assia Djébar. Chamoiseau and other proponents of *créolité* spotlight the paradox of preserving Creole storytellers’ legacies in writing—or in French. Djébar even intersperses her bloody tale of a modern Algerian Schéhérazade with fragments from Galland’s eighteenth-century *Mille et une nuits*, foregrounding the question of what happens to the voice and to stories after a storyteller dies. Folklore in Francophone literature is not simply a way to bypass colonial legacies and evoke survivals of an idealized oral past: literary depictions of folklore, especially in French, are sometimes a means of spotlighting the layers of mediation and colonization through which even oral traditions may pass.

Considering Francophone writers like Djébar and Chamoiseau alongside nineteenth-century writers shows the portability of devolutionary discourses on folklore. Storytelling topoi—even old ones used in new ways—help to define a Francophone literary aesthetic in opposition to French models. But these ideologically, geographically, and temporally distanced examples highlight important reasons for the storyteller’s productivity in both contexts. By imagining the storyteller’s death or the loss of fragmented voices, writers place themselves at a culture turning point that necessitates action. The repeated problem of what to do with orality becomes a means of gauging shifts the notion of a writer’s cultural obligations—and of literature’s potential to be an instrument of cultural transmission. And concerns about who is no longer telling stories betray often deeper anxieties about who is starting to read—or write—them. Modern literature does not spell the storyteller’s death. Instead, death simply becomes the storyteller’s literary lifeblood in modernity, and literary depictions of storytelling actually tell stories about literature.

---

<sup>18</sup> Cheyronnaud, ed., *Instructions*, 87-88.

## Chapter 1:

### Storytellers and Story writers: Schéhérazade's Legacy in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century France

“Un conte est vieux dès la première fois qu’il a été raconté.”  
—saying recorded by Antoine Galland in *Les Maximes des Orientaux*<sup>19</sup>

Since 1704 when the legendary storyteller Schéhérazade awoke in the first of Antoine Galland's twelve volumes of *Les Mille et une nuits*, she has held sway over the Western imagination.<sup>20</sup> For one thousand and one nights, she tells stories to charm her husband the sultan Schahriar and thwart his plan to take new wife every night and have her killed at dawn. But, Schéhérazade, the storyteller from the Orient of old, also proves remarkably portable and adaptable. Her marvelous tales of genies and magic lamps as well as the story of her own peril before the sultan sparked a wave of continuations, imitations, and rewritings that started even before Galland's final volume saw print in 1717.<sup>21</sup> From opera to visual arts to popular culture, Schéhérazade and characters from her stories like Ali Baba or Aladin have traveled the world. But, of Schéhérazade's many reincarnations since Antoine Galland published the first Western translation of this ancient folkloric storytelling saga, there is perhaps none more enduring than her prevalence in literature. At the heart of Schéhérazade's existence in print culture is the professional proximity writers share with storytellers. Balzac and Proust both clearly recognized this when they looked to the *Nights* as a model of monumental narrative sagas. An obvious but seldom asked question emerges: How does this ancient storyteller speak to modern literature? Why do writers keep coming back to something so seemingly archaic when their own conditions of writing are so different from Schéhérazade's storytelling and from the Eastern folkloric tradition from whence she hails?

Schéhérazade is significant not only for the quality or quantity of her stories but also for the *circumstances* of their *oral* telling. This proves particularly pertinent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France as the reading public was growing, the genre of the *conte* was changing, and nascent anthropological discourses announced the death of storytelling in the face of modernity. Even before the advent of folklore studies in nineteenth-century France, Galland frames his presentation of Schéhérazade's exotic stories with his own notions of folklore. And while storytellers and their audiences have long dramatized narrative reception within the pages of literature, Schéhérazade is a reminder of an audience's capacity to influence not only how and

---

<sup>19</sup> Antoine Galland, *Les Paroles remarquables, les bons mots, et les maximes des Orientaux* (Paris: Benard, 1694), 343.

<sup>20</sup> I retain the contemporary French spelling of “Schéhérazade” and reproduce other orthographies only in direct quotations.

<sup>21</sup> For example, François Pétis de la Croix's *Les Mille et un jours* appeared from 1710 to 1712. An exhaustive listing of the all of the imitations and continuations of the *Nights* would be impossible. For an overview of translations, rewritings, and notable references, see A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 165-171. See also Hiam Aboul-Hussein, *Cheherazade, personnage littéraire* (Alger: Société nationale d'édition et de diffusion, 1981), 61-154.

when tales are told but also to determine *what* kind of stories are acceptable. Crébillon's sultan in *Le Sopha*, for example, may live years after his grandmother Schéhérazade, but he blindly invokes her generic precedent that, of course, runs contrary to the kind of *conte* that Crébillon and his storyteller have in mind. In the early nineteenth century, Isabelle de Montolieu, largely overlooked in studies of female authors rewriting Schéhérazade, offers a pessimistic view of a storyteller's and a woman's place in a world where husbands and kings have the sole say in what is aesthetically worthy of being written down. Finally, in the mid-nineteenth century, Schéhérazade lives on as reference point in debates about literary standards and the *roman feuilleton*, or serialized fiction. Writers like Théophile Gautier disparage the daily demands of newspaper editors, attune to profit and oblivious to art, by comparing their readerships to Schéhérazade's sultan—who ultimately beheads her in Gautier's "Mille et deuxième nuit." The possibility of Schéhérazade's death becomes her literary lifeblood—and a way to thinking about the very economy of cheap print that Benjamin holds should have silenced the storyteller in the first place.<sup>22</sup>

### The Storyteller Awakens: Antoine Galland and Schéhérazade's French Début

A French Orientalist and translator, Antoine Galland (1646-1715) lived in Constantinople for five years as an advisor to Louis XIV's ambassadors before being appointed to the king's service as an antiquary. He had already translated collections of Arabic sayings, tales, and fables when he began his work on what was to be the first Western translation of the *Nights*. A bestseller in Galland's day, *Les Mille et une nuits* appeared in twelve volumes from 1704 to 1717. That Galland undertook this massive project at this time was no coincidence. Schéhérazade fit naturally into many eighteenth-century French cultural currents and literary debates, as Galland no doubt anticipated that she would.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, Orientalism was already flourishing, as seen in the exaggerated portrayals of exotic subjects in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), Racine's *Bajazet* (1672), or Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721). But Galland's *Mille et une nuits* brought the exoticism of the Orient to France in a different form—the *conte*.

By modern standards, Galland would hardly be considered a faithful translator. He admittedly filtered his text through what he calls in his preface "la délicatessen de notre langue and de notre temps."<sup>24</sup> For the early eighteenth century, his liberties with language, style, and content would have been nothing out of the ordinary. Galland's project was, however, still unique. The *Nights* are part of a vast folkloric tradition of stories that existed in multiple places under different guises. Galland's diaries and correspondence offer insight into his writing process. As an antiquarian, Galland amassed an impressive personal collection of medals,

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 83-109.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Paul Sermain, "Les Mille et une nuits de Galland dans le cadre de la culture française classique du conte et de la fiction," in *Les Mille et une nuits: du texte au mythe*, ed. Jean-Luc Joly and Abdelfattah Kilito (Rabat: Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, 2005), 223-236.

<sup>24</sup> Antoine Galland, *Les Mille et une nuits*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 21. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Jean-Paul Sermain and Aboubakr Chraïbi's three volume edition. Henceforth, volume numbers and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

manuscripts, books from the East. He seems to bring his perspective as a collector of cultural artifacts to his compilation of stories. Instead of working from one discrete text or set of texts, as a “translator” Galland chooses between multiple manuscripts when deciding what stories—or which versions—to include, finding value both in unique stories and ones that are staples of the *Arabian Nights* tradition. His journal entry for March 25, 1709 even recounts his first meeting with a certain Hanna, whose storytelling delighted the writer:

Le matin, j’allai voir M. Paul Lucas, qui estoit sur le point de sortir. Je m’arrestai avec M. Hanna, maronite d’Halep, qu’il avoit amené d’Halep, et M. Hanna [me rapporta] quelques contes arabes, fort beaux, qui me promit de les mettre par écrit pour me les communiquer.<sup>25</sup>

Some of the most famous stories of *Les Mille et une nuits* like Ali Baba or Aladin would come from future visits with Hanna.<sup>26</sup> Galland’s project was open-ended: he was always interested in procuring new manuscripts or even hearing stories told. His *Mille et une nuits* must be understood as more than a simple translation but the result of adaptation, creation, and even lived encounters with oral traditions.

Identifying the separate components of this amalgamation has, not surprisingly, proved difficult. Folklorists have naturally found a plethora of tale types and motifs in Schéhérazade’s stories and even in the story of Schéhérazade herself.<sup>27</sup> Literary scholars, interested in Galland’s presence or absence in literary history, look for his mark on the text. Georges May sets out to prove Galland’s originality and elevate him to the rank of a major author in his book *Les Mille et une nuits d’Antoine Galland, ou, le chef-d’œuvre invisible*. Fedwa Malti-Douglas minimizes i Galland’s innovations and discounts May’s methodology.<sup>28</sup> Yet, in the absence of an “original,” any attempt to determine the exact extent of Galland’s textual changes is doomed to be hypothetical. And, as the historical reception of the text is concerned, such changes are of no import. Whether or not Galland was responsible for one detail or another did not prevent them from finding meaning in new context.

Does folklore, then, figure into Galland’s *Mille et une nuits* as anything but a source of materials that he either alters in substance or simply places in a new context? Many scholars of literary history tend to treat folklore as a binary state. Texts—or elements of them—either do or do not belong to this category. May, for example, does not see *Les Mille et une nuits* as not sharing the status of “folklore” that he readily accords to Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights*: “Si ce dernier appartient bien, en effet, au domaine du folklore, ce n’est plus du tout le cas de la

---

<sup>25</sup> Antoine Galland, “Journal parisien d’Antoine Galland (1708-1715),” *Mémoires de la Société de l’histoire de Paris et de l’Île de France* 46 (1919): 39.

<sup>26</sup> For a comparison of these “oral” stories to those that Galland more likely derived from manuscript sources, see Sylvette Larzul, “Further Considerations on Galland’s *Mille et une Nuits*: A Study of the Tales Told by Hanna,” *Martels & Tales* 18, no. 2 (2004): 258-271.

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Hasan El-Shamy, “The Oral Connection of the *Arabian Nights*,” in *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, ed. Irich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 9-13.

<sup>28</sup> Georges May, *Les Mille et une nuits d’Antoine Galland, ou, le chef-d’œuvre invisible* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986). Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Review of *Les Mille et une nuits d’Antoine Galland ou le chef-d’œuvre invisible*, Georges May,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 1 (1991): 196.

version de Galland, destinée elle, comme on l'a vu à un public mondain et raffiné."<sup>29</sup> May's rejection of the label "folklore" comes as no surprise since collective creation runs contrary to his argument for Galland's originality. But there is more to *Les Mille et une nuits* than Schéhérazade's stories. In the parts that are most indisputably Galland's authorial interventions—like prefaces or notes—folklore remains an operative category precisely because Galland's calculated characterizations of orality and tradition are meant to resonate with the interests of his audience. More so than any tale types or motifs in Schéhérazade's stories, Galland's audience, this "public mondain et raffiné" in May's words, makes folklore important for understanding *Les Mille et une nuits* as a landmark in French literary history. The matter at hand is not if a text "qualifies" as folklore by some necessarily ambiguous measure of "originality" or "authenticity." Instead, the question is *how* writers present a text's relation to folklore and *what* the attraction of orality says about readers, even the most refined, and their place in the changing literary market.

Galland's audience did not demand that Oriental tales have a verifiable ethnographic referent in lived oral practices any more than they did for literary fairytales. Folklore—domestic or exotic—could not simply be presented as raw material. It had to be properly packaged for the audiences it was intended to please. In this light, certain *notions* of folklore can be literary creations, no matter what traditional materials they may be associated with. Charles Perrault's *Contes du temps passé* (1697), which preceded Galland's *Mille et une nuits* by only a few years, had already succeeded into making folklore appealing to a refined audience, not by obscuring popular origins but by highlighting them. But, unlike in the *Nights*, Perrault's collection has no explicit narrative frame. Instead, through frontispieces, titles, prefaces, *moralités*, and attributions of tales to his young son, Perrault situates these stories at French *veillées*. He links them to time-honored oral traditions, passed on from generation to generation, as famously articulated in the *moralité* to "Peau d'âne": "Le Conte de Peau d'Ane est difficile à croire, / Mais tant que dans le Monde on aura des Enfants, / Des Mères et des Mère-grands, / On en gardera la mémoire."<sup>30</sup> Galland material, on the other hand, has the most explicit of frames, recalled even by the title *Les Mille et une nuits*. Like Perrault, Galland still adds his own implicit frame, largely through "Avertissements" addressed to his readers at the start of each of his twelve volumes. This implicit frame—that might be called a "frame of folklore"—presents Schéhérazade's story *and* the stories she tells in relation to cultural currents familiar to eighteenth-century French readers.

In his first "Avertissement," Galland wastes no time in discounting competing representations of the Orient. It is precisely because the tales of *Les Nuits* are traditional that they offer a more compelling and authentic spectacle of otherness:

Ils [les contes] doivent plaire encore par les coutumes et les mœurs des Orientaux, par les cérémonies de leur religion, tant païenne que mahométane; et ces choses y sont mieux marquées que dans les auteurs qui en ont écrit et que dans les relations des voyageurs. [...] Ainsi, sans avoir essuyé la fatigue d'aller chercher ces peuples dans leurs pays, le lecteur aura ici le plaisir de les voir agir et de les entendre parler. [...] (1: 21-22)

<sup>29</sup> May, *Les Mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Perrault, *Contes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 115. On implicit frames of orality in Perrault's tales, see Louis Marin, "Les Enjeux d'un frontispice" *L'Esprit Créateur* 29, no. 3 (1987) and Elizabeth W. Harries, "Simulating Oralities, French Fairy Tales of the 1690's," *College Literature* 23, no. 2 (1996).

If folklore allowed readers to bridge geographic, temporal, and class divides, it come as no surprise that Galland would align his work with folkloric traditions deeply rooted in Eastern culture. Galland, who had once been charged by Louis XIV with collecting material artifacts from the East, was now offering a collection of stories that contained marks of immaterial culture: mores, customs, and religious practices. This was not to be a static product but one that brought foreign people to life before French eyes for the pleasure of the reader. Galland's markedly theatrical language highlights the idea that Schéhérazade's stories offer eighteenth-century French audiences the chance to *experience* the sights, sounds, stories of a foreign land, all within the pages of a book. Folklore offered a stamp of authenticity and a guise of unmediated access to the voice of the people. The French reading public had already accepted a similar sales pitch for Perrault's *Contes*, presented as "une image de ce qui se passe dans les moindres Familles."<sup>31</sup> Though Perrault's tales evoked only one level of French society and Galland's were held up as representative of an entire civilization, they both offer their literary renditions of folklore as a way for readers to effortlessly access a sphere of otherness.

In the case of *Les Mille et une nuits*, Galland reinforces the frame of folklore that surrounds his project by situating it in relation to a much larger storytelling tradition. Looking at these stories with an outsider's perspective, Galland has nothing to gain by claiming to have the *only* right version, as someone who tells a story from his own culture might. Instead, he stresses their variation and abundance. In fact, in his travel writings, Galland notes the prevalence of storytelling in the East, especially in Turkish culture where he deems the sheer quantity of tales and fables in circulation "une chose étonnante."<sup>32</sup> He associates Schéhérazade and her tales with anonymous storytellers like those whom he had observed in his own journeys, describing his manuscript as "un recueil de contes, dont on s'entretient en ce pays-là dans les veillées" (1: xiv). So widespread are these time-honored stories that they are not even particular to Schéhérazade: "On trouve de ces contes en arabe, où il n'est parlé ni de Scheherazade, ni du sultan Schahriar, ni de Dinarzade, ni de distinction par nuit," Galland states at the start of his seventh volume (2: 257). Even the very quote from Galland's first "Avertissement" that some critics point to as an ironic self-serving reference to Galland's own hand in the shaping of *Les Mille et une nuits*, could, in fact, be taken as a reference to collective creation and transmission, shaped over the centuries: "On ignore le nom de l'auteur d'un si grand ouvrage, mais vraisemblablement il n'est pas tout d'une main: car comment pourra-t-on croire qu'un seul homme ait eu l'imagination assez fertile pour suffire à tant de fictions?" (1: 21) What readers enjoy is not the work of "un seul homme" but the product of an entire civilization, molded and formed over time but now conveniently delivered to them in the pages of a book. Galland, therefore, presents his work as more than a translation of one specific collection of stories but an entire slice of Eastern culture. His insistence on this frame of folklore is simultaneously a reminder that he is not the exclusive bearer of these tales and an affirmation that he exclusively controls the literary means through which French readers can access them.

Not coincidentally, Galland's *Mille et une nuits* and their appeal to certain concepts of folklore correspond to a time of debate about the very notion of "culture"—and how or if books could express it. The *querelle d'Homère*, a lingering skirmish of the Quarrel of the Ancients and

---

<sup>31</sup> Perrault, *Contes*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Antoine Galland, *Journal d'Antoine Galland pendant son séjour à Constantinople* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002), 242.

Moderns that spilled over into the early eighteenth-century, arose from two opposing translations of the *Iliad* and views of Homer and his potential for contemporary significance. Did Homer exist? Could he even be one single person? Distant literary history also held a particular fascination for an acquaintance of Galland's Pierre-Daniel Huet.<sup>33</sup> Huet's *Traité de l'origine des romans* (1670) traced the source of the *roman* to the ancient Orient and attempted to define the genre in relation questions of "truth" and instructional value.<sup>34</sup> Interest in literary history, representations of culture, and origins genres no doubt enhances the appeal of Galland's *Les Mille et une nuits* in the early eighteenth century.

Through Schéhérazade, Galland introduces a model of the origin and circulation of *contes* very different than what was commonplace in France. The aged *ma mère l'oye* who graces many a frontispiece of Perrault's tales was an evocation of storytelling's attachment to bygone times. In the unilinear evolutionary scheme of things, folklore was fading as French society reached greater heights of civilization. Lower social classes and popular *contes* represented survivals of the past against which "modern" and literate French society could define itself. On the other hand, Schéhérazade's exotic storytelling is not fading out. Galland emphasizes the abundance of tales in the land of Schéhérazade where, unlike in France, storytelling thrives—with the support of the written. In Turkey, he noted that some booksellers subsist on nothing but renting texts to storytellers who read and, no doubt, embellished them before enthusiastic audiences.<sup>35</sup> This union of written and oral storytelling resurfaces with Schéhérazade who is neither old nor illiterate and who advances a vision of orality mediated by but not separated from the written.<sup>36</sup>

In the prologue to Galland's *Mille et une nuits*, we meet first meet the grand-vizir, whom the sultan enlists to find him a new bride every day, and then the grand-vizir's daughters, Dinarzade and the soon-to-be storyteller, Schéhérazade. Learned and literate with youth and beauty on her side, Schéhérazade is, if anything, an anti-Mother Goose:

Le grand-vizir, qui comme on l'a déjà dit, était malgré lui le ministre d'une si horrible injustice, avait deux filles, dont l'aînée s'appelait Scheherazade, et la cadette Dinarzade.

---

<sup>33</sup> Galland and Huet crossed paths in Caen—Huet's native town and a meeting place for writers and thinkers who gathered at the home of the then-aged Jean Regnaud de Segrais—and went onto correspond about various literary or historical matters. See Mohamed Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Nizet, 1964), 99-101. Most notably, Galland challenged Huet on the history of the city of Vieux. In his book *Origines de la ville de Caen*, Huet described it as a mere Roman camp while Galland found evidence that it was an extant and important city in Roman times. Huet later abandoned his position. See Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland*, 383-385.

<sup>34</sup> Huet's *Traité* was reprinted several times, including while Galland's *Mille et une nuits* were still being published. See Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Traité de l'origine des romans* (Paris: Jean Mariette, 1711).

<sup>35</sup> Galland, *Journal*, 242.

<sup>36</sup> As Schéhérazade shows, the figure of the storyteller is not a single manifestation of orality but an articulation of varying and sometimes contradictory combinations of "oralities" that are not always diametrically opposed to the written. On the many manifestations of orality with particular attention to their applicability to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, see the chapter "Voices in Print" in Elizabeth W. Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 59-63. For a recent perspective on orality and fairy tales, see Lewis C. Seifert, "Entre L'Écrit et l'oral: la réception des contes de fées 'classiques'," in *Le Conte en ses paroles: la figuration de l'oralité dans le conte merveilleux du Classicisme aux Lumières*, ed. Anne Defrance and Jean-Francois Perrin (Paris: Desjonquères, 2007), 21-33.

Cette dernière ne manquait pas de mérite; mais l'autre avait un courage au-dessus de son sexe, de l'esprit infiniment, avec une pénétration admirable. Elle avait beaucoup de lecture et une mémoire si prodigieuse que rien ne lui était échappé de tout ce qu'elle avait lu. Elle s'était heureusement appliquée à la philosophie, à la médecine, à l'histoire et aux beaux-arts; et elle faisait des vers mieux que les poètes les plus célèbres de son temps. Outre cela, elle était pourvue d'une beauté excellente, et une vertu très solide couronnait toutes ces belles qualités. (1: 35)

There is a striking predominance of the lexical field of reading and writing in this description of a character who will go on to be a celebrated storyteller but is compared only to the poets of her day. In Galland's prologue, Schéhérazade is cast not as a bearer of traditions but as a crafty and studious young woman. Part of her appeal, therefore, is not only her exoticism but her resonance with social and literary practices among women in France. In a notable example of earlier frame narrative, Segrais's *Nouvelles Françaises* (1658), points to tensions between popular iterations of the *conte* and its literary counterparts. The princesse Aurélie—modeled after Mlle de Montpensier, Segrais's *protectrice* and a descendant of Marguerite de Navarre, author of *L'Heptaméron* (1558)—uses her lineage to make fun of the very label “contes de grand-mère” and by extension popular tales and their tellers.<sup>37</sup> *Les conteuses*, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women fairy tales writers work to create alternatives to the storyteller as a Mother Goose style peasant. Their drawings or descriptions of storytellers show women reading and writing, sometimes even associated with mythological female figures.<sup>38</sup> These similarities, Jean-Paul Sermain argues, do not escape Galland's notice. Sermain, for example, contends that Galland inscribes emerging French salon practices into *Les Mille et une nuits*:

Du salon, Galland retient deux traits caractéristiques: il célèbre l'art et les ambitions de la conversation, il lui donne son lieu et son visage; il est la part des femmes dans cet art de la conversation. Quand nous parlons du transfert du salon dans *Les Mille et une nuits*, il est bien évident qu'on n'y trouve rien de ressemblant à un salon parisien: il faut l'entendre par la reprise des traits qui le définissent et en signifient le projet et l'influence.<sup>39</sup>

For *salonnières*, like Schéhérazade, oral practices and literate society appear as unproblematic partners. At a time when the genre of the *conte* is being rethought and reworked for literary ends in France, Galland's Schéhérazade suggests that orality can be part of a world of nobility, writing, and books.

---

<sup>37</sup> “Ce sont des contes de ma grand-mère, dit Aurélie, riant de l'application qu'elle faisait d'une chose qui se dit si vulgairement” (Jean Regnault de Segrais, *Les Nouvelles françaises, ou, les divertissements de la princesse Aurélie*, 2 vols., vol. 1 [Paris: Société des textes français modernes, 1990], 22). In the definition of “conte” in 1687 and 1694, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* echoes this less than laudatory view of tales and their tellers: “Le vulgaire appelle, Conte au vieux loup. conte de vieille. conte de ma mere l'oye. conte de la cicogne, à la cicogne. conte de peau d'asne. conte à dormir debout. conte jaune, bleu, violet. conte borgne, Des fables ridicules telles que sont celles dont les vieilles gens entretiennent et amusent les enfants.”

<sup>38</sup> As Harries, emphasizes, “They saw their tales not as a continuation of an illiterate female tradition but as a new and powerful invention in the world of letters” (Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 70.). See also Gabrielle Verdier, “Figures de la conteuse dans les contes de fées féminins,” *Dix-septième siècle* 180 (1993).

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Paul Sermain, *Les mille et une nuits entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2009), 159.

Schéhérazade also shows that a storyteller need not be aged or dependent on a dying tradition to exist under a dependent on a dying tradition to exist under a certain threat. Each night, she tells tales to the sultan. Only if the tale succeeds in garnering sufficient interest does she stave off her execution. Galland introduces Schéhérazade through her kinship to the grand-vizir, charged with the unfortunate task of carrying out the sultan's deadly orders. Her first words are an address to her father that culminates in her plan to eliminate this very threat:

J'ai dessein d'arrêter le cours de cette barbarie que le sultan exerce sur les familles de cette ville. Je veux dissiper la juste crainte que tant de mères ont de perdre leurs filles d'une manière si funeste. [...] puisque par votre entremise le sultan célèbre chaque jour un nouveau mariage, je vous conjure par la tendre affection que vous avez pour moi de me procurer l'honneur de sa couche. (1: 35)

Bent on swaying his daughter from her dangerous plans, the grand-vizir resorts to storytelling. His explicitly didactic fables show that narratives can fail.<sup>40</sup> The assertive Schéhérazade refuses to consider their warnings, and her father finally abandons storytelling for threats of physical violence against his rebellious daughter. In contrast to her father's rash, formulaic tactics, Schéhérazade engineers a *mise en scène* of storytelling that is akin to narrative risk management:

Elle ne songea plus qu'à se mettre en état de paraître devant le sultan; mais, avant que de partir, elle prit sa sœur Dinarzade en particulier, et lui dit: "Ma chère sœur, j'ai besoin de votre secours dans une affaire très importante; je vous prie de ne me le pas refuser. Mon père va me conduire chez le sultan pour être son épouse. Que cette nouvelle ne vous épouvante pas, écoutez-moi seulement avec patience. Dès que je serai devant le sultan, je le supplierai de permettre que vous couchiez dans la chambre nuptiale, afin que je jouisse cette nuit encore de votre compagnie. Si j'obtiens cette grâce, comme je l'espère, souvenez-vous de m'éveiller demain matin une heure avant le jour et de m'adresser à peu près ces paroles: *Ma soeur, si vous ne dormez pas, je vous supplie, en attendant le jour qui paraîtra bientôt, de me raconter un de ces beaux contes que vous savez.* Aussitôt je vous en conterai un, et je me flatte de délivrer par ce moyen tout le peuple de la consternation où il est. (1: 43-44)

Schéhérazade's condensed presentation makes her scheme seem simple. Yet these few sentences describe a complex and risky narrative endeavor.

As Ross Chambers shows in his book *Story and Situation*, storytellers and narrators do not enjoy inherent "professional authority." They do not get the narrative equivalent of life appointments, tenure, or job security. Stories exist only in time and storytelling laurels and authority must be garnered anew each time through the very act of telling:

Such authority, then, is highly vulnerable. It rests on an act of authorization on the part of the addressee(s), and one that (taking the form of a suspension of conversational turn taking) can very easily be withdrawn (either by a return to turn taking or by leaving the storytelling situation altogether). A miscalculation of effect, a failure of *tactics*, and the hearers have lost interest, the narrator has lost control. As Michel de Certeau has pointed out, the storyteller in his or her exposed position is forced to be a tactician. If "strategy"

---

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of the father's stories, see Edgard Weber, *Le Secret des mille et une nuits: l'inter-dit de Sheherazade* (Paris: Eché, 1987), 79. For a discussion of the father's storytelling strategies within the scope of other exemplary tales in the *Nights*, see Muhsin Mahdi, "Exemplary Tales in the 1001 Nights," in *The 1001 Nights Critical Essays and Annotated Bibliography* (1985), 5-7.

is the practice of those who are masters of the terrain and “tactics” that of those who are not, at the outset, in control of the situation, the narrator, who is situationally condemned to operate without preexistent authority and to earn the authority to narrate in the very act of storytelling, must be a master of certain “tactical” devices that ensure his or her *survival* as storyteller.<sup>41</sup>

The “*survival* as storyteller” that Chambers discusses is, in Schéhérazade’s case, condensed into a life-or-death matter. Turn taking or temporarily surrendering the floor is never an issue. Schéhérazade is the lone storyteller. If Schéhérazade’s audience loses his interest, she loses her life. In Schéhérazade, the two poles of the frame thus far merge: the success or failure of stories (seen in her father’s fumbling fables) and the life or death decision the sultan makes each morning when he persists in his daily plan to have “une fille mariée et une femme morte” (1: 34).

Compared to later translations of the *Nights* in which the frame figures prominently throughout, Galland only offers subtle reminders of the sultan’s presence and continued threat. But even when Galland begrudgingly complies with his readers’ demands and eliminates Dinarzade’s daily refrain of “ma chère sœur, si vous ne dormez pas [...]” with his third volume and suppresses the division by nights with his seventh volume, he still insists on the importance of the frame in the text and paratexts. “On est bien aise cependant d’avertir encore les lecteurs que Scheherazade parle toujours sans être interrompue,” Galland adds (2: 257). On occasion, we are still privy to the sultan’s thoughts: “l’histoire dont elle me fait fête est peut-être encore plus divertissante que toutes celles qu’elle m’a racontées jusqu’ici; il ne faut pas que je me prive du plaisir de l’entendre; après qu’elle m’en aura fait le récit, j’ordonnerai sa mort” (1: 355). But evocations of the frame need not be so explicit. The mere act of telling offers a reminder of the frame’s dynamic relation to the framed stories. If Marguerite’s stranded *devisants* told tales in *L’Heptaméron* to pass the time, their stories did nothing to stop the rising waters or speed the reconstruction of a bridge. Schéhérazade’s tales, on the other hand, are what will determine her fate.

The frame narrative returns for the last time in the epilogue of the *Nights*, the story of Schéhérazade’s pardon during which the sultan proclaims an end to the cycle of marriage and murder. In most versions besides Galland’s, Schéhérazade presents children, often three sons, to her husband who pardons her and orders her stories written down and preserved for posterity. Galland’s epilogue—whose authorship is the object of some debate—is striking not only in its extreme brevity but in what it leaves unresolved.<sup>42</sup> There are no children, and after pardoning Schéhérazade, the sultan does nothing to recuperate for her stories for his own purposes:

Le sultan des Indes ne pouvait s’empêcher d’admirer la mémoire prodigieuse de la sultane son épouse, qui ne s’épuisait point, et qui lui fournissait toutes les nuits de nouveaux divertissements, par tant d’histoires différentes.

---

<sup>41</sup> Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 213-214. Emphasis in the original. While Chambers’ study focuses on nineteenth-century short stories, his insights into storytelling are applicable far beyond this historical context.

<sup>42</sup> The grounds for questioning Galland’s authorship stem in large part from the posthumous publication of his last volume. See Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland*, 286-287. Even during his lifetime, Galland’s editor sometimes inserted things into the text without his permission, as Galland describes in the “Avertissement” to volume nine (3: 423). For information to the *Nights* besides Galland’s, see Heinz Grotzfeld, “Neglected Conclusions of the *Arabian Nights*: Gleanings in Forgotten and Overlooked Recensions,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 16 (1985): 73-87.

Mille et une nuits s'étaient écoulées dans ces innocents amusements; ils avaient même beaucoup aidé à diminuer les préventions fâcheuses du sultan contre la fidélité des femmes; son esprit était adouci; il était convaincu du mérite de la grande sagesse de Scheherazade; il se souvenait du courage avec lequel elle s'était exposée volontairement à devenir son épouse, sans appréhender la mort à laquelle elle savait qu'elle était destinée le lendemain, comme les autres qui l'avaient précédée.

Ces considérations et les autres qualités qu'il connaissait en elle, le portèrent enfin à lui faire grâce. "Je vois bien, lui dit-il, aimable Scheherazade, que vous êtes inépuisable dans vos petits contes: il y a assez longtemps que vous me divertissez; vous avez apaisé ma colère, et je renonce volontiers en votre faveur à la loi cruelle que je m'étais imposée; je vous remets entièrement dans mes bonnes grâces, et je veux que vous soyez regardée comme la libératrice de toutes les filles qui devaient être immolées à mon juste ressentiment."

La princesse se jeta à ses pieds, les embrassa tendrement en lui donnant toutes les marques de la reconnaissance la plus vive et la plus parfaite.

Le grand vizir apprit le premier cette agréable nouvelle de la bouche même du sultan. Elle se répandit bientôt dans la ville et dans les provinces, ce qui attira au sultan et à l'aimable Scheherazade, son épouse, mille louanges et mille bénédictions et tous les peuples de l'empire des Indes. (3: 373)

With no heirs to the kingdom or written records of Schéhérazade's tales, this celebration of family and empire seems strangely hollow.

By contrast, in other versions of the *Nights*, the sultan's decision to write down tales is often seen as a reaffirmation of his royal power. Schéhérazade's narrative function was but temporary, and stories only exist in a fleeting moment of oral performance. It is the her husband who will now control the durable traces of these one thousand and one nights of stories:

When the narration has ended, the king resumes his all-powerful role, but perhaps recognizing that he has recently been deposed, albeit temporarily, by the storyteller, he appropriates the stories, has them written down under his own aegis, and therefore once more becomes the master of his kingdom.<sup>43</sup>

Malti-Douglas takes this a step further, linking a written record of Schéhérazade's tales to another element missing in Galland's conclusion, heirs to the sultan's kingdom:

The longer version also clarifies Shahrazâd's relationship to literature. She may have narrated the stories, but it is Shâhriyâr who has them written down, to be eventually copied and distributed by his male successor. Her world is the evanescent one of oral performance. It is both measured by and linked to time: a thousand and one nights. To the males is reserved the authority and permanence of written literature. [...] Shahrazâd's extraordinary role is also a temporary one: necessitated by a crisis, it comes to an end with the end of that crisis.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Bonnie D. Irwin, "What's in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling," *Oral Tradition* 10 (1995): 50.

<sup>44</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 28. For a summary of conclusions of to the *Nights* with particular attention paid to heirs to the kingdom and heirs to Schéhérazade's tales, see pages 25-26.

Here, even the memory of the storyteller's stories is committed to writing in the male world of books. Storytelling gives way to writing, and stability is restored.

Critical discussions of the epilogue of the *Nights* provide a compelling illustration of the tendency of different versions of this storytelling saga—from art, opera, or literature—to mesh together into one. Often, the story we think we know of Schéhérazade and the sultan is a combination of different versions, in essence yet another variation on the story. Galland's epilogue—and its clear divergences from better known versions—go largely unnoticed and uncontextualized.<sup>45</sup> In a rare reading of the specificities of Galland's epilogue, Amine Azar considers the sultan's prominence reflective of the prevailing concepts of monarchical power in early eighteenth-century France:

Dans la version orientale, le dénouement est l'œuvre de Shéhérazade. Galland le remplace par un autre plus conforme à l'idéologie du siècle de Louis XIV, et qui se superpose rigoureusement au dénouement du *Cid* et à celui du *Tartuffe*, révélant ainsi son appartenance au même moule idéologique. Dans la version de Galland, Shéhérazade est dessaisie de l'initiative du dénouement, qui passe entièrement du côté du "bon plaisir" du monarque.<sup>46</sup>

Galland died in 1715, the same year as Louis XIV, though the final volume of *Les Mille et une nuits* was only published in 1717, two years into the regency of the Duc d'Orléans. Azar makes an important point in gesturing towards this historical context, yet a careful consideration of Galland's conclusion reveals many dissonances with "l'idéologie du siècle de Louis XIV."

The basis of the storytelling in the *Arabian Nights* is the sultan's daily routine of "une fille mariée et une femme morte." This is an immediate threat for lives of the kingdom's women. But their deaths, after only one night in the sultan's bedchamber, also pose a clear threat for the kingdom's future. A woman who does not live long enough to be unfaithful also does not live long enough to bear an heir to the throne—a major preoccupation in any monarchical society. Galland's Schéhérazade gives the sultan no sons, only stories. Furthermore, Schéhérazade's stories do not serve but instead subvert the sultan's power. Schéhérazade uses the suspense and seduction of her "petits contes" to thwart his very decree, one thousand and one times over. Consciously or not, the sultan momentarily sacrifices a certain amount of power each time he surrenders authority to the storyteller and her narration. In Galland's epilogue, Schéhérazade's stories are not taken away from her and neatly repacked into a written collection. The lack of a written intervention changes the cumulative effect of the tale telling. Her stories remain as she leaves them, a testament to her success in stopping the sultan's slaughter, their memory framed by her crafty scheme, not the cover of a book that enjoys royal authorization.

By contrast, the French monarchy was deeply invested in channeling the forces of art and literature to the construction and propagation of its own image, as Azar himself highlights. Galland's sultan may not take cues from the likes of Richelieu or Louis XIV, but he still provides a compelling means of reflection on Galland's own conditions of writing. Weren't all French

<sup>45</sup> Even May, who considers this *dénouement* "la marque peut-être la plus frappante de l'originalité de Galland," overlooks this absence in cataloguing the features specific to this version. May rightly notes that Galland did not have a complete manuscript of the *Nights* and likely did not have a manuscript of the conclusion. For May, this is all the more reason to believe in Galland's originality: he was left to use his own imagination and draw freely on the endings described by others who had heard the story or examined manuscripts. See May, *Les Mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland*, 156.

<sup>46</sup> Amine A. Azar, "La ruse nuptiale de Shéhérazade," *Cahiers de l'Orient* 5 (1987): 174.

writers in Galland's day to some extent subject to the whims of a monarch? Galland had to obtain royal approvals for his work prior to its printing. In his diary entry for March 10, 1712, he happily notes that, in response to his request of January 28, he has received "l'onzième tome des *Mille et une nuit*, accompagné de l'approbation de M. Danchet, et ainsi en estat de pouvoir estre imprimé."<sup>47</sup> But when the first volume of *Les Nuits* appeared in 1704, Louis XIV was already physically and politically weakened. If Galland's sultan resonates with the old patronage system, he also provides a stand-in for the new book market. Galland sometimes delivered volumes of *Les Nuits* directly to his most esteemed readers: "Le soir, je fis présent à Madame la marquise d'O de deux exemplaires des Mille et une [*nuit*], reliez en maroquin rouge, un pour elle et l'autre pour Madame la Dauphine," he notes in his diary on February 1, 1712. On Sunday, June 11, 1713, his entry reads "L'après-disné, je vis Madame de Vertamont, première présidente du grand conseil, Madame la Duchesse de Brissac et Mademoiselle de Vertamont. Je prestai aux deux dernières le 12e tome des Mille et Une Nuits pour le lire."<sup>48</sup> However, Galland is aware that his books must sell to more than this limited audience.

Though the mass audiences of nineteenth-century newspapers are still a ways off, the literary market was changing. While story-hungry monarchs might be losing power and might have their years numbered, story-hungry audiences were growing. The evolution of storytelling topoi in French fiction reflect seventeenth-century writers' awareness of such conditions, as Nicholas Paige contends in "The Storyteller and the Book: Scenes of Narrative Production in the Early French Novel." Paige considers the erosion in the 1660s and 1670s of the "coterie" model of storytelling—narrative exchange among a closed group of equals—as emblematic of this.<sup>49</sup> Galland's take on an ancient folkloric storytelling saga is hardly analogous to early French novel like those whose news uses for the storyteller Paige examines. However, it is not inconsequential that *Les Mille et une nuits* appear in France at a time when storytelling topoi had undergone profound changes in response to conditions of literary production that would be inescapable for Galland.

Whatever the authorship of his epilogue to the *Nights* and whatever his hand in shaping or inventing traditional stories in his text, Galland occupied in the market the place of a writer—not a translator or scholar masquerading as a storyteller. The publication history of *Les Nuits* shows what a particular place this was. Galland's relationship with his publisher, who also had an economic interest in pleasing the public, was a fraught with problems. In one instance, Galland's publisher Claude Barbin—famous for Perrault's *Contes* and LaFontaine's *Fables*—usurped his artistic control over the text and thickened the eighth volume of *Les Nuits* with additional tales inserted into the frame. Galland discovered these tales translated by Pétis de la Croix only after the publication. In his next volume, printed by a different publisher, Galland denounced the addition.<sup>50</sup> The notion of a writer engaging in direct, personal, unmediated communication with a small group of readers is clearly dated. Each volume of *Les Mille et une nuits* appearing separately as Galland completed it, leaving to sustain the interest of his growing

<sup>47</sup> Galland, "Journal parisien," 113.

<sup>48</sup> Galland, "Journal parisien," 126.

<sup>49</sup> Paige, "The Storyteller and the Book," 143-152.

<sup>50</sup> On Galland's dispute with "la maison Barbin," then headed by Barbin's widow, "la Veuve Barbin," see Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland*, 268-270.

audience—not for one thousand and one nights in a sultan’s palace—but for thirteen years and twelve volumes in an increasingly anonymous book market.

In a sense, Galland is not just first among Western translators of the *Arabian Nights*. He is also first in a long line of European authors to make Schéhérazade, the tale-wielding and death-defying sultana of the Orient of old, a reflection of his own day. *Les Mille et une nuits* show the possibility for literature to repackage folklore, to create a story about folklore that can prove more important for literary history than the identification of traditional materials within the text. And Galland, in this intermediary moment when royal approvals were still necessary but readers were becoming more distant and more numerous, offers a reminder that the storyteller—even one geographically and culturally removed as Schéhérazade—can be a means of thinking about contemporary literary production.

### Schéhérazade and the evolution of the *conte*: Crébillon’s *Le Sopha*

Schéhérazade has neither children nor a written record of her own tales in Galland’s world, but she hardly wants for a legacy in the world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. Schéhérazade’s tales are more than just an invitation for writers to pen another continuation or imitation. They also act as a generic landmark for the *conte*. In his first “Avertissement,” Galland situates Schéhérazade’s tales and their didactic value in opposition to *contes* already familiar in France:

Pour peu même que ceux qui liront ces Contes soient disposés à profiter des exemples de vertus et de vices qu’ils y trouveront, ils en pourront tirer un avantage qu’on ne tire point de la lecture des autres Contes, qui sont plus propres à corrompre les mœurs qu’à les corriger. (1: 22)

*Contes de fées* that were popular in France starting in the seventeenth century and shared a certain marvelous element with Schéhérazade’s tales of genies and magic carpets.<sup>51</sup> But other kinds of *contes* existed, including bawdy tales in the vein of La Fontaine’s *Conte et Nouvelles en vers* (1664)—whose stories of infidelity and amorous intrigue were short on examples of virtue that Galland offers. Later, writers after Galland would use Schéhérazade’s stories as a reference point for asking what their own iteration of the *conte* might do differently than their predecessors. In the decades following the publication of *Les mille et une nuits*, the *conte* expands to become a laboratory of philosophical or moral inquiry. Schéhérazade’s tales come to represent a form of the *conte* more oriented towards entertainment.

Claude-Prosper Joylot de Crébillon (1707-1777), son of the playwright Prosper Crébillon, gives a compelling example of the evolution of the *conte* and of Schéhérazade’s legacy in the Enlightenment with *Le Sopha* (1742). Crébillon terms *Le Sopha* a “conte moral,” though the term is more frequently associated with Marmontel (1723-1799) and his collections of *conte moraux* later in the eighteenth century. The interest of the text, however, is not the generic labels

---

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Jean-Paul Sermain, “Le Rapport du conte de fées à l’oralité: trois modèles (Perrault, Galland, Hamilton),” in *Le Conte en ses paroles: la figuration de l’oralité dans le conte merveilleux du Classicisme aux Lumières*, ed. Anne Defrance and Jean-Francois Perrin (Paris: Desjonquères, 2007), 34-44.

in its title but the debate among the characters about *contes*, what they should do, and who should decide. The frame is set at the court of the sultan Schah-Baham, a “Prince ignorant et d’une mollesse achevée,” whose one distinction is that he is Schéhérazade’s grandson.<sup>52</sup> When lots are cast to see who will tell a story, the duty falls to a certain Amanzéi, whose soul was condemned to live in sofas in a previous incarnation. Much to the sultan’s dismay, Amanzéi’s tales bear no resemblance to his grandmother’s *contes*, but take the form of rather libertine stories that probe the underlying workings of human nature—things that sofas are in an ideal position to observe. They are not dry moral diatribes devoid of any entertainment value but accounts of the erotic intrigues and social machinations that happened on or around the various sofas that Amanzéi inhabited. And, for French readers, their parallels to contemporary society would have been quite visible. While the frame is set in the ancient Orient, Amanzéi’s tales describe a world that is remarkably similar in political and social concerns to eighteenth-century France.<sup>53</sup>

*Le Sopha* is famous, among other reasons, for the uproar that its publication provoked. Writers like Montesquieu with his *Lettres Persanes* (1721) had already used an outsider’s perspective as a way to analyze European society—and distance themselves from the critiques their characters level against their own world. *Le Sopha*, however, seems to have struck too close to home. Crébillon was exiled from Paris for three months following its publication. Crébillon had blatantly refused to heed warnings about the licentious nature of his *conte*, its unfavorable portrayal of monarchs, and its not-so-veiled references to French political officials. But Jean Sgard suggests that this alone might not have been enough to spark the censure that ensued.<sup>54</sup> Was Crébillon perhaps victim of the royal authority’s need to create a stern example? Whatever the case, Crébillon chose not to publish again for twelve years. In 1754, he returned to the scene of the court of the sultan Schah-Baham in *Ah quel conte!*, but references to the frame and stories of *Les Mille et une nuits* do not have the same overt parallels with the contemporary literary and political scene that they had in *Le Sopha*.

In *Le Sopha*, Schéhérazade’s shadow looms large as the sultan Schah-Baham invokes both his genetic and generic heritage:

Je pensais que pour rendre les jours moins longs, il faudrait que chacun de nous racontât des histoires; quand je dis des histoires, je m’entends bien! Je veux des événements singuliers, des fées, des talismans; car ne vous y trompez pas, au moins, il n’y a que cela de vrai. Eh bien! Nous convenons donc tous de faire de contes? Mahomet veuille m’assister! Mais je ne doute pas que même sans son secours, je n’en fasse de meilleurs que qui que ce soit; et la raison de cela, c’est que je sors d’une maison où l’on n’ignore pas que l’on en sait faire, et sans vanité d’assez bons. (34)

<sup>52</sup> Crébillon, *Le Sopha* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 30. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations come from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>53</sup> On this parallel, see Geeta Paray-Clarke, *La féerie érotique: Crébillon et ses lecteurs* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999). The earliest edition of *Les Mille et une nuits* documented in Crébillon’s personal holdings is from 1774. It is impossible to determine whether Crébillon knew versions besides Galland’s. He certainly owned many other *contes orientaux* before that, including Pétis de La Croix’s *Mille et un jours* (Crébillon, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Jean Sgard, 4 vols., vol. 2 [Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1999], 825, note 821).

<sup>54</sup> Jean Sgard, *Crébillon fils, le libertin moraliste* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2002), 121.

The sultan, who cannot stay focused long enough to finish a sentence much less a tale, believes that lineage alone guarantees his claim to same status as a storyteller that his grandmother enjoyed. Schah-Baham may be the sovereign of his land, but he does not have the only say in the discussion of *contes*. His wife the Sultane-Reine “qui avaient enore le courage de penser, et de s’instruire” responds:

Ne dirait-on pas, à vous entendre, qu’un Conte est le chef-d’œuvre de l’esprit humain Et cependant, quoi de plus puénil, de plus absurde? Qu’est-ce qu’un Ouvrage (s’il est vrai toutefois qu’un Conte mérite de porter ce nom;) qu’est-ce, dis-je qu’un Ouvrage, où la vraisemblance est toujours violée, et où les idées reçues sont perpétuellement renversées; qui s’appuyant sur un faux et frivole merveilleux, n’emploie des extraordinaires, et la toute-puissance de la Féerie; ne bouleverse l’ordre de la Nature et celui des Éléments que pour créer des objets ridicules, singulièrement imaginés: mais qui souvent n’ont rien qui rachète l’extravagance de leur création [...]. (33)

Though the Sultane-Reine arrives at very different conclusions than her husband, she shows much the same shortsightedness by blindly condemning the things that he blindly accepts. Her idea of the *conte* is limited to the marvelous. But, in her support of “vraisemblance,” she neglects the possibility that stories which do not seem true could still communicate truths.

In early editions of *Le Sopha*, Crébillon includes yet another distinct voice in this debate. The frame narrator steps away from his omniscient narratorial role and adds his personal opinion:

A quelque point que les contes ornent l’esprit, et quelque agréables, ou quelque sublimes que soient les connaissances et les idées qu’on y puise, il est dangereux de ne lire que des livres de cette espèce. Il n’y a que les personnes vraiment éclairées, au-dessus des préjugés, et qui connaissent le vide des sciences, qui sachent combien ces sortes d’ouvrages sont utiles à la société, et combien l’on doit d’estime et même de vénération aux gens qui ont assez de génie pour en faire, et assez de force dans l’esprit pour s’y dévouer, malgré l’idée de frivolité que l’orgueil et l’ignorance ont attachée à ce genre. Les importantes leçons que les contes renferment, les grands traits d’imagination qu’on y rencontre si fréquemment, et les idées riantes dont ils sont toujours remplis, ne prennent point sur le vulgaire, de qui l’on ne peut acquérir l’estime qu’en lui donnant des choses qu’il n’entende jamais; mais qu’il puisse se faire honneur d’entendre. (29-30)

His intervention is not an afterthought but a means of introducing the substance of the debate to come. He, in essence, offers Schah-Baham as an example of his own point. In some later editions, Crébillon deletes this paragraph on the value of *contes* for the select few, perhaps, Jean Sgard speculates, because it seems to exclude the point of view of the Sultane-Reine.<sup>55</sup> She is neither one of the few enlightened ones who can truly appreciate *contes* nor one of “le vulgaire” who fancies herself capable of understanding their meaning. The narrator’s intervention is, nonetheless, important for establishing the potential of the *conte* to be an instrument of reflection under certain conditions—conditions which are dependent the reflection and reason of the reader or listener. From the start, Crébillon’s own reader is left to decide where he falls in this spectrum and to search out the lessons *Le Sopha* has to offer.

Ultimately, Schah-Baham proves most significant not as a self-proclaimed storyteller, but as an audience member who, not coincidentally, happens to be a sovereign ruler. As the sultan,

---

<sup>55</sup> Crébillon, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 825, note 822.

Schah-Baham also considers himself the final arbiter of aesthetics—a role that French monarchs claimed and that the French reading public would, in practice at least, soon dispute them. The result is a rather unfavorable portrayal of an audience who seeks mindless entertainment and a monarch who refuses to change with the times—and constrains narrative production along the way. Schah-Baham clings unthinkingly to a dated model of the *conte*: “On assure même, que le Recueil des Contes de Schéhérazade, que son auguste Grand-Père avait fait écrire en lettre d’or, était le seul Livre qu’il [Schah-Baham] eût jamais daigné lire,” the narrator tells us (30-31). Schéhérazade’s tales, “dont il était défendu, sur peine de la vie, de faire la critique,” lose their power to entertain the sultan after innumerable repetitions (31), yet he persists in demanding more like the ones that have already failed him—putting any storytelling in a difficult situation.

Schah-Baham believes that stories, and thus storytellers, are in his service. And he sees the ultimate goal of storytelling as relieving his boredom, giving no thought to the possibility of any loftier potential. During Amanzéi’s story about Zulica and Nassès, the sultan gets impatient when the storyteller relates dialogue that actually advances the plot. He stops Amanzéi, however, to request that he unnecessarily prolong the description of the lovers’ dinner: “J’aime, sur toutes choses, les propos de table” (182). Much to the sultan’s frustration, his wife points out the incongruencies of her husband’s demands:

Je veux qu’on apprenne qu’un Sultan est fait pour raisonner comme il lui plait; que tous mes ancêtres, ont eu le même privilège que celui qu’on me dispute; que jamais femme bel-esprit, n’a eu le crédit de les empêcher de parler comme il voulaient, et que ma grand-Mère même à qui, je crois, vous n’avez pas l’audace de vous comparer, n’a jamais eu celle de contredire Schah-Riar mon aïeul, fils de Schah-Mamoun, qui engendra Shah-Techni, lequel... (182)

After the usual evocation of Schéhérazade (“ma grand-Mère”), the sultan launches into an account of his own genealogy which uses the same verbal structure as Biblical accounts of Jesus ancestors. Lineage, for the sultan, trumps logic. The sultan’s use of the verb “raisonner” contrasts his brand of decision-making based on royal privilege and desire into stark contrast with the philosophical reason and reflection of the Enlightenment.

Crébillon makes the sultan’s rants relevant to actual debates about *contes* by raising important questions but providing only answers that are clearly devoid of real reason. Schah-Baham, for example, considers the classic problem of believability in fiction something that can be resolved by his decree. The sultan invokes truth in his plea for *contes* delivered to his liking: “Je veux des événements singuliers, des fées, des talismans; car ne vous y trompez pas, au moins, il n’y a que cela de vrai.” Truth seems to reference what seems true for this particular genre, as the sultan understands it at least. The sultana, on the other hand, bemoans the lack of *vraisemblance* in *contes* which she thinks only encompass the marvelous. But Amanzéi complicates the situation. The basis for his tales is his own shape-shifting. The sultan, however, declares this inconceivable, though, as his wife points out, he readily accepts even the most fanciful tales of flying carpets and magic spells as real. By becoming a sofa, Amanzéi takes the marvelous and the problem of belief to a different level. He becomes part of the story in a way that Schéhérazade and most other storytellers never claim to. For the sultan, the marvelous is “true” because it is a substitute for reality, not a reflection on it. On the other hand, Amanzéi’s stories, whether they are historical fact or not, easily could have happened. They are an affront to entertainment and to the sultan’s brand of the *conte* because they are too real. Ultimately, Crébillon spotlights broader questions in fiction about what is true, whether or not there is a

value in showing it, and if certain genres are more suited than others to certain kinds of truths. As is typical of *Le Sopha*, the reader is not presented with a viable conclusion. The sultan consents to let Amanzéi start his stories, but follows up with one last question that underscores his disconnect from the true problem at hand: “Vous avez donc été Sopha, mon enfant? [...] Hé, dites-moi, étiez-vous brodé?” (39).

Unlike earlier frame narratives in which the *devisants* discussed at length the specifics of tales and offered interpretative models, the frame of *Le Sopha* offers little guidance. Amanzéi is forced to answer extraneous questions—affirming that the first sofa his soul inhabited was, in fact, embroidered. Instead of providing genuine reflections on the substance of the story, the sultan’s commentaries and interruptions call into question his own capacity to understand, much less censor, artistic production. Are we, after all, to trust the tastes of someone who considers the invention of *broderie* and *découpure* as a “chef-d’oeuvre de l’esprit humain” (31)? The reader may see his traces of his own desires in the sultan’s instance on stories that provide fast gratification or may admire the sultana’s aspirations of education and reason. But the reader cannot fully map himself onto any of the audience members, whose arguments for or against *contes* are so clearly flawed. Crébillon, instead, demands a more active reader.

Though Amanzéi’s stories certainly have the potential to provide some pleasure, the enlightened reader must see beyond this as well. The erotic tale provides an intimate view of human nature in general, not just physical desire. Crébillon uses an object—the sofa—as a window to the human condition and the *conte* as a space to examine the moral confusion that he finds. “J’aime assez les choses claires,” insists the sultan. Crébillon’s *conte*, however, shows that what motivates alliances, betrayals, and maybe even love is anything but simple. In the domain of *contes*, something new is emerging. “Ah, ma grand-mère!” exclaims Schéhérazade’s grandson at the end of Amanzéi’s final tale, “ce n’était pas ainsi que vous contiez” (237), stressing with the imperfect verb “contiez” that Schéhérazade’s brand of storytelling belongs to the past. But it is up to the reader to see the deeper philosophical import of Amanzéi’s stories—and possibly to reflect on what happens when the *siècle des lumières* fails to deliver *contes* to a sovereign’s liking.

Crébillon’s sultan, like Galland’s, reflects the demands of a sovereign *and* the demands of consumers of narrative, both very real forces in literary production in France. Writing a few decades after Galland, Crébillon faced an even larger book market. However, Crébillon’s sultan has more immediate parallels to the monarchy, not the market place, in France. Naturally, Crébillon does not explicitly critique dynastic succession. However, the sultan’s boast of storytelling prowess mirrors the basis of his claims to political power: it is something passed on by virtue of blood. Crébillon shows the shortcomings of familial succession in its application, or misapplication, to storytelling, leaving the reader to draw any further conclusions. Crébillon does not say that Schéhérazade’s tales were intrinsically worthless in their own day; instead his point seems to be to illustrate how an unenlightened listener and sovereign might misuse their example and hinder to artistic expression generations later.

A few years after *Le Sopha*, Schéhérazade’s name surfaces again in another, typically eighteenth-century *conte*. Voltaire’s *Zadig* (1748), a *conte philosophique*, makes the *conte* a deliberate testing of a hypothesis and a study in reason and meaning-making. *Zadig*’s search for happiness still provides a compelling story with many narrative twists and turns, though it is not the licentious fiction of Crébillon’s *sopha*/storyteller. While Voltaire does not use Schéhérazade’s legacy to shape his characters’ as Crébillon does in *Le Sopha*, Voltaire, like

Crébillon, uses Schéhérazade's example shape his own concept of the *conte*. His story opens with an "épître dédicatoire," addressed to a fictional sultana by an ancient Persan poet. Voltaire uses this clearly fictional dedication to trace his story dates back to the days when *Les Mille et une nuits* were first taking shape. At this time, Oulog, a suprisingly an enlightened sultan, enjoyed reading *Zadig*—in the original Chaldean, of course—but mocked his wives' preference for *Les Mille et une nuits*: "Comment pouvez-vous préférer, leur disait le sage Oulog, des contes qui sont sans raison et qui ne signifient rien? —C'est précisément pour cela que nous les aimons, répondaient les sultanes."<sup>56</sup> Unlike Crébillon's sultan Schah-Baham who argues fervently for the merit of his grandmother's tales, Oulog's wives openly declare them mindless. This, they willingly admit, is exactly what they seek in *contes*. But Crébillon and Voltaire refuse to give their audiences, whoever they might be in reality, easy entertainment simply because they want it. They both claim the *conte*—often considered an expendable genre and associated with less-than-serious content—for the Enlightenment and for their own philosophical ends.

### Isabelle de Montolieu's "Suite et conclusion des *Mille et une nuits*"

Where Crébillon imagines Schéhérazade's descendants, other authors like Isabelle de Montolieu revisit Schéhérazade herself and the decisive moment of her pardon at the sultan's court. Montolieu (1751-1832) was born Pauline Polier de Bottens in Lausanne. She married twice, the second time to the Baron de Montolieu. She had a particular interest in Rousseau as well as German and English literature. Though little known today, Montolieu translated or wrote over one hundred novels, of which *Caroline de Lichtfield* (1786) was the most popular.<sup>57</sup> Her "Histoire de la princesse Una, ou les Talismans, Suite et conclusion des *Mille et une nuits*, contes arabes" appears in her *Recueil de Contes*, published in Geneva in 1803. While the adventures of Princess Una should constitute only nine nights of storytelling, the meandering plot spans slightly more than two hundred pages, with Schéhérazade and the frame narrative surfacing only in the last two and a half pages. Readers looking for Montolieu's typical sentimental flowery prose would not have been disappointed in the embedded tale of happy marriages. Readers looking for similarly joyful ending for Schéhérazade would have been left with a very different story, one of the sultan's tyranny, both as Schéhérazade's audience and as her husband.

In the scope of rewritings of Schéhérazade, Montolieu's "Suite et continuation" is rarely mentioned and hardly stands out as a literary masterpiece.<sup>58</sup> However, it does present historical interest as one of the first adaptations of the legendary storyteller from the pen of a female author. In Galland's *Mille et une nuits*, Schéhérazade makes storytelling look easy, as she effortless responds to Dinarzade's clock-like promptings. She never laments her plight. Once she is pardoned, her storytelling ceases, and her voice is never heard again. Montolieu delves

<sup>56</sup> Voltaire, *Zadig* (Paris: Larousse, 1998), 38.

<sup>57</sup> See Alain Nicollier and Henri-Charles Dahlem, "Isabelle de Montolieu," in *Dictionnaire des écrivains suisses d'expression française* (Geneva: Editions GVA, 1994). See also the preface to Isabelle de Montolieu, *Le Serin de Jean-Jacques de Rousseau*, ed. Claire Jacquier (Carouge-Genève: Minozoé, 1997).

<sup>58</sup> Georges May makes a rare mention of Montolieu, briefly discussing her text as a point of comparison to Galland's epilogue. (May, *Les Mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland*, 163-164).

into the human implications of the frame. Even the once-obliging Dinarzade becomes a malicious sibling, mocking Schéhérazade's tales and questioning her ability to bear children.<sup>59</sup> Schéhérazade, now a struggling storyteller, runs out of good stories and resorts to telling a bad one—which the sultan actually likes! Montolieu makes no explicit gestures towards the still young nineteenth century, to her own place as a woman writer, or to the contemporary literary scene. However, her take on audience demands and the sultan's usurpation of oral tales for his own archives resonates with many cultural currents at the dawn of the nineteenth century when readerships were growing and folklore study was budding.

Montolieu's rewriting of Schéhérazade's final nights of storytelling spotlights the two elements most conspicuously absent from Galland's epilogue: heirs to the throne and a written record of Schéhérazade's tales. Schéhérazade concludes her final tale with a mention of the protagonists' children and an indication that Princess Una's story was transcribed and kept for posterity in a fictional empire:

Una et Zulmé ne se quittèrent jamais, leurs enfants joignirent à des traits charmants le courage du lion, et les vertus douces de l'ânesse; les talismans, cachés dans le trésor, ne servirent que dans de grandes occasions, le nain se reposa, et cette histoire écrite en lettres d'or fut conservée dans les archives de l'Empire. (202)

The sultan halts Schéhérazade's storytelling less out of appreciation for the tale's art and more out of his own jealousy of the tale's characters. The conclusion of the tale reminds him of two things that his own kingdom lacks: heirs and a written account Una and Zulmé's adventures. Speaking of this story that is "conservée dans les archives de l'Empire," he makes an immediate connection to his own archives:

JE VEUX, qu'elle [l'histoire] le soit aussi dans les miennes, s'écrira Shariar; voilà ce que j'appelle une belle histoire! après celle-là, il faut comme on dit tirer l'échelle; je n'en veux plus entendre d'autre, et je consens à vous laisser vivre; mais à condition qu'au lieu d'histoires, vous me ferez aussi de beaux enfants comme cela, qui tiennent du lion et de l'âne; entendez-vous, Madame? Ce n'est pas le tout que de savoir de beaux contes, il me faut aussi des enfants, et l'un n'empêche pas l'autre.... (202)

Schéhérazade, it would seem, has emerged triumphant, in the sense that the sultan agrees to let her live. But her success is tempered by the means through which it is achieved and by the conditions of her pardon. As a once artful storyteller, she has been reduced to telling a story she considers bad—a story that will now live on for posterity. As a woman, she is reduced to her reproductive potential.

Most versions of the *Nights*, Galland's notably excepted, make some mention of offspring resulting Schéhérazade's one thousand and one nights in the sultan's bedchamber. Critics have often found parallels between Schéhérazade's narrative fecundity and her childbearing:

---

<sup>59</sup> Dinarzade, who has the last word in the epilogue, goes so far as to declare that her sister's life-saving stories had more success than they deserved. See Isabelle de Montolieu, "Conte de la princesse Una, ou Les Talismans, Suite et conclusion des Mille et une Nuits, contes Arabes," in *Recueil de contes* (Genève: Paschoud, 1803), 203. Montolieu is not alone her negative characterization of the storyteller's sister. In a text published posthumously in 1730, Antoine Hamilton imagined a scene in which Dinarzade criticizes Schéhérazade's stories and begs to replace her sister before the sultan. See Jean-François Perrin, "Les Transformations du conte-cadre des *Mille et Une Nuits* dans le conte orientalisant français du début du XVIIIe siècle," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 104 (2004): 56-57.

Shahrazad is characterized by nothing if not her fertility—both narrative and otherwise—and it is a tribute to her legacy of potentially infinite narrative generation that the text possesses an ability, indeed a willingness, to accommodate ultimately any tale between its ever-flexible borders, in the interest of maintaining narrative variety.<sup>60</sup>

Such readings, however, assume that Schéhérazade already has children at the time of her pardon—like in Madrus’s late nineteenth-century version. But Montolieu takes a unique approach. She makes children not a factor in a pardon that has already been granted but a condition of one that could be revoked at anytime: “je consens à vous laisser vivre; mais à condition qu’au lieu d’histoires, vous me ferez aussi de beaux enfants,” the sultan stipulates (202). The fictional characters in his wife’s tale, Una and Zulmé, are proud parents. The sultan, also, wants children. In a direct substitution, children replace stories as the object of his desire and the means of staying Schéhérazade’s execution. By making Schéhérazade’s survival contingent upon childbearing, Montolieu, in a sense, becomes one of the first feminist critics of the *Nights*. She spotlights an important though rarely explicit dimension of Schéhérazade’s situation: even when the sultan frees Schéhérazade from her storytelling obligations, he still retains control over her body through the laws of marriage. In fact, her initial access to the sultan’s bed and, hence, to his attention, is predicated on her female body, not her as yet unrevealed narrative talents.

A monarch’s desire for children needs little explanation: heirs to the throne are the foremost assurance of the kingdom’s stability and future, in the eyes of the monarch’s subjects and in the eyes of outsiders. Montolieu’s sultan’s other demand—written stories—is less obvious in its motivations but similar in its purpose. While archives won’t ensure orderly royal succession, they will provide successors with a record of past glory—a heritage visible even to outside rivals and one that, unlike oral stories, falls under the monarch’s complete control. The focus has shifted to that which is durable. Where Galland’s sultan pardons Schéhérazade when his murderous compulsions abate and he recognizes that she will be able to tell tales *ad infinitum*, Montolieu’s sultan halts Schéhérazade’s tales because he has stumbled upon the now more pressing need to assemble *written* stories. In essence, Montolieu’s Schéhérazade is pardoned, albeit conditionally, more because of writing than because of storytelling. The decisive moment is when the sultan’s desire to own a written record of stories told in the past outweighs his interest in stories that Schéhérazade could tell in the future.

Montolieu offers a reminder that shifts in the cultural—or, in this case, political—utility of stories can change how they are viewed, valued, or preserved. Though Montolieu was writing in Switzerland and had no direct ties to the nascent discipline of folklore in France, it is worth noting that her “Suite et continuation” was published in 1803, only shortly before the founding of France’s first folklore society, the *Académie Celtique*. Her sultan’s move to take oral stories and transform them into a permanent written record for the glory of the State is not wholly dissimilar to some nineteenth-century examples of nationalistic folklore collecting. The members of the *Académie Celtique*, in fact, find their motivation the need to generate a record of the past befitting France’s new position as an imperial power. If Montolieu doesn’t explicitly address

---

<sup>60</sup> Sandra Naddaf, *Arabesque: Narrative Structures and the Aesthetics of Repetition in the 1001 Nights* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 5. For an summary of how heirs to the kingdom and heirs to Schéhérazade’s tales figure into various versions the epilogue to the *Nights*, see Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, 25-26.

folklore or tradition, she raises questions that resonate beyond her fictitious sultan's kingdom. Why are stories written down? And what happens to storytelling once tales are put on paper and archived? Here, the intervention of writing makes storytelling obsolete. Utility and durability supplant art or at least the potential for it. A story's content matters less than the story told about it, that is to say, *how* it is used once removed from the storyteller's control.

There is, however, more to Montolieu's sultan than his demand for written stories: he also delights in bad stories, or at least stories that Schéhérazade deems bad. He is both a stand-in for powerful figures who control archives and can command stories transcribed as well as a reflection of common readers who want stories that meet *their* liking. Writers in Montolieu's day dealt with both. An increase in literacy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produces not only a mass readership but also a change in tastes. In common perception, too much literacy engenders a decline in standards. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Schéhérazade's worst, most boring story is ultimately the very one that her husband, the sultan, likes best:

Convenez que le goût du Sultan mon maître est singulier; je lui ai fait pendant neuf cent-quatre vingt douze nuits les plus charmantes histoires du monde, qui ne l'on point appaisé; enfin au bout de mon savoir, j'en imagine une qui n'a pas le sens commun [...] et c'est elle qui me sauve la vie.<sup>61</sup>

In the nineteenth-century literary market place, the growing reading public is beginning, like to sultan, to have a say in what *they* deem worthy—to determine what will be written. With an audience of jealous sultans or lazy readers, second-rate, boring stories lacking “sens commun” can ultimately prove the most successful.

Montolieu is hardly alone in lifting the veil of “happily ever after” from Schéhérazade's life. Where later authors imagine Schéhérazade's literal execution, Montolieu suffocates the storyteller under an ironic guise of success and survival. The two things that Schéhérazade can produce—tales and children—are taken from her female sphere and put in the sultan's service. The stories are to be written for his archives. The children will be his heirs. Schéhérazade is left with little. In essence, Montolieu kills the Schéhérazade whom we know and expect. She silences Shéhérazade not with swords or strangulation like Gautier, Poe, and many other but with much more familiar forces like the whims of an audience and the oppression of patriarchal societies.

Clearly, Montolieu's Schéhérazade, with her imperfections and insecurities, is not the usually unshakable young woman who prevails by virtue of her narrative brilliance. And the antagonist relationship between Dinarzade and Schéhérazade hardly conforms to the model of sisterly solidarity advanced by many feminist studies of the *Nights*. But pessimistic as Montolieu's ending may be, it does not make Schéhérazade a total traitor to women. Montolieu's Schéhérazade exposes a woman's plight—as a wife and a purveyor of narrative. Hers is not a “corrected” version of the *Nights*. It is a continuation that calls into question other accounts of the thousand and first night. She reminds us that, no matter the fanfare of Schéhérazade's pardon or the sultan's warm reception of her stories, the storyteller, now voiceless, remains bound by marriage, for the thousand and second night and every one after that. Montolieu quietly critiques the silences and oversights of less-than-realistic antecedents

---

<sup>61</sup> Montolieu, “Conte de la princesse Una,” 204. All future quotations from the text will be cited parenthetically.

simply by telling her own story—much like princes paying child support or princesses as single mothers make modern adaptations of fairy tales commentaries on their traditional intertexts. By exposing one possible “reality” behind the *Nights*, Montolieu’s Schéhérazade spotlights the shortcoming of supposedly happy endings and creates an alternative ending, reflective of her own conditions as a woman and a writer.

### Schéhérazade, the Newspaper, and the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Gautier’s “Mille et deuxième nuit”

Crébillon and Montolieu both use a sultan with less-than-sophisticated tastes as a stand-in for their own audience—or what they feared their audiences might become. Implicit in this is the possibility that writers or storytellers might find themselves compelled to betray their art and deliberately produce bad stories to please their audience. What if audiences begin to demand *only* bad stories? Why might they become more vocal in their demands? What are the consequences if their demands go unmet? Such questions come to the fore in the nineteenth century as more people of previously illiterate classes begin to read. These questions, and Schéhérazade’s place in them, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the rise of the *roman feuilleton*, serialized fiction published in newspapers.<sup>62</sup>

By 1836, technological advances and increasing literacy make the mass daily production of newspapers more profitable than ever. The horizontal space across the bottom few inches of a newspaper page, the “feuilleton” in journalistic terms, becomes the ideal place to publish installments of a “roman” or novel. And so, the *roman feuilleton* is born—its very name a reminder of its materiality tied to the presentation of a text in the physical space of a newspaper page. For a few writers and critics, the *roman feuilleton* is a positive development even for non-economic reasons: a means to reach larger audiences and a way bring to light important social problems.<sup>63</sup> Yet, many others consider serialized fiction poisonous to *real* literary standards: the economy of newspaper sales means that the mass public’s buying habits can now dictate what sees print. Writers feel limited by supposedly “canned” plot lines and limited linguistic registers that serialized fiction demands. Major authors whose work sold to newspapers, including Balzac, are some of the *feuilleton*’s most vocal critics.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> On the *roman feuilleton* and the debates surrounding it, see Lise Dumasy, ed., *La Querelle du roman-feuilleton: littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999), Yves Olivier-Martin, *Histoire du roman populaire en France* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980), and Lise Queffelec, *Le roman-feuilleton français au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989).

<sup>63</sup> “One has only to regard the format of a nineteenth-century newspaper, in which the feuilleton occupied the bottom quarter of the front page, to see, literally, how thin was the line between political fact and literary fiction. News stories were literary constructions; feuilleton novelists used news stories as content. The tendency of mass media is to render the distinction between art and politics meaningless” (Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989], 140). Even writers who did not immediately champion this political dimension of the *feuilleton* later put it to work in their own writing.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Guy de Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), esp 53. See also Villiers de l’Isle Adam, “Deux Augures,” in *Contes Cruels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 74-90. On Balzac, see Kevin

Schéhérazaïe, her own daily narrative production, and her demanding audience become frequent reference points in the articles, essays, or speeches that make up these debates, now dubbed the “querelle du roman feuilleton.” But the possibility of rewriting Schéïhérazaïe’s story continues to be, just as she was for Crébillon and Montolieu, a way to reflect on writing in the pages of fiction itself. In fact, Théophile Gautier’s 1842 short story “La Mille et deuxième nuit” uses a continuation of the *Nights* to condemn the *feuilleton*. In a recent book on modern adaptations of Schéïhérazaïe, Dominique Jullien suggests that part of Schéïhérazaïe’s prominence at this point in the nineteenth century is due to the resonance of the *Nights* with nineteenth-century political questions associated with *romans feuilletons*. For example, the calife in Schéïhérazaïe’s story masquerades as an ordinary man to explore the low life of his own land, much like the social observers in the most famous of all *feuilletons*, Eugène Sue’s *Mystères de Paris*. This certainly explains some of the many references to the *Nights* in articles, essays, or speeches about the *roman feuilleton*. But, in light of Gautier’s tale which Jullien treats only in passing, I want to suggest a very different approach to the storyteller’s significance in this context.<sup>65</sup> Instead of looking at the content of Schéïhérazaïe’s stories in relation to specific *feuilletons*, it is also possible to consider the parallels in their circumstances of production, something that Gautier’s “Mille et deuxième nuit” foregrounds.

Like the narrator in “La Mille et deuxième nuit,” Gautier wrote for newspapers out of economic necessity. A meticulous poet and master of the fantastic tale, Gautier (1811-1872) was a proponent of “art for art’s sake.” As his famous formulation in the preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* explains, “Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien” (193). The narrator in “La Mille et deuxième nuit” echoes this aesthetic philosophy, which stands diametrically opposed to the model of the *feuilleton*. Frustrated with his editors’ daily demands, the narrator plans an afternoon of escape, alone with his hashish, opium, and dreams of true poetry. His calm is soon broken by unexpected visitors: Schéïhérazaïe and her sister Dinarzaïe, traveling by magic carpet, arrive greatly distressed at his doorstep of his Parisian apartment. Schéïhérazaïe, simply put, has run out of stories:

—A force de conter, je suis arrivée au bout de mon rouleau; j’ai dit tout ce que je savais. J’ai épuisé le monde de la féerie; les goules, les djinns, les magiciens et les magiciennes m’ont été d’un grand secours, mais tout s’use, même l’impossible; le très glorieux sultan, ombre du padischa, lumière des lumières, lune et soleil de l’Empire du milieu, commence à bâiller terriblement et tourmente la poignée de son sabre; ce matin, j’ai raconté ma dernière histoire, et mon sublime seigneur a daigné ne pas me faire couper la tête encore; au moyen du tapis magique des quatre Facardins, je suis venue ici en toute hâte chercher

---

McLaughlin, *Writing in Parts: Imitation and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), esp. 28.

<sup>65</sup> Jullien does mention “La Mille et deuxième nuit” but offers no sustained analysis of its commentary on contemporary literature as its intricacies fall largely outside of the scope of her reading of political symbols, Schéïhérazaïe, the *roman-feuilleton debate*. See Dominique Jullien, *Les Amoureux de Schéïhérazaïe: variations modernes sur les Mille et une nuits* (Geneva: Droz, 2009), 34-35. As Jullien notes, even modern day scholars like George May, who dispute the accuracy of this analogy, nonetheless admit its prevalence in the nineteenth century. See May, *Les Mille et une nuits d’Antoine Galland*, 58-65 or Georges May, “Schéïhérazaïe et la paralittérature,” in *Lettres et réalités* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 1988), 227-245. For historical examples and analysis of this analogy, see Jullien, *Les Amoureux de Schéïhérazaïe*, 33-35.

un conte, une histoire, une nouvelle, car il faut que demain matin, à l'appel accoutumé de ma sœur Dinarzarde, je dise quelque chose au grand Schahriar, l'arbitre de mes destinées.<sup>66</sup>

The problem, Schéhérazade explains, is that the eighteenth-century French translator Galland got it wrong:

Cet imbécile de Galland a trompé l'univers en affirmant qu'après la mille et unième nuit le sultan, rassasié d'histoires, m'avait fait grâce; cela n'est pas vrai: il est plus affamé de contes que jamais, et sa curiosité seule peut faire contre-poids à sa cruauté. (672)

The sultan wants to hear stories more than ever but Schéhérazade has no more to tell. Ironically, the only tale the narrator has to offer his exotic visitor is a *conte oriental*, in this case a story about a certain Mahmoud-Ben-Ahmed's love for a woman who turns out to be a *péri*, a mystical shape-shifting being.<sup>67</sup> Gautier, after all, joined the likes of Baudelaire, Hugo, and Nerval in seeing the East as an alternative to the utilitarianism and materialism that plagued not only bourgeois mindsets but most of much of Western society.<sup>68</sup> The frame offers no account of Schéhérazade's reception of this tale. She scribbles it down and hops back on her magic carpet. The narrator hears nothing more from her. The only indication of the sultan's reaction to the tale comes from reports the narrator receives from friends traveling in the East. They find Dinarzade carrying a blood stained handkerchief, constantly repeating the refrain that she had once used to wake Schéhérazade in the sultan's chamber: "Ma soeur, contez-nous une de ces belles histoires que vous savez si bien conter" (686). The narrator can only assume that the story failed to please Schéhérazade's murderous one-man audience, and that the sultan beheaded her.

Audience demands were, not coincidentally, more visible and controversial than ever in 1842, the year Gautier's story was written and is explicitly set. In 1842, for example, Eugène Sue's serialized novel *Les Mystères de Paris* debuted, inaugurating a literary success of hitherto unimagined proportions.<sup>69</sup> Even people who *couldn't* read for themselves waited for the next day's installment which was read aloud in cafés across Paris.<sup>70</sup> Gautier himself was said to have commented that sick people delayed dying find out what would happen next in the *Les Mystères de Paris*: "Le magique *la suite à demain* les entraînaient de jour en jour, et la mort comprenait qu'ils ne seraient pas tranquilles dans l'autre monde s'ils ne connaissaient le dénouement de cette

---

<sup>66</sup> Théophile Gautier, "La Mille et deuxième nuit," in *Œuvres* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), 672. Henceforth, all quotes are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>67</sup> A ballet entitled, *La Péri*, based on this tale was first performed at the Paris opera house in 1843.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Dahab, "Théophile Gautier and the Orient," in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (1999), 1.

<sup>69</sup> On the reception of *Les Mystères de Paris*, see Lise Queffelec, *Le roman-feuilleton français au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989) or Christopher Prendergast, *For the People by the People?: Eugène Sue's Les mystères de Paris* (Oxford: Society for French Studies, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> The nineteenth-century newspaper, which should kill storytelling in Benjamin's estimation and contribute to the "isolation of print," ironically brings the written craft of the *feuilletoniste* closer to Schéhérazade's oral narrative mode in some ways. Critics of the *roman-feuilleton*, however, saw this collective consumption not as a revival or renewal of tradition but as proof that this form of fiction was a worrisome means of influencing the masses, even those who could not read. See Jullien, *Les Amoureux de Schéhérazade*, 37-39.

bizarre épopée.”<sup>71</sup> Sue’s novel was the ultimate crowd-pleaser, as one critic noted, simply because he gave readers what they wanted:

Ce romancier a su plier la nature de son esprit aux exigences du public, et ce qu’il lui demandait, il le lui a donné; aussi a-t-il été pris en vive amitié et lui a-t-on dit souvent ce que répétait chaque matin le sultan des *Mille et une Nuits*: Contez-nous donc quelqu’un de ces contes que vous nous contez si bien.<sup>72</sup>

In the world of the *feuilleton*, the writer’s task, like Schéhérazade’s, is to assuage his audience’s immediate narrative craving only enough to make them hungry for more. In fact, newspapers sometimes coordinated subscription renewal dates with cliff-hangers in the plot of a *roman feuilleton*.



Figure 1: Grandville, “Machine littéraire indéfectible pour la fabrication des feuilletons sans points ni virgules.” In “Exposition de l’avenir.” In *Le Diable à Paris: Paris et les parisiens*, edited by Paul Gavarni, Grandville, Honoré de Balzac, Octave Feuillet, et al. Hetzel: Paris, 1868: 13.

It is this very demand-driven model of literary production that Gautier and his narrator condemn. In their view, artistic disaster ensues when newly literate classes, uninitiated into arts and letters, are allowed to dictate the course of literature. Gautier’s narrator only submits to their demands at times of extreme hunger, as he tells Schéhérazade. He then writes what will sell, making financial, not artistic, choices—a point for which the *roman feuilleton* is often faulted. For example, in an essay aptly titled, “De la littérature industrielle,” Sainte-Beuve, one of the nineteenth century’s most famous critics, accuses writers of deliberately sacrificing style to maximize their word counts, column inches, and profits—going so far as to write *only* in dialogue to spread their text out over more space.<sup>73</sup> An 1844 drawing by the French artist and caricaturist Grandville (1803-1847) underscores this widespread perception of the commodification of writing in the *feuilleton* market (Figure 1).<sup>74</sup> The word “feuilleton” appears on pages that are being manufactured like sausage. A butcher, knife in hand, stands ready to chop the text

<sup>71</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Histoire de l’art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*, 5 vols., vol. 3 (Bruxelles: Hetzel, 1859), 161.

<sup>72</sup> Alfred Asseline, “Critique Littéraire: *Les Mystères de Paris*,” *Revue de Paris* 4, no. 11 (1842): 109-110.

<sup>73</sup> Sainte-Beuve, “De la littérature industrielle,” in *La Querelle du roman-feuilleton: littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)*, ed. Lise Dumasy (Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999), 35-36. The essay was first printed in the *Revue des deux mondes*, September 1, 1839).

<sup>74</sup> On this and other depictions of nineteenth-century Paris in Grandville’s drawings, see Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, esp. 110-158.

into printable portions. The writer is now an assembly line worker, is holding his quill in one hand and literarily “cranking” out his work with the other. Speed and quantity trump art.

By not showing the reader, Grandville reminds us that reading, like eating, has become part of the everyday: any one can eat, and soon almost anyone will be able to read. The culinary comparison also implies immediate consumption of a product that, like food, has a limited shelf-life and only satiates the consumer for a short time. In contrast to oral storytelling, in which telling and listening are necessarily simultaneous, readers of a written text are usually far removed from the moment of narrative production—hence why storytelling scenes within literature have long been a means to dramatize narrative reception or interpretation. But the consumption of a *feuilleton*, like the consumption of food, is much more immediate. Readers, therefore, have new and more consequential ways of making their tastes known. Eugène Sue, for example, received voluminous correspondence from readers, not only commenting on his storyline but suggesting directions for it.

As writers think about their readers as almost real-time consumers of narrative, the storyteller becomes an important means of thinking about audiences—and their immediacy. Gautier’s *Schéhérazade* makes it clear that her sultan has less-than-sophisticated taste in stories. So when she knocks on the door of a *feuilletoniste* in search of a story it is clearly not such a compliment to French readers. A similarly uncomplimentary characterization of Parisian audiences appears in an essay by Alfred-Auguste Cuvillier-Fleury (1802-1887), published the same year as Gautier’s story. Cuvillier-Fleury was the editor of the *Journal des débats* which had printed several of Sue’s serialized novels and would soon begin publication of his landmark *Les Mystères de Paris*. His treatment of the *roman feuilleton* is more nuanced later in this essay that is ostensibly about Eugène Sue. Cuvillier-Fleury, however, begins with a likely apocryphal story about the eighteenth-century translator, Galland:

Une nuit d’hiver, M. Galland, le traducteur des *Mille et Une Nuits*, fut réveillé en sursaut par une bande d’étourdis qui criaient de toute leurs forces sous sa fenêtre: “M. Galland! M. Galland!” Il ouvre enfin et demande ce qu’on lui veut. “M. Galland, n’est-ce pas vous qui nous avez donné ces beaux contes arabes? Oui, c’est moi. Eh bien! Monsieur Galland, si vous ne dormez pas, contez-nous, en attendant le jour, un de ces contes agréables que vous savez...”

Galland’s readers substitute his name for *Schéhérazade*’s in the refrain that *Dinarzade* used every morning to wake her sister. The point for the nineteenth century, Cuvillier-Fleury contends, is that audiences have changed: readers no longer have to go to a writer’s bedroom window to deprive him of sleep. The nineteenth-century mass readership’s increasing indifference to the aesthetic quality of the tales combines with their growing influence on the literary market to create a constant refrain even more disturbing to authors:

Aujourd’hui on ne va plus réveiller chez eux les faiseurs de contes. C’est une plaisanterie du temps passé. Mais, c’est très sérieusement qu’on les empêche de dormir. Essayez donc, en effet, de satisfaire à cette passion furieuse du public pour le roman qui est le seul goût littéraire de l’époque, si vous n’y consacrez vos jours et vos nuits. Un romancier qui prétendrait dormir laisserait trop d’avance à ses rivaux. —Conteurs, nos beaux conteurs, donnez-nous des contes, bons ou mauvais, niais ou sublimes, vertueux

ou sataniques, avec ou sans style; mais donnez-nous des contes! car nous ne savons plus lire autre chose.<sup>75</sup>

Readers' desire for quantity and generic predictability determine what the market will tolerate. Originality is undesirable, experimentation impossible. Stagnation ensues. The mass public will only accept more of the same.

But what happens when audiences do not get what they want? Historically speaking, if a *roman feuilleton* did not sell, it could simply be canceled mid-story. This was the case in 1845 with Balzac's *Les Paysans*. If audience approval had always been a life-or-death matter in Schéhérazade's storytelling, it becomes a matter of professional survival for writers like Gautier. Nineteenth-century *feuilletonistes* might not have to satisfy murderous sultans, but they do face a new tyranny of public tastes. The narrator makes this explicit when he empathizes with Schéhérazade: "Votre sultan Schahriar, ma pauvre Schéhérazade, ressemble terriblement à notre public; si nous cessons un jour de l'amuser, il ne nous coupe pas la tête, il nous oublie, ce qui n'est guère moins féroce" (672). At the end of Gautier's story, this threat becomes reality: Schéhérazade is executed. We are told this is because the sultan didn't like the story the narrator sent, but we are not told why he didn't like it. We know the narrator believes his own readers will like it. So perhaps this means that the French reading public's tastes were so bad, that what they actually wanted would elsewhere be grounds for executing a storyteller. Or maybe the nineteenth-century flavored French Orientalism that sold in Paris wasn't suited to Schéhérazade's one-man market. Schéhérazade's death would then be a cautionary tale about what happens when stories are not tailored to their listeners or readers.

On another level, the utter lack of explanation for the sultan's reaction points to a generic void: frame narrative usually shows a story's reception instead of leaving readers wondering about it. In this light, the generic expectations associated with the text actually become part the mechanism for its commentary on its own moment in literary history. Unlike essays or speeches, literary texts allow a writer to approach nineteenth-century fiction from within. Gautier launches a similar attack against the economics of *feuilletons*, elsewhere, like in a poem "Après le feuilleton."<sup>76</sup> But the short story comes with even more generic baggage. The structure of Gautier's "Mille et Deuxième Nuit" is easily recognizable: a narrative frame, a framed tale, and a return to the frame. And Schéhérazade's presence is not surprising—certainly stranger things have happened when Gautier's narrators start a story with an opium pipe in their mouth. But the storyteller's narrative predicament flies in the face of generic expectations. For, at the same time, folklorists were collecting supposedly vanishing oral stories, short fiction is replete with examples of narrators writing down oral material from storytellers, be they wayfaring strangers or weary travelers. And, as Peter Brooks notes in his article "The Storyteller":

Next to the nineteenth-century novel, which appears to be fully aware that it is a purely bookish phenomenon, dependent on the new industrial processes of printing and distribution, there are, for instance, tales—short stories and novellas—which often insist,

<sup>75</sup> Alfred-Auguste Cuvillier-Fleury, "M. Eugène Sue. *Le Morne-au-Diable ou l'Aventurier*," in *La Querelle du roman-feuilleton: littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)*, ed. Lise Dumasy (Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999), 65.

<sup>76</sup> See Théophile Gautier, *Émaux et camées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 119. In this poem the speaker delights in a few days of freedom from the soul-numbing demands of producing "chefs-d'œuvre mort-nés" (line 6). Here, the poetic form reinforces the message, reminding us that it is only *after* prostituting his talent to newspapers and *feuilletons* that the speaker can find a few minutes to savor true poetry.

somewhat perversely, on their authentic relation to a tradition and a communicative situation that are clearly obsolete.<sup>77</sup>

Gautier's short story self-consciously proclaims its own status as written, a product of the print marketplace. He has a storyteller firmly rooted in tradition—perhaps the best-known storyteller ever—but he does not lay claim to an “obsolete” or traditional mode of telling. In fact, Gautier's Schéhérazade has no stories, making it clear that the storyteller's interest is not limited to being able to tell stories.

Furthermore, it is Schéhérazade who actually writes the story down. The illustration that accompanies the first publication of story in August of 1842 (Figure 2) underscores this.<sup>78</sup> A



Figure 2: Gautier, Théophile. “La Mille et Deuxième Nuit.” *Musée des familles, lectures du soir* 9 (1842): 321.

woman in Oriental garb, presumably Schéhérazade, sits before an open book. The left hand page reads “fin de la mille et unième nuit.” The woman is writing the title “La Mille et deuxième nuit” on the right hand page, positioning Gautier's tale as the one and only real continuation of the *Nights*. But in the story itself, we are told that Schéhérazade, fresh from the East, speaks no French, a detail not accounted for in the illustration. The narrator's story which starts with his written notes is, actually, filtered through his oral telling and then through his servant Francesco's perhaps unreliable Arabic translation before Schéhérazade scribbles it down to tell the sultan. Where nineteenth-century short stories often use storytellers to create an illusion of direct narrative exchange, Gautier

uses the storyteller to spotlight convoluted and highly mediated transmission. When he signals the end of the framed story, the narrator reminds us of a few of these layers of written and oral narration: “Telle est en substance l'histoire que je dictai à Schéhérazade par l'entremise de Francesco” (686). The greatest storyteller of all, pen in hand, begs the question of whether storytelling is even possible anymore.

<sup>77</sup> Brooks, “The Storyteller,” 21.

<sup>78</sup> For the first publication of the story, see Théophile Gautier, “La Mille et Deuxième Nuit,” *Le Musée des familles, lectures du soir* 9 (1842): 321-330. “La Mille et deuxième nuit” was soon reprinted in other periodicals. Gautier references the plotline in an 1841 letter in Théophile Gautier, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Claudine Lacoste-Veysseyre, 12 vols., vol. 1 (Geneva: Droz, 1985), 238.

Gautier's tale ends with Dinarzade, wandering alone around Baghdad, continually repeating her usual prompt for stories: "Ma soeur, contez-nous une de ces belles histoires [...]". Though Schéhérazade is not native to French soil or the nineteenth century, Gautier's story registers strains of nineteenth-century writers' and folklorists' mournful lament of the death of orality. Dinarzade's now-unanswered plea shows that silence has replaced storytelling. Through a spiraling *mise en abyme*, Gautier makes his exotic storyteller's fate a commentary on 1840s France. Gautier, himself a *feuilletoniste* out of economic necessity, puts his narrator in a similar situation. "La Mille et deuxième nuit," itself published in a real nineteenth-century periodical, features a fictional *feuilleton*, supposedly destined for another such Parisian publication. A bleak picture emerges. The storyteller is dead or has no stories; the ones that writers have to offer are made-to-order merchandise. Writers are not keepers of the storyteller's memory. They are nearly-mechanical producers of narrative in the service of readers who indiscriminately demand instant, easy, and frequent gratification—not art.

Gautier's "Mille et deuxième nuit" is a reminder that even when storytelling is not possible, it is not necessarily forgotten. Even beyond the context of the *roman feuilleton*, oral traditions are a way of thinking about the modes of production and reception of narrative that exist *outside* of commodity-based marketplaces. And the supposed death of the storyteller provides a compelling narrative about the consequences of more people of traditionally non-literate classes reading—and writing—within this literary market place. In his essay "De la littérature industrielle," Sainte-Beuve, in fact, imagines that, in the near future, everyone will have seen his words in print:

Ce sera de moins en moins un trait distinctif que d'écrire et de faire imprimer. Avec nos mœurs électorales, industrielles, tout le monde, une fois au moins dans sa vie, aura eu sa page, son discours, son prospectus, son *toast*, sera *auteur*. De là à faire un *feuilleton*, il n'y a qu'un pas. Pourquoi pas moi aussi? se dit chacun.<sup>79</sup>

The *feuilleton* will not just be read and influenced by the masses, but written by them. Sainte-Beuve may not say it directly, but other critics will go on to assert that folklore is trampled when the doors to writing are flung open to the masses. The people become passive readers and aspiring writers, shunning the roles of listeners and storytellers that they previously occupied, in the literary imagination at least. Writers are faced with an incursion of lower classes "poètes ouvriers"—working class writers who claimed to be "poets." Gautier, hardly a folklorist like Nodier or Nerval, nonetheless becomes a champion of time-honored *poésies populaires* as a way to point out the shortcomings of *poésies ouvrières*, this new, supposedly literary production.<sup>80</sup>

In short, stories told about the storyteller become a means to nuance concepts of the "literary." Gautier's "Mille et deuxième nuit" is a reminder of this. Even with Schéhérazade beheaded, all is not negative. The very assertion that a story's commercial "success" might be inversely proportionate to its literary value means that, outside of this commercial sphere, art has not been forgotten by everyone. The narrator whom Schéhérazade visits one afternoon in 1842 is among those who can separate the artistic value of a literary text from the economic value the market assigns it. The narrator laments his professional plight as a *feuilletoniste* precisely because this kind of writing takes him away from a poetic calling that he still holds dear. Gautier

<sup>79</sup> Sainte-Beuve, "De la littérature industrielle," 31.

<sup>80</sup> Théophile Gautier, "Poésies nouvelles," *Revue des deux mondes* (1841): 915.

does not discount the possibility that true literature can exist, only that it can exist in the conditions that 1842 Paris offers a *feuilletoniste*.

### **Conclusion: Telling Retellings**

Storytelling scenes have long allowed authors to work through many literary questions: how should stories be interpreted? Who should tell them? What are the differences between the written and the oral? What can the spoken do that the written cannot? What power does storytelling have to teach, to entertain, or to change hearts and minds, even of stubborn sultans? While Schéhérazade invites many of the same reflections as other storytellers, she often does so more explicitly and more dramatically. And perhaps one of the things that Schéhérazade does best among storytellers in literature is to spotlight a necessary ingredient of storytelling: the audience. A writer can write without readers present. But storytelling requires the presence of listeners at the moment of narrative production. Schéhérazade's life-or-death storytelling might seem far removed from modern literature, but the sultan, her very particular one-man audience, provides a figure for writers' ever-growing readerships.

Crébillon, Montolieu, and Gautier offer only a few examples of the vast tradition of rewriting the *Nights*—a tradition to which Galland also arguably belongs. But together they show how Schéhérazade's appeal to writers can sometimes lie outside of her own stellar stories—that her importance might be less in her own narrative production and more in the literary and cultural shorthand she provides for talking about problems of narrative reception. These adaptations of Schéhérazade illustrate a point that holds true even for less illustrious storytellers throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth- century France: discourses on storytelling are often motivated less by concerns about who is no longer telling stories and more by concerns about who has started to read, write, or demand a certain kind of reading material.

In life and in death, Schéhérazade provides cultural, temporal, and material distance from Western literature, all the while allowing critical perspective on writers' own circumstances of narrative production. Galland's concerns reflect the gradual dissolution of the patronage system. Crébillon works through questions about the genre of the *conte* and its potential for philosophical reflection. Montolieu illustrates the importance of how political figures use stories and the difficult place of a woman in marriage and narrative production. Finally, Gautier's "Mille et deuxième nuit" shows how a literary text, in which the storyteller would usually obey certain generic conventions, can add another layer to the many references to Schéhérazade that surface in debates surrounding the rise of the *roman feuilleton*. In short, by telling or retelling stories about this ancient storyteller, writers tell a story about modern literature itself.

## Chapter 2:

### Literature and the Death of Folklore: Nodier and Nerval

On September 16, 1852, *Le Moniteur Universel*, France's official government newspaper, published a decree for the preservation of *poésies populaires*, issued by the Napoléon III, at the urging of Hippolyte Fortoul, his *ministre de l'instruction publique*.<sup>81</sup> The "Prince President" and soon-to-be Emperor pledged the funding to support the publication of a "recueil general des poésies populaires de la France" and stipulated that a commemorative medal recognize the project's foremost contributors. The political motivations behind this decree are clear: to rival with the folklore collections of other European countries and group regional lore under the umbrella of a national collection. But Napoléon III was not alone in his concern for supposedly disappearing traditions. This renewed enthusiasm for folklore also fanned the flames of debates about cultural transmission, *poésies populaires*, and modern literature. Jean-Jacques Ampère, a writer and critic, headed a committee charged with publishing guidelines for folklore collectors who wished to contribute to Napoléon III's project. Ampère's *Instructions relatives aux poésies populaires de la France* appeared in 1853 and folklore collections trickled in from across the Hexagon.<sup>82</sup> This new movement for folklore study was short-lived, and no massive publication was ever realized. But Napoléon III's decree and Ampère's *Instructions* nonetheless provide a powerful example of how discourses on folklore can prove productive on another level by fueling new ways of thinking about tradition, modernity, cultural expressivity, and literature.

Champfleury, a French critic and proponent of realism, was among the literary figures to weigh in on Ampère's work, chiding him in a letter from October 1853 for editing texts to suit bourgeois taste. Champfleury's letter, which he later reprinted as a newspaper article and book chapter, garners a footnote at most in histories of folklore studies in France.<sup>83</sup> It does little to illustrate the evolution of the as yet unnamed field of folklore within the development of French anthropology or ethnography—the fields with which it is most closely associated today. But this letter does point to an overlap between folklore study and literary production, as they existed in nineteenth-century France. Realism, for example, is not usually connected to the recovery of popular traditions, yet Champfleury, latter a folklore collector himself, championed folkloric

---

<sup>81</sup> *Le Moniteur universel* was the official government newspaper. Napoléon III's decree, dated September 12, 1852 and Fortoul's report appeared on the front page. Only Fortoul's contribution is reprinted in Maurice Agulhon, "Le problème de la culture populaire en France autour de 1848," *Romantisme* 9 (1975): 64.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-Jacques Ampère, *Instructions relatives aux poésies populaires de la France: décret du 13 septembre 1852* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1853). For a modern edition, see Cheyronnaud, ed., *Instructions*. The responses to Ampère's *Instructions* sent from across the Hexagon remain today in the manuscript archives of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. See Paul Benichou, *Nerval et la chanson folklorique* (Paris: J. Corti, 1970), 173.

<sup>83</sup> Champfleury's letter was first reprinted in *La Revue de Paris* on November 15, 1853 and then included as a chapter in Champfleury, *Le Réalisme* (Paris: Michel Levy, 1857).

creation because it exists outside of the artificial literary conventions he deplored.<sup>84</sup> In broader terms, however, this letter shows that Champfleury, ignorant of how folklore's disciplinary identity would evolve, can espouse a view of folklore study as intrinsically linked to artistic creation—a view that some nineteenth-century French writers shared and attempted to put into practice. George Sand, for example, sprinkled regional lore throughout her depictions of the French countryside, garnering her praise from Champfleury for her sensitivity to the charm and poetic value of folksong. She organized her novel *Les Maîtres Sonneurs* (1853) not into chapters but into “veillées,” reinforcing the claim that her story originated with peasant storytellers. Prosper Mérimée, then *Inspecteur des monuments historiques*, was concerned not only with the preservation of material culture but also with immaterial traditions. Playing on hunger for exotic “folklore,” he went so far as to publish original poetry as Serbo-Croatian folksongs in his successful literary mystification, *La Guzla* (1827). But, more so than many other writers, Gérard de Nerval, whom Champfleury goes on to cite by name, and Charles Nodier, the figurehead of an earlier generation of Romantics, not only used folklore in literature, but used folklore to think about the very notion of literature, where it came from, and where it was going.

For Nerval, Champfleury, Ampère, and their contemporaries, folklore collecting was a matter of the utmost urgency, just as it had been for Nodier, a member of the *Académie Celtique*, France's first folklore society, founded in 1804. “Il semble seulement qu'on commence ce beau recueil quelques siècles trop tard,” tellingly remarked Mérimée in reference to Napoléon III's decree and Ampère's guidelines.<sup>85</sup> Champfleury sums up the motivations of Hippolyte Fortoul, Napoléon III's minister who spearheaded the initiative: “Un sentiment purement archéologique a poussé M. le ministre de l'instruction publique à accueillir cette idée; la pensée qui a présidé à cette œuvre est celle-ci: Sauver le plus possible, pendant qu'il en est temps encore, des débris de l'art populaire.”<sup>86</sup> Never does Champfleury contest the notion that folklore is also dying. Instead, he suggests that the remaining aesthetic and artistic potential of France's fast-fading past might be overlooked in the rush to simply document its remnants:

Je crois, monsieur, au bon sens, au zèle, à l'intelligence des membres du comité, mais je crains qu'ils ne regardent la mission plutôt en archéologues qu'en artistes. Des hommes tels que Gérard de Nerval, qui a donné des échantillons de poésies populaires dans ses livres [...] rendraient certainement des services réels dans l'entreprise actuelle.<sup>87</sup>

Folklore, in Champfleury's eyes, exists not only to be collected, snatched from the jaws of modernity, but to be viewed as art—and employed to literary or musical ends. According to Champfleury, writers have a keen sensitivity to poetry, wherever it is found. They are better equipped to compare regional variants or identify their defining characteristics. Nerval himself welcomed Napoléon III's decree and Ampère's *Instructions* but expressed a similar fear that

---

<sup>84</sup> Champfleury is said to have considered his own substantial folklore collection (Champfleury and Jean-Baptiste Théodore Weckerlin, *Chansons populaires des provinces de France* (Paris: Lécivain et Toubon, 1860) a part of his realist project: “Je me dis que ces études sur l'art et la littérature populaire ne me sortent pas de ma route” (qtd. in Jules Auguste Troubat, *Une amitié à la d'Arthez: Champfleury, Courbet et Max Buchon* [Paris: 1900], 152).

<sup>85</sup> Prosper Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Maurice Parturier, 17 vols., vol. 6 (Paris: Le Divan, 1941), 450-451.

<sup>86</sup> Champfleury, *Le Réalisme*, 196.

<sup>87</sup> Champfleury, *Le Réalisme*, 193.

folklore collecting in France would be executed “purement au point de vue historique et scientifique.”<sup>88</sup>

While the pull of what folklore theory calls the devolutionary premise—the recurrent belief that traditions will not survive the present age—is not specific to any one time or place, nineteenth-century France repeatedly revitalizes this old story about the loss of tradition with new notions of national identity and cultural modernity.<sup>89</sup> These devolutionary discourses on folklore are a reminder that ethnographic reality is no match for what exists as real in the cultural imaginary. Studies of *culture populaire* show how printed materials like *livres de colportage* had long circulated in rural areas and how even reading aloud had infiltrated some fireside *veillées*, sometimes allowing written stories to enter into oral circulation.<sup>90</sup> But the fact that the untarnished oral culture that nineteenth-century writers imagine probably never existed in their day is immaterial to their belief that it was disappearing. At the same time they imagined industrialization and urbanization to be incomptable with the past, they saw modern literature as uniquely equipped to appreciate its beauty or preserve its traces. Writers could then be heirs to the storyteller’s legacy and to the poetic inspiration of the people, a “pieux héritage,” in Nodier’s words.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Nodier and Nerval envision the possibility of a certain brand of literature that, while it will not reverse the course of events, will nonetheless preserve the memory of oral practices that would otherwise be forgotten.

### Literary Firesides: “Nodier va conter”

Nodier (1780-1844), now renowned for a handful of *conte fantastiques* like *Tribly, ou le Lutin d’Argail* (1822) or *Smarra, démons de la nuit* (1821), was a powerful and polymorphous presence in French Romanticism. A writer, lexicographer, librarian, and philologist, Nodier published a novel in 1803 but is best remembered for his short stories that constitute the bulk of his literary production. He served as editor of the official newspaper of the newly annexed provinces of Illyria in the western Balkans in 1812-1813.<sup>92</sup> He then settled in Paris where, starting in 1824, he hosted his famous fireside *soirées* at the *Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal* helped to shape the careers of Romantics like Hugo, Dumas, Vigny, and Musset. Haunted by the memory of the Terror—he saw men guillotined on his own father’s order in Besaçon—Nodier gradually became disillusioned with Enlightenment philosophy and turned away from his early Revolutionary allegiances. His work is profoundly marked by a sense that literature and life are undergoing profound changes, not necessarily for the better. Balzac saw Nodier as part of an

<sup>88</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 284. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Nerval are from the Pléiade edition and will be cited parenthetically by volume and page number.

<sup>89</sup> Dundes, “The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory,” 5-19.

<sup>90</sup> Agulhon, “Le problème de la culture populaire,” esp. 53-57 and Michel de Certeau, *L’Invention du quotidien* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1980), 45-72.

<sup>91</sup> From the introduction to the short story “Légende de Sainte Béatrix,” in Charles Nodier, *Contes* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1961), 783. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations of Nodier’s short stories are from the Garnier edition edited by Pierre-Georges Castex and will be parenthetically cited by page number in the text.

<sup>92</sup> Rudolf Maixner, *Charles Nodier et l’Illyrie* (Paris: Didier, 1960), 14, 117.

“école du désenchantement,” an expression that Paul Bénichou borrows for the title of his book that traces strains of uncertainty and despair in the work of writers like Nodier, Nerval, Musset, or Gautier.<sup>93</sup> Turning away from rational mentalities, Nodier became fascinated with the unconscious and sleep and their illuminative powers for understanding human experience, themes he explores in his fantastic tales.

Most scholarship on Nodier focuses on discrete points in his life or work: his days at the Arsenal, his stay in Illyria, or his later interest in the subconscious.<sup>94</sup> But if Nodier’s literary and political thought is ever-changing, there is one thread that seems relatively constant: his fascination with the popular. Plenty has been said about Nodier and vampires, even by nineteenth-century critics who recognized vampiric themes in his explorations of sleep phenomena and the fantastic. But vampire lore is actually part of Nodier’s broader engagement with folklore, both in France and in faraway lands.<sup>95</sup> In “Nodier et le commerce des vampires,” for example, Daniel Sangsue shows that Nodier’s time in Illyria was not the immediate impetus for his interest in vampires, as many have believed. Instead, after his return to France, Nodier used his exotic travels to create an image of himself as a seasoned folklorist and an authority on the subject. Though he never engaged in actual fieldwork, wrote articles on vampire lore for French newspaper *Le Journal des Débats*, of which he was later editor.<sup>96</sup>

Seen in the broader context of Nodier’s work, this journalistic strategy is but one example of Nodier’s attempt to “authenticate” his presentations of folkloric materials. For example, in his preface to the first edition of his fantastic tale “Smarra, démons de la nuit,” Nodier does not claim to have written the story, only to have translated it from an Illyrian author who had an insider’s perspective on local superstitions.<sup>97</sup> Such claims to authenticity are not infrequent when literature draws on—or even invents—folklore. In Nodier’s case, however these authenticating moves serve a much different purpose than they did for later writers like Nerval who emphasizing the distance between the written and the oral. Nodier does not so much seek to make folklore a part of modern literature than to cast his literature as a continuation of a folkloric past.

Similar strategies surface in Nodier’s treatment of folklore in his own homeland where, unlike in Illyria, traditions do not seem to be fairing so well. Devolutionary discourses on folklore find a committed spokesman in Nodier: “Hâtons-nous de raconter les délicieuses histoires du peuple, avant qu’il les ait oubliées,” reads a quote attributed to Nodier on title page

---

<sup>93</sup> Paul Benichou, *L'École du désenchantement: Sainte-Beuve, Nodier, Musset, Nerval, Gautier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Jacques-Remi Dahan, *Visages de Charles Nodier* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008). Dahan assembles several of his earlier thematic essays on Nodier in this aptly titled work. The absence of any modern edition of Nodier’s collected works still attests to the relative lack of critical attention his writing has attracted.

<sup>95</sup> From the late nineteenth century onward, some critics cast Nodier’s interest in vampires as a product of his time in Illyria, while others attributed it to earlier travels and explorations of sleep phenomena. Jean Larat, *La tradition et l'exotisme dans l'œuvre de Charles Nodier* (Paris: Champion, 1923) and Rudolf Maixner, *Charles Nodier et l'Illyrie* (Paris: Didier, 1960).

<sup>96</sup> Daniel Sangsue, “Nodier et le commerce des vampires,” *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 98, no. 2 (1998): esp. 235-237.

<sup>97</sup> Charles Nodier, *Smarra, ou Les démons de la nuit, songes romantiques, traduits de l'esclavon du Cte Maxime Odin, par Ch. Nodier* (Paris: Ponthieu, 1822), i-viii.

of *Legendes et traditions populaires de la France*, a folklore collection published in 1840.<sup>98</sup> Here, we find a familiar devolutionary haste: popular storytellers are vanishing; someone else must tell these “délicieuses histoires.” Interestingly, this quote is not from an article on folklore but from the prologue of an 1837 short story “La Légende de Sœur Béatrix”:

Hâtons-nous d’écouter les délicieuses histoires du peuple, avant qu’il les ait oubliées, avant qu’il en ait rougi, et que sa chaste poésie, honteuse d’être nue, ne soit couverte d’un voile comme Eve exilée de paradis.<sup>99</sup>

In their original context, these words linked Nodier’s story to traditions perceived as authentic, in essence to aligning his literary production with the same work of preservation that folklore collections accomplish. The slight difference in wording—the original is an exhortation to not to “tell” but “listen” to stories of the people—opens the way for literary creation based on an attentiveness to popular. “La Légende de Sœur Béatrix” tells of a miracle of Notre-Dame, reminiscent of Medieval hagiography, however Nodier’s introduction situates the story in relation to modernity, which he considers analogous to original sin. Just as the forbidden fruit allows Eve to suddenly realize that she is naked, so does the supposed “progress” and knowledge of the nineteenth century prompt the people to shun their pure and natural poetry.

The idea of a primitive innocence unmarred by the original sin of modernity becomes a *leitmotif* in Nodier’s work. In prefaces, articles, and essays on everything from the printing press or *patois* to the *Bibliothèque bleue*, Nodier refers back to an idealized, oral past, analogous to pre-fall innocence of the Garden of Eden. An odd tension marks Nodier’s thought, however: he amassed and categorized knowledge as his lexicons, library, and even insect collections attest, yet he questions the potential of “la science” and reason to lead to a deeper understanding of human experience. A librarian and bibliophile, he seems to disparage printing. A writer, he admires non-literate societies. In his essay “De l’utilité morale de l’instruction,” Nodier tells his readers they will find “la plus douce, la plus bienveillante, la plus hospitalière, la plus généreuse des populations” in a non-literate society: “Respirez en paix cette atmosphère d’innocence et de jeunesse, d’enthousiasme et de poésies que le souffle de la science n’a pas altérée. Vous êtes chez les Morlaques, et ils ne savent pas lire.”<sup>100</sup> Nodier may take idealization and nostalgia to the extreme, but his example of faraway oral societies echo then-prevalent concerns about the supposedly effects noxious effects of literacy on France’s own traditionally non-literate classes.<sup>101</sup> In nineteenth-century France, more people were reading, a major cultural preoccupation that prompts fears about a decline of literary standards. Later writers tend to be more specific in the targets of their criticism: *poètes ouvriers* who claim poetic turf as their own or readers of *roman feuilleton* who demand daily doses of fiction to their liking. But Nodier’s work registers his own anxieties about the massive changes to literature—or even the social

<sup>98</sup> François Louis Charles Amédée d’Hertault Beaufort, *Legendes et traditions populaires de la France* (Debecourt, 1840).

<sup>99</sup> Nodier, *Contes*, 784. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations of Nodier’s short stories are from the Garnier edition edited by Pierre-Georges Castex and will be parenthetically cited by page number in the text.

<sup>100</sup> Charles Nodier, *De l’utilité morale de l’instruction*, 12 vols., vol. 5, *Œuvres* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1998), 290-291.

<sup>101</sup> On the supposedly harmful effects of reading—and writing—on France’s growing working class in the nineteenth century, see Jacques Rancière, *La nuit des prolétaires* (Paris: Hachette littératures, 2006).

order—that ensue when more people begin reading. Nodier’s answer is not a return to orality at the expense of writing but a vision for a kind of literature that preserves the poetic essence of what he admires in primitive cultures.

Nodier’s discussions of poetry do not use the expression “poésies populaires” to distinguish between folkloric and literary production. Instead, he speaks only of “poésies.” Though Nodier often attaches this ideal to orality and even illiteracy, he never excludes the written, as his definition of poetry from the prologue to “La Légende de Sœur Béatrix” suggests:

La poésie d’une époque se compose, en effet, de deux éléments essentiels, la foi sincère de l’homme d’imagination qui croit ce qu’il raconte, et la foi sincère des hommes de sentiment qui croient ce qu’ils entendent raconter. Hors de cet état de confiance et de sympathie réciproques où viennent se confondre des organisations bien assorties, la poésie n’est qu’un vain nom, l’art stérile et insignifiant de mesurer en rythmes compassés quelques syllabes sonores. [...] Voilà pourquoi nous n’avons plus de poésie dans le sens naïf et original de ce mot, et pourquoi nous n’en aurons pas de longtemps, si nous en avons jamais. Pour en retrouver de faibles vestiges, il faut feuilleter les vieux livres qui ont été écrits par des hommes simples, ou s’asseoir dans quelque village écarté, au coin du foyer des bonnes gens. C’est là que se retrouvent de touchantes et magnifiques traditions dont personne ne s’est jamais avisé de contester l’autorité, et qui passent de génération en génération, comme un pieux héritage, sur la parole infallible et respectée des vieillards. Là ne sauraient prévaloir les objections ricaneuses de la demi-instruction, si revêche, si maussade et si sotté, qui ne sait rien à fond, mais qui ne veut rien croire, parce qu’en cherchant la vérité qui est interdite à notre nature, elle n’a gagné que le doute. [...] Les faits qu’on vous rapporte n’ont pas besoin, d’ailleurs, de tant d’éclaircissements: n’ont-ils pas le témoignage du vieil aïeul qui les savait de son aïeul, comme celui-ci d’un autre vieillard qui en a été le témoin oculaire? Et dans cette longue succession de patriarches nourris dans l’horreur du péché, s’en est-il jamais rencontré un seul qui ait menti? (782-783)

Syllable counts and rhyme schemes do not make poetry. Instead, Nodier looks back to the most basic elements of narrative transmission: a teller and an audience. True poetry requires the mutual confidence of both and is more likely to exist in oral exchanges. In live storytelling, the storyteller and his listeners see each other, share the same physical space, and the same enthusiasm for the story. The teller’s personal investment in the story piques the listener’s attention, and the attentive audience encourages the storyteller’s performance. No matter how unbelievable the tale is, it is accepted at face value. Problems arise when illusions of “enlightenment” prompt a search for rational explanations for everything and kill the mutual trust that Nodier sees as the basis of storytelling and poetry.

Nodier’s praise of the popular won this passage the admiration of later folklorists who extracted it from the story and printed it alone.<sup>102</sup> However, alongside a short story and in the pages of a book, Nodier’s definition speaks to literature, or rather, to a certain kind of literature. True to devolutionary discourses, Nodier imagines only “faibles vestiges” of such poetry persisting in the nineteenth century. But he is less concerned with the traditional plots that folklorists scrambled to document and more concerned with preserving a certain concept of the

---

<sup>102</sup> Charles Nodier, “La Littérature populaire: opinion de Charles Nodier,” *La Tradition: revue générale des contes, légendes, chants, usages, traditions et arts populaires* 1 (1887): 177-209.

poetics of narrative transmission. Here, Nodier breaks ranks with writers and folklorists who often fall back on a familiar dichotomy between the expressivity of the oral and the limitations of the written. Instead, Nodier contrasts the unimaginative exchange of narrative with a form of narrative exchange in which the listener or reader is free to enter into the imaginative universe of the story, unconstrained by self-important views of human knowledge. He admires Perrault, Homer, and even the *livres de colportage* of the *Bibliothèque bleue* that others like Charles Nisard held in great disdain.<sup>103</sup> For Nodier, remnants of the past survive not just at peasant firesides but also in dusty books, “les vieux livres qui ont été écrits par des hommes simples.” Since all writing is not diametrically opposed to this poetic ideal, the possibility remains that literature could still be created in this model. Cultural transmission is, therefore, a major literary preoccupation for Nodier. Though his own written work belongs to a different generation and different material conditions than these “touchantes et magnifiques traditions,” he nonetheless seeks to position it as their narrative next of kin. In the prologue to “La Légende de Sœur Béatrix,” he casts tradition as “un pieux heritage” passed down through generations (“cette longue succession de patriarches”).

But Nodier’s place in this line of succession need not be limited to preserving the kind of traditional narrative *content* that he boasts in “Sœur Béatrix.” Cultural transmission should also preserve the *spirit* of exchange that he deems central to poetry. In the fantastic, Nodier’s idea of mutual confidence between the teller and listener comes back in force, most explicitly in the prologues or prefaces that are often overlooked. Even Pierre-George Castex, in his nearly encyclopedic *Le Conte fantastique en France*, only makes passing mention to Nodier’s many introductory remarks in his chapter entitled “Nodier et ses rêves.”<sup>104</sup> For Nodier, however, these introductions are not inconsequential; they provide the apparatus that links his writing and past narrative practices.

For example, Nodier’s 1836 fantastic tale “Paul ou la ressemblance” makes a bold claim: “[...] ce n’est pas ici une oeuvre d’écrivain, mais une causerie de la veillée, destinée à ne pas sortir d’un petit cercle de bonnes gens dans lequel j’ai renfermé mon auditoire, mes prétentions littéraires et ma réputation” (649). At stake is not only a certain kind of writing but a certain audience “un petit cercle de bonnes gens,” similar to the “bonnes gens” we find “au coin du foyer” in the prologue to “Légende de Sœur Béatrix.” The lexical fields of orality mix effortlessly with those of writing under Nodier’s pen as he asserts that his written tale is not a writer’s work but the product of an evening chat. The plot of “Paul” stands alone, Nodier does not cite the story as traditional. The scene is the French Pyrenees in 1834. A father happens upon a young man who bears an inexplicable resemblance to his recently deceased son and even has the same name, Paul. Paul refuses the offer to leave his menial existence and live with the wealthy, bereaved couple. But Nodier’s seemingly unrelated introduction to the story begins with a hypothetical scenario in which the narrator imagines having to forever forgoe either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. He chooses to retain the later:

<sup>103</sup> Nisard highlights the potentially subversive element of these books. (Nisard, *Histoire des livres populaires ou de la littérature de colportage* [Paris: Imp. Simon Baçon, 1864]). Nodier’s view of the *Bibliothèque bleue* emphasizes the popular element of tales, customs, and folk medicine found in these cheap blue-bound books over the political and literary texts that they also included. See Charles Nodier, *Nouvelle Bibliothèque bleue ou, Légendes populaires de la France* (Paris: C. de Batines, 1842).

<sup>104</sup> Pierre-Georges Castex, *Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant* (Paris: J. Corti, 1951), 121-167.

Ce qui me charme dans l'*Odyssee*, [...] c'est la bonne foi sublime de ce poète qui récite ingénument des contes d'enfants comme il les a entendu réciter, et qui les orne à plaisir des plus riches couleurs de l'imagination et du génie, parce qu'il n'a rien appris de mieux dans la conversation des vieillards, des héros, et des sages. (643)

It is learning and “reason,” absent from “la conversation des vieillards” that stifles imagination. “Progress” and scientific thought render the nineteenth-century insensible to the greatness of the classical storyteller Odysseus:

Heureuse influence des découvertes et des progrès! ne redemandez pas ce sublime conteur [Odysseus] aux siècles pour lesquels il était fait, et qui l'ont cependant méconnu. Vous seriez encore plus ingrat et plus injustes qu'eux; vous ne lui donneriez pas l'aumône. (644)

While these reflections on ancient storytellers and condemnations of the nineteenth century might seem repetitive in Nodier's entire *œuvre* or digressive within this one fantastic tale, they are, in fact, central to Nodier's concept of the fantastic, the genre for which he is most remembered as a writer.

Nodier applied the term “fantastique” fairly liberally, to include many forms of fantasy, fairy tales, or the marvelous, but saw all these narrative forms united by a generic pedigree which traceable to antiquity. He sees these not as “new” genres but as narrative practices with a direct pedigree to the past, and especially to his concept of poetry.<sup>105</sup> In introducing his lengthy 1832 story “La Fée aux miettes,” for example, Nodier writes:

C'est que, pour intéresser dans le conte fantastique, il faut d'abord se faire croire et qu'une condition indispensable pour se faire croire, c'est de croire. Cette condition une fois donnée, on peut aller hardiment et dire tout ce que l'on veut.” (170)

If this story is usually read for its exploration of sleep, dreams, and the subconscious, it contains very specific models for telling and reading tales. Nowhere is Nodier's literary posturing in regards to oral storytelling more explicit. The prologue opens on a familiar tone, addressing the reader as a friend:

Je vous déclare, mon ami, et, qui que vous soyez, je vous donne ce nom, selon toute apparence, avec une affection plus sincère et plus désintéressé qu'aucun homme dont vous l'ayez jamais reçu, je vous déclare, dis-je, qu'après le plaisir de faire quelque chose qui vous soit agréable, je n'en ai point ressenti d'aussi vif que celui d'entendre raconter ou de raconter moi-même une histoire fantastique. (167)

As Céline Mathon-Baudel noted in a paper on “Nodier et les traditions populaires,” this entire preface is structured as a contract of mutual engagement: the narrator promises an amicable atmosphere of aesthetic pleasure. As the preface continues, he demands of the reader an attentive and open-minded reading, which includes making notes in the book's margins and ignoring reviews in newspapers.<sup>106</sup> When the story begins, the reader is reminded of its oral status by the presence of a fictitious listener, Daniel Cameron. Daniel surprises the narrator in the midst of a rant about the state of literature and finds himself the narratee of the tale that follows. As Mathon-Baudel notes, “La Fée aux miettes” claims a lineage with the past—tales that date to the days of king Solomon—and a path to the future: “La nécessité de la continuité est

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Charles Nodier, “Du fantastique en littérature,” *Revue de Paris* (1830): 205-226.

<sup>106</sup> Céline Mathon-Baudel, “Nodier et les traditions populaires,” in *Charles Nodier: colloque du deuxième centenaire* (Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 1981), 258-261.

manifestée par le mot de la fin, pris charge par le lecteur fictive, Daniel, qui a compris l'histoire et est en mesure de la retransmettre."<sup>107</sup> Once again, Nodier's vision of cultural transmission appears, in large part, to be dependent on a repetition of the past and a faith in the potential of writing to recuperate storytelling models for its own future.

This is not to say that Nodier does not appear conscious of his texts' written status, only to say that he does not link them to nineteenth-century print culture. Returning to the example of "La Fée aux miettes," we have a story that the narrator first hears at a French fireside, one of the "veillées rustiques" hosted by a certain Joseph Poisson, storyteller *par excellence* (169). Already, the preface gives the text an oral genealogy, as if to prevent the reader from assessing it directly as part of the literary context to which it really belongs. Nodier's preface, addressed "Au lecteur qui lit les préfaces," takes this artifice one step further, inviting the reader to a different kind of storytelling scene (167). The operative distinction here is not between oral and written storytelling, as one might expect, but between certain kinds of readers and certain kinds of writing. Nodier anticipates criticism his story will receive in newspapers, themselves emblematic of nineteenth-century print culture and less-than-discerning readers:

Ce que votre Journal ne vous dira pas, c'est que j'ai adopté cette manière dans la ferme intention de prendre une avance de quelques mois sur l'époque prochaine et infaillible où il n'y aura plus rien de rare en littérature que le commun, d'extraordinaire que le simple, et de neuf que l'ancien. (172)

Nodier once again authenticates his writing by positioning it as an unproblematic successor to exhausted models of storytelling. He reiterates the theme that undercuts so much of his thinking about tradition and modernity: the future of literature and models of true poetry are to be found in past.

Nodier's place in literary history would not be complete without some mention of the real fireside gatherings over which he famously presided at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Here too, Nodier, carefully cultivates his own reputation as a storyteller. Vincent Laisney's book *L'Arsenal romantique: Le Salon de Charles Nodier (1824-1834)* offers an extensive analysis of the importance of Nodier's Sunday *soirées* for the development of individual writers, for the Romantic movement in general, and for collaboration between writers, composers, and visual artists.<sup>108</sup> If only the Romantic select attended Nodier's *soirées* and heard his tales first hand, his own reputation as a *conteur* extended beyond the walls of his library. Alexandre Dumas was among Nodier's guests who went on to describe these storytelling scenes:

[...] soit que Nodier eût entamé le récit d'une histoire d'amour, d'une bataille dans les plaines de la Vendée, d'un drame sur la place de Révolution, d'une conspiration de Cadoudal ou d'Oudet, il fallait écouter presque sans souffle, tant l'art admirable du conteur savait tirer le suc de chaque chose. [...] On n'applaudissait pas, non on n'applaudit pas le murmure d'une rivière, le chant d'un oiseau, le parfum d'une fleur; mais le murmure éteint, le chant évanoui, le parfum évaporé, on écoutait, on attendait on désirait encore!

Mais Nodier se laissait doucement glisser du chambranle de la cheminée sur son grand fauteuil; il souriait, il se tournait vers Lamartine ou vers Hugo:

<sup>107</sup> Mathon-Baudel, "Nodier et les traditions populaires," 257.

<sup>108</sup> Vincent Laisney, *L'Arsenal romantique: Le Salon de Charles Nodier (1824-1834)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002).

—Assez de prose comme cela, disait-il; des vers, des vers, allons! [...] Cette fois, on applaudissait.<sup>109</sup>

A Parisian library is a far cry from a rustic hearth and Nodier is no peasant spinner of tales. Yet Dumas separates Nodier's storytelling from Lamartine's or Hugo's declamation of verse that is clearly a product of nineteenth-century literary trends. Not only do Nodier's stories leave the listener with a desire for more, they leaves them silent—a silence, that, for Dumas, is analogous to response to natural beauty. One does not clap for a flower or a stream. Storytelling, too, should happen naturally, and it draws its authority from the something larger—and older—than recent poetic creations.

In his chapter on “Les ‘Causeries’ de Charles Nodier,” Laisney shows how Nodier, like those who attended his gatherings, used his *soirée* storyteller persona to think about his writing. In an 1829 letter to his friend Jean de Bry, Nodier claims to mentally rehearse reading all of his written work before four imagined listeners, including his own father and the friend to whom this letter is addressed. Laisney concludes:

Ceci nous prevue qu'il n'y a pas de césure entre le Nodier écrivain-de-contes et le Nodier conteur-au-feu. En l'un comme en l'autre, l'Arsenal, en tant que dispositif et posture de communication, joue un rôle moteur, et cela, que cet Arsenal soit réel ou imaginaire...<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, this imagined “live” exchange allows Nodier to put himself into the position of the storyteller, even though what he is orally delivering has been already been written. His audience members, like real listeners, then provide immediate feedback through their approbation, disapproval, or even interruptions. “Plaisanterie à part, vous me feriez un vrai chagrin de me retirer cette illusion,” Nodier confides to his friend. “C'est, en vérité, le seul charme et le seul prix de mon travail et je regrette seulement de m'y être livré trop tard, car elle m'aurait épargné bien de sottises.”<sup>111</sup> If Nodier cites the usefulness of this imagined feedback, there seems to be something deeper motivating his mental storytelling game: by pretending to be a storyteller performing before his family and close friends, he also finds a way to attach his writing practices to the very oral practices whose recuperation is a recurrent theme in his texts themselves.

An unsigned introduction to an 1853 edition of selected tales by Nodier, not coincidentally entitled *Contes de la Veillée*, provides a fascinating footnote to the tropes of orality that are so prevalent in Nodier's work. The anonymous author points to the loss that Nodier's death almost ten years before represents French literature. But, unlike the real *conteurs* whose tales whose tales vanish from *veillées*, Nodier's tales can be reprinted—and even reframed in such a way as to reinforce and expound on the claims of oral lineage that Nodier already makes:

[...] en présentant les *Contes de la Veillée* aux personnes qu'attire le charme des douces lectures, nous ne pouvons mieux faire que de répéter ces paroles de Nodier: “Vous craignez l'ennui des spectacles, vous craignez surtout l'ennui des salons; c'est le cas de faire chez vous un grand feu, bien clair, bien vif et bien pétillant; de baisser les lampes devenues presque inutiles; d'ordonner à votre domestique, si par hasard vous en avez un, de ne rentrer qu'au bruit de la sonnette, et ces dispositions prises, je vous engage à

<sup>109</sup> Alexandre Dumas, “Charles Nodier et le Salon de l'Arsenal,” in *Mademoiselle de Marsan de Charles Nodier* (Paris: Editions de Montsouris, 1944), 94-95.

<sup>110</sup> Laisney, *L'Arsenal romantique*, 79.

<sup>111</sup> Qtd. in Laisney, *L'Arsenal romantique*, 79.

raconter ou à écouter des histoires au milieu de votre famille et de vos amis.” Lecteurs, faites un feu bien vif, et prêtez l’oreille, Nodier va conter.<sup>112</sup>

If Nodier encouraged families and friends to tell or listen to stories as an alternative to the amusements that society, salons, and theatres offered, the author of this preface encourages readers to turn to Nodier’s tales as an alternative to the kind of literature that wholly disregards its oral ancestor.<sup>113</sup> The final line “Lecteurs, faites un feu bien vif, et prêtez l’oreille, Nodier va conter” could only have made Nodier proud. The language of storytelling is unproblematically transferred to the act of literary consumption. And Nodier’s writing is held up as a substitute for live storytelling.

### Nerval, *Sylvie*, and “Chansons et légendes du Valois”

“Avant d’écrire, chaque peuple a chanté.”<sup>114</sup> With this seeming truism, Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) opens “Les Vieilles Ballades françaises” in *La Sylphide* in July 1842. Nerval, whose use of folksong Champfleury admired, belonged to both a later generation of Romantics and a later generation of folklorists than Nodier. A member of the *Petit Cénacle* where young Romantics like Théophile Gautier gathered in the 1830s, Nerval published many an article in French periodicals, as did other writers who lived by the market demands of the mid-nineteenth century. But Nerval’s folklore collection was more than a curiosity to be forgotten with the next newspaper. He reworked it a total of six times—a career record by Frank Paul Bowman’s count—and finally appended it as “Chansons et légendes du Valois” to an 1854 republication of *Sylvie, souvenirs du Valois*, “un petit roman qui n’est pas tout à fait un conte” in the author’s own words (3:821).<sup>115</sup> And Nerval’s seemingly simple statement about literature’s lineage in “Les Vieilles Ballades françaises” actually asks a complex question about its future: will nineteenth-century literature be its oral forebears’ faithful keeper, rightful heir, or indifferent replacement?

Nerval’s *œuvre* is unique in that his pervasive interest in folklore takes so many forms, from a plea for environmental conservation cast as a folktale to reflections on professional storytellers in the Orient. Just as for Nodier and earlier folklorists, the purported disappearance of folklore prompts a reevaluation of the place of literature cultural expression and cultural preservation. This is most clear in *Sylvie* the tale of a Parisian narrator’s love for three different women who sometimes overlap in his mind. When he returns to his native Valois expecting his childhood sweetheart Sylvie to be the faithful keeper of traditions, reality disappoints: reading has replaced singing and storytelling; industrialized labor has supplanted sewing and lace making.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Nodier, *Contes de la veillée* (Paris: Charpentier, 1853), 4.

<sup>113</sup> The quote from Nodier is taken from the introduction of “Histoire d’Hélène Gillet” that Nodier presents as a “conte de la veillée” and a “conte fantastique vrai” (330).

<sup>114</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), v-xii. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Nerval are from the Pléiade edition and will be cited parenthetically by volume and page number.

<sup>115</sup> Frank Paul Bowman, *Gérard de Nerval: la conquête de soi par l’écriture* (Orléans: Paradigme, 1997), 177.

*Sylvie* has given rise to voluminous scholarship and great critical acclaim, including Marcel Proust's admiration for a blurred temporality that borders on the dreamlike.<sup>116</sup> But many of the stories that *Sylvie* tells find their significance not in their originality but in their echoes of pervasive cultural narratives. *Sylvie*'s progression from peasant roots to a literate urban life is, for example, emblematic of increasing nineteenth-century literacy rates, a social reality that prompts writers to rethink how literary standards are defined. And *Sylvie* lends a fictional face to the same narrative of the death of tradition that prompts folklore study—and the folklore collection that Nerval eventually appends to the text. Yet, while folklore in Nerval's work does not go unstudied, it does go largely uncontextualized. Gabrielle Chamarat's study of Nerval's use of ironic distancing and realist aesthetics does gesture to broader contexts, citing the influence of realist trends on literary interest in folklore in the 1850s.<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, Paul Benichou's nearly encyclopedic index of folksong in Nerval's work, *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*, offers useful references and impressive annotations, but seldom looks beyond Nerval's *œuvre* to underlying discourses on tradition.<sup>118</sup> Even treatments of Nerval's folklore collection tend to situate it only in relationship to the themes of *Sylvie*: folksong as a space of temporal instability that harkens back to the past, in one example, and folksong as part of Nerval's search for a poetry capable of translating a lost maternal "voix vive," in another.<sup>119</sup> For the editors of the Pléiade, the personal tone of the folklore collection's commentary links it to Nerval's voice and to the "souvenirs" of *Sylvie*'s subtitle, thereby heightening autobiographical quality of the main text's first person narration (3:1228). Yet, folklore's interest for literary history cannot be confined to folksongs and tales. It also lies in the stories told *about* tradition.

Nerval, like many writers of his day, maintained a distance from current events, especially Napoléon III's December 2, 1852 *coup d'état*. *Sylvie* first appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* in August of 1853, but the opening pages are set in the 1830s, in the aftermath of an earlier regime change: "Nous vivions alors dans une époque étrange, comme celles qui d'ordinaire succèdent aux révolutions ou aux abaissements des grands règnes" (3:538).<sup>120</sup> While the narrator seeks refuge in the timeless ivory tower of poets, distractions—in the form of anything from women to financial news to childhood memories—constantly pull him back into the nineteenth century. But the revolutions in *Sylvie*, though profound, are not political ones. Instead, they play out in *Sylvie*'s lifestyle changes and in how the narrator, a writer assimilated into the urban elite, is forced into a different understanding of love, time, tradition, and even literature.

In the first chapter, it is, ironically, a newspaper—a glaring symbol of nineteenth-century print culture that Benjamin considers a death knell for the storyteller—that sparks the narrator's memories of *Sylvie* and his impromptu trip to the Valois. The narrator scans stock market

<sup>116</sup> "On est obligé à tout moment de tourner les pages qui précèdent pour voir où on se trouve, si c'est présent ou rappel du passé" (Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 166).

<sup>117</sup> Gabrielle Chamarat, "Un petit roman qui n'est pas tout à fait un conte: Peut-on parler d'un réalisme de *Sylvie*?" *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 108, no. 3 (2008): 603-604.

<sup>118</sup> Benichou, *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*.

<sup>119</sup> See, respectively, Philippe Destruel, *L'Écriture nervalienne du temps* (Saint-Genouph: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 2004), 282-283 and Dagmar Wieser, *Nerval: une poétique du deuil à l'âge romantique* (Geneva: Droz, 2004), esp. 295.

<sup>120</sup> On the publication history of *Sylvie*, see Bowman, *Gérard de Nerval*, 205-211.

reports and discovers that he is suddenly a rich man with the means to seduce the actress whom he has gone to the theater to admire. A headline unrelated to commerce catches his eye:

—Mon regard parcourait vaguement le journal que je tenais encore, et j’y lus ces deux lignes: “Fête du Bouquet provincial. —Demain, les archers de Senlis doivent rendre le bouquet à ceux de Loisy.” Ces mots, fort simples, réveillèrent en moi toute une nouvelle série d’impressions: c’était un souvenir de la province depuis longtemps oubliée, un écho lointain des fêtes naïves de la jeunesse. (3:540)

This fragment of traditional provincial life that might have been an oddity or a curiosity for some readers strikes a personal chord with the narrator who once participated in the same festival. In a move typical of the fluid temporality of *Sylvie*, the headline “Demain” points toward the future but orients the narrator’s thoughts to the past:

—Un lourd chariot, traîné par des bœufs, recevait ces présents sur son passage, et nous, enfants de ces contrées, nous formions cortège avec nos arcs et nos flèches, nous décorant du titre de chevaliers, —sans savoir alors que nous ne faisons que répéter d’âge en âge une fête druidique survivant aux monarchies et aux religions nouvelles. (3:540)

The imperfect verbs in this passage underline the repetitive, ritual quality of these time-honored customs. Folklore, for the narrator, still exists in what Benjamin would call the “auratic mode”—the state of a work of art which is not divorced from its “ritual function” or transposed from its traditional sphere by technological reproduction.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, the narrator sees tradition as a force resistant to political shifts (“monarchies”) and socio-cultural ones (the advent of Christianity). In his mind, the present—like the stock quotes—generates unreliable information and fluctuating wealth, while the past provides stable and unchanging traditions.

The narrator’s confidence in the permanence of tradition stands in stark counterpoint to the race against the devolutionary clock that characterizes the history of nineteenth-century French folklore studies. When he embarks on a spontaneous journey to Loisy, it is for a profoundly personal quest to relive a childhood festival, not a folklore collecting mission for national or regional good. He is not only ignorant of time—he has no watch—but ignorant of the effects of time. He hopes only to arrive before the end of the all-night festival; the end of cherished traditions never figures into his rush. During his four-hour carriage ride, the narrator imagines Sylvie untouched by passing years:

Et Sylvie que j’aimais tant, pourquoi l’ai-je oubliée depuis trois ans?... C’était une bien jolie fille, et la plus belle de Loisy!

Elle existe, elle, bonne et pure de cœur sans doute. Je revois sa fenêtre où le pampre s’enlace au rosier, la cage de fauvettes suspendue à gauche; j’entends le bruit de ses fuseaux sonores et sa chanson favorite:

*La belle était assise  
Près du ruisseau coulant...*

Elle m’attend encore... Qui l’aurait épousée? elle est si pauvre! (3:543)

Sylvie, in his imagination, is the teller of tales and the singer of folksongs who performs the domestic work long associated with the female storyteller. In an image reminiscent of Perrault’s frontispieces, Sylvie’s “fuseaux sonores,” the lace bobbins that click together in her skillful

---

<sup>121</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 256.

hands replace Mother Goose's spinning wheel, and she sits by her vine-covered window, frozen in her poverty and peasant purity.<sup>122</sup>

Sylvie would seem, then, to be a member of a centuries-old sewing circle of storytellers. However, she breaks this thread, literally and figuratively: when the book ends, she is a literate city dweller and a baker's wife, selling goods for immediate consumption in the most literal terms. The narrator begins to notice these changes in chapter ten, when he enters the room where he remembered Sylvie singing and sewing. Suddenly, he realizes that nothing is as he had imagined it the day before. The modern furnishings, hardly conducive to quaint sewing scenes, surprise him. "Vous ne travaillerez point à votre dentelle aujourd'hui?" the narrator asks Sylvie. "Oh! Je ne fais plus de dentelle, on n'en demande plus dans le pays," she says dismissively. "Que faites-vous donc?" asks the puzzled Parisian (3:559). Sylvie presents him with a metal tool that he cannot identify—a "mécanique" used to stretch the fabric of the gloves she now sews. In Benjaminian terms, Sylvie, with her new tools, has joined the age of mechanical reproduction. A work product that is not marked by a sense of place replaces unique handmade lace.

The journey the narrator envisioned as a return to unchanged people and places therefore becomes a painful process of discovering both how and why things have changed. As the narrator and Sylvie take a stroll, Sylvie surprises him with her nonchalant literary references:

C'est un paysage de Walter Scott, n'est-ce pas? disait Sylvie. —Et qui vous a parlé de Walter Scott? lui dis-je. Vous avez donc bien lu depuis trois ans!... Moi, je tâche d'oublier les livres, et ce qui me charme, c'est de revoir avec vous cette vieille abbaye, où, tout petits enfants, nous nous cachions dans les ruines. Vous souvenez-vous, Sylvie, de la peur que vous aviez quand le gardien nous racontait l'histoire des moines rouges? —Oh! ne m'en parlez pas. —Alors chantez-moi la chanson de la belle fille enlevée au jardin de son père, sous le rosier blanc. —On ne chante plus cela. —Seriez-vous devenue musicienne? —Un peu. —Sylvie, Sylvie, je suis sûr que vous chantez des airs d'opéra! —Pourquoi vous plaindre? —Parce que j'aimais les vieux airs, et que vous ne saurez plus les chanter.

Sylvie modula quelques sons d'un grand air d'opéra moderne...Elle phrasait!  
(3:560)

In this swift dialogue, Sylvie counters each request with a refusal, systematically crushing the narrator's remaining hopes. When an indirect hint for a story fails, he requests a song. "On ne chante plus cela," curtly replies Sylvie who launches instead into an operatic melody—a stark contrast to the "vieux airs" the narrator desires. Earlier, in chapter five, the narrator had recited passages from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* to Sylvie while she picked strawberries (3:548). Each of them respected his or her established social role, with him adapting literature for Sylvie's passive consumption. But now, Sylvie reads the very books that the narrator tries to forget.

---

<sup>122</sup> For a reading of the metaphorical association between the narrative act of tale telling and the artisan act of weaving or spinning, see Karen E. Rowe, "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 53-74. Critics of *Sylvie* have seen her intricate lace making as a model for textual creation. See, for example, Rae Beth Gordon, "Dentelle: Métaphore du texte dans *Sylvie*," *Romanic Review* 73, no. 1 (1982): 45-66. Chambers analyzes clocks and watches as models for the narrative ("figurative embedding") and sees the same precise yet intricate movement in Sylvie's handwork (Chambers, *Story and Situation*, esp. 102-104).

Books have lost their distant mystique for Sylvie, and she has lost her simple charm for the narrator, a transformation that exemplifies the widespread notion of the perversion of the lower classes through the introduction of books.<sup>123</sup> The once happy peasant Sylvie joins the ranks of those from a non-lettered milieu whose encounters with books, or even part of a book, introduce them to a world irreconcilable with theirs. The narrator, a writer, is unable to express himself before Sylvie precisely because she is no longer the same person:

La route était déserte; j’essayai de parler de choses que j’avais dans le cœur, mais je ne sais pourquoi, je ne trouvais que des expressions vulgaires, ou bien tout à coup quelque phrase pompeuse de roman,—que Sylvie pouvait avoir lue. (3:561)

Sylvie is now in a position to recognize literary allusions or borrowings. She cites Rousseau’s warning about the incompatibility of novels and chaste women: “Toute jeune fille qui lira ce livre est perdue” (3:555).<sup>124</sup> But the corruption here is of a different order: Sylvie has been stripped of her purity not as a woman but as an idealized peasant storyteller.

Print culture and industrialization, however, do not cause Sylvie to involuntarily forget folksongs, but instead to deliberately withhold them. This often overlooked nuance illustrates the extent of her transformation: she is not an unwitting victim of modernity but an accessory to the loss of tradition. In fact, her final foray into folksong is intended only to taunt the narrator, distracted by thoughts of the actress Aurélie:

Vous êtes dans vos réflexions? dit Sylvie, et elle se mit à chanter:

A Dammartin l’y a trois belles filles:

L’y en a z’une plus belle que le jour...

—Ah! méchante! m’écriai-je, vous voyez bien que vous en savez encore des vieilles chansons.

—Si vous veniez plus souvent ici, j’en retrouverais, dit-elle, mais il faut songer au solide. Vous avez vos affaires de Paris, j’ai mon travail; ne rentrons pas trop tard: il faut que demain je sois levée avec le soleil. (3:562)

Ultimately, Sylvie never contradicts the narrator’s assertion that these songs still linger in her memory—only his assertion that she, with her work and real-world concerns, should sing them. She shuns even the role of audience member as incompatible with her new life:

Le père Dodu se mit à entonner un air à boire; on voulut en vain l’arrêter à un certain couplet scabreux que tout le monde savait par cœur. Sylvie ne voulut pas chanter, malgré nos prières, disant qu’on ne chantait plus à table. (3:563)

Once an active bearer of regional oral traditions, Sylvie is now a passive consumer of mass, urban entertainment.

In spite of Sylvie’s own silences, models of storytelling abound in *Sylvie*. In *Story and Situation*, Ross Chambers shows how two models—one of novelistic “seduction” into the narrative world and one of cautionary tales with morals or confessions—shape the narrator’s

---

<sup>123</sup> In his study of urban *ouvriers*, for example, Rancière shows traces stories of people from a non-lettered milieu come upon even a part of a book and are forever doomed, having been introduced to a world irreconcilable with their own destiny. See Jacques Rancière, *La parole muette* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), 71-79.

<sup>124</sup> Sylvie’s quote is an approximation of a passage at the end of Rousseau’s preface: “Jamais fille chaste n’a lu de romans, et j’ai mis à celui-ci un titre assez décidé pour qu’en l’ouvrant on sût à quoi s’en tenir. Celle qui, malgré ce titre, en osera lire une seule page est une fille perdue [...]” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* [Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967], 4).

recounting of his personal story to women in his life.<sup>125</sup> Chamber's goal, however, is to examine how nineteenth-century texts construct their own brand of narrative authority after the storyteller's downfall, not to historically situate literature within on-going narratives of storytelling's devolution. In this context, another narrative model emerges: the stories and songs whose only presence is in their glaring absence. The narrator cannot enjoy them as a listener nor can he attempt to replicate them in his own writing. But ultimately, they are important forces in shaping the story he tells. The traditions that he once imagined as pillars of human existence disappear, disproving his original hypothesis that the past and present are identical. But the immediate result in *Sylvie* is not a rush to collect the last remnants of an oral past. Instead, it is the narrator's self-conscious awareness of his own moment and of his own literary work's status as inauthentic in light of the values and the narrative modes he mourns—a stark contrast to Nodier's refusal to situate his own work within the nineteenth-century literary market place.

While print culture is present in chapter one when the narrator picks up a newspaper after a night at a Parisian theater, he never imagines that he will one day take *Sylvie* to see a play. With his quiet resignation to *Sylvie*'s new lifestyle and literary tastes, however, come more vocal affirmations of his own place in the world of writing. He pens a play and accompanies the theater troop as their “seigneur poète” (3:566). His aside in chapter thirteen, “si j'écrivais un roman, jamais je ne pourrais faire accepter l'histoire d'un cœur épris de deux amours simultanées” (3:564), is not just a statement of what generic models he accepts or refuses. It is a reminder that he is writing—that *Sylvie*, like the script he wrote or the books he had tried to forget, is a literary object. Even the title of the last chapter, the famous “Dernier Feuillet,” underscores that *Sylvie* is a written text, a book that must have a last page. And the chapter's opening lines shift to the narrative present, making the events already described more distant and the moment of narration—indeed the moment of writing—more immediate:

Telles sont les chimères qui charment et égarent au matin de la vie. J'ai essayé de les fixer sans beaucoup d'ordre, mais bien des cœurs me comprendront. Les illusions tombent l'une après l'autre, comme les écorces d'un fruit, et le fruit c'est l'expérience. Sa saveur est amère; elle a pourtant quelque chose d'acre qui fortifie,—qu'on me pardonne ce style vieilli. Je cherche parfois à retrouver mes bosquets de Clarens perdus au nord de Paris, dans les brumes. Tout cela est bien changé! (3:567)

The exclamation “Tout cela est bien changé!” proves applicable to all of the narrator's expectations, not just the changed landscape. And the “illusions” dispelled in the course of the previous chapters concern not only his amorous expectations but also the future of cultural expression: orality is no longer a viable narrative option.

“Dernier Feuillet” ends with *Sylvie*, now married to a baker, sharing a book with the narrator during one of his visits: “nous lisons quelques poésies ou quelques pages de ces livres si courts qu'on ne fait plus guère” (3:569). The vague reference “ces livres” has fueled much speculation.<sup>126</sup> However, the fact that Nerval names no specific book only spotlights the

<sup>125</sup> Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 100-101.

<sup>126</sup> Ross Chambers suggests that “ces livres” could be the ultimate self-reflexive gesture—*Sylvie* fits the description of a short, fragmented text whose moments of “style vieilli” the narrator has just confessed—or a reminder of other literary texts cited in the chapter, especially *Werther* (Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 118-120). Cellier, on the other hand, assumes that these books are “keepsakes,” the short personalized volumes like those mentioned in *Madame Bovary* (Léon Cellier, “De *Sylvie* à Aurélia, structure close et structure ouverte,” *Archives des lettres modernes* 131 [1971]: 34).

circumstances of its consumption, making it representative not of one book but of reading in general. The image of the narrator reading a book with Sylvie as her children play nearby stands in stark counterpoint to the traditional storytelling scene in which narrative is oral and children listen attentively at the feet of a peasant storyteller as in famous illustrations or even Perrault's moralité: "Le Conte de Peau d'Ane est difficile à croire, / Mais tant que dans le Monde on aura des Enfants, / Des Mères et des Mère-grands, / On en gardera la mémoire."<sup>127</sup> Even the narrator of Sylvie had earlier underscored the seeming inviolability of oral transmission in describing a dream of childhood scenes: "Des jeunes filles dansaient en rond sur la pelouse en chantant de vieux airs transmis par leurs mères, et d'un français si naturellement pur, que l'on se sentait bien exister dans ce vieux pays du Valois, où pendant plus de mille ans, a battu le cœur de la France" (3:541). But at the end of Sylvie, there are children and mothers, but there are no stories or songs—only books. The chain of oral transmission is broken, not for just for one generation but for generations to come.

"Chansons et légendes du Valois," which Nerval appends to *Sylvie* in 1854, begins on the same note of irreparable loss:

Chaque fois que ma pensée se reporte aux souvenirs de cette province du Valois, je me rappelle avec ravissement les chants et les récits qui ont bercé mon enfance. [...] J'en ai donné plus haut quelques fragments. Aujourd'hui, je ne puis arriver à les compléter, car tout cela est profondément oublié; le secret en est demeuré dans la tombe des aïeules. (3:569)

A reference to "souvenirs de cette province du Valois," reminiscent of the title *Sylvie, souvenirs du Valois*, replaces the opening line from 1842 version of "Les Vieilles Ballades françaises": "Avant d'écrire, chaque peuple a chanté." But in physical proximity to *Sylvie* and historical proximity to a renewed interest in folklore under the Second Empire, nowhere in this folklore collection's six reincarnations is the question of what happens to written artistic expression after songs and stories cease more pronounced.<sup>128</sup>

If Nerval's folklore collection evokes concern about the disappearance of folklore, his commentaries also show a profound concern for literature—whose survival was ensured but whose quality was not. Historically speaking, French verse was widely seen as beholden to dated conventions and rules inherited from neo-classicism. But along with frustrations about the old, came anxiety about the new. The rise of the roman feuilleton, for example, became possible with the emergence of affordable daily newspapers. In fact, the first installments of Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, the most famous of all romans feuilletons, appeared only one month before the initial 1842 version of Nerval's folklore collection. And starting in the 1830s, poètes ouvriers claimed literary creation for the working class as well, furthering, as Rancière shows, on-going debates about what constitutes literature.<sup>129</sup> Though Rancière does not mention

<sup>127</sup> Charles Perrault, *Contes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 115.

<sup>128</sup> For a comparison of all versions, see Benichou's chart in *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*, 184.

<sup>129</sup> Writers and critics dismissed the quality of these poems, but took their existence seriously. Stories abound of personal ruin, even suicide, caused by literary aspirations of the lower classes. In 1841, the critic and philosopher Lerminier points to broader consequences for the social order: "[...] cette entrée en écriture n'est pas seulement la perte de quelques malheureux, elle est la perturbation de l'ordre même qui destine les hommes de l'outil aux oeuvres réglées de l'outil et les hommes de la pensée aux veilles de la pensée" (qtd. in Rancière, *La parole muette*, 77).

poésies populaires, they became an important reference point for writers to think about the advent of poésies ouvrières, the dangers of the new, and the artifices of the old.

What the case of *poésies ouvrières* makes visible in Nerval's treatment of *poésies populaires* is not so much anxieties about literacy and urbanization—whose purported effects are quite clear in Nerval's work. Indeed, Nerval pens his folklore collection knowing that writers who do not share his active involvement in folklore study nevertheless bring awareness of discourses on folklore to literary problems. In 1841, the year before the publication of “Les Vieilles Ballades françaises,” Théophile Gautier referenced *poésies populaires* in his critique of a volume of *poésies ouvrières*:

Les vieilles chansons populaires pleines de fautes, de rimes inexactes et d'assonances hasardées improvisées par des compagnons en voyage, des bergers en contemplation, renferment mille fois plus de poésies que le gros volume colligé par M.O. Rodrigue. [...] Le littérateur est absent, et quand les plus grands poètes peuvent faire une strophe valant un de ces couplets-là, ils s'estiment les plus heureux de monde.<sup>130</sup>

The folkloric genesis and oral transmission of “vieilles chansons” contrasts with the literary imitations—and attendant class transgressions—of this “gros volume.” Gautier, a master of carefully wrought verse and a seemingly unlikely ally for folklore, does not speak for all writers.<sup>131</sup> He does, however, show how some authors perceive *poésies ouvrières* as a forceful incursion on their literary turf while *poésies populaires*, on the other hand, allow writers to imagine encounters with the popular on their own terms. Unlike *poètes ouvriers*, these “compagnons en voyage” and “bergers en contemplation” make no claims to literary status, distancing them from writers. And *poésies ouvrières* are further vilified in that they contribute to the destruction of traditional ways. In “Chansons et légendes,” Nerval describes washerwomen or bargemen who go about their tasks, not singing snippets of near-forgotten songs but “les romances à la mode, platement spirituelles, ou même franchement incolores, variées sur trois à quatre thèmes éternels.” (3:579) And Sylvie may not write poems, but she goes from being a storyteller to a silent reader.

As Gautier shows, the comfortable distance between modern writing and *poésies populaires* allows writers to advance their own notions of literature—or, as Nerval does in “Chansons et Légendes du Valois,” to challenge the notions of others. Here, Nerval asserts that *poésies populaires* in those *patois* farthest from French enjoy the best documentation and reception:

On publie aujourd'hui les chansons patoises de Bretagne ou d'Aquitaine, mais aucun chant des vieilles provinces où s'est toujours parlée la vraie langue française ne nous sera conservé. C'est qu'on n'a jamais voulu admettre dans les livres des vers composés sans souci de la rime, de la prosodie et de la syntaxe; la langue du berger, du marinier, du charretier qui passe, est bien la nôtre, à quelques élisions près, avec des tournures

<sup>130</sup> Gautier, “Poésies nouvelles,” 915. Gautier's later praises of folklore, may, Benichou suggests, be influenced by Nerval's notion of *poésies populaires* and the publication of his folklore collection in 1842 (*Nerval et la chanson folklorique*, 349-350).

<sup>131</sup> Most notably, perhaps, George Sand, herself a champion of folklore, sees nothing harmful in *poésies ouvrières* and even wrote a preface to a volume by a weaver turned poet. See Magu, *Poésies de Magu, tisserand à Lizy-sur-Ourcq* (Paris: Charpentier, 1845), v-xii. Nodier, a folklorist of an earlier generation, had a different concept of literature and considered literacy a destructive force for lower classes—and the pure poetry of their folklore. See Nodier, *De l'utilité morale de l'instruction*, 267-297.

douteuses, des mots hasardés, des terminaisons et des liaisons de fantaisie, mais elle porte un cachet d'ignorance qui révolte l'homme du monde, bien plus que ne fait le patois. (3:569)

By pointing out this trend in folklore collecting, Nerval does not merely justify the new regional emphasis of his folklore collection, which had started as “Les Vieilles Ballades françaises.” He also raises the much broader question of what belongs in books, who decides, and how. In this case, “chansons patoises” are less of an affront to “l'homme du monde” and his notion of literature because they confine folklore to that which is most visibly “other,” linguistically or geographically. But in Nerval’s vision, folklore is not just to be documented in books as an oddity or distant remnant of the past; it is to live on in its influence on writers. The folksongs of his native Valois are, therefore, all the more worthy of documentation precisely because of their linguistic proximity to nineteenth-century poetry.

Nerval’s concern about what will be “conservé” also shows that devolutionary narratives do more than justify the urgency of folklore collecting. They imbue folklore with a temporal distance from the present. This reinforces folklore’s status as a source of literary inspiration and poetic archive that circumvents recent literary models and aesthetics. Fortoul, Napoléon III’s minister responsible for his folklore collecting enterprise, hails its literary utility for these very reasons:

Dans ces chants, qui offrent non seulement la trace des événements de l'histoire nationale, mais encore les modèles de beautés trop longtemps méconnues, nous aimerons à retrouver une fraîcheur de génie qui n'appartient qu'à quelques époques heureuses; au contact de l'expression naïve du vieil esprit français, notre littérature se surprendra peut-être à rougir des fausses délicatesses où s'égaré parfois sa subtilité.<sup>132</sup>

In *La Bohême galante* (1852), Nerval also references the project’s literary benefit:

On parle en ce moment d'une collection de chants nationaux recueillis et publiés à grands frais. Là, sans doute, nous pourrions étudier les rythmes anciens conformes au génie primitif de la langue, et peut-être en sortira-t-il quelque moyen d'assouplir et de varier ces coupes belles mais monotones que nous devons à la réforme classique. (3:278)

Like classical literary models, *poésies populaires* have a history on French soil. But they evolve without regard to literary quarrels or fixed forms—they are old, but not stagnated or artificial. And folklore collecting makes at least some of these examples accessible, bridging the distance between writers and storytellers and folk singers for now and for years to come.

However, the mere existence of a folklore collection, especially appended to *Sylvie*, raises a less historically-specific problem of loss and distance: namely, the question of what happens when writing, unable to fully capture the artful contours of speech or sound, seeks to render the oral. Even before the nineteenth century, frame narratives often make at least a cursory nod to the irreproducibility of the storyteller’s performance that the narrator claims to have witnessed. In his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Rousseau highlights a similar divide: “L'écriture, qui semble devoir fixer la langue, est précisément ce qui l'altère; elle n'en change pas les mots, mais le génie; elle substitue l'exactitude à l'expression. L'on rend ses sentiments quand on parle, et ses idées quand on écrit.”<sup>133</sup> Nerval, too, acknowledges the inherent shortcomings of the written, but he goes one step further, ascribing the initial moment of loss to

<sup>132</sup> Qtd. in Agulhon, “Le problème de la culture populaire,” 64.

<sup>133</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Paris: L'École, 1987), 89.

the realm of the oral: “Nous nous arrêtons dans ces citations si incomplètes, si difficiles à faire comprendre sans la musique et sans la poésie des lieux et des hasards, qui font que tel ou tel de ces chants populaires se grave ineffaçablement dans l’esprit” (3:579). It is precisely “la musique” and “la poésie des lieux et des hasards” that grant folksong a powerful sense of place—and make it impossible to recreate even orally, much less in writing. But for Nerval, the self-perpetuating loss inherent in oral performance is not a practical ethnographic problem or something merely to be accounted for by a generic disclaimer within existing literary models. Instead, it is an impetus for a vision of artistic renewal. Just as Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé later would, Nerval finds inspiration in the German composer Richard Wagner’s concept of “total artwork.”<sup>134</sup> He constantly seeks “music” in an ancient sense—resonances across the spectrum of artistic expression—in poetry and seeks poetry in the broadest sense in any literary endeavor. While duplicating folksong remains impossible, an awareness of the ephemeral and unpredictable elements of its performance help writers to expand their own concepts of poetry.

That folklore study and collection could be a boon to literary production was not empty rhetoric, as Katie’s Trumpener’s study of the British Empire shows.<sup>135</sup> However, France’s European neighbors were far ahead in folklore collecting, something the French had deplored since the early nineteenth century and the *Académie Celtique*.<sup>136</sup> When the narrator in Nerval’s *Les Faux Sauniers* collects a French folksong, he tellingly adds: “On voit encore, par ces quatre vers, qu’il est possible de ne pas rimer en poésie;—c’est ce que savent les Allemands [...]” (2:63). Indeed, what writers most vocally lamented is that these other countries also had a head start in doing something with their folklore—weaving a narrative of a glorious national past and integrating the traces of this proud heritage into their artistic production. And as Nerval shows in “Chansons et légendes,” in nineteenth-century France, inspiration from *poésies populaires* was more than a question of enriching literature; it was also a claim that a certain kind of literature could be a bearer of cultural memory—as evidenced, Nerval reminds us, by the example of neighboring nations:

---

<sup>134</sup> Nerval also admired Wagner for achieving innovative artistic forms inspired by a return to origins and sources, as notably illustrated in the section “Musique” in *La Bohême galante* (3:272). Veen deems Nerval once of the first in France to realize the importance of Wagner’s music. See J. van der Veen, “Autour des *Chansons et légendes du Valois* de Gérard de Nerval,” *Neophilologus* 44, no. 1 (1960): esp. 94.

<sup>135</sup> Katie Trumpener shows how the figure of the bard comes to encapsulate questions of history, memory, and cultural preservation in the late eighteenth century. These debates about tradition—fueled by the controversy over the Scottish poet James Macpherson’s famed literary mystification *The Poems of Ossian*—shape novelistic production, giving rise to new historical or nationalistic genres. See Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. 67-127.

<sup>136</sup> On nineteenth-century French folklorists comparing their efforts to those of folklorists in other countries, see Rearick, *Beyond the Enlightenment*, 18-19. Nerval echoes similar sentiments on more than one occasion. For example, in an 1850 article about a perceived lack of children’s books and legends in France, he writes: “Est-ce à dire que nous manquions de légendes nationales ou fabuleuses? Nous possédons à peu près toutes celles dont se vantent les peuples du nord; seulement, il faut les aller recueillir dans les récits de la campagne, aux veillées, ou dans ces vieilles chansons de grand-mères qui se perdent de plus en plus” (2:1252).

Il serait à désirer que de bons poètes modernes missent à profit l'inspiration naïve de nos pères, et nous rendissent, comme l'ont fait les poètes d'autres pays, une foule de petits chefs-d'œuvres qui se perdent de jour en jour avec la mémoire et la vie des bonnes gens du temps passé. (3:579)

This juxtaposition of “bons poètes modernes” and “bonnes gens du temps passé” and the active verb “rendre” brings to the surface questions of cultural transmission that have been implicit throughout the folklore collection. Nerval does not call for literary reproductions of *poésies populaires* or for literature to reverse the course of events and make the storyteller whole. Nevertheless, poets are not unconditional heirs of storytellers and singers, free to squander their inheritance or mock their ancestors. They are the ward of what little remains of popular traditions, charged with a duty to seek inspiration from and foster appreciation for these national treasures.

In purporting to memorialize folklore, however, literature implicitly affirms its own staying power. As the editors of the Pléiade edition of Nerval's work rightly note, within the universe of *Sylvie*, writing is the breath that bestows life:

Rien de ce qui a été et de ce qu'a aimé le narrateur n'existe plus, l'écriture seule peut redonner vie à tout ce qui, réel ou imaginaire, constitue son passé et amorcer un temps cyclique qui ferait disparaître tout ce qui semble irrémédiablement linéaire, irréversible, à jamais divisé entre passé impossible à retrouver et avenir inconnu. (3:1217)

Indeed, there is a long list of things in *Sylvie* that are described only after their disappearance or can only find life in writing: Sylvie's room, the idyllic view of Ermenonville, even Adrienne whose very existence is only confirmed when Sylvie announces her death years before in the last sentence. “Chansons et légendes,” however, stands to be read as a prolongation of this list. Folklore has become dependent on print for its documentation and writers for its memorialization.

In short, the underlying narrative is one of literary modernity. David Harvey's concept of “myths of modernity” provides a useful parallel: purported ruptures with the past may not fully reflect historical reality, Harvey argues, but these supposed turning points fuel “founding myths” whose promise of newness marks the nineteenth-century French imagination.<sup>137</sup> In a similar way, predictions of the unprecedented perils for oral traditions leave no path but the written. Even former storytellers like Sylvie now read books. And “Chansons et légendes du Valois,” like most folklore collections of its day, presents itself as a last-resort cultural salvage operation. But Nerval never treats the documentation of these folkloric fragments as an end in itself. He seeks not to erase the old but to embrace it—or at least a literary reimagining of it. Positioning literature as a site of cultural transmission and successor to the storyteller does not, however, fly in the face of modernity's imperative to break with the past. Instead, it is a constant reminder of this break, a reassertion of modernity, and an implicit reproach to brands of literature that lacks this mission or memory.

Commonplaces about the death of tradition, therefore, become spaces for literary innovation. In folklore, Nerval finds both models and motivation for formal experimentation. His decision to append a folklore collection to *Sylvie* is a prime example. As Jacques Bony shows in *Le récit nervalien: une recherche des formes*, Nerval's patchwork-like recombination of extant works is artistic, not accidental: a defiance of generic categories symptomatic of a

<sup>137</sup> David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8-10.

constant search for outlets for his own literary expression. Yet, appendices with various degrees of ethnographic pretension were not without precedent in Nerval's day. In 1846, George Sand ended *La Mare au diable* with an account of the vanishing wedding customs in which the novel's characters, advertised as fictional, figure as examples. In 1847, Mérimée added a fourth chapter to his 1846 novella *Carmen* in which the pedantic narrator, unreliable from the start, advances contrived etymologies and gives some suspect accounts of gypsy customs. "Chansons et légendes," on the other hand, originates not in a fictional context but from discourses on the death of tradition that had developed over decades. And it appears in its final incarnation in the context not only of *Sylvie* but also of a short story collection, *Les Filles du feu*, in which it stands out as a generic anomaly.

Therefore, the union of "Chansons et légendes" and *Sylvie* begs a broader question: if storytelling is dying, are literary models based on its existence to be another casualty of modernity? For Nodier, the answer seems to lie simply in a more direct return to the past. But Nerval's work suggests that literature will require new forms to accomplish its mission *vis-à-vis* vanishing traditions. In this light, the generic dissonances between *Sylvie* and the appended folklore collection actually reinforce their thematic resonances, translating into formal terms the story of loss that both explicitly echo in their content. *Sylvie* shows that when the demise of oral tradition is at stake, silences can sometimes speak the loudest. Instead of being neatly introduced by a frame narrative, *Sylvie* is dotted with disorienting flashbacks. Songs are always fragmented. Requests for stories go unheeded. Only in the written, impersonal realm of the folklore collection are these gaps partially filled in: the song identified as Sylvie's favorite when two lines of it surface in the narrator's memory appears in full in the appendix, for example. Nerval marks the evolution of storytelling topoi by imposing on *Sylvie* the same silences that contemporary devolutionary discourses prescribe to storytelling. And "Chansons et légendes," once an isolated folklore collection, now stands as a repository for elements that the diffuse structure of *Sylvie* does not accommodate.

This is not to say that storytelling frames without folklore collections or silent storytellers cannot translate cultural narratives into formal terms. Barbey d'Aurevilly's fragmented frames in *Les Diaboliques*, for example, call into question where the actual story lies and if storytelling, as direct communication, exists at all.<sup>138</sup> And, in more general terms, writers self-consciously rethink their own craft in light of discourses on tradition and orality—much like the narrator in *Sylvie* whose realizations correspond to increasing references to the written nature of his story. Not surprisingly, however, scholarly considerations of the influence of folklore on literary production are usually limited to questions of explicit borrowing or poetic form. For example, in his conclusion to *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*, Benichou briefly traces a few potential stylistic influences of *poésies populaires* in the works of writers after Nerval, but suggests that next step would be an extensive study of subtle ways that Symbolist poets draw on the themes or forms of folksong. Yet, in a sense, Benichou already goes a step further when he lists later poets like Stéphane Mallarmé or Paul Valéry, far removed from the popular, who reference Nerval's folklore studies or join the chorus of earlier writers who point to the inspiration that foreign writers have already found in their own folklore.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, the

---

<sup>138</sup> See Brooks, "The Storyteller," 21-38.

<sup>139</sup> In an undated letter to the Belgian poet, Grégoire Le Roy, Mallarmé writes, "J'avais souci souvent, à part moi, qu'il y aurait lieu, notre vers richement perverti, de le tremper à une source de chansons, comme

influence and documentary value of Nerval's folklore collection does not lie exclusively in the cherished songs and stories he records. It also lies in juxtaposition of this folklore collection, so concerned by the future of literature, with a literary masterpiece, so marked by the loss of folklore. Together, *Sylvie* and "Chansons et légendes" show how literature becomes a bearer of stories about folklore—stories that are, more often than not, also about literature itself.

### Conclusion: Folklore's Literary Afterlife

In the nineteenth century, a forward-looking age that keeps one eye on the past, folklore becomes a reference point for thinking about the very categories of literature or modernity that supposedly spell its demise. In the French imagination and lexicon, "monuments" in need of preservation included songs and stories that also hold the memory of earlier generations but come closer to literature in form than crumbling cathedrals.<sup>140</sup> Unlike linguistics, archeology, or other disciplines represented in the study of *poésies populaires*, literature could reintegrate folklore, in one form or another, back into the France's artistic output. As Nodier and Nerval show, writers' reactions to this are hardly uniform. For Nodier, a generation before Nerval, nineteenth-century literature has still not reached its height as a commercial enterprise. His recuperation of the past can be read as an attempt to circumvent the material conditions of narrative production that are changing the face of nineteenth-century literature. Nerval, on the other hand, reinforces his narrative of modernity by inscribing the distance between the written and the oral in the form and content of his work. Stories once existed in oral form, as Nodier is quick to remind us, but folklore collections, by their very nature, never did. The prominence of print culture at the end of *Sylvie*, coupled with the addition of the folklore collection *Chansons et légendes*, illustrates the extent of historical evolution seen between Nodier and Nerval—from a writer who was a member of France's first folklore society at the start of the nineteenth-century to a writer involved in the mid-century resurgence of folklore study.

In France, discourses on folklore and cultural memory do not coalesce under a new and easily delineated generic label—like Trumpener's example of the historical novel in the British Empire. Though Nodier and Nerval differ in their treatments of the written and the oral, it is, perhaps, not coincidental that they both resist the nineteenth century's most visible genre, the novel, and turn towards the short story. In his reflections on the death of the storyteller, Benjamin dismisses the short story as having "removed itself from oral tradition" and considers its extreme brevity as emblematic of modernity.<sup>141</sup> Yet, Nodier and Nerval suggest that writers return to this ill-defined genre to experiment with literary renditions of the oral and to create a

---

font les Anglais: pour qu'il soit merveilleux et natif." Valéry références Nerval's folklore collection in his preface to Nerval's poetry collection *Les Chimères* (Paris, Les Amis de Poésie, 1944): "Sait-on que ces quelques pages, dédiées aux vieilles ballades françaises, n'ont pas été sans influence sur certains poètes qui avaient vingt ans quand j'en avais douze" (qtd. in Benichou, *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*, 359-360).

<sup>140</sup> "*Monumentum* est en latin tout ce qui rappelle quelqu'un ou quelque chose, tout ce qui en perpétue le souvenir. [...] Le monument est la trace, non pas seulement matérielle ou architecturale, mais aussi verbale, mentale ou gestuelle, de ce qui est passé, de ce qui n'existe plus" (Belmont, *Aux sources de l'ethnologie française*, 14).

<sup>141</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 93.

link to the past, real or imagined.<sup>142</sup> More so than nineteenth-century novels that tend towards invisible third-person narrators, the short story still provides snippets of the storyteller's voice or at least the spectral memory of the storyteller's presence. For Nodier, this is most visible in the *conte fantastique*, a prime site for recreating a true confidence between the teller and an audience.<sup>143</sup> For Nerval, the flexibility of short fiction, compared to marathon novels, allows for generic exploration, integration of the oral, and reflections on it.

In later movements for folklore study when devolutionary predictions resurface, it is not coincidentally the names Nodier and Nerval that appear as examples of how to transcend dry, documentary approaches to folklore. The 1880s saw the founding of several folklore-related publications, including *La Tradition*, a splinter from *La Revue des traditions populaires*. In the journal's inaugural edition, Émile Blémont offers *La Tradition* as an alternative to other publications that are mere "recueils" and do not merit the designation "revue":

[T]outes se restreignent systématiquement à la production pure et simple de documents originels, sans avoir cure ni tenir compte de la valeur et de l'emploi de ces matériaux dans l'œuvre supérieure de l'Art et du progrès.<sup>144</sup>

His reproaches are strikingly reminiscent of Champfleury and Nerval who deplored "archeological" approaches to folklore. Blémont continues:

L'évolution de la Tradition vers la Science et l'Art offre à nos travaux le champ le plus vaste et le plus fertile. N'est-ce point un spectacle singulièrement attrayant, que la physionomie et la destinée des chercheurs et des trouveurs qui se sont passé de siècle en siècle le flambeau sacré? Et quelles figures sympathiques, que ces personnages de transition, d'une nature à la fois si délicate et si franche, si aristocratique et si familière, qui, tels que Charles Nodier et Gérard de Nerval, servent d'intermédiaire entre le sentiment des cœurs simples et l'intelligence des esprits cultivés, entre les aspirations du sublime et les sérénités du beau"<sup>145</sup>

Blémont imagines not only a transmission of lore but a transmission of the mission of collecting and studying it. It is a flame kept alive by writers whose task is not only to create original work but also to cultivate an appreciation of tradition.

Blémont cites Nodier and Nerval as exemplifying an alternative way of thinking about folklore, as more than the object of collecting and cataloguing. Likewise, Nodier and Nerval's place in folklore studies offers an alternative way of thinking about moments in literary history. Clearly, this view of literature as part and parcel of folklore studies runs counter to the trends that ultimately prevailed in anthropological or ethnographic circles. But Nodier and Nerval show that it was nonetheless a force in literary production. If they are both resigned to the death of orality and storytelling, their hope for what comes afterward is the exact opposite of Benjamin's view of isolated, autonomous print. For Benjamin, the novel replaces the story, and the storyteller dies. But for those who live—and write—at the same time as they imagine tradition making its last

<sup>142</sup> Though Chambers does not undertake a historical contextualization the nineteenth-century short story, he contends that storytelling devices and narrative strategies that exist elsewhere can be more evident in the concision of short stories. See Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 28.

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, Nodier, "Du fantastique en littérature," 205-226.

<sup>144</sup> Emile Blémont, "Notre programme," *La Tradition: revue générale des contes, légendes, chants, usages, traditions et arts populaires* 1 (1887): 1.

<sup>145</sup> Emile Blémont, "Notre programme," *La Tradition: revue générale des contes, légendes, chants, usages, traditions et arts populaires* 1 (1887): 6.

stand, the future is still being decided. In their hands, the pervasive narrative of the loss of tradition that echoes in folklore studies, government decrees, or literature can itself be the first page of an origin story of literary modernity or the impetus for literary innovation.

### Chapter 3:

#### The *Conte* and the *Conteur*: Mérimée, Barbey, and the Nineteenth-Century Short Story

The short story is notoriously difficult to define: it does not have a monopoly on brevity or on storytelling topoi. It can overlap with the prose poem or novella and exists under various generic labels.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, other genres have scenes of oral storytelling—one could even think of novels like George Sand's. But short fiction does have long-standing associations with oral storytelling. Prior to the nineteenth century, landmark collections like Marguerite de Navarre's *Hemptaméron*, Segrais's *Nouvelles Françaises*, or even Galland's translation of *Les Mille et une nuits* relied on carefully crafted narrative frames that introduce or even interpret the story for a fictional audience. In the nineteenth century, these earlier storytelling models, their neat frames, and loquacious *devisants* fall by the wayside or are utterly transformed. But if the nineteenth century spells doom for the traditional *conte* and *conteur*, it not coincidentally hosts a revolution of the literary *conte*. And as Ross Chambers contends in *Story and Situation*, the nineteenth-century short story's extreme concision can make visible storytelling devices and narrative strategies that are less obvious elsewhere.<sup>147</sup> While literary history of the period offers innumerable examples of how the genre is defined in relation or in opposition to orality, Prosper Mérimée and Barbey d'Aurevilly, both masters of the short story, illustrate a range of ways that folklore and storytelling prove productive for short fiction whose materials conditions are farther removed than ever from those of its oral ancestor.

On the one hand, Barbey d'Aurevilly never spearheaded folklore collections or lent their names to the rolls of folklore societies, yet he, like Balzac before him, returned to scenes of narrative transmission and lamented the disappearance of oral practices of Parisians salons, not peasant *veillées*. And, as Barbey's recurrent use of high-society storytelling shows, those storytellers farthest removed from Mother Goose's hearth are often freest to explore age-old tensions between the written and the spoken in new ways—and the closest to the world of print on which literary imaginings of storytelling ultimately reflect. On the other hand, the folklorist and early master of the French short story Prosper Mérimée strayed away from actual storytelling scenes—but nonetheless makes storytelling and its interruption central to his generic innovation. For Mérimée, unanswered prompts for storytelling or frames that overshadow stories can mark a break with past storytelling models without staging the death of the storyteller. As literature—by no accounts fading—rethinks its relationship to the traditions that were supposedly disappearing, Mérimée and Barbey show that there are not only new reasons to write about orality but new ways to do so. In their hands, short story becomes a forward-looking autonomous art product conscious of its written status.

---

<sup>146</sup> Mérimée, for example, refers to the same story as a *conte* and a *nouvelle* within the one sentence. For a historical overview of generic labels for short fiction, see René Godenne, *La Nouvelle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995), esp. 54-57. On attempts to define the short story, see Michel Guissard, *La Nouvelle Française: Essai de définition d'un genre* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 2002).

<sup>147</sup> Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 28.

## Mérimée: Short Stories and the Margins of Storytelling

The name Prosper Mérimée (1803-1873) seldom appears with the likes of nineteenth-century literary giants like Balzac, Flaubert, or Mérimée's friend Stendhal. Mérimée's theater is rarely read, and his one novel is usually mentioned only in the context of historical fiction. But Mérimée has a place in French literary history thanks to one genre: the short story. Mérimée shaped short fiction with the bare-bones brevity of "Mateo Falcone," the subtle fantastic of "La Vénus d'Ile," and the exoticism of "Carmen." Named *Inspecteur des monuments historiques* in 1834, Mérimée was an important voice in debates about the preservation of France's material past. He corresponded extensively with Violet-le-Duc, the architect responsible for the restoration of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. But Mérimée also took an interest in immaterial monuments—customs, ballads, and stories—that he believed to be equally in need of preservation. In response to an 1852 decree that Napoléon III issued for the preservation of *poésies populaires*, Mérimée wrote "Il semble seulement qu'on commence ce beau recueil quelques siècles trop tard."<sup>148</sup> But, unlike Nerval, Nodier, or Champfleury who expressed similar concerns, Mérimée did not turn to literature to remedy these devolutionary ills or to be an archive for tradition. An early story, "Federigo" (1829), is a bit of an anomaly in his work in that it reads like a folktale. While Mérimée insists on the popular, Italian roots of its plot, he does not link his text to larger questions of the preservation of folklore. In fact, Mérimée seems more interested in the geographic origins of the tale—a point he later disputes with Champfleury.<sup>149</sup>

Throughout Mérimée's *œuvre*, his personal motto, "Souviens-toi de te méfier," stands as a perpetual challenge to his readers. Things are not what they seem, and folklore is no exception. Ironically, one of Mérimée's best-selling works was actually a literary mystification: *La Guzla* (1827) was original poetry passed off as ballads from the newly-annexed provinces of Illyria (modern day Transylvania).<sup>150</sup> Mérimée was not the only author to fabricate folklore while simultaneously supporting the preservation of *traditions populaires*; Nerval and Nodier both did the same.<sup>151</sup> But Mérimée, once found out, simply turned the game he had played with his

<sup>148</sup> Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, 450-451.

<sup>149</sup> In "Federigo," the title character's mystery visitors turn out to be Jesus and his apostles. They grant Federigo three wishes in recognition of his hospitality. Ruined by gambling, Federigo parlays these wishes into a way win at cards and to delay death. Mérimée insisted on the story's Italian origins in the Middle Ages. Much to Mérimée's dismay, Champfleury criticizes his "Federigo," proclaiming the more simple supposedly French version of the folktale to be superior. See Champfleury, *De la littérature populaire en France: recherches sur les origines et les variations de la légende du bonhomme Misère* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et De Broise, 1861), esp. 19-20. Champfleury's reproduces his study in Champfleury, *Histoire de l'imagérie populaire* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1869), 105-188.

<sup>150</sup> Prosper Mérimée, *La Guzla, ou, choix de poésies illyriques, recueillies dans la Dalmatie, la Bosnie, la Croatie et l'Herzegowine* (Strasbourg: J.H.E. Heitz, 1926).

<sup>151</sup> Charles Nodier, a fellow Romantic and Mérimée's predecessor at the *Académie française*, took his own liberties in his descriptions of Illyrian traditions, customs, and ballads, particularly in newspaper articles—though he, unlike Mérimée, actually lived in Illyria as editor of the official newspaper in the newly annexed provinces in 1812-1813. (Maixner, *Charles Nodier et l'Illyrie*, 14, 117). Nerval's folktale "La Reine des poisons," published independently and then with *Sylvie* as part of "Chansons et légendes du Valois, is likely of his own invention. He makes varying and contradictory claims about its origins and most likely used the guise of traditional provenance to bolster his own criticisms of deforestation in the tale.

readers into another layer of fiction: a story about finding himself penniless in Venice en route to Illyria, stranded with friends, among them Jean-Jacques Ampère. Mérimée claims then to have written this collection of “poésies populaires” to finance their trip and allow them not to collect folklore on site but to evaluate the accuracy of what Mérimée had already imagined in *La Guzla*.<sup>152</sup>

In Mérimée’s later work, folklore figures most often as the object of his own characters’ searches. As serious and scholarly as Mérimée can be, he continues to present folklore and history through games, deceptions, and falsifications. The narrators of “Carmen,” “Colomba,” “Lokis,” and “La Vénus d’Ille” offer a case in point. They are all on quests to document poetry, artifacts, or customs and, in typical nineteenth-century fashion, identify their supposed historic and geographic origins. But self-aggrandizing pseudo-scholarship repeatedly overshadows common sense and the narrators’ basic powers of observation. The title character of “Colomba,” a master of Corsican improvisatory folksong (785), proves to be a more skilled reader of people, circumstances, and forged documents than the narrator. In “Lokis,” one of Mérimée’s last works, the narrator, Professor Wittenbach, postpones his own marriage when the need to collect folklore and “monuments linguistiques” proves more pressing.<sup>153</sup> However, he mistakes a translation of an original text for a traditional ballad (1062), ironically falling victim to a literary mystification very similar to the one with which Mérimée had begun his own career.

In Mérimée’s fiction, texts that seem “authenticate” often are not. Questions that seem resolved usually remain unanswered. And unanswered questions are the only thing that is assured. While short fiction had long been associated with didactic ends, Mérimée’s frequently inconclusive endings leave the reader to ponder not only what happened in the story but also what these events mean. This break with generic precedent paves the way for future practitioners, as Corry Cropper suggests:

While Prosper Mérimée did not create a new genre, he did reinvent the French short story and prepare the terrain for Villiers de l’Isle Adam, Emile Zola, Barbey d’Aureville and Guy de Maupassant who follow him. [...] He eliminates the omniscient character or narrator who explains what has taken place or why it has occurred. Mérimée’s narrators remain very much removed from the events they narrate, unable to explain them and unwilling to offer a simple moral which would allow readers to experience a comforting sense of closure.<sup>154</sup>

Indeed, Mérimée’s narrators seem to stand in the way of any moral or explanation. But t Mérimée’s narrators’ shortcomings as *folklorists* add a historically specific dimension to the distance between the narrator and the events or stories he attempts to recount.

While Mérimée subscribed to prevailing beliefs about the disappearance of folklore, never does he explicitly mourn the death of the storyteller. Rarely do his short stories even feature storytelling scenes so long associated with the genre. Instead, Mérimée uses folklore and storytelling to ask questions about literature and about human knowledge. Ever seeking to

<sup>152</sup> Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, 375-376.

<sup>153</sup> “Ajournalant donc mon mariage avec Mlle Gertrude Weber, je me rendis à Kowno (*Kaunas*), avec l’intention de recueillir tous les monuments linguistiques imprimés ou manuscrits en langue jmoude que je pourrais me procurer, sans négliger, bien entendu, les poésies populaires, *dainos*, les récits ou légendes, *pasakos* [...]” (1050).

<sup>154</sup> Corry Cropper, “Prosper Mérimée Reassessed: The Evolution of the French Short Story,” *Romance Notes* 40, no. 3 (2000): 360.

highlight the unreliability of perception, Mérimée reminds his readers of the blurred boundaries between tradition and originality or orality and writing. With both his own mystifications and those of his characters, Mérimée calls into question our ability to recognize history and traditions—the very heritage that folklorists, writers, and preservationists were clamoring to save. Mérimée shows people in search of folklore or people who happen upon stories, but maintains a distance from actual narrative exchange, the aspect of storytelling around which short fiction is usually structured.

But Mérimée's avoidance of storytelling scenes is by no means symptomatic of an ambivalence towards folklore or its future and must be understood in relation to his very particular style. Mérimée was a master of concision, shunning flowery descriptions and psychologically complex characters. "Je hais les détails inutiles, et d'ailleurs je ne me crois pas obligé de dire au lecteur tout ce qu'il peut facilement imaginer," tellingly proclaims the narrator of one of Mérimée's last stories, "La Chambre bleue."<sup>155</sup> This economic style and ironic tone have made "dryness" a frequent reproach of his writing. Barbey d'Aurevilly was, for example, outspoken in his criticism of Mérimée. Yet, Mérimée manages with few words and relatively simple plots to probe human nature and the limits of knowledge, often through a candid look at local belief systems, religion, superstition, or learned narrators who understand less than the provincial subjects of their study. Often what Mérimée doesn't say or show speaks louder than what he does. Much like he artfully manipulates the non-dit in descriptions and plots, so does Mérimée seldom point directly to what is missing on a formal level. This perhaps explains both why the lack of storytelling scenes in his work goes largely unnoticed by critics and why this lack is potentially significant. Two of Mérimée's works—the short and rarely studied "La Partie de Trictrac" and the lengthily and well-known "Carmen"—illustrate how he structures stories not around an absence of storytelling but in the margins of storytelling.

"La Partie de trictrac" (1830) has nothing to do with familiar folktales but everything to do with storytelling. In this isolated maritime setting, the story in question is not one that characters eagerly await but one that they try to escape. Mérimée's uncharacteristically long introduction mimics the boredom and repetitiveness of the life at sea that it describes. Crew members grow weary of each other—and each other's stories. One evening, as an antidote to the monotony of their existence, the officers are sitting on deck, dropping their knives in an idle game to see which way the point will fall. The narrator, an apparent newcomer to this world, asks to borrow the captain's knife so that he can join them. He gets not the knife but a story of the captain's tragically departed friend Lieutenant Roger to whom the knife belonged:

Je devinai qu'une histoire allait suivre, je ne me trompais pas. Le capitaine commença sans se faire prier; quant aux officiers qui nous entouraient, comme chacun d'eux connaissait par coeur les infortunes du lieutenant Roger, ils firent aussitôt une retraite prudente. (536-537)

The officers flee in the face of story they know all too well, leaving only the narrator.

The next fourteen pages—the bulk of the text—recount Roger's love for the actress Gabrielle, the fateful moment that he cheats at the backgammon-like game of trictrac, his opponent's suicide, and his subsequent desire to take his own life. Roger, back at sea, asks his

---

<sup>155</sup> Prosper Mérimée, *Théâtre, romans, et nouvelles*, ed. Jean Mallion and Pierre Salomon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1978), 1041. Unless noted otherwise, all subsequent references are to the Pléaïde edition of Mérimée's work will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

friend the captain to promise to throw him overboard should he be injured in battle. Later, when Roger is gravely wounded, the captain hesitates to fulfill his promise. At this moment of decision, the story has reached its climax. But a most inopportune return of the frame interrupts the captain's story:

“Donne-moi une poignée de main,” dis-je [le capitaine] à Roger.

Au moment même où notre pavillon fut amené...

.....

“Capitaine, une baleine à bâbord! interrompit un enseigne accourant à nous. — Une baleine? s'écria le capitaine transporté de joie et laissant là son récit. Vite, la chaloupe à la mer! la yole à la mer! toutes les chaloupes à la mer! —Des harpons, des cordes! etc., etc.”

Je ne pus savoir comment mourut le pauvre lieutenant Roger. (550)

The captain's story ends with a truncated sentence (“Au moment même où notre pavillon fut amené...”) that stops at the very moment the reader expects a resolution of Roger's fate. Storytelling is summarily abandoned in favor of whale hunting. The captain never finishes his tale, and the reader, like the narrator, never learns how Roger died.

While “La Partie de trictrac” is not remembered as one of Mérimée's masterpieces, it has nonetheless fueled some critical speculation. Some critics largely disregard the frame and focus on the framed story. Danielle Mihram, for example, reads undercurrents of classical tragedy in “La Partie de trictrac.”<sup>156</sup> Peter Cogman considers the narrative problems resulting from the captain's uncertain knowledge of Roger's adventures and his oscillation between his own eye-witness accounts and hearsay.<sup>157</sup> For Paul Dunham, however, the frame is key and makes “La Partie de trictrac” Mérimée's first articulation of his own poetics of narration in which incompleteness only signals only a different level of completion.<sup>158</sup> Most recently, Cory Cropper has situated “La Partie de trictrac” not only within the scope of Mérimée's work but within overarching nineteenth-century cultural narratives, associating sports, games, and chance with prevailing notions of history. Though insightful, these readings of “La Partie de trictrac” largely overlook the potential significance of Mérimée's choice of an oral storytelling scene to probe the workings of chance and to experiment with techniques that become central to his own short story writing. Beyond the world of this ship, “La Partie de trictrac” is a story about narrative forms, their evolution, silence, or interruption.

“La Partie de trictrac” is unique in Mérimée's work in that the interpolated story stops mid-sentence. However, Mérimée's short stories offer numerous, less accentuated examples of seeming incompleteness. Often, this lack of resolution requires a reevaluation of the preceding tale in light of a final detail that gives it new meaning—and a different level of completion. One frequent example of Mérimée's aesthetics of *inachèvement* comes from “Arsène Guillot,” in which the narrator's closing observation implicitly counters his earlier refusal to tell what happens between Madame de Piennes and Max. A sentence penciled onto Arsène's tombstone—“Pauvre Arsène! Elle prie pour nous”—suggests that Max and Madame de Piennes (“nous”) are

<sup>156</sup> Danielle Mihram, “La Partie de trictrac, nouvelle aux résonances tragiques,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 8 (1979-1980): 53-61.

<sup>157</sup> Peter Cogman, “Cheating at Narrating: Back to Mérimée's 'La Partie de trictrac,’” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 26, no. 3 (1997): esp. 84-87.

<sup>158</sup> Paul Dunham, “Bored on Board: Sea Travel and the Poetics of Narration in Mérimée's *La Partie de Trictrac*,” *Essays in French Literature* 37 (2000): 1-16.

united in an amorous affair and in need of prayer (935). The intrusion of the frame in “La Partie de trictrac” similarly forces the reader to distance himself and seek a new perspective on the captain’s story of love, death, friendship, and cheating at the game of trictrac. The very moment that should provide resolution is instead a void. There is no moral, and the narrator does not even attempt to speculate about what happened. His unapologetically inconclusive conclusion—”Je ne pus savoir comment mourut le pauvre lieutenant Roger”—is a declarative utterance on the surface, but one that ironically encapsulates legions of questions. Does the captain ask for Roger’s hand in order to cast him overboard? Does he renege on his promise and bring the dying man out of the line of fire? More importantly, if the narrator does not know how Roger died, then what is the point of his story, besides disappointing the reader?

Conclusions in the form of questions, implicit or explicit, are typical both of Mérimée’s fiction and his historical writing that also frequently unravels into uncertainty. “As a historian he is unafraid to show his doubts, his hesitations, his inability to explain everything, to offer readers a tightly constructed historical narrative,” Cropper observes. “He presents history as chaos that can be approximately and loosely connected via hypotheses, but never fully understood or represented.”<sup>159</sup> Cropper underscores the importance of games and chance in the nineteenth-century imagination, even citing a trictrac manual that asserts that knowledge of the game might have equipped Napoléon to deal the chance in life and war and, thereby, avoid defeat.<sup>160</sup> Cropper’s identification of an analogy between games and historical discourse is particularly telling for this story entitled “La Partie de trictrac.” Cropper convincingly shows how Roger repeatedly attempts to manipulate chance, be it in games of trictrac or in trying to hasten his own demise. This story, therefore, proves emblematic of Mérimée’s reflections on chance as a structuring force of human experience—one that often either defies the explanations ascribed to it or falls outside of logical progressions of events presented in historical narratives.

Cropper rightly notes that historical discourse is not an inconsequential abstract game: for example, nineteenth-century political regimes justify themselves through a narrativization of the past. But Mérimée’s take on narrative, chance, and history has its own concrete and more immediate repercussions as storytelling is concerned. Mérimée undermines “standard” storytelling and story reading in “La Partie de trictrac,” not with the captain’s tale of trictrac that Cropper and others have analyzed at length but with the puzzling and seldom mentioned frame that changes the entire experience of reading the story. It is a chance happening—the appearance of the whale—that interrupts this story and transforms it into a reflection on storytelling, be it written or spoken, at sea or on land. Cropper and, recently, Scott Carpenter have both shown how deception and trickery (e.g., forged letters, falsified folklore, or practical jokes) structure plots of Mérimée’s short stories, even when these stories are not properly mystifications themselves. Carpenter cites the example of two stories (“Il viccolo di Madama Lucrezia” and “La Chambre bleue”) which create a “trap” through “readerly expectations.”<sup>161</sup> In these examples, the reader’s identification with a prominent first-person narrative voice causes him to share in the narrator’s humiliation and frustration when what seems to be a fantastic tale reaches

---

<sup>159</sup> Corry Cropper, *Playing at Monarchy: Sports as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>160</sup> Cropper, *Playing at Monarchy*, 54.

<sup>161</sup> Scott Carpenter, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France: Frauds, Hoaxes, and Counterfeits* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 22.

a rational resolution or a “murder” mystery ends with an actual crime. “La Partie de Trictrac” lays a similar trap.

Unlike literary mystifications, in which Mérimée seems to deliver what he promises, “La Partie de trictrac” seems not to deliver what it promises: a story. In both cases, appearances are deceptive. From the beginning, Mérimée uses the conventions of frame narrative to cultivate the reader’s generic expectations. The demarcation of the frame and the story could not be clearer: “Voici à peu près quel fut le récit du capitaine [...],” says the narrator (537). There are no generic red flags, nothing to signal anything but a well-behaved short story frame that provides a structural set-up for storytelling. Consistent with the expected dynamics of frame narrative, the captain appears as a storyteller and the narrator as a mere relay of his story. But when the frame silences the captain’s tale, it forces the reader to rethink not just what kind of story is at hand but where the story lies and who the storyteller might be. Since the captain abandons storytelling to chase a whale and the narrator can only relay what the captain has told him, we are, in a sense, left with no storyteller. Yet, the reader who equates disappointment and frustration at the interruption of the captain’s tale with being deprived of a story has also been taken in: he has been expecting the wrong story. The story finds its fullness in incompleteness, in becoming the story of interrupted storytelling. This, however, means that it exists only in the hands of the narrator who is merely a passive relay, not a storyteller. And, not insignificantly, it exists only in writing. Ultimately, Mérimée finds what might be the only way to redeem the captain’s tale. An interruption takes a story that had been told many times before and makes it interesting in its incompleteness, assuring that is to remain perpetually new and unfulfilled—but only in writing.

Indeed, this story of storytelling subtly but repeatedly gestures towards its own written form. At the end, when the sailors announce the whale sighting, Mérimée uses a full line of ellipses to demarcate a narrative no-man’s-land that belongs neither to the story of Roger’s death nor to the frame. Such a typographical signal is not a representation of part of an oral story nor can it be vocalized. It, like the story that it makes possible, exists only in print.

Unlike many short story narrators who lament the inability of writing to do justice to the oral, this narrator points out the shortcomings of orality. At the beginning, the narrator also calls attention to the visual element of his text when he cites the first lieutenant as an example of how repetition ruins the effect of a story: “Quand jamais a-t-il manqué de s’arrêter tristement après avoir prononcé pour la première fois dans son récit ce mot, l’empereur... ‘Si vous l’aviez vu alors!!!’ (trois points d’admiration) ajoute-t-il invariablement” (535). It is as if the narrator mockingly points out how the very attraction of oral storytelling—its spontaneity—has even vanished on the ship. His parenthetical remark “trois points d’admiration” affirms his attachment to the written: he can communicate this detail to the reader with a visual aside. But he prefaces this with three actual exclamation points, his own punctuation in the text. If oral storytelling has become as formulaic and predictable as a written script with punctuation, then the reader is left to wonder if the narrator’s written story will offer more.

Implicit in all of this is the fact that written conventions of storytelling can get old just as much as oral ones can and that the narrator’s criticisms of oral telling can also apply to the predictability of frame narratives in written texts. This befits a short story that itself breaks with dated literary models. Mérimée actually uses the description of life on the ship to foreground forms of entertainment that do not evolve: “Le commissaire de marine possédait une histoire bien intéressante,” says the narrator. “Comme il nous enchantait la première fois qu’il nous raconta son évocation du ponton de Cadix! mais, à la vingtième répétition, ma foi, l’on n’y pouvait

plus tenir” (536). Books are reread twenty times over. Stories are retold to the point that everyone anticipates not only their content but also the cadences of the teller’s voice. With this negative example of narrative stagnation, Mérimée gestures towards his own pursuit of generic innovation.

In fact, the publication history of “La Partie de trictrac” suggests that Mérimée saw this tale as important to the image he wanted to create of himself as a pioneer of nineteenth-century short fiction. “La Partie de trictrac” was first published in the *Revue de Paris* on June 13, 1830. However, in 1833, when Mérimée compiled his short story collection *Mosaïque*, he insisted on placing it before “Le Vase étrusque” that was actually written earlier.<sup>162</sup> Mérimée is not attempting to pass off this brief tale as a novice effort. Instead, this deliberately altered chronology allows him to show that generic innovations were central to his literary project from the start. At a time when historians are trying to condense the past into understandable narratives governed by clear causes and definite effects, Mérimée seeks a place in literary history as a writer whose narratives point to—and artistically embrace—the forces of chance and perpetual disorder that he sees at the heart of human existence.

“La Partie de trictrac,” however it is viewed within Mérimée’s œuvre, destabilizes the very core of conventional storytelling: the story, which is supposed to be time-honored, complete, didactic, and central to human existence. “La Partie de trictrac” shows the distance Mérimée maintains in his fiction from discourses on the death of the tradition that resonated among fellow folklorists, linguists, and archaeologists: a storyteller falls silent, but there is no lament for his narrative art. The narrator offers no apology for being unable to finish the story. If literature usually presents, praises, or mourns neatly packaged scenes of storytelling, Mérimée shows its raw edges. He does not offer his literary text as an “authentic” testament to oral traditions, but may, ironically, produce a representation more reflective of reality. He uses the instability and unpredictability inherent in oral narrative performance to create the very drama of his written text: storytelling can be—and is—interrupted.

On the surface, Mérimée’s early tale “La Partie de trictrac” shares relatively little with “Carmen” (1845), one of his last publications before a nearly twenty year literary silence. Unlike “La Partie de trictrac,” “Carmen,” often deemed a novella, is remembered not for its structure but for its story of exotic intrigue and seduction. But there is more to this renowned tale of exotic intrigue and seduction than Don José’s affair with the gypsy woman Carmen and her death at his hands—a plot made famous by various artistic adaptations, including Bizet’s 1875 opera. In fact, much of Mérimée’s text consists of the self-important ramblings or narrative digressions of the narrator, a Frenchman traveling in Spain for historical research. While the frames and narrative techniques in “Carmen” do not translate into good opera, they do bring this famous story to bear on evolutions of storytelling and story writing in the nineteenth century.

“Carmen” begins as it ends, with the fumbling narrator musing on his scholarly quest and his own intellectual superiority:

J’avais toujours soupçonné les géographes de ne savoir ce qu’ils disent lorsqu’ils placent le champ de bataille de Munda dans le pays des Bastuli-Pœni, près de la moderne Monda, à quelque deux lieues au nord de Marbella. (937)

---

<sup>162</sup> For the publication history, see Mérimée, *Théâtre, romans, et nouvelles*, 1376. The editors of the *Pléiade* publish Mérimée’s short stories in chronological order but note Mérimée’s attempt to alter this chronology.

The narrator seems, however, less well versed in history or archeology than self-aggrandizement: “En attendant que ma dissertation résolve enfin le problème géographique qui tient toute l’Europe savante en suspens, je veux vous raconter une petite histoire; elle ne préjuge rien sur l’intéressante question de l’emplacement de Munda” (988). He then presents the story of Carmen as an inconsequential narrative excursion, secondary to his ground-breaking scholarship on an obscure matter that readers have a hard time believing could passionately inspire anyone—much less “toute l’Europe savante.” Such an uninviting presentation of this “petite histoire” would not normally draw in readers or listeners. The irony here is that the narrator, by revealing his own unreliable judgment, actually accords some interest to a story precisely by disregarding it.

In “Carmen,” a certain level of suspicion is not out of place. In spite of his scholarly pretensions and the proliferation of footnotes in his text, the narrator is unable to grasp basic information about his subject, the gypsy woman Carmen. For example, only after he ventures four tries in a geographic guessing game, does an exasperated Carmen finally reveal her identity and her origins—or lack thereof—to the bewildered narrator: “Allons, allons! vous voyez bien que je suis bohémienne; voulez-vous que je vous dise *la baji*? Avez-vous entendu parler de la Carmencita? C’est moi” (950). Ultimately, she outsmarts him. But it is not until chapter three, when the frame gives way to Don José’s narrative, that this becomes clear. Don José has killed Carmen and is found possession of the narrator’s distinctive watch that Carmen stole. Though the narrator promised in the opening lines to tell “une petit histoire,” it is Don José who actually brings the promise to fruition. Only after Don José’s recounting of the night they met Carmen does the Frenchman understand what really happened—even though he already spent the first two chapters narrating the events from his own perspective.

The story that Don José tells the narrator would be the logical place to expect storytelling to come to the fore. But Don José’s account is, as Peter Cogman notes, only “pseudo-oral”: it reads like a written text, makes no overt gestures to its original, supposedly oral incarnation and lapses after the first few sentences into the past historic, a literary tense.<sup>163</sup> Instead, the reflections on storytelling in “Carmen” are far removed from any claims to orality. The fourth chapter of “Carmen,” added by Mérimée in 1847, abruptly shifts the focus from Don José’s story back to the narrator’s scholarly pretensions. This pseudo-ethnographic epilogue has long puzzled critics. Some disregard it completely while others consider it an intervention of the author’s, not the narrator’s, voice and a manifestation of Mérimée’s own interest in gypsy peoples.<sup>164</sup> The editors of the most recent *Pléaide* edition tend towards the latter approach:

On a trop tendance à comprendre *Carmen* à travers l’opéra de Bizet. *Carmen* est avant une étude sur les gitans. On s’explique mieux ainsi qu’en 1847 il [Mérimée] ait ajouté à sa nouvelle cette sorte de dissertation qui au premier abord peut paraître superflue. Même si elle n’est pas d’un sérieux à toute épreuve, elle répond à la préoccupation qui l’a

<sup>163</sup> Peter Cogman, *Narration in Nineteenth-Century French Short Fiction: Prosper Mérimée to Marcel Schwob* (Durham, UK: University of Durham, 2002), 28.

<sup>164</sup> For an overview of readings of the fourth chapter, see David Mickelsen, “Travel, Transgression and Possession in Mérimée’s ‘Carmen,’” *Romanic Review* 87 (1996): 6. Cogman convincingly argues that chapter four is consistent with the tone and frame that opens “Carmen” and represents the older version of the frame narrator. A version of his earlier article “The Narrators of Mérimée’s *Carmen*” (Nottingham French Studies 27.2 [1988]: 1-12) appears in his book Cogman, *Narration in Nineteenth-Century French Short Fiction*, 21-50.

guidé tout au long de son récit. Préoccupation d'ethnologue, disons-nous. Mais aussi de philologue. (1586)

While they concede that Mérimée's appended study is not to be taken as strict scholarship, they nonetheless read it as part of the Mérimée's world, not the fictional world of "Carmen." Citing the incongruity of the fourth chapter's observations with the events of the preceding story, they reproach the author for negligence: "Mérimée paraît avoir oublié un peu son héroïne" (1586). Mérimée's own ethnological and philological interests are undeniable. One need not even consult his translations of Russian authors or his articles on the origins of beliefs and customs.<sup>165</sup> These preoccupations pervade his work in everything from inscriptions found on the statue of his famous fantastic tale "La Vénus d'Ille" to descriptions of bullfights ("Lettres Adressées d'Espagne"). Unlike in his scholarly activity, Mérimée is not held to speak with his own voice in his fiction. The conclusion of "Carmen" need not be an authorial exposé of his own views or a suggestion that the rest of the text is to be read as a study of gypsies. Instead, this added chapter is a calculated characterization of a narrator who continues to undermine his own credibility until the very end. Mérimée does not "forget" his heroine; he moves "Carmen" beyond Carmen herself. He creates a narrator whose seemingly irrelevant ramblings actually highlight the incongruities in the text and bring them to bear on the act of storytelling and transformation of the storyteller's voice.

The end offers a case in point. The narrator closes "Carmen" with a proverb that he hails as "à propos" but for which he offers no explanation:

En voilà bien assez pour donner aux lecteurs de *Carmen*, une idée avantageuse de mes études sur le Rommani. Je terminerai par ce proverbe qui vient à propos: *En retundi panda nasti abela macha*. En close bouche, n'entre point mouche. (994)

Many readers, like the narrator, fall into the trap of thinking that proverbs preempt any discussion. Proverbs often seem synonymous with indisputable disambiguating wisdom, yet their meaning relies on metaphor and is wholly dependent on their context. Therefore, they may be used sarcastically or even inadvertently misused.<sup>166</sup> In Mérimée's story, the proverb, clearly identified by its generic label, could still be accidentally self-abasing: the narrator unwittingly spotlights that he has again failed at a display of erudition by adding a chapter about the gypsies and not simply stopping with Don José's story. Conversely, the proverb can be read as a *conscious* self-referential move by which the narrator refuses to open his mouth to say any more than has already been said. Cropper, in fact, suggests that the last line of "Carmen" is as an explicit generic break with the short story's moralizing past: "With this final wink to his readers, Mérimée's narrator seems to be saying: 'If you are expecting a moral, or a tidy explanation of the preceding narrative, you'll have to make it up on your own: I'm not going to let flies enter *my* mouth.'"<sup>167</sup>

The latter interpretation seems more likely as it provides the kind of open ending of which Mérimée is so fond. However, neither possibility explains *why* the narrator chooses to use a proverb, a recognizable genre of folklore, to close his short story. By employing what he

<sup>165</sup> See, for example, Prosper Mérimée, "Des mythes primitifs," *Revue contemporaine* XXII, no. October 15 (1855).

<sup>166</sup> See, for example, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning," in *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland, 1981), esp. 120.

<sup>167</sup> Cropper, "Prosper Mérimée Reassessed," 359.

identifies as a gypsy proverb, he could be attempting to show his familiarity with gypsy lore: he is not only a linguistic who looks at the culture from the outside, but he claims to be initiated into it and to be able to competently manipulate its folk wisdom. Or, to take Cropper's reading of Mérimée's short fiction as cultivating irony and distance a step farther, the last line of "Carmen" could be seen as producing a double generic let down. Both proverbs and stories promise succinct wisdom and morals. In fact, Walter Benjamin considers proverbs a condensation of the wisdom and experience that stories once communicated: "A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall."<sup>168</sup> Though less poetic than Benjamin's ivy-covered wall analogy, studies of folk narrative have also shown that proverbs that co-exist with stories are usually concluding or moralizing elements that interpret or summarize the entire tale or fable.<sup>169</sup> Mérimée's proverb would *seem* to be reproducing this function in a literary context. But this sentence, though clearly spotlighted as both a proverb and a fitting conclusion, actually leads the wayward story further away from the generic fold. It is a crowning moment of Mérimée's masterful concision and irony: from the circuitous ramblings of the narrator emerges a proverb, concise in its word count but less than precise in its meaning. Not insignificantly, it is with a proverb, often called the "wisdom of many," that Mérimée marks the didactic silence at the end of his story.

In his reading of "Carmen" as a reflection on uncertainty, David Ellison also sees the final proverb as way of underscoring an absence:

From the open mouth flow lies, and therefore, seduction, danger, and death. To close the mouth is to ward off danger, but also all possibility of knowledge, which means, also, to die. This living in the open closure of death is uncanniness, *Unheimlichkeit*, *l'inquiétante étrangeté*: it is the place of *Carmen*.<sup>170</sup>

The multiplicity of interpretations that the proverb invites shows that it does not necessarily "shut off *Carmen* as seduction machine," as Ellison would have it. However, Ellison rightly gestures towards the meaning imbued into the silence that the proverb announces and the association of this silence with death. If the proverb produces a realm of uncanniness and closes a metaphorical mouth on the cultural and geographic uncertainties that Ellison studies, it simultaneously opens a door for discussion of other stakes of "Carmen." To close the mouth is not only to stave off danger but to stave off stories. The storyteller not only opens his mouth to deliver a moral but also to tell a story. If the narrator claims to have done neither, he absolves himself of any liability for the failure or inappropriateness of the tale or its conclusion. He maintains the relatively low-risk position of a self-assured scholar and not the precarious position of a storyteller actually in tune with his audience. Therefore, he can return safely to his world of contrived etymologies and misplaced cultural observations.

In "Carmen," Mérimée preempts any possibility of equating the narrator with a storyteller. This is significant because it is not always the case in short fiction. In his analysis of Flaubert's "Un Cœur simple," Ross Chambers suggests that sometimes the best storyteller is the narrator who makes the fewest prefatory claims and calmly launches into his narrative, quietly

<sup>168</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 108.

<sup>169</sup> Pack Carnes, "Introduction," in *Proverbia in Fabula: Essays on the Relationship of the Fable and the Proverb*, ed. Pack Carnes (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), 20. See also Agnes Szemerkenyi, "The Use of Proverbs in Hungarian Folktales," *Proverbium* 7 (1990): 235-236.

<sup>170</sup> David R. Ellison, "The Place of *Carmen*," in *GEO/GRAPHIES, Mapping the Imagination in French and Francophone Literature and Film*, ed. Freeman G. Henry (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 84.

and confidently building the “trust” of the narratee.<sup>171</sup> Chamber’s broad application of the term “storyteller” in this case to any narrator who tells a story—there is no frame or scene of oral storytelling in Flaubert’s *conte*—could lead to some confusion if this observation is transferred to contexts where there is an explicit storytelling figure. However, Chambers’ point still stands. Narrators use many of the same techniques as oral storytellers, as Chambers shows later on.<sup>172</sup> Both oral storytellers and literary narrators who forgo justifications of their own authority and let their story speak for itself are often the most convincing. Yet, in “Carmen” and elsewhere, Mérimée favors narrators who vocally undermine their own authority.

Where storytellers once stood watch as *devisants* debated their story’s importance or exemplarity, Mérimée’s most famous narrators have little use for outside acceptance or rejection. Impervious to the affect and emotivity of French Romanticism, the narrators of “Carmen,” “Lokis,” and “La Vénus d’Ille” are often quick to dismiss their stories as secondary to philological and ethnographic ramblings. The narrator is detached both from the emotional impact of the story and the narrative techniques characteristic of storytelling. The result is that stories—and reflections on storytelling—appear when least expected. In “La Partie de trictrac,” the narrator comes closest to the role of storyteller at the end. Only the distance that his written retelling brings to the incomplete tale can transform it into a different story. But he falls into this role as if by chance and he never deviates from a passive narratorial relay function. The narrator of “Carmen,” on the other hand, poses as somewhat of an anti-storyteller from the start. Though he proposes to “raconter” a “petite histoire,” he violates the basic conventions of good storytelling. In his glaring inaccuracies and oversights, his narration becomes part of the spectacle. In showing how much this narrator resists the example of the storyteller, Mérimée highlights how much others embrace this model.

Both “La Partie de trictrac” and the last chapter of “Carmen” stage incongruous and unexpected dynamics between frame narrators and those who tell the framed tales. These tensions—whether they are suggested from the beginning or only arise at the very end—are generative of distance: distance from earlier literary models; distance from the overarching cultural narrative of death of tradition; cultural distance inherent in the ethnographic perspective; distance between the narrator and the reader who is left without a guide. Hippolyte Taine, in an 1874 preface to an edition of some of Mérimée’s letters, contemplates this very distance in Mérimée’s short fiction and imagines how readers in the year 2000 might see Mérimée’s narrative techniques in a different light:

Il est probable qu’en l’an 2000 on relira *la Partie de trictrac*, pour savoir ce qu’il en coûte de manquer une fois à l’honneur. Remarquez enfin que l’auteur n’intervient point pour nous faire la leçon; il s’abstient, nous laisse conclure; même et de parti pris, il s’efface jusqu’à paraître absent; les lecteurs futurs auront des égards pour un maître de maison si poli, si discret, si habile à faire les honneurs de son logis. Les bonnes manières plaisent toujours, et on ne peut rencontrer d’hôte mieux élevé. A la porte, il salue ses visiteurs, les introduit, puis se retire, les laissant libres de tout examiner et critiquer seuls;

<sup>171</sup> Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 215.

<sup>172</sup> Chambers, *Story and Situation*, 220.

il n'est pas importun, il ne se fait pas le cicerone de ses trésors, jamais on ne le prendra en flagrant délit d'amour propre.<sup>173</sup>

As Taine foresaw, the new millennium has in fact brought new readings of “La Partie de trictrac.” But his own analogy between narrating a story and receiving guests remains a powerful one. In “La Partie de trictrac,” narrator invites the readers into the story. But he quietly excuses himself, leaving his guests to explore their surroundings. In “Carmen,” the narrator never disappears. He does “nous faire la leçon,” but he does so in such a way that we are left with more questions and are invited, if not forced, to seek our own explanations. And, both “La Partie de trictrac” and “Carmen” mark a void with their last line: they have both seem to have promised something—a moral from a proverb or an end to a story—but leave this promise unfulfilled.

This distance makes us look harder for what we expect to be there and prompts us to ask why we do not find it. The explanation for Mérimée, it would seem, lies not in his text but in the readers' generic expectations that color their reading of it. We do not find what we seek simply because we have fallen into the trap of reading for something that the text will not deliver. But to take this void as devoid of meaning would be a mistake. For Mérimée, once again true to his personal motto “Souviens-toi de de te méfier,” reading is often more meaningful when it requires the reader to question his own assumptions and to experience, through the act of reading, the limitations of his own perception. Mérimée makes reading an active, not passive, pursuit. The burden of interpretation is on the reader who is, met with multiple levels of telling and retelling, is constantly reminded that reinterpretation might be necessary.

### **Barbey d'Aureville: The Storyteller, the Salon, and Conversational Ricochets**

If Mérimée is usually considered the master of the early nineteenth-century French short story, he is by no means alone in experimenting with the genre and its relation to orality. While only a few years younger than Mérimée, Barbey d'Aureville (1808-1889) published his most famous tales in the 1850s and onward, after Mérimée's main works of the 1830s and 1840s. A right-leaning critic, novelist, and short story writer, Barbey disparaged post-Revolutionary politics, professed a conservative brand of Catholicism and demonstrated a fascination with all forms of debauchery. Barbey was not involved in the study of *traditions populaires*, but his nostalgia for the past is more explicit than Mérimée's.

Modern critics freely bestow the title “conteur” on Barbey. He, like Mérimée and Maupassant, excelled more in short fiction than he did the novel.<sup>174</sup> But Barbey also claimed the term “conteur”—and its oral implications—for himself. If he lived by his pen, Barbey believed that he was at his most creative when he verbally told, not wrote, his stories. As Petit notes in

<sup>173</sup> Hippolyte Taine, “Introduction,” in *Lettres à une inconnue. Précédées d'une étude sur Mérimée par H. Taine* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1874), xxxi.

<sup>174</sup> For an application of the literary term *conteur* to Barbey as regards his propensity for short fiction, see Andrée Hirschi, “Barbey 'conteur',” *Revue des lettres modernes* (1969): 7-30. See also Timothy Unwin, “Barbey d'Aureville conteur: discours et narration dans 'Les Diaboliques',” *Neophilologus* 72, no. 3 (1988): 353-365.

the preface to the *Pléaide* edition of Barbey's works, Barbey craved the simultaneous but sometimes subtle audience feedback that comes only with a live storytelling:

L'art de Barbey d'Aureville est—tout le monde l'a dit—d'un conteur plus que d'un romancier. [...] Plus qu'écrire, il aime parler. Le plaisir qu'il a le plus constamment préféré est celui de la conversation où il excellait, exécutant à lui seul des “sonates de conversations” pour le bonheur de voir sur le visage de ses auditeurs le reflet de sa propre parole. [...] Il lui est arrivé de préférer la réputation de salon—parce qu'il la goûtait plus immédiatement—à la vraie gloire, de préférer charmer quelques auditeurs que ses lecteurs.<sup>175</sup>

Remembering a particular moment of oral improvisation, Barbey himself once lamented: “Victor-Antoine, beau sujet à écrire, mais jamais je ne l'écrirai comme je l'ai parlé l'autre soir chez la baronne de M(aistre).”<sup>176</sup> Barbey not only thought about storytelling as something that belonged to another sphere; he thought about it in relation to writing.

Though even Barbey's novels sometimes used storytelling topoi, it is his most famous work, *Les Diaboliques*, that is most notable for its writing of orality. The six short stories of this collection are united not only by their investigation of women's evil but also by their conversation style that sometime gives way to vertiginous layers of storytelling frames. While Barbey continued working on *Les Diaboliques* until right before their publication in 1874, he was already making plans for the collection when he described it with a different title in an 1850 letter:

Le volume aurait pour titre général *Ricochets de conversation* et contiendrait six nouvelles, toutes dédiées et portant en tête leurs dédicaces. J'écris ces Nouvelles en ce moment, car je suis l'homme de plusieurs *lièvres* et mes cartons sont aussi pleins de choses commencées que ceux de *Léonard de Vinci*. J'ai *ses défauts à défaut de son génie*. Plusieurs de ces Nouvelles paraîtront peut-être dans *la Mode*, mais non toutes, car il y en aura de trop fortement alcoolisées pour les liseuses blanches et roses de *la Mode*.<sup>177</sup>

Writing for the periodic press was nothing unusual for Barbey whose fiction, even novels, were often serialized. The first of these *Ricochets de conversations*, “Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist” appeared in *La Mode* in May of 1850, having been rejected by *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. Barbey was enraged by the alterations made to his text, now “absurdement coupé, *guillontiné*” into parts for serialized publication. Only one other *Diabolique* appeared as a *feuilleton*: “Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan” in *La Situation* in 1867.<sup>178</sup> Barbey sensed correctly that these stories would be too scandalous for the certain publication venues. Though the author insisted that each story broached a serious moral problem, his detractors wanted to see his work formally condemned for indecency. Their case against Barbey was dismissed in January of 1875, but he did not reprint his collection until 1882.

<sup>175</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), xxxix.

<sup>176</sup> Barbey d'Aureville, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, xxxix.

<sup>177</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Lettres à Trebutien*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Paris: Blaziot, 1908), 16. Qtd. in Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 1275.

<sup>178</sup> Jacques Petit, “Notice,” in *Œuvres romanesques complètes de Barbey d'Aureville* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 1289. For additional information about the publication history of individual *Diaboliques*, see Jacques Petit, “Le Manuscrit des *Diaboliques*,” *Revue des lettres modernes* 600-604 (1981): 53.

If conversational ricochets crisscross all six *Diaboliques*, they rebound most forcefully in “Le Dessous de cartes d’une partie de whist,” itself originally titled “Ricochets de conversation.” In this *Diabolique*, probably the most famous of Barbey’s collection, the storyteller is particularly prominent, and the narrator’s and audience members’ reflections on his craft are most pronounced. The framed tale, related by the storyteller in the Baronesse de Mascranny’s salon, has all the makings of a good story. A mysterious stranger, the master *whisteur* Marmor de Karkoël arrives in noble circles still reeling from the Revolution. His affair with the Comtesse de Stasseville becomes public knowledge only after his departure. After the Comtesse’s death, the discovery of a slain newborn child in the Comtesse’s flower planter raises further suspicions. The storyteller, who remembers seeing Karkoël conceal a vial of liquid in a large ring, does more than leave the audience wondering if either Mme de Stasseville or her daughter Herminie were Karkoël’s victims—or the mother of his child. He closes with a series of questions so inconclusive that he leaves the audience to contemplate if his “story” was actually a story at all. Did the Comtesse poison her own daughter and then fall victim to her lover Marmor de Karkël? Did he poison them both? Did either of them bear his child? The number of possible solutions to the mystery is staggering.

Within this convoluted plot, Barbey inserts frequent laments for times past—and their vanishing storytelling and conversational practices. Peter Brooks, in his article “The Storyteller” has focused on orality as an object of nostalgia both in literary texts by the likes of Balzac or Barbey and in Walter Benjamin’s eponymous essay to which he responds.<sup>179</sup> But studies of storytelling in the nineteenth century, even insightful ones like Brooks’, could still gain from a clear delineation between ethnographic reality and cultural narratives about tradition. Nostalgia often implies an *idealized* past, not an objective view of history. The very notion of orality, as mourned by writers, folklorists, or even government officials, is itself filtered through the nineteenth-century imagination—and is, therefore, perhaps not as far-removed from literature as Brooks sometimes makes it seem.<sup>180</sup> Descriptions of salon storytellers are no more to be taken as documentary accounts of historical fact than literary renderings of peasant *veillées*.

With these caveats, however, nostalgia remains a useful lens through which to view elements Barbey’s work. In its etymological origins, for example, “nostalgia” has pathological associations as a disease of acute longing. Barbey’s nostalgia is symptomatic of another medical metaphor: the death of the storyteller. Both of these metaphors often invite a search for the author’s proposed remedy for the perceived malady—a rush to identify textual strategies that compensate for this loss or assuage this longing, even if only for the fleeting moment of literary consumption. In the case of Barbey’s “Le Dessous de cartes,” for example, critics repeatedly cite Barbey’s insistence on orality and use of storytelling frames as attempts to restore or recover storytelling of times past.<sup>181</sup> This rhetoric of “reclaiming” dangerously borders on the implication that this loss was a historical fact and that a certain kind of writing manages to snatch

<sup>179</sup> Brooks, “The Storyteller,” 21-38.

<sup>180</sup> “But what needs explanation, or at least exploration,” Peter Brooks writes, “is the survival of this oral tradition in the literary culture of the nineteenth century and in texts that have nothing to do with the fantastic or the infantile, with the *veillée* or the circle of storytellers” (“The Storyteller,” 22).

<sup>181</sup> Brooks’ claims about restoration of a lost communicative situation in literature are nuanced by his acknowledgement of ways that writers like Barbey and Balzac also point to the impossibility of this recovery. See Brooks, “The Storyteller,” esp. 36. The difficulty arises when subsequent critics echo this claim of restoration without the nuance.

orality, though not unscathed, from the menacing jaws of modernity. It also risks obscuring the very innovations at the heart of Barbey's enterprise.

Undeniably, Barbey does tease the reader with indications that his stories will provide scenes of storytelling and conversation—increasingly rare in literature as in life. Brooks situates short story writers' insistence on orality as a “challenge” to the novel that foreshadows generic changes to come. Recent genre criticism, like a 2003 article by Karen Humphreys, has considered the forces of generic transformation already at work in *Les Diaboliques* and how Barbey spotlights broader problems of formal innovation through these individual stories.<sup>182</sup> More specifically, I would argue that Barbey experiments with the genre of the short story in relation to orality—orality both as a mode of communication represented in literature and orality as the object of a cultural narrative of loss. “Le Dessous de cartes” is built around a continual tug-of-war between the written and the oral, between the traditional and the innovative, and between the reader's expectations or desire to hear a story and the unexpected directions the texts takes. But the interest of these dueling forces is not in which direction wins but in the multitudinous new directions which emerge from their frictions. From fragments of orality and ruins of dated literary conventions, Barbey seeks less to preserve something old than to create something new. The result is a vision for the short story—and perhaps for literature in general—that uses orality and storytelling on literary terms and for literary ends.

In “Le Dessous de cartes,” storytelling may not be explicitly shown as dying, but other forms of orality are. The Baroness de Mascranny's salon stands as a notable exception, a hold-out of times past. The narrator hails “le soin véritablement héroïque que la baronne prend de la conversation, cette fille expirante des aristocraties oisives et des monarchies absolues” (172). Keeping with political metaphors, the salon-goers, few and fading, seek refuge in her salon from the ravages of the nineteenth century, much like nobles once sought refuge from the Revolution in the town of Coblenz:

Avec l'esprit et les manières de son nom, la baronne de Mascranny a fait de son salon une espèce de Coblenz délicieux où s'est réfugiée la conversation d'autrefois, la dernière gloire de l'esprit français, forcé d'émigrer devant les mœurs utilitaires et occupées de notre temps. C'est là que chaque soir, jusqu'à ce qu'il se taise tout à fait, il chante divinement son chant de cygne. Là, comme dans les rares maisons de Paris où l'on a conservé les grandes traditions de la causerie, on ne carre guère de phrases, et le monologue est à peu près inconnu. Rien n'y rappelle l'article du journal et le discours politique, ces deux moules si vulgaires de la pensée, au dix-neuvième siècle.<sup>183</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> “One can argue that the collection could be read as a metatext for the very process of transforming literary genres—not only the genres of the epigram and the lapidary, as argued in this essay. Barbey also experiments with the short story genre, with oral tradition (*Ricochets de conversation*), autobiography and even *tombeau*.” (Karen Humphreys, “Dandyism, Gems, and Epigrams: Lapidary Style and Genre Transformation in Barbey's *Les Diaboliques*,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 31, no. 3 & 4 [2003]: 269). A *tombeau* marked the death of a notable person. Once a musical genre, the *tombeau* often took poetic form in the nineteenth-century. Mallarmé, for example, wrote such poems for Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire.

<sup>183</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Les Diaboliques* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 172. Unless otherwise noted, all citation from *Les Diaboliques* are from this edition and will henceforth be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

Barbey faults political currents for fostering a commodification and debasement of literary and rhetorical forms. Unlike wit and refined conversation, newspapers and political speeches target an audience of the masses and aim to sell a product or an idea in the immediate. Both are dependent on post-Revolution technical or political developments. And both are to some extent dependent on market demands since politicians are now beholden to the people.

In this stark condemnation of nineteenth-century morals and literary trends, there is a convergence of the two factors that Jacques Petit considers most salient in the genesis of *Les Diaboliques*: “l’influence de Balzac et la réaction de Barbey contre son époque.”<sup>184</sup> Indeed, in 1832, Balzac had opened his short story “Une Conversation entre onze heures et minuit” with a strikingly similar evocation of disappearing oral practices:

Ce salon est le dernier asile où se soit réfugié l’esprit français d’autrefois, avec sa profondeur cachée, ses mille détours, sa politesse exquise. Là vous trouverez encore quelque spontanéité dans les cœurs, de l’abandon, de la générosité dans les idées. Nul ne pense à garder sa pensée pour un drame, ne voit des livres dans un récit. Personne ne vous apporte le hideux squelette de la littérature, à propos d’une saillie heureuse ou d’un sujet intéressant.<sup>185</sup>

Barbey, who had enthusiastically read much of Balzac’s work, likely had this passage in mind when crafting “Le Dessous de cartes.” Though writing at different times, Barbey and Balzac both posit a temporal proximity to the demise of a certain form of orality, much like folklorists throughout the ages have done when faced with a seemingly imminent demise of popular traditions. Lamenting the state of print culture and decrying serialized fiction or journalism was somewhat of a pastime for nineteenth-century writers faced with an uneasiness about their craft’s allegiance to market demands. Théophile Gautier, Villiers de Lisle Adam, and Guy de Maupassant all took their stab at the very medium that ensured their livelihood.<sup>186</sup> In terms of oral practices, newspapers meant that stories, intrigues, or wit that were once the stuff of salon conversation or lived exchange could be subsumed into print, *feuilletons*, and market circulation. And Balzac’s and Barbey’s narrators—with their “hideux squelette de la littérature” and “moules si vulgaires de la pensée, au dix-neuvième siècle”—set their salon refuges—and their literary texts—apart from this commodification. This becomes more explicit when Balzac reworks his salon description from “Une Conversation” to introduce a different of salon scene in “Autre Étude de femme” (1842). Here, Balzac concludes “Enfin le hideux squelette d’une littérature aux abois ne se dresse point, à propos d’une saillie heureuse ou d’un sujet intéressant.”<sup>187</sup> “Une littérature” is a reminder that the model Balzac disparages is but one and that others are possible.

For both Barbey and Balzac, salon storytelling and conversation, though different, both stand in opposition to utilitarian mores and market-driven literary models. But in practical terms, storytelling, where one person speaks and others listen, is not a particularly conversational

---

<sup>184</sup> Petit, “Notice,” 1274. On Barbey’s interest in this and other tales by Balzac, see also David Bellos, “Barbey d’Aureville et les pensées de Balzac,” *Revue des lettres modernes* 10 (1977): 115-124. Peter Brooks addresses Balzac’s awareness of the industrialization of print and his persistent interest in oral communication (“The Storyteller,” 22). Though no doubt possible, a study of orality, the storyteller, and Balzacian narrators is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

<sup>185</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Nouvelles et contes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 1:1111.

<sup>186</sup> Théophile Gautier, “Après le feuilleton,” in *Émaux et Camées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 111. Maupassant, *Bel-Ami*, esp 53. Adam, “Deux Augures,” 74-90.

<sup>187</sup> Balzac, *Nouvelles et contes*, 2: 1303-1304.

endeavor. In “Autre Étude de femme,” Balzac suggests that one of the traits of fine conversation is not only its multiplicity of voices but also its multiplicity of forms, “cette profusion de pensées, de formules, de contes, de documents historiques” that wit weaves through conversation like a winding river. In the next paragraph, Balzac describes the conversation of this particular evening, now conversation “devenue conteuse.”<sup>188</sup> The four tales that follow—taken from earlier published texts featuring women, their sufferings, and the sufferings they inflict—are each told by a different character. Conversation continues, mostly before and after each one. Conversation prompts the storytelling scene and helps to make sense of the stories told. But conversation also gives rise to a need for literary structures that can account for it.

Therefore, part of Balzac’s immediate influence on Barbey’s *Diaboliques* might be in questioning the very relationship between conversation and storytelling. Literature is perhaps one of the few places that storytelling is *not* a dialogic or interactive process. Even when an oral story is complete, it never stands alone, almost always existing simultaneously with interruptions, chance occurrences, audience reactions, or the storyteller’s own gestures or vocal nuances. Where Balzac may have a back-and-forth between storytelling and conversation, Barbey pushes the structural envelope and attempts to superimpose the two. The conversation never yields to the storytelling. The rules of the game, Barbey seems to suggest, are changing—and perhaps were never valid to begin with.

In the opening line of “Le Dessous de cartes,” an anonymous first person narrator plunges the reader into the convoluted world of conversational echoes: “J’étais un soir de l’été dernier, chez la baronne de Mascranny, une des femmes de Paris qui aiment le plus l’esprit comme on en avait autrefois [...]”<sup>189</sup> Both the past tense and the reference to “last summer” establish a temporal distance between the narrator and the events he is about to recount. The narrator introduces the storyteller through his own hesitations about why one person would monopolize salon conversation—hesitations that quickly disappear:

Quand j’eus reconnu celui qui parlait, je ne m’étonnai ni de cette attention, —qui n’était plus seulement une grâce octroyée par la grâce, ... —ni de l’audace de qui gardait ainsi la parole plus longtemps qu’on n’avait coutume de le faire, dans ce salon d’un ton si exquis.

En effet, c’était le plus étincelant causeur de ce royaume de la causerie. Si ce n’est pas son nom, voilà son titre! (174)

While the superlatives that this “étincelant causeur” merits allow him to freely transgress conversational conventions, they do not protect him or his story from excessive interruption that transgresses generic conventions. Conversation and commentary, once reserved for *devisants* who had listened to a tale, now precede the telling, take the form of protests against the tale, or are simultaneous and superimposed onto the story. An unpredictable stream of comments from the audience replaces the expected alternation between the frame and the story. Gone are the “lois du divertissement” upon which Princesse Aurélie had once structured her ladies’ seventeenth-century storytelling ventures in Segrais’s famed *Nouvelles Françaises*. Gone are the time constraints of Balzac’s sixty minutes of storytelling in “Une Conversation entre onze heures et minuit” and orderly exchange of stories between salon-goers. The most traditional of storytelling scenes—a circle of attentive listeners—proves the most disruptive.

<sup>188</sup> Balzac, *Nouvelles et contes*, 2: 1303-1304.

<sup>189</sup> Barbey d’Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques*, 171. Unless otherwise noted, all citation from *Les Diaboliques* are from this edition and will henceforth be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

Time after time, Barbey returns to something familiar only to take it in a new direction. For example, narratorial disclaimers about the insurmountable gulf between the written and the oral were a literary commonplace in earlier frame narratives—frame narratives that pre-date nineteenth-century discourses on modernity and whose most basic conventions Barbey undoubtedly violates.<sup>190</sup> In “Le Dessous de cartes,” the narrator’s laudatory introduction of the storyteller’s tale seems reminiscent of these earlier frame narratives:

Il raconta ce qui va suivre. Mais pourrai-je rappeler, sans l’affaiblir, ce récit, nuancé par la voix et le geste, et surtout faire ressortir le contre-coup de l’impression qu’il produisit sur toutes les personnes rassemblées dans l’atmosphère sympathique de ce salon? (177)

For some critics, this deferential nod to the inherent expressivity of the oral announces an attempt to faithfully reproduce its nuances:

Both [Barbey and the narrator in “Le Dessous de cartes”] fear that the spontaneous interaction between storyteller and listener as well as the richness of the spoken word, nuanced by intonation and gestures, are lost in their written versions. The challenge of Barbey’s narrators therefore consists in avoiding this loss. They hope to achieve this primarily by giving their written text the same dialogical structure that characterizes the conversation situation in the salon.<sup>191</sup>

Certainly, Barbey’s narrator acknowledges that an audience member’s grimace is as much a part of a storytelling performance as a surprise ending. Rather than seeking to avoid a loss, Barbey presents a text that proclaims its own written status. In this passage, Barbey’s most explicit innovation lies in phrasing his disclaimer as a question. He indirectly invites the reader to judge the text, all the while emphasizing that the reader, who did not witness the audience’s reactions or hear the original story as the first-person narrator did, could never have the requisite knowledge to determine if this written rendering did justice to the moment of storytelling.

Instead of staging a frame audience to give the reader a faithful proxy within the text and a sense of proximity to the narrative exchange, Barbey underscores the reader’s isolation and dependence on print. At times, the reader is left out of the loop because the narrator simply doesn’t have a certain bit of information or doesn’t provide it in time. He intercepts listeners’ comments or the storyteller’s story mid-sentence. In fact, the storyteller’s voice is introduced with an ellipsis, a void: “...Les plus beaux romans de la vie,—disait-il quand je m’établis sur mes coussin de canapé, à l’abri des épaules de la comtesse de Damnaglia, —sont des réalités qu’on a touchées du coude, ou même du pied, en passant” (175). This typographic indication of an incomplete start reminds us that ricochets of conversation are not tales that start with “once upon a time,” and proceed uninterrupted to a “happily ever after” ending. The trajectory of the tale is unpredictable. Ellipses abound, though it is not always clear whether they mark an omission or simply a trailing off of the speaker’s voice. Not only do audience member’s interruptions frustrate the reader for whom the story is delayed, but the narrator’s own commentaries also bisect sentences (e.g., 182; 183).

<sup>190</sup> For example, the author figure / narrator of Segrais’s seventeenth-century frame narrative joins in this chorus of written nods to the oral: “Je fus fort attentive à son discours et, quelque temps après, j’écrivis cette histoire le plus conformément que je pus à ce que j’eus l’honneur de lui entendre dire. Je ne puis jeter les yeux sur ce récit sans confesser que je lui ai fait perdre beaucoup de ses grâces” (Segrais, *Les nouvelles françaises*, 1:23).

<sup>191</sup> Susanne Roszbach, “Dandyism in the Literary Works of Barbey d’Aurevilly: Ideology, Gender, and Narration,” *Modern Language Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 92.

In short, Barbey makes fundamental differences between telling a story, reading story, and hearing a story an essential part of his story. At a key moment when we begin to wonder about the mysterious relationship between *whisteur* Marmor de Karkoël and Mme Trembly de Stasseville, the storyteller launches into an elaborate description of the large diamond the countess is wearing. “Eh! eh! qu’est-ce qui brille?,” asks the le chevalier de Tharsis. At the same time, another salon-goer asks a seeming different but simultaneous question:

—Et, qui est-ce qui tousse? —dit simultanément le marquis de Saint-Albans, tiré par une toux horriblement mate de sa préoccupation de joueur, en se retournant vers Herminie, qui brodait une collerette à sa mère.

—C’est mon diamant et c’est ma fille, —fit la comtesse du Tremblay avec un sourire de ses lèvres minces, en répondant à tous les deux. (208)

The possible significance of this gem only becomes evident a few pages later when the storyteller remembers having previously seen de Karkoël furtively pouring an Indian poison into a concealed container within a large ring. He then tells how he learned several years after the fact of the mysterious deaths of the Comtesse and her daughter when the chevalier de Tharsis’s told him a story about the body of an infant found in a flower planter in the Comtesse’s salon. As Peter Brooks and others have remarked, the simple conjunction “et” in the Comtesse’s remark “C’est mon diamant et c’est ma fille” proves ambiguous in establishing a relationship, casual or otherwise, between her ring and her daughter.<sup>192</sup> But her response goes a long way in setting out the relationship between the written and the spoken. The questions the Comtesse answers were raised in two separate though *simultaneously* uttered comments. Even the storyteller’s oral recounting cannot render them as he heard them—at the same time—for he must speak them in succession. Both the listener and the reader share some disadvantages. But a written rendering of the oral is yet another degree removed from the original.

Distance, therefore, becomes an operative term. Balzac’s narrator in “Une Conversation entre onze heures et minuit” gestures towards “la distance qui se trouve entre la parole et l’écrit” in his introductory remarks.<sup>193</sup> Unlike many earlier writers, Barbey does not attempt to bridge this distance but to embrace it—translating it into his style and structure, creating other distances along the way. By distancing the reader from the fictional listener and by distancing the listeners—and, arguably, even the storyteller—from the story, Barbey creates a model for short fiction that offers a very different perspective on telling, writing, and reading. It might therefore, seem that Barbey’s text asserts its own inconsequentiality: the purported death certain forms of orality means that fictional listeners are consuming a story in a way that is no longer practically relevant for real readers. And these fictional listeners are, themselves receiving a highly mediated version of what the narrator witnessed last summer when a storyteller recounted what he had seen many years ago, what he had himself had been told many years after that, and what he has never been able to find out. But the oral, be it conversation or storytelling, remains a fact of life—and of writing. Barbey does not incriminate the written, whose future and relevance is assured, but adds another unknown card to the game of reading by raising generic expectations of conventional storytelling but always leaving them unfulfilled. It is as if he delights in pointing his readers in another direction, to say “See, there is another way,” or in greeting them with silences that can only take form in relation to the rest of the equally fragmented text.

<sup>192</sup> Brooks, “The Storyteller,” 31.

<sup>193</sup> Balzac, *Nouvelles et contes*, 1112.

When the written falls short or orality breaks apart, Barbey creates not a void but a space for rethinking the roles of readers, authors, narrators, listeners, and storytellers. Readers must map themselves onto to this jumbled terrain of orality. They see in the audience their own desire to hear a story, but they are constantly forced to step back from the text. Barbey may nostalgically look towards the past, but he writes in the present. He does not ask what comes next; he quietly creates literature that *is* what comes next. Instead of apologizing for the limitations of the written, he uses them to create artful echoes of orality. He shows that written storytelling can exist on its own terrain, without being justified by orality—or by the stiff literary conventions that purport to reproduce it. And he implicitly suggests that interruptions, digressions, echoes, and narrative dead-ends, shunned by earlier literary conventions, are actually the stuff of real world storytelling—a point that notably resurfaces in another *Diabolique*, “Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan” (1867).

Like “Le Dessous de cartes,” “Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan” has its own share of unknowns and voids—which, in this case, make the substance of the story itself. The premise is simple: twelve former mistresses of a certain Jules-Amédée-Hector de Ravila de Ravilès summon their “Don Juan” into a *boudoir* to have dinner and tell the story of his greatest love. The structure, however, is complex: one frame opens onto another in a way that critics often liken to Russian dolls or nesting boxes. The story opens midway through a conversation in which the narrator describes Ravila’s account of this unusual dinner party. Only later in the conversation does the narrator remember, as somewhat of an afterthought, to clue the reader into the identity of his interlocutor, the marquise: “Ce que je venais de dire à la vieille marquise Guy de Ruy était l’exacte vérité,” (87). The narrator then continues the story that his friend Ravila, Don Juan as he is nicknamed, has told him. Don Juan prolongs his introduction as long as possible and savoring the power he has over each woman who listens impatiently to see if she will be remembered as his greatest love. Ultimately, his greatest love is not a love that he even experienced, but one that he inspired and learns about only after the fact in the third party account of a former lover of his, a certain marquise. One evening, the marquise’s daughter sits in a chair from which Don Juan has just risen. Convinced that the traces of his body heat leave her carrying his child, she tells her confessor of her sullied state. The fumbling and embarrassed priest manages to recount the “confession” to the girl’s the mother who tells the story to Ravila years later, after her daughter’s death. Literarily and figuratively it is a tale of emptiness: the pregnancy is but a figment of the girl’s imagination; the “story” is hardly about love at all.

While this brief tale is not as well known as “Le Dessous de cartes,” it pushes to an extreme certain structural and stylistic innovations that are present but less visible in other *Diaboliques*. “Si tout récit de Barbey raconte une quête du savoir à partir d’indices matériels, le ‘le Plus bel amour de Don Juan,’ où ces derniers sont réduits au minimum, est la plus audevillienne de ses œuvres,”<sup>194</sup> concludes Nabih Kanbar. There is no enigma. But it takes a dizzying accumulation of layers, frames, and narrative voices to arrive at this point where neither a story nor a child is conceived. The structure of “Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan” is somewhat of a narratological playground, its labyrinthine intricacies lending themselves nicely to charts or

---

<sup>194</sup> Nabih Kanbar, “Évolution de la figure du témoin dans *Les Diaboliques*,” in *Barbey d’Aureville: cent ans après (1889-1989)*, ed. Philippe Berthier (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 287.

diagrams.<sup>195</sup> Barbey's narrative creates—or deliberately refuses to create—meaning from these rapid shifts between frames, narrators, and naratees. Yet, investigations of *how* he accomplishes this structural feat say little about *why* he would endeavor it in the first place.

Short fiction often relies on the *non-dit* for concision: things are known but go unstated. Barbey, on the other hand, seems to delight in non-stories: there is nothing to tell because nothing is known (“Le Dessous de cartes”) or because nothing happened (“Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan”). In other words, an inability to exchange experiences—what Walter Benjamin considers one of the gravest causalities of modernity and the downfall of storytelling—becomes the very substance of Barbey's stories. For Barbey, absence, incompleteness, and ambiguity offer aesthetic possibilities of their own and, indeed, take literary storytelling story to new heights. In a famous analogy in “Le Dessous de cartes,” he suggests that merely glimpsing hell would be more terrifying than beholding the totality of its horrors:

Ce qui sort de ces drames cachés, étouffés, que j'appellerai presque à transpiration rentrée, est plus sinistre, et d'un effet plus poignant sur l'imagination et sur le souvenir, que si le drame tout entier s'était déroulé sous vos yeux. Ce qu'on ne sait pas centuple l'impression de ce qu'on sait. Me trompé-je? Mais je me figure que l'enfer, vu par un soupirail, devrait être plus effrayant que si, d'un seul et planant regard, on pouvait l'embrasser tout entier. (175)

Both the spectator surveying hell through a small window and the listener or observer of one of life's dramas use their own imagination to fill in the blanks, personalizing the spectacle and imprinting it in their memory. Similarly, the multitude of things unknown or unspoken at the end of “Le Dessous de cartes” gives the story power:

—Quel aimable dessous de cartes ont vos parties de whist! —dit la baronne de Saint-Albiti, joueuse comme une vieille ambassadrice. —C'est très vrai ce que vous disiez. À moitié montré il fait plus d'impression que si l'on avait retourné toutes les cartes et qu'on eût vu tout ce qu'il y avait dans le jeu. [...]  
—Ah! —dit passionnément Mlle Sophie de Revistal, —il en est également de la musique et de la vie. Ce qui fait l'expression de l'une et de l'autre, ce sont les silences bien plus que les accords. (221-222)

Ultimately, voids or narrative blind spots do not stifle the story. Instead, these silences prolong it, like rests in music, allowing it to resonate with the audience's own speculations.

In this light, Barbey's reversal of the dynamics of frame narrative is even more radical than it seems on the surface. It is almost as if the mere possibility of a story becomes a pretext for the frame. While the audience craves a story, the storyteller does not hide that he might not be able to satisfy their curiosity. In “Le Dessous de cartes,” the storyteller disassembles from the beginning the very rhetoric of eye-witness accounts on which the telling of even the most unbelievable tales is usually predicated. It is not by direct observation or even recent gossip that the storyteller comes by these details: “Je me suis arrêté sur cette première soirée d'un séjour qui dura plusieurs années. Je n'y étais pas; mais elle m'a été racontée par un de mes parents plus âgé que moi [...].” (189). The storyteller makes no attempt to conceal the gaps in his story:

---

<sup>195</sup> See, for example, Andrea Calì, “Stratégies narratives dans *Les Diaboliques*,” in *La narration et le sens: études sur Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Maupassant et Balzac* (Lecce: Milella, 1986), 7-75.

Moi qui vous parle, j'ai vu dans mon enfance... non, vu n'est pas le mot! j'ai deviné, pressenti, un de ces drames cruels, terribles, qui ne se jouent pas en public, quoique le public en voie les acteurs tous les jours [...] (175)

What he narrates is wholly believable but not wholly known to him. The most basic of the storyteller's resources—*what* he has seen and heard—now takes second stage to *how* he narrates what he does—or does not—know. The short story that was once the leading literary host for uninterrupted, plot-driven stories that could only exist in the controlled environment of writing. Now, in Barbey's hands, the short story seems to forgo even the mandate for plot, creating new relationships between readers, listeners, tellers, and writers.

Some nineteenth-century writers turn to storytelling to give an illusion of unmediated communication or to nostalgically enact a live exchange of stories. Barbey, on the other hand, willingly highlights how very mediated his snippets of conversation and stories really are. Writing cannot reproduce the intonations and simultaneous utterances of orality. But once the short story stops apologizing for these shortcomings, another possibility emerges: creating a *feeling* of orality, and this, somewhat ironically, through stories largely divested of the sentimental, emotional content of characters' own feelings. Balzac's narrator had hinted at this in "Autre Étude de femme" by seeking to convey the "charm" of the evening precisely by preserving some of the spontaneity and even imperfections of oral exchanges:

Jamais le phénomène oral qui, bien étudié, bien manié, fait la puissance de l'acteur et du conteur, ne m'avait si complètement ensorcelé. Je ne fus pas seul soumis à ces prestiges, et nous passâmes tous une soirée délicieuse. La conversation, devenue conteuse, entraîna dans son cours précipité de curieuses confidences, plusieurs portraits, mille folies, qui rendent cette ravissante improvisation tout à fait intraduisible; mais en laissant à ces choses leur verdeur, leur abrupt naturel, leurs fallacieuses sinuosités, peut-être comprendrez-vous bien le charme d'une véritable soirée française, prise au moment où la familiarité la plus douce fait oublier à chacun ses intérêts, son amour-propre spécial, ou, si vous voulez, ses prétentions.<sup>196</sup>

For Barbey, too, there is always an implicit suggestion that "reproducing" orality actually means delivering a fractured, hybrid product, allowing the reader, like fictional audience, to hear things only bit by bit—if at all.

Another visible innovation in "Le Plus Bel Amour" is that Barbey refuses not only the didactic model of short fiction that demands a moral; he also resists plot, the most obvious ingredient for any narrative. What holds his stories together is not the end but the struggle to reach to this void—a struggle that never surfaces in Mérimée's "La Partie de trictrac" in which generic conventions are only violated at the last minute. Barbey seems to say from the beginning that fiction can be as much about the telling as about the story and as much about the experience of listening as the end point. As Peter Brooks shows in *Reading for the Plot*, desire for plot or "narrative desire" extends to the narratization of history or personal experience. Plot, in this light, is a means of converting events or observations into an understandable form from which meaning can be made. If a refusal of plot is nothing new in the twenty first century, it was more remarkable in Barbey's day. Instead of a utilitarian end-driven approach to storytelling, Barbey privileges the means over the end. In "Le Plus Bel Amour," for example, the succession of frames occupies more than two thirds of the text. And when the story finally emerges, it not only

<sup>196</sup> Balzac, *Nouvelles et contes*, 2: 1305.

ends with a literal absence in an imagined pregnancy but it also leaves unfulfilled the desires—narrative and otherwise—of the women who requested it.

Brooks uses another classic storytelling text, the *Arabian Nights*, to illustrate how narrative desires and other desires can overlap, often in stories themselves about desire, like “Le Plus Bel Amour.” Simply put, in the *Arabian Nights*, the sultan’s desires are unchecked. He marries a new woman every night and has her killed in the morning. When Schéhérazade marries him, she slowly redirects his desires into a desire for narrative.<sup>197</sup> This may not be a particularly original reading of the *Nights*, but it offers a useful reference point within Brooks’ argument. As opposed to narratology, which offers a largely static view of a text, Brooks focuses on “plotting,” the means by which an author moves a plot forward and keeps a reader turning pages. Schéhérazade exemplifies this forward motion and sustained narrative desire as her storytelling is regulated by the predictable rhythms of night and day. In “Le Plus Bel Amour,” on the other hand, Barbey moves the text forward not by moving the plot but by spotlighting the listener’s desires for a story:

Il avait souligné, par inflexion, le mot d’*imprudence* comme eût fait le plus habile acteur et en homme qui savait que tout l’intérêt de son histoire ne tenait plus qu’au fil de ce mot-là!

Mais cela suffisait apparemment, car ces douze beaux visages de femmes s’étaient renflammés d’un sentiment aussi intense que les visages des Chérubins devant le trône de Dieu. Est-ce que le sentiment de la curiosité chez les femmes n’est pas aussi intense que le sentiment de l’adoration chez les Anges?... (104-105)

The very particular storytelling scene in “Le Plus Bel Amour” quite explicitly aligns a feminine desire for plot with more intimate desires. The women are not sitting around a fireplace but in a bedroom. Each waits in vain to hear a story that will crown her Don Juan’s greatest love.

In essence, Barbey makes narrative desire a major part of the storyline and spectacle. Like in Mérimée’s “La Partie de trictrac” that begs to be read on the larger level of the story of an incomplete story, Barbey could be seen as telling the story of unsatisfied narrative desires. Even without the sexual overtones of “Le Plus Bel Amour,” “Le Dessous de cartes” spotlights the audience’s emotional involvement in the story:

Ici, encore, le conteur s’arrêta. Il n’avait plus besoin de se presser. Il nous tenait tous sous la griffe de son récit. Peut-être tout le mérite de son histoire était-il dans sa manière de la raconter... Quand il se tut, on entendit, dans le silence du salon, aller et venir les respirations. Moi, qui allongeais mes regards par-dessus mon rempart d’albâtre, l’épaule de la comtesse de Damnaglia, je vis l’émotion marbrer de ses nuances diverses tous ces visages. (214)

The emphasis on the storyteller’s way of telling a story (“sa manière de la raconter”) suggests that maybe the sole merit of his performance lies in his dandy-like delivery. He privileges not the content but the performative process. But this also begs an analogous question for literature and literary short stories: might their value also lie in their artful telling? With storytellers who consistently refuse to succumb to the audience’s desires or demands for plots, Barbey’s suggests that his short stories are becoming autonomous art products. They exist—and thrive—outside of

---

<sup>197</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 60-61.

these rules. In this new world of the *literary* short story as a *literary* product, the storyteller is not dying but simply evolving to exist in service of the telling and not the story.

It is interesting to note that in both “Le Dessous de cartes” and “Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan,” the storyteller keeps the narrative upper hand. Ravila provokes the exasperation of his listeners, but still commands their attention and desire. He reveals that the young girl who had thought herself with child died years later. An incomplete utterance ends the story with yet another void: “– Sans cela!... fit la duchesse songeuse.” It is as if, lost in thought, she never finishes her sentence. The initial frame of the narrator and the marquise’s conversation never returns. We know, however, from the narrator’s prefatory remarks that, true to his Don Juan identity, the storyteller leaves the *boudoir* with something to boast about: how he taunted his audience by telling a “non-story.” In “Le Dessous de cartes,” the enigma remains unresolved, but the story still has the power to provoke silent shivers or the Baroness de Mascranny’s vocal declaration in the last line that she will never again wear her favorite flower again because of its associations with the events of the story. The storyteller is like the master *whisteur*. He has carefully played his cards that he has and quits while he is ahead.

In this light, a comparison with Balzac’s *Sarrasine* (1830) would seem natural. In *Sarrasine*, the story is complete, yet the contract is a failure precisely because of the story’s completion. Disgusted by what the story reveals, Madame de Rochefide refuses the favors she had promised in return for its telling. There is no more to say nor would she want to hear it if there were more: “Assez!” she exclaims. Peter Brooks notes that both *Sarrasine* and “Le Dessous” provoke an end result of pensiveness in the narratee.<sup>198</sup> The difference, however, is that, in *Sarrasine*, this is not the desired result. Similarly, in Balzac’s *L’Auberge Rouge*, the resolution to the enigma proves undesirable. By asking Monsieur Taillefer if he is from Beauvais, the narrator shows him to have been the murderer in the story that they have heard around the dinner table. On one hand, this provokes negative consequences for Taillefer’s health and for the narrator’s conscience—he now has to decide whether or not to seek the hand of the murderer’s daughter who has benefited from her father’s ill-gotten gains. On the other hand, it ruins the interest of the story for everyone else who finds that the answer to the mystery was literally before their eyes. Balzac’s narrators persist nonetheless in finishing their stories. It is as if their foremost loyalty is to the story—the story of realism that must be told whatever the audience’s reaction—and not to effective storytelling that sometimes requires an incomplete story.

Barbey, by contrast, keeps the narrator and the storyteller separate. In *Sarrasine*, the same first person narrator who had opened the tale recounts his attempt to play the role of storyteller. But his storytelling fails when the marquise orders him to be silent. He returns to his original role as a mere narrator, reduced to describing the marquise’s discontentment. He has revealed all that he knows; he has no more power. His story has an effect, just not the desired one. “Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan” reverses the narrative contract in *Sarrasine*. The narrator of *Sarrasine* agrees to tell his story in exchange for an evening with Madame de Rochefide which he never gets. Ravila gets to eat the supper put before him and garners a story to tell about his experience, but he never satisfies his audience’s desires and retains his power.

---

<sup>198</sup> Brooks, “The Storyteller,” 33.

The story's narrator, on the other hand, merely recounts the events of the storytelling *soirée* as told to him by Ravila / Don Juan, continually reminding the reader that only the illustrious guest and his twelve former mistresses were present:

Ce dut être curieux, n'est-ce pas? Cette page inouïe de ses Mémoires, Ravila l'écrira-t-il un jour?... C'est une question, mais lui seul peut l'écrire... Comme je le dis à la marquise Guy de Ruy, je n'étais pas à ce souper, et si j'en vais rapporter quelques détails et l'histoire par laquelle il finit, c'est que je les tiens de Ravila lui-même, qui, fidèle à l'indiscrétion traditionnelle et caractéristique de la race Juan, prit la peine, un soir de me les raconter. (92)

The narrator in "Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan" highlights the imperfections of his account. But, unlike in the narratorial disclaimer of "Le Dessous de cartes," there is no mention of the storyteller's oral art. Instead, the narrator excuses himself for not being able to *write* the tale as well as the storyteller—the only one who could really write it. Here, the distance between the narrator and the storyteller gives the reader critical perspective on the very act of narration. Some stories can be told better in writing—or only told in writing. And some stories are only interesting when left unresolved.

Even in the absence of a story and the presence of a narrator, Barbey's storytellers are still standing at the end—but they are not alone. When storytellers have the possibility to write and when authors share identifying characteristics with their fictional storytellers, there is a *rapprochement* of literary and oral iterations not only of the *conte* but also of the *conteur*. In earlier frame narratives, such as that of Segrais, some overlap between the narrator and the author was not uncommon. Barbey, though he never explicitly equates himself with his storytellers, nonetheless teases the reader with references to himself and his written art. In "Le Dessous de cartes," Barbey's reference to "le plus étincelant causeur de ce royaume de la causerie" is often read as a self-reflexive gesture. Indeed, Barbey modeled the Baroness de Mascranny's salon on that of the Baroness de Maistre, where he found a receptive audience for his own stories. Furthermore, in "Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan," he gives the storyteller Ravila his age and his first names: Jules-Amédée. In Barbey's case, this is possible because the salon practices have greater social proximity to authors and readers than the oral traditions the writers like Nodier or Nerval depict at rural firesides. The distance inherent in the ethnographic gaze vanishes. The storyteller ceases to be a social "other." This explains perhaps why Barbey's stories, though replete with storytellers and even a few laments for vanishing traditions, do not have dying storytellers. His storytellers are not inherently incompatible with print culture, only with certain iterations of utilitarian, artificial, or market-driven "literature" to which Barbey hopes to provide an alternative.

While Barbey's doctors, dandies, modern-day Don Juans, and aristocratic hold-outs from the Revolution would not have swapped stories with peasant storytellers, they join their popular homologues in short stories in probing the future of orality in literature. Nostalgic communal storytelling scenes dot Barbey's *œuvre*, but they are not merely oases of lived narrative exchange in a barren landscape of cheap print and utilitarian values that Barbey so disparaged. As much as Barbey is given to looking backward—at political, social, and literary times past—he also moves the storyteller forward, using an age-old figure to break the rules of literary storytelling and to forge new stylistic ground in the written evocation of the oral.

## Conclusion: Generic Legacies and Literary Afterlives

One need only consider a few great authors of the Renaissance writing to see that the term *conteur* was applied to writers long before Prosper Mérimée or Barbey d'Aurevilly. As fluid as designations for short fiction might be, it is still interesting that the evolution of the literary *conte* into a distinctly nineteenth-century phenomenon coincides with the supposed disappearance of *contes* from the oral landscape. In 1857, Champfleury, writing about Robert Challes and his *Illustres Françaises* of 1713, deems the author “un conteur remarquable,” and goes on to qualify his use of the word “conteur”:

Qu'est-ce qu'un conteur sinon un écrivain qui improvise un récit que d'autres font passer, au coin du feu, dans une conversation animée. Si depuis cent ans le roman, qui n'est qu'un conte développé, a pris des allures plus ambitieuses, que peut-on demander au conteur? D'exprimer clairement sa pensée, d'essayer de se faire comprendre des petits et des grands, et de ne pas froisser les esprits simples et d'une éducation médiocre, par une phraséologie ambitieuse, souvent incompréhensible sans l'aide d'un dictionnaire.<sup>199</sup>

As the publication history of many *contes* shows, they are often the product of literary labors, not oral improvisation transferred to the page. However, Champfleury's explanation exposes one of the ways that literary *conteurs* were imagined: as the pen and paper equivalent of a fireside storyteller, trafficking in the same tales, improvising with the same verve, and telling stories with the same clarity.

But if the short story had been attached to orality prior to the nineteenth century, orality hadn't been attached to the same devolutionary discourses or complicated cultural contexts. Even if the short story had not evolved, its generic reference point of orality (as it exists in the literary imaginary, at least) would have. This holds true not only for examples of frame narrative that stage or resist storytelling, like those seen in the work of Barbey or Mérimée, but also for other nineteenth-century short stories that are less overtly innovative. Even the very use of the terms *conte* and *conteur*, dear to Balzac, can stand as a reminder of oral roots and perhaps even the spectral presence of the storyteller.

Benjamin's essay, “The Storyteller” proves useful for thinking about the last question. As Peter Brooks has noted, Benjamin seems to oscillate between criteria for what qualifies a storyteller. The real subject of his essay is Nikolai Leskov, a Russian writer whose craftsman-like approach to writing Benjamin admired.<sup>200</sup> But Benjamin spends much of it expounding on the qualities of a storytelling that seem to distance it from the written. A similar definitional problem emerges in Benjamin's discussion of stories. On one hand, Benjamin insinuates that reading a story allows the reader a certain companionship with a storyteller, although he is not physically present:

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any

---

<sup>199</sup> Champfleury, *Le Réalisme*, 112.

<sup>200</sup> A point that Peter Brooks explores in more detail: “One of the many difficulties presented by Benjamin's essay arises from his choice of an example that strikes us as an inauthentic instance of the matter under discussion,” Brooks begins (“The Storyteller,” 25-26).

other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the word, for the benefit of the listener.)<sup>201</sup>

Yet it would seem that not all written stories have this effect of spontaneously generating the presence of a storyteller to make reading less of an isolated act. Benjamin quotes Valéry's assertion that "Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated" (93). Valéry's examples include detailing on carvings, paintings, or miniatures that mimic the slow processes of nature by which layers are added, eroded or altered across the years. Benjamin also sees the short story as symptomatic of this drive to abbreviate and truncate:

In point of fact, he has succeeded in abbreviated even story-telling. We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story," which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of then, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.<sup>202</sup>

My goal here is not to reconcile parts of Benjamin's argument or to point out contradictions within it. Instead, it seems most interesting that in both of these examples, Benjamin assumes that the written story has or has had a genetic relationship to an oral. If the short story has abbreviated what Benjamin considers worthy in storytelling, might it not still bear other markers of its oral origins? At the same time, might literature also use orality on its own terms, deliberately removing the short story from a certain idealized notions of oral traditions but not renouncing storytelling or the storyteller?

In the nineteenth-century short story, the orderly exchange of stories may have fallen by the wayside in favor of lone storytellers and frames that range from skeletal to intrusive. But the storyteller is not condemned to eternal oblivion. What the nineteenth-century lays to rest is not the notion of orality, but the generic models, framing conventions, narratorial strategies that are no longer viable in the storytelling terrain of modernity. As Barbey and Mérimée's incomplete tales, ambiguous endings, or fractured frames show, innovations that proclaim the short story's allegiance to the written can actually create new outlets for the storyteller's voice.

---

<sup>201</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 100.

<sup>202</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 93.

## Chapter 4:

### Still the Same Old Story?

#### Assia Djebar, Patrick Chamoiseau, and the Death of the Storyteller

In the nineteenth century, France's colonial and imperial aspirations played a major role in the formation and development of formal folklore study. The *Académie Celtique*, founded in 1804, sought to provide Napoléon's expanding Empire with a narrative of national past that would circumvent the inconvenient legacy of the French Revolution. In 1852, Napoléon III, hoping to generate a politically expedient record of France's cultural heritage, issued a decree for the collection and publication of French folklore. But changing geopolitical contexts complicate the politics of folklore collecting. Jean-Jacques Ampère's guidelines for folklore collecting *Instructions relatives aux poésies populaires de la France* (discussed in my second chapter in relation to Nerval and the mid-nineteenth century) illustrate this: Ampère's first task was to delineate what folklore was actually "French." Do Creole folksongs count simply because they are sung in French colonies? Does France retain a claim to immaterial culture like oral traditions once control of a colony is lost? Are "French" traditions French forever—or at least until they evolve past the point of recognition? Ampère takes the broadest possible approach, advocating for the inclusion of folklore not in French like "chants créoles" and the recuperation of "French" folklore survives in the Francophone world: "On pourra s'adresser même à des populations françaises qui n'appartiennent plus à la France, quand elles auront conservé des chants populaires qui remontent à une époque antérieure à leur séparation de la mère patrie."<sup>203</sup>

Folklore's utility in colonial or post-colonial identity politics works both ways, however. French Canadian folklorists, for example, fervently objected to the rhetoric of Ampère's *Instructions* and criticized folklore collections like Champfleury's 1860 *Chansons populaires des provinces de France* for treating their culture as a mere extension of France or a temporary storage for traditions waiting to be reclaimed. For them, the present function of folklore, not some hypothetical origin, determined its importance. They used the riches of their folklore to prove their cultural worth—and independence. Such debates might seem to mere footnotes in the history of nineteenth-century folklore study, but they are actually indicative of a broader trend: folklore acts as a hinge between France and the Francophone world. And folklore remains central to cultural self-situation in post-colonial and neo-colonial contexts, even once interest in folklore study fades in France. In the twentieth century, these questions find their most sustained and visible prolongation not in folklore scholarship but in the Francophone literary. The dialogue is no longer a direct transatlantic exchange of letters but an engagement with colonial legacies—on writers' own terms in the imaginative space of literature.

Orality becomes a hallmark of Francophone fiction. In fact, most contemporary mentions of the storyteller and literature in French would likely not elicit examples of not eighteenth- or nineteenth-century texts from the *métropole* but of twentieth-century Francophone texts, from Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant du sable* (1985) to Antonine Maillet's 1979 saga

---

<sup>203</sup> Cheyronnaud, ed., *Instructions*, 87-88. Ampère, like his friend Alexis de Tocqueville, had observed in North America the survival of French folksongs, widely thought to be disappearing on the mainland.

of exiled Acadians, *Plélagie-la-Charette*, the first book written outside of France to be awarded the *Prix Goncourt*. Orality and tradition in Francophone literature hardly escape critical note, but literary history rarely considers that folklore is a nexus of political and ideological contention. More often than not, folklore appears in criticism as a cultural heritage that pre-dates French presence or at least evolves independently of it. This offers a clear illustration of a well-known fact among folklorists: folklore lends itself to idealization as an unsullied holdout of the past, be it pre-literature, pre-industrial, or pre-colonial. Sometimes this is part of its literary function. In nineteenth-century France, when writers feared the effects of mass literacy, they imagined a pure oral culture subsisting in the French countryside where printed materials and *livres de colportage* had actually long since had an impact. Nothing stops Francophone writers from waxing nostalgic for their own oral ideal. And storytellers can lend a stamp of indigenous culture to extra-Hexagonal writing. But the significance of folklore—and the stories told about it in literature—prove much more nuanced. Unproblematized notions of orality and tradition will necessarily fail to elucidate the function of similar idealizations in a text or will obscure an author's own problematization of folklore. In Francophone literature, one important but sometimes overlooked nuance lies in the fact that orality need not bypass the impact of colonization to be productive in post-colonial contexts. The mere fact that Francophone authors choose to write about orality in French is an indication of this.

Though there are many possible examples, Assia Djébar of Algeria and Patrick Chamoiseau of Martinique stand out for foregrounding the mediation of oral traditions and making this central to their very concepts of the writer's cultural role. If they turn to the storyteller, it not to connect with a pure oral past. To the contrary, they offer a reminder that literary depictions of folklore and storytelling are sometimes the very means by which writers document, critique, or challenge colonial legacies. Francophone writers do, however, share more with their earlier metropolitan counterparts than colonial ties and a desire to mobilize folklore for their own cultural ends. They also share some strikingly similar concerns for the future of orality and the impact of print culture on ways that information is exchanged or experiences are shared. Both fear the disappearance of orality and both inscribe this fear into literature through the death of the storyteller. Djébar's short story "La Femme en morceaux" and Chamoiseau's novel *Solibo Magnifique* offer a case in point. Djébar's story juxtaposes French translations of *Les Mille et une nuits* with the story of a Atyka, young French teacher, beheaded in front of her class during the Algerian Civil War for reading these stories with her students. In *Solibo Magnifique*, the storyteller Solibo's death by a mysterious "égorgette de parole" becomes the subject of a bungled police investigation in Martinique, where the law is "made in France" and is capable of construing an everyday events into egregious crimes. What kills the storyteller? Does the writer have the possibility, indeed the obligation, to assume a role of cultural transmission? Might the storyteller's legacy be best preserved in literature not through the imitation of traditional folkloric forms but the creation of new literary ones? These questions, many of the same ones that lingered behind the stages of French literary production in the first half of the nineteenth century, live on when the storyteller dies again in twentieth-century Francophone fiction.

But the Francophone storyteller's interest is not simply in echoing nineteenth-century questions about literature or about folklore but in asking new ones and transposing old ones to new contexts. For both Djébar and Chamoiseau, writing is has a political dimension as a means of resistance, critique, and construction of identity. As one critic observes in the case of Chamoiseau and the literature of Martinique:

‘L’Ecrire’ a une fonction non seulement esthétique mais politique. Axe essentiel de la construction d’une identité—voire de tout notre être, puisque les histoires et les discours de toutes sortes contribuent à orienter nos perspectives, à structurer nos mentalités, et surtout à définir nos valeurs—la littérature sera l’arme privilégiée du guerrier de l’imaginaire.<sup>204</sup>

Both Solibo’s “égorgette de la parole” and Atyka’s brutal execution can be directly linked to a political context: the neo-colonial order in Martinique where the law is “made in France” or the civil war of 1990s Algeria where Islamic militants disregard the established rule. Furthermore, Djébar and Chamoiseau link the mediation of oral traditions—through historical narratives, folklore collection, literature, or translation—to these political contexts and translate this into the very form of their texts. Djébar switches between italic and roman characters to juxtapose—and eventually merge—excerpts from French translations of Schéhérazade’s tales with the story of her “nouvelle conteuse.” In *Solibo Magnifique*, the accounts of the narrator, a writer bearing Chamoiseau’s name, challenge the conclusions of police reports that are interspersed throughout the text.

If both stories end with death, neither text treats death as an ending. In “La Femme en morceaux,” the severed head of Atyka, a teacher turned storyteller, continues speaking until she finishes her story. In *Solibo*, the storyteller’s death spawns more stories among his listeners—and prompts the narrator’s arduous struggle to find a way to write Solibo’s words. Djébar and Chamoiseau carve out intermediary spaces between life and death, orality and writing, voice and silence—spaces that make it possible to explore more explicitly than before not only what happens to the storyteller but what might happen to the story. In doing so, they show that the storyteller loses no significance from a direct engagement with the colonizer’s influence, language, or literary traditions.

### “Écrire ça sert à quoi?": Chamoiseau and *Solibo Magnifique*

Born in 1953 and raised in Fort-de-France, Chamoiseau is the author of one play, several essays, and over ten novels, among them *Texaco*, which won the *Prix Goncourt* in 1992. The cultural tensions of Martinique’s status as a French *department d’outre mer* undercut Chamoiseau’s portrayal of the island, especially in his blending of Creole and French or orality and writing. The storyteller is a looming presence in his work. Sometimes the storyteller is a specific character, as in *Solibo Magnifique* or *Texaco*. Other times, Chamoiseau references the specter of anonymous plantation storytellers. In *Écrire en pays dominé*, a sort of intellectual autobiography, he even imagines himself becoming this “Maître de la Parole” in a dream.

To understand Chamoiseau’s use of folklore, critics often look to the literary movement of *créolité* and the essay that might be considered its founding document, *Éloge de la Créolité*, which Chamoiseau co-authored with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant in 1989. *Créolité* is difficult to define for it eschews established categories in favor of “open specificity,” in one

---

<sup>204</sup> Lorna Milne, *Patrick Chamoiseau: espaces d’une écriture antillaise* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 181.

famously ambiguous formulation.<sup>205</sup> The authors of *Éloge* acknowledge their debt the movement of *négritude* upon which they build, but propose an alternative to its universalizing cultural identity built on purported common ties to Africa. They privilege, instead, a mixture of languages, cultures, races, and peoples that is specific to each locality. Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant claim to be breaking free from European aesthetics, and their esteem of folklore is a case in point. *Créolité* relies on original, artistic production for its existence and evolution, but it holds the influence of collective culture, especially oral traditions, as essential to any artistic expression.<sup>206</sup> Perhaps in part because of the authors' manifest desire to differentiate themselves from the past, the essay is rarely situated within the long literary history of writing orality.

Folklore—and the identity politics of its portrayal—do surface in one rare historical comparison in the English-language Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's reflections on *Éloge* and Chamoiseau's *Texaco*:

In the manifesto we hear the really old yearning for naïveté, for the purified and primal state of the folk of the virginal countryside with its firefly fables and subdued nobility, in other words Rousseau and Gauguin from the mouths of their subjects, their voluble natives.<sup>207</sup>

Folklore is only a very small detail in Walcott's argument that a metropolitan subtext underlies *Éloge*, an essay written in French whose structure and rhetoric he finds reminiscent of the French pamphlet tradition. Though he admits to a bit of over-simplification in his characterization of the role of folklore, his reproach is telling. He does not fault the proponents of *créolité* for a return to French folkloric *material*. Theirs is not a transposition of traditional French texts into Creole, something that was in fashion in the nineteenth century with the translation of fables like LaFontaine's into Creole.<sup>208</sup> Instead, he contends that they bring to their own folklore the same idealizing gaze as colonizers. In Walcott's reading, writers of *créolité* betray their own cause through their use of folklore, the very point that they claimed would distinguish them from European models.

Chamoiseau and his co-authors may convey some element of longing for a flourishing folklore of the past. However, the importance of folklore in *Éloge*—and in literary history—cannot be reduced to nostalgia or “yearning for naïveté.” They attempt to reconcile their work as modern writers with their calling to respect the oral traditions to which they “return” in order to go beyond (“dépasser”) them:

Y retourner, oui, pour d'abord rétablir cette continuité culturelle (associée à la continuité historique restaurée) sans laquelle l'identité collective a du mal à s'affirmer. Y retourner, ou, pour en enrichir notre énonciation, l'intégrer pour la dépasser. Y retourner, tout simplement, afin d'investir l'expression primordiale de notre génie populaire. [...] Bref,

---

<sup>205</sup> Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité / In Praise of Creoleness* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 27.

<sup>206</sup> Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité*, 29.

<sup>207</sup> Derek Walcott, “A Letter to Chamoiseau,” *New York Review of Books* (14 Aug. 1997).

<sup>208</sup> See for example, Déjean Mont-Rosier, ed., *Fab Lafontèn, Fables de La Fontaine* (Matoury (Guyane): Ibis Rouge Éditions, 2002). See in general, Jean Bernabé, *La fable créole* (Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge éditions: GEREC-F/Presses universitaires créoles, 2001).

*nous fabriquerons une littérature* qui ne déroge en rien aux exigences modernes de l'écrit tout en s'enracinant dans les configurations traditionnelles de notre oralité.<sup>209</sup>

Orality is not the end nor is it the ultimate ideal. But if the authors of *Éloge* seek to create a new cultural and artistic identity, their most basic aims regarding folklore are nothing new in literary history: “returning” to the oral, seeking inspiration from folklore, and assuring continuity with the past while creating the literature of the future. Furthermore, their motivations are rooted in a familiar fear: the death of the storyteller. More than just a response to *negritude* and Aimé Césaire’s mid-twentieth century writings, *créolité* is another in a long series of responses to perceived disappearance of folklore.

In the nineteenth-century, for example, writers grappled with a similar problem of preserving of something old and oral and while simultaneously creating of something new and written. Nodier, Nerval, Mérimée, and Champfleury all combined writing with folklore study to reflect on evolving forms of cultural production. In 1852, Hyppolite Fortoul, Napoléon III’s minister responsible for his folklore collecting enterprise, even employed a similar rhetoric, referencing the “génie” of the popular in justifying the literary utility of collecting folksong:

Dans ces chants, qui offrent non seulement la trace des événements de l’histoire nationale, mais encore les modèles de beautés trop longtemps méconnues, nous aimerons à retrouver une fraîcheur de génie qui n’appartient qu’à quelques époques heureuses; au contact de l’expression naïve du vieil esprit français, notre littérature se surprendra peut-être à rougir des fausses délicatesses où s’égare parfois sa subtilité.<sup>210</sup>

Fortoul’s discussion of folklore is even more strikingly considering the vast historical divide between 1850s France and twentieth-century Martinique. In mid-nineteenth-century France, a sense of literary history already exists. A generation earlier, Nodier had even translated his nostalgia for the past into a call to return to earlier literary forms. He believed that the literature of the past better replicated the direct exchange of narrative that was being lost with the death of storytelling and the advent of modern “literature” destined for the masses. On the other hand, Fortoul and writers like Nerval or Mérimée who respond to Napoléon III’s decree use folklore as an impetus for formal innovation. But they still believe that existing literature needs *renewal* in the face of modernity, not invention or justification. For the authors of *Éloge*, however, modernity is already a given. But literary history that they can call their own is not.

However, in this old story about the death of the storyteller lies an important commonality between proponents of *créolité* and many nineteenth-century writers who saw folklore as subsisting only in the shadow of its previous glory. Nerval ends “Chansons et légendes du Valois” (the folklore collection that he eventually appended to his final publication of *Sylvie*) with a mournful description of peasant and workers “qui jettent au vent quelques lambeaux des chants de leurs aïeules.” But, Nerval continues, modernity and new forms of entertainment it introduces need not be allowed to sweep away the last traces of these folkloric treasures:

Il serait à désirer que de bons poètes modernes missent à profit l’inspiration naïve de nos pères, et nous rendissent, comme l’ont fait les poètes d’autres pays, une foule de petits

<sup>209</sup> Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité / In Praise of Creoleness* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 36.

<sup>210</sup> Qtd. in Agulhon, “Le problème de la culture populaire,” 64.

chefs-d'œuvres qui se perdent de jour en jour avec la mémoire et la vie des bonnes gens du temps passé.<sup>211</sup>

Faced with a cultural landscape scattered with remnants of oral traditions, what should writers do? This question seems to go hand-in-hand with cultural narratives of the death folklore, wherever they surface. It allows writers to position themselves in relation to folklore and ask questions about the work of cultural transmission that literature might perform. Chamoiseau's aptly titled essay "Que faire de la parole" provides a case in point:

Demeurent, pour l'écrivain, des lambeaux de mémoire orale, disséminés à travers le pays, des bouts de contes, des bribes de comptines, des éclats de titimes, des haillons de paroles diverses, qui se bousculent, qui s'entrechoquent, qui ont subi les effets de la francisation et de diverses aliénations, et qui surtout semblent en voltige permanente, quasiment inaccessibles dans leur essence, dans la mesure où aucune approche systématique, rationnelle, méthodique de récupération de l'oralité n'existe en Martinique. C'est donc avec cette réalité-là que l'écrivain créole d'aujourd'hui doit travailler. Il sait qu'il lui faut assurer la continuité avec l'oral, s'enrichir du conteur, mais pour cette tâche, il est douloureusement démuné. Alors, comment faire?<sup>212</sup>

Nerval and Chamoiseau's similarities in lexical choices and images are striking. Oral traditions—Nerval's "lambeaux des chants" or Chamoiseau's "lambeaux de mémoire orale"—are fragmented and scattered, their essence often slipping through the fingers of the writers who reach for them.

For Chamoiseau and his contemporaries, however, the death of the storyteller—and literature's cultural imperative to intervene—is not a simply reprise of a familiar nineteenth-century refrain. Part of the interest for literary history is that the operative categories of folklore and literature evolve to reference the different things. To some extent, the idea of literature as art and the text as an autonomous object have already been established. Francophone texts may echo many of the same laments for folklore or pleas for literary renewal as earlier ones but the motivations behind these are different. And, in vastly different cultural and political contexts, these pleas yield very different results. The ownership, control, or use of oral, intangible cultural goods can be politically charged, as Ampère's broad definition of "French" folklore showed. The transposition of folklore into fiction does not purge it of these other associations, but often heightens them by linking them to broader social and cultural debates. In fact, Chamoiseau's reference to "la francisation" is a reminder that the colonial enterprise does not leave folklore unscathed—in its language, its function, or in its integration or alienation from the cultural "mainstream." For Chamoiseau, orality is not a means of circumventing French cultural hegemony but a prompt for examining it and a site for challenging it—in French and in writing.

*Solibo Magnifique* (1988), Chamoiseau's second novel, casts the storyteller Solibo's death and the police's bungled investigation as a result of this "francisation" and attendant cultural alienation. Solibo's audience members, including the narrator, insist that the storyteller simply died of an "égorgette de la parole," his throat slit by the word.<sup>213</sup> The police, beholden to

<sup>211</sup> Gérard de Nerval, "Chansons et légendes du Valois," in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 579.

<sup>212</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, "Que faire de la parole," in *Écrire la "parole de nuit": la nouvelle littérature antillaise*, ed. Ralph Ludwig (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 155.

<sup>213</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 25. Henceforth, all quotations are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.

illusions of rationality and superiority, mock the witnesses, their language, and their belief system. This criminal investigation becomes “criminal” in a different sense, spiraling into a cycle of violence that leaves two witnesses dead and an officer gravely injured. In the face of physical abuse, one of the witnesses, Congo, exerts his last measure of autonomy and jumps to his death from a police station window. At the same time the officers attempt to maintain physical control over the suspects, they also attempt to control the story of the events that transpire. Chief Sergeant Bouafesse, for example, weaves a tale about the events leading up to Congo’s suicide, saying that the suspect had assaulted *him* but that he pled with him not to jump. Sucette, in response to this blatant fabrication, lifts a huge filing cabinet and flings it on top of an officer, literally throwing back at the police their own paperwork and skewed stories (208, 211). At the end, Solibo, even in death, manages to thwart the French administration’s beloved protocol: his body becomes so heavy that Inspector Pilon orders a crane for its removal (149), only to find it suddenly so light that the orderly can twirl it on one finger over the stretcher (154). The coroner, whom the officers hope to give scientific credibility to their accusations, instead presents findings that defy scientific logic: Solibo has been strangled from the inside (215).

Chamoiseau tells this story through an amalgamation of different voices, taking the form of police reports, flashbacks, transcriptions of Solibo’s performances, and the narrator’s account of Solibo’s death and the events that followed. This hybrid and often puzzling text has attracted much critical attention. In terms of genre, *Solibo* is usually read in relation to how it adapts or departs from models of detective fiction.<sup>214</sup> Recently, Wendy Knepper has argued that the novel can be understood as the result of a creolization of genres. By incorporating elements of cartoons or oral storytelling into what appears to be a police novel, Chamoiseau would extend the aesthetics of creolization to generic models.<sup>215</sup> On a linguistic level, *Solibo* also presents a clear interest, due in large part of Chamoiseau’s inventive use of the French language and his own brand of sometimes-Creolized French.<sup>216</sup> By juxtaposing French prose with exclamations in Creole or by using neologisms to create deliberate ambiguity for his reader, Chamoiseau conveys the cultural tensions of life in Martinique. Solibo’s death is also central to Chamoiseau’s critique of the neo-colonial order and figures prominently in scholarly understandings of the novel.<sup>217</sup> His “égorgette,” for example, could be reminiscent slaves’ recourse to swallowing their tongue to commit suicide: Solibo, unable to escape the neo-colonial order, continues to tell stories, knowing that the words would spell his death.<sup>218</sup> Few critics however, relate this *one*

---

<sup>214</sup> On *Solibo* and the development of Caribbean crime fiction see, Mouhamadou Cissé, “Les Glissements policiers dans les romans de P. Chamoiseau, R. Confiant et F. Chalumeau,” *Présence Francophone* 77 (2009): 66-85.

<sup>215</sup> Wendy Knepper, “Remapping the Crime Novel in the Francophone Caribbean: The Case of Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Solibo Magnifique*,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2008): esp. 1435-1438.

<sup>216</sup> For background on linguistic studies of Chamoiseau’s integration of French and spoken Creole, see Marie-Christine Magloire, “De la voix à l’écrit créole, une langue de l’écart,” in *L’Oralité dans l’écrit, et réciproquement*, ed. Robert Gauthier (Toulouse: C.A.L.S., 2002), 209-218.

<sup>217</sup> In a rare exception, Michel Prat speaks of Solibo’s demise as a natural death in “Patrick Chamoiseau, un émule martiniquais de Gadda,” *Francofonia: Studi e ricerche sulle letterature di lingua francese* 9, no. 17 (1989): 114.

<sup>218</sup> Lydie Moudileno, *L’écrivain antillais au miroir de sa littérature: mises en scène et mise en abyme du roman antillais* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1997), 100 and Delphine Perret, “La Parole du conteur créole: Solibo magnifique de Patrick Chamoiseau,” *The French Review* 67, no. 5 (1994): 834.

storyteller's death to broader stakes of the death of *the* storyteller, a perceived disappearance of oral narrative. When Solibo's death is linked to a larger loss, it is usually limited to the context of the novel's fictional universe or to the tenants of *créolité*. Lydie Moudileno goes farther than most critics in using Solibo's death to elucidate the novel's examination of textual production itself. First, she calls into question the nature of "crime" in this crime novel. Murder need not be the premeditated killing of a specific person: "Le conteur meurt de continuer à conter alors que la société antillaise moderne lui refoule les mots dans la gorge." Most importantly, Moudileno shows that the storyteller's suffocation by society changes not only the landscape of oral storytelling but the narrator's task as a writer.<sup>219</sup> He not only mourns Solibo's death, but responds to it, rethinking the very nature of writing. Though *Solibo* seems to be a story of a storyteller's sudden death, it is also an account of the narrator's gradual development as a "marqueur de paroles," and, most importantly perhaps, a reflection on the relationship between these two poles of the plot.

Building on this, folklore becomes an important concept for the narrator and the storyteller alike. The narrator's writing process, even during Solibo's life, is one of trial and error in which he experiments with multiple approaches to documenting and writing about Creole culture. He starts not as a writer but as a collector of folklore, an "ethnographe" in the local market. And he ends not as surrogate for the storyteller but as "marqueur de paroles" who insists on his difference from "écrivains." Folklore finds significance not only as oral content or traditional material that is being lost. Folklore is also a discipline of study whose rhetoric of preservation and use of writing the narrator experiments with and ultimately critiques. If Chamoiseau explores the perennial literary question "Que faire de la parole?" in one way or another across his theoretical and fiction writing, he uses *Solibo* to stage one writer and folklore collector's personal struggle to render the essence of oral traditions and the worldviews which give rise to them. That the narrator bears Chamoiseau's name only makes these questions more immediate. Ultimately, any resolution achieved at the end of the novel does not come from the elucidation of the circumstances of Solibo's death but from an elucidation of how Solibo's death changes the narrator's task as a writer. By making the circumstances of the narrator's production of narrative part of the story, Chamoiseau shows how the text evolves in relation into the opposing models of storytelling, interpretation, and documentation around which it is structured.

The novel opens with a police report that includes all of the official trappings—a recitation of facts, citations of criminal code, and the coroner's preliminary findings—but never names Solibo nor mentions his storytelling. In the next section, a new narrative voice intervenes and starts the story of Solibo's death again from the beginning: "Au cours d'une soirée de carnaval à Fort-de-France, entre dimanche Gras et mercredi des Cendres, le conteur Solibo Magnifique mourut d'une égorgette de la parole, en s'écriant: Patat'sa!..." (25) From the start, the juxtaposition of these two different versions of Solibo's death points to the dueling stories and opposing interpretative models that will mark ideological and cultural conflicts in the novel. The narrator presents the same events but describes them unproblematically as if there is no mystery, and references Solibo by name, as if he is a known and loved storyteller. And even before we know his name or profession, the narrator is tied to writing: his first verbal expression employs the *passé simple*—now considered a written, not spoken form. For all practical purposes, the statement "le conteur Solibo Magnifique mourut" can only exist in writing. It

---

<sup>219</sup> Moudileno, *L'écrivain antillais*, 98.

cannot be mistaken for an imitation of the oral.<sup>220</sup> Only later does another intervening police document—a witness list—reveal the narrator’s identity: “Patrick *Chamoiseau*, surnommé Chamzibie, Ti Cham ou Oiseau de Cham, se disant ‘marqueur de paroles,’ en réalité sans profession, demeurant 90 rue François-Arago” (30).

The narrator, like Solibo’s other audience members, “simples écoutants de contes-cricraks,” are transformed from mourners into “*témoins*” (29). In a sense, the storyteller’s death spawns more stories: his friends all give their own detailed accounts about what they saw and why they loved the storyteller they called “Magnifique.” The witnesses’ stories about Solibo’s death become emblematic of the storyteller’s very existence: they make sense in Creole culture but become meaningless, even criminal in official, administrative, or governmental contexts. The interactions between the police and the listeners-turned-suspects become a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of incongruous interpretative models and the complexities of meaning-making. Inspector Pilon, a fan of French *romans policiers*, dreams of stumbling upon a case not tainted by superstition or local belief that can be solved rationally, following the generic model he has come to expect (117-118). Chief Sergeant Bouafesse seldom speaks of the law that he is charged to enforce in Martinique without proudly proclaiming that this law is “made in France.” His investigation does not seek to uncover what happened to Solibo but to find evidence that can be construed to support the story of what he *thinks* happened: that Solibo fell victim to some local poison, killed by one of his own listeners. At the very moment the narrator is explaining Solibo’s alienation from an increasing print-dependent society, Bouafesse interrupts with his standard question about what Solibo ate. But the narrator’s testimony, which Bouafesse dismisses as philosophical mumbling, ultimately offers the only real explanation of Solibo’s mysterious death.

Communication breaks down not because of a difference of language—the narrator, at least, can masterfully manipulate French—but a difference of worldview. This is, in fact, what prompts the criminal investigation in the first place: in their ignorance of traditional storytelling, the police are unable to accept that Solibo’s sudden silence was not cause for alarm—that silence is part of the storyteller’s art. Therefore, when all of the depositions concur that “un silence est une parole” (147), the police construe a standard storytelling practice into proof of a conspiracy. Translation appears not only as moving between languages but moving between the different perspectives. Chamoiseau creates a story that repeatedly calls into question its very own substance: the ability to communicate through language. He makes the reader conscious that even translations—which he sometimes opts not to provide for Creole words or expressions—may not suffice to translate meaning. When one officer asks a witness in French to state his profession, another must recast the question as “what do you do for the *békés*” (143, trans. 95). And, when the narrator proclaims himself a “marqueur de paroles,” he is documented as “en

---

<sup>220</sup> Chamoiseau’s use of different verbs tenses and modes—including the imperfect of the subjunctive later in the narrator’s account in *Solibo*—is a stylistic strategy typical of his use of obscure or even arcane French words or syntax to create a carefully calculated effect. The use of the *passé simple* pervades *Texaco* where least expected, as one scholar observes: “[...] Marie-Sophie’s narrative has ostensibly been translated not only from Creole in French, from an oral language into a written one, but has also been couched in the formal and literary past historic tense, rather than the more informal and oral *passé composé*” (Maeve McCusker, “Translating the Creole Voice: from the Oral to the Literary Tradition in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*,” in *Reading Across the Lines*, ed. Christopher Shorley and Maeve McCusker [Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 2000], 121).

réalité sans profession” (30). His stated profession does not correspond to anything recognizable within in the French lexicon or the officers’ experience and is, therefore, assumed simply not to exist.

The “marqueur de paroles” finds himself in a difficult professional position, misunderstood by the Departmental administration and critiqued by the storyteller whose very words define his writing. Solibo, unlike the blissfully ignorant peasants of the nineteenth-century French imagination, is aware of literature, going so far as to point out the shortcomings of one of Chamoiseau’s earlier *books*. Solibo explicitly asks questions about literature and orality that earlier writers and storytellers could not articulate or accommodate in extant literary forms. The relationship between the storyteller and the writer becomes a dialogic one, and the narrator’s insecurities about writing become part of the story. Sprinkled throughout the text are the narrator’s recollections of his own conversations with Solibo and of the storyteller’s pointed criticisms of writing. These passages, set apart from the main text only by spaces, parentheses or indentations, are woven into the narration of the Solibo’s death and the witnesses’ custody. Often their only connection to the surrounding text is that Solibo’s words call the text itself into question. The novel seems to resist being *read* as a novel. The reader is forced to keep its problematic production in sight, as if these reflections on writing and storytelling either warrant the suspension of the narrative or constitute the very essence of the novel itself.

The first such quotation interrupts the description of the witness Doudou-Ménar’s violent rampage in the police station after the officers ignore her pleas to send help for her friend Solibo:

(Solibo Magnifique me disait: “ ...Oiseau de Cham, tu écris. Bon. Moi, Solibo, je parle. Tu vois la distance? Dans ton livre sur Manman Dlo, tu veux capturer la parole à l’écriture, je vois le rythme que tu veux donner, comment tu veux serrer les mots pour qu’ils sonnent à la langue. Tu me dis j’ai raison, Papa? Moi je dis: On n’écrit jamais la parole, mais des mots, tu aurais dû parler. Écrire, c’est comme sortir le lambi de la mer pour dire: voici le lambi! La parole répond: où est la mer? Mais l’essential n’est pas là. Je pars, mais toi tu restes. Je parlais, mais toi tu écris en annonçant que tu viens de la parole. Tu me donnes la main par-dessus la distance. C’est bien, mais tu touches la distance.... ”) (53, trans. 28)<sup>221</sup>

Solibo does not consider the narrator a cultural outsider, only a non-storyteller. He recognizes the good intentions behind the narrator’s inherently flawed attempt to capture orality in writing. The writer has made an effort and extended his hand to the storyteller. But what he touches—and presumably what he writes—is still only the distance between them. Solibo’s interrogation—“Tu vois la distance?”—questions whether the writer actually perceives this distance. Solibo explains with a metaphor befitting Martinique’s island geography: the writer, by picking up the seashell, touching it, and naming it, believes that he holds it. He fails to consider the sea from which he has removed it. The sea is what makes the shell what it is. Likewise, in attempting to reproduce the oral in writing, the writer transposes the storyteller’s natural “parole” into a milieu that does not accommodate its essence.

That rendering orality in writing is impossible is not a new contention. Literary history, even in seventeenth-century frame narrative, offers innumerable examples of narrators themselves lamenting their inability to fully represent in writing a story that have just heard

---

<sup>221</sup> The book Solibo references, actually a play termed “théâtre conté” is Patrick Chamoiseau, *Manman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse* (Paris: Caribéennes, 1982).

artfully told. But this is never a reason not to retell the story, simply a strategy for establishing the narrator as a relay for the storyteller. In Chamoiseau's novel, the storyteller critiques writing. The narrator does not masquerade as the storyteller or act as a mere mouthpiece for his stories. Instead, his reflections on writing and his conversations nuance relationship between orality and writing and open up new configurations for meetings of the written and the spoken. No longer can orality be seen as only as a pure ideal and writing as its inferior imitation.

One often overlooked detail is that Solibo resists certain kinds of oral storytelling as much or more than he resists writing:

Des autorités de l'action culturelle avaient souvent sollicité sa participation à des spectacles de conteurs de scène, mais Solibo, craignant cette sorte de mise en conservation où l'on quittait la vie pour un cadre d'artifice, avait prétexté de mystérieuses obligations. Seule l'igname sotté, disait-il, fournit la corde qui l'étrangle. Cette transition entre son époque de mémoire de bouche, de résistance dans le détour du verbe, et cette autre où survivre doit s'écrire, le rongeaient. (222-223)

Solibo levels the same accusations against on-stage storytelling that he does against the narrator's writing of orality: decontextualization. By participating in festivals purported to preserve and celebrate folklore, Solibo would betray his own storytelling—even with no writing in sight. On a stage at an appointed time, storytelling becomes artificial. Submitting to this would be paramount to the storyteller killing his own craft by surrendering an essential part of his art and admitting irrelevancy in all natural, unstaged contexts.

With Solibo's scorn for organized storytelling events, is Chamoiseau's novel to be read as a condemnation *both* of the outside forces that silence Creole storytellers *and* attempts to preserve these same traditions? One of the pillars of *créolité* is an elevation of oral traditions and a rethinking of aesthetic valuations imposed by French standards. But, since folklore is also purported to be disappearing, organized folklore movements are imperative: "L'action folklorique est, du point de vue de la simple conservation d'éléments du patrimoine, absolument nécessaire," *Éloge* concludes.<sup>222</sup> The interest of *Solibo Magnifique* is not that it constitutes an ideological reversal on Chamoiseau's part: Solibo's objections need not be those of the author. Instead, this novel complicates the meeting of folklore and literature by putting into practice what can only be theorized, described, or discussed in an essay like *Éloge*. In his refusal to accept folklore festivals, Solibo shows that binary oppositions between the spoken and the written—oppositions which characterize many readings of this novel—fail to consider the nuances that define his storytelling and Martinique's cultural realities. In the universe of *Solibo Magnifique*, orality and writing are not homogenous categories. Instead, each encompasses a range of communicative forms. Chamoiseau's novel is built on these pluralities and the constant negotiation of distinctions.

If Solibo's own storytelling would be fundamentally different if transposed onto a stage, then all oral storytelling is not equal. By extension, might it also be possible that different kinds of writing exist? In his insistence on being called a "marqueur de paroles," the narrator has actually already suggested a similar distinction. The expression "marqueur de paroles" is a neologism, based on the Creole verb for "to write," "maké," derived likely from the French "marquer." At the time of his formal interrogation, the narrator explains: "Non, pas écrivain:

---

<sup>222</sup> Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard/Presses universitaires créoles, 1989), 61, note 11.

marqueur de paroles, ça change tout inspectère, l'écrivain est d'un autre monde, il rumine, élabore ou prospecte, le marquer une agonie: celle de l'oraliture, il recueille et transmet" (169-170, trans 115). In fact, the narrator's refusal of the title "écrivain" is analogous to Solibo's refusal to be part of storytelling festivals. Each believes that the integrity of his stories, be they written or spoken, depends on a distinction that is incompressible to most. And, like the storyteller, whom Chamoiseau often references as a "Maître de la Parole," the "marqueur" must define himself in relation to the traditional word.

But if the narrator distinguishes between the function of an "écrivain" and a "marqueur," is the text itself to be read as the work of one or both? Can a "Chamoiseau écrivain" be separated from a "Chamoiseau marqueur" within the text? Lydie Moudileno asks this question in comparing the main text to the appended "écrit du souvenir," an account of Solibo's last story assembled from the narrator's recollections and notes of other's recollections. Moudileno ultimately affirms that the narrator undertakes and completes his work as a "marqueur de paroles" whose task is both to provide an account of the *parole* as well as reflections on the conditions of its production and of his own writing.<sup>223</sup>

With the novel inscribed in its totality under the sign of the "marqueur," there is no shift from one kind of writing to another. Yet, while the narrator is a "marqueur" at the time of the narration, part of what he narrates is his circuitous trajectory to arrive at the point. He starts not as a writer or "marqueur" but as an ethnographer and folklore collector. In the local market, he studies "djobeurs" who live off of odd jobs, not coincidentally the subject of Chamoiseau's own first novel:

A force de patience, j'avais fait admettre mes cahiers, mes crayons, mon petit magnétophone à piles qui ne fonctionnait jamais, mon appétence malsaine pour les paroles, toutes les paroles, mêmes les plus inutiles. Pour me dissimuler, je rendais quelques menus services de-ci de là, charroi d'ordure, nettoyage de légumes, recherche des pièces de cinq centimes indispensables à la souplesse rituelle du marchandage des prix. Ma recherche avançait d'autant plus mal que j'avais de fréquentes crises d'asthme et qu'il m'était impossible de me souvenir de mon plan de travail. [...] Prétendue ethnographe, je vivais sans plus de distance l'engourdissement des heures chaudes en m'affalant dans les brouettes comme les djobeurs, ou me figeant, debout, assis, tel que l'instant me surprenait, à la manière des vieilles marchandes qui attendent ainsi le retour d'un vent frais. [...] J'avais beau, durant mes éclaircies lucides, m'imaginer en *observation directe participante*, comme le douteux Malinowski, Morgan, Radcliffe-Brown, ou bien Favret-Saada chez ses sorciers normands, je savais que nul ne s'était vu dissoudre ainsi dans ce qu'il voulait rigoureusement décrire. (43-44, trans. 21)

With writing and recording instruments, the narrator approaches the market, its merchants, and customers as objects of study from which he will collect data for his own project. But he becomes more a part of market life than an observer of it. The narrator Chamoiseau, a "prétendu ethnographe," fails to live up to the example of ethnographers who integrate themselves into the *milieu* they study, without influencing it and while retaining the distance necessary for objective analysis.

The narrator's study of the market forces him into the difficult position of an auto-ethnographer. Being true to ethnographic conventions would require him to be untrue to himself

---

<sup>223</sup> Moudileno, *L'écrivain antillais*, 109.

and to separate himself from his own culture. But his familiarity with the target culture also enables him to see the shortcomings of available methodologies. He finds himself adrift with no examples, or inspiration. It is, somewhat surprisingly, the market's charcoal vendor and esteemed storyteller, Solibo Magnifique, who leads the narrator to a different way of thinking about writing and ethnographic documentation:

Mystère sur mon devenir si le personnage de Solibo Magnifique n'avait réveillé ma vieille curiosité, me permettant ainsi, à travers lui, de retrouver une logique d'écriture, sans pour autant, hélas, parvenir à réparer cet isalop de magnétophone dont l'enregistrement depuis mon arrivée ne s'intéressait qu'à son propre souffle trop clairement bronchitique. Solibo m'aborda un matin, avec comme bonjour la question épuisée: Chamzibié ho, écrire ça sert à quoi?... puis il me parla de tout et de rien [...] (45)

This vague "logique d'écriture" is defined primarily by what it is not, namely the approach of a "prétendu ethnographe." The narrator's perpetually malfunctioning tape recorder—interested only in its "propre souffle trop clairement bronchitique"—is emblematic of the ethnographic approach that he brings with him from the outside but abandons when it proves unsuitable in practice. The verb "retrouver" implies that this newly recovered "logique d'écriture" was once present and later had been lost, presumably when the narrator used his "cahiers" and "crayons" exclusively for ethnographic data collection. Temporarily freed from the pressures of incessant documentation and scholarly distancing, Chamoiseau the narrator begins to think about what he had tried to record and about how he had tried to record it.

But Solibo's sudden death transforms the narrator's work and the narrator himself. While in custody, the narrator promises to bear witness in writing to Solibo's life and death. After his release, he begins to regret this promise. Even before Solibo's death, the narrator had not arrived at a satisfactory means of writing or recording his stories. Without Solibo's prodding, the challenge seems insurmountable. To escape the nagging memory of his promise, the narrator returns to the market and the ethnographic project that he had once renounced. He is reminded of his duty to Solibo by the most surprising of visitors, a much-changed Chief Inspector Pilon. After Solibo's death, Pilon begins a personal study of storytellers. He comes to understand Solibo's difficult situation in a world that has forgotten him and his art: "Il avait vu mourir les contes, défaillir le créole, il avait vu notre parole perdre de cette vitesse que pas un de nos maîtres ne pouvait écouter, il se voyait saisi par cette fatalité qu'il avait cru pouvoir vaincre" (223-224). Pilon approaches his former detainee, the narrator Chamoiseau, in the hopes that this "marqueur de paroles" will preserve Solibo's last words. But the narrator does not so much as acknowledge Pilon:

Il fallait, conclut Pilon, transmettre au moins l'essentiel de ce qui, en fait, avait été son testament... Il s'en alla, amis, sans que je ne lui jette un regard, que je ne lui dise un mot, bouleversé par ce rappel de ce que je savais, que nous savions tous, que nous avons toujours su de manière parcellaire. (224)

The Chief Inspector's plea for the transmission and preservation of Solibo's last story makes the narrator acutely aware that he is neglecting his own promise. He is in a position to tell Solibo's story, yet he spends his days pursuing an ethnographic study he knows to be useless. One day, well after Pilon's visit, the narrator is suddenly seized by the memory of Solibo and of the brutality he himself endured in the hands of the police. He now feels compelled to transmit what he saw and heard. But he lacks the means to make put this knowledge into transmittable form.

Revisiting his initial ethnographic notes about Solibo, the narrator concludes them to be insufficient, even treacherous:

Mais écrire? Comment écrire la parole de Solibo? En relisant mes premières notes du temps où je le suivais au marché, je compris qu'écrire l'oral n'était qu'une trahison, on y perdait les intonations, les mimiques, la gestuelle du conteur, et cela me paraissait d'autant impensable que Solibo, je le savais, y était hostile. (225 / trans. 158)

Instead of making the writer the sole purveyor of narrative, the storyteller's death makes the writer acutely aware of his own powerlessness. With a personal and cultural obligation to tell Solibo's story, the narrator has more to say than ever, but he finds himself in the puzzling position of a writer who is unsure of how to write. Once he definitively admits the impossibility of writing the oral, he is left a void in his writing practices. He puts down his pen and listens to other witnesses' reconstitutions of parts of Solibo's final story, trying to compile them together in his mind. When one of the witnesses, Pipi, gives a three hour performance in imitation of Solibo, the narrator tapes it. But his attempt to translate it into written form yields only a mound of meaningless pages. This process of trial and error affirms that standard models of writing and documentation will not suffice. At the end of it all, the narrator realizes that he must invent a new approach, adapted to the situation, if he is to transmit any trace of Solibo's storytelling:

Si bien, amis, que je me résolus à en extraire une version réduite, organisée, *écrite*, sorte d'ersatz de ce qu'avait été le Maître cette nuit-là: il était clair désormais que sa parole, sa vraie parole, toute sa parole, était perdue pour tous—et à jamais. (226)

This written synthesis of Solibo's final storytelling performance appears in the novel as an appendix entitled "Après la parole: l'écrit du souvenir." Ironically, it is only in admitting that Solibo's true word is forever lost that the narrator can actually be a bearer of Solibo's stories and memory. He no longer attempts to write only the "parole."

Solibo's storytelling, discussed since the beginning, finally takes textual form. But the reader expecting a riveting tale from this storyteller deemed "Magnifique" may be disappointed. The story is hardly folk narrative in the conventional sense. Solibo references traditional Creole folktale characters like "compère Tigre," "compère Lapin," and "Ti-Jean" only to say that he will *not* be telling their stories this particular night. In fact, his story—or at least the part he lived to tell—has no clear plot at all. From the beginning of the novel, deliberate mystery and poetic liberty have been defining factors in the storyteller's art:

Il ne s'agissait pas de comprendre le dit, mais de s'ouvrir au dire, s'y laisser emporter, car Solibo devenait là un son de gorge plus en voltige qu'un solo de clarinette quand Stélio le musicien y gouffrait son souffle. (33, trans. 13)

For a storyteller, the word is like a musical instrument: anyone can handle it but only the initiated can coax meaning and art from it. Solibo does not always speak with words that can be understood in isolation but uses sound and silences to create an effect. This goes a long way to explain the disjointed structure of this "écrit du souvenir," containing frequent word plays, passages of nonsense syllables, calls and responses, and even a guessing game with the audience.

By including these performative and participatory elements, in the account of Solibo's story, Chamoiseau allows the reader to experience how transcribing words is vastly different than recreating the totality of their effect and the context that give them meaning. In fact, this "écrit du souvenir," presented as a synthesis of Solibo's words, opens with a transcription of the sound of a drum, played by Sucette, one of Solibo's audience members. Lines like "Plakatak, / Blin, Piting, Piting, / Tak!" (231) seem meaningless, but they use the familiar domain of music to

remind the reader of the limits of transcription. No more can we expect letters to represent pitch and rhythm than we can words to recreate Solibo's storytelling, musical in its own way. And, though Sucette's accompaniment is *part* of Solibo's storytelling performance, the reader, unlike Solibo's listeners, will never experience them in simultaneity.

The reader, therefore, cannot be a surrogate for the audience member, a textual eavesdropper on Creole storytelling traditions. The story that the reader receives goes beyond this. For, ultimately, the reader is the naratee not of the storyteller but of the narrator who calls himself a "marqueur de paroles." The "écrit du souvenir" goes a long way to elucidate the mission of this "marqueur." This document that the narrator struggles so long to produce is virtually meaningless in isolation. Returning to Modileno's conclusion that the entire text is the work of the "marqueur," it becomes evident that only the union of the appendix and the main text can allow the "marqueur" to accomplish his double mission: both cultural documentation *and* reflection on what is recorded, how it is preserved, and why it is written. The preceding chapters provide a context for the verbal art of the appendix. They tell about the disappearing riches of Creole culture in Martinique, the oppression of French cultural hegemony, and potential for the law "made in France" to misconstrue a storyteller's death into an audience's conspiracy. And they raise questions about the possibility of cultural transmission in this context. Solibo refuses to participate in storytelling festivals whose very mission would seem to be preserving his art. Pilon pleads for the narrator to write down Solibo's stories. The narrator fights with his tape recorder, scribbles field notes, and finally rejects both the role of ethnographer and that of writer only to return to his ethnographic work as a refuge from the duty that the storyteller's passing leaves him.

More often than not, critical paradigms of transmission tend to treat literature as part of a line of succession. Oral traditions are passed down. Stories are heard and then reproduced. Earlier historical contexts, seventeenth-century frame narratives for instance, offer examples of case in which the narrator is a stand-in for the writer and then a mouthpiece for the storyteller. But transmission becomes much more problematic when the narrator is not merely a stenographer. The relay of the story becomes part of the story itself. And, when the storyteller is purported to be dying, a cultural preservation becomes a more urgent matter. Nineteenth-century French writers scramble to snatch the last remnants of tradition from the jaws of modernity. Post-colonial cultural dynamics compound this urgency, yet the complexities of transmission in Francophone literature are often overlooked. *Solibo Magnifique* offers a case in point.

One critic of *Solibo* suggests, for example, that the narrator becomes a "new 'conteur.'"<sup>224</sup> With his more nuanced view of ethnography, he is the storyteller's successor. However, the narrator's ultimate self-identification is not as an ethnographer or folklore collector, but as a "marqueur de paroles" whose mission is that of assuring cultural continuity. When the term first appears in *Éloge de la créolité*, it is in a discussion of the Creole writer's separation from the storyteller. The authors cast European literary history as a gradual evolution from speaking to writing, in which literary forms spring from the local traditions. By contrast, in Martinique, written literature is introduced from the outside, thereby excluding "marqueurs" and their sensitivity to oral traditions:

---

<sup>224</sup> John F. Moran, "Finding One's Way Between Descartes and Zombis: Making Sense of the World in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*," *Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 9, no. 32 (2004): 228.

Ailleurs, les aèdes, les bardes, les griots, les ménestrels et les troubadours avaient passé le relais à des scripteurs (*marqueurs de parole*) qui progressivement prirent leur autonomie littéraire. Ici, ce fut la rupture, le fossé, la ravine profonde entre une expression écrite qui se voulait universal-moderne et l'oralité créole traditionnelle où sommeille une belle part de notre être.<sup>225</sup>

The Creole writer is not the storyteller's direct successor: The need for the new literary and cultural identity of *créolité* is premised on this very rupture. The Creole writer, whom Chamoiseau will call a "marqueur de paroles," must go back to orality and seize the opportunity that literary history in the colonial world never afforded him.

In a sense, *Solibo Magnifique* tells the story of the narrator Chamoiseau realizing something that the writer Chamoiseau holds central to his work: that orality transcends traditional materials and that its recuperation must look to the moods, mindsets, and emotions of tellers and listeners who have embraced this fugitive and often mysterious "Parole." In his essay "Que faire de la parole?", Chamoiseau recounts his own folklore collecting, reminiscent, of course, of the narrator's beginnings in *Solibo*:

Mon premier soin a été de me mettre à l'écoute de vieux conteurs actuels, les derniers conteurs. Ils vivent dans les mornes une longue agonie. Je les écoute et je les enregistre aussi souvent que cela m'est possible. C'est un matériau extraordinaire qui témoigne un peu du rythme originel, des stratégies de dissimulation du sens vrai, des tactiques pour opacifier l'expression. [...] Et je les écoute moins pour entendre ce qu'ils disent que pour savoir *comment* et *pour quels effets* il le disent.<sup>226</sup>

Like the Creole language, Chamoiseau's storyteller was born of slavery and on colonial plantations. He told tales by night, offering amusement, education, and hidden meaning that said the unsayable—explaining the "stratégies de dissimulations" that present-day storytellers maintain. Chamoiseau does not discount fieldwork or folklore collecting. He simply does not consider it an end in itself. And though the narrator in *Solibo*, casts aside his tape recorder and ethnographer's notebook, he, too, still relies on oral materials, or memories of them, as the basis for his literary product.

In this light, Chamoiseau's novel is not so much about the content of oral traditions than about the transformation that their literary transmission requires. In "Que faire de la parole?", Chamoiseau explicitly reflects on this transformation. He counters one of the most common ways of talking about folklore in literature, the passage from the oral to the written: "[...] j'ai acquis le sentiment que le passage de l'oral à l'écrit exige une zone de mystère créatif. Car il ne s'agit pas, en fait, de passer de oral à l'écrit, comme on passe d'un pays à un autre." The point is not to write the oral or to write in imitation of the oral, he continues: "il s'agit d'envisager une création artistique capable de mobiliser la totalité qui nous est offerte, tant du point de vue de l'oralité que de celui de l'écriture."<sup>227</sup> *Solibo*, written several years earlier, shows the narrator failing at his first attempts at writing precisely because he bypasses this step of "mystère creative." Ultimately, the work of the "marqueur" is more an act of creation and culturally-

<sup>225</sup> Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité*, 35. Elsewhere, Chamoiseau experiments with different designation for the storyteller, including "oralitourain" which borrows its word ending from the French "écrivain."

<sup>226</sup> Chamoiseau, "Que faire de la parole," 155-156.

<sup>227</sup> Chamoiseau, "Que faire de la parole," 157.

atuned adaptation than of direct transmission and transcription. The “marqueur” cannot merely collect folklore. Nor can he stand back as a reporter, noting events as they unfold. Indeed, part of his art is manipulating chronology, presenting Solibo’s story only once its context has been already established and using flashbacks to narrate the life of a storyteller who dies in the first sentence of the novel. From remembrances of the storyteller to footnotes referencing crime lab reports or autopsy findings, *Solibo* offers ample reminders of the plurality of stories the narrator mediates and the preexisting layers of mediation that he navigates. Like Solibo’s poetic silences, Chamoiseau’s narrator combines these varied elements of the text in such a way that the interrelations between languages, stories, words, genres, and cultures may resound.

In Chamoiseau’s view, literature is the vehicle *par excellence* for cultural transmission precisely because it can integrate remnants of oral traditions with self-conscious reflection. Transmission is not supposed to be neat or direct. In fact, its complexities and detours are representative of the historical circumstances that give rise to *créolité*. Chamoiseau’s book of Creole stories *Au Temps de l’antan*, published the same year as *Solibo*, illustrates this in the most unexpected of generic contexts: a folktale collection, a form closely associated with orality and ethnographic documentation. In the epigram to the preface signed by Chamoiseau, the writer/narrator addresses the storytellers of old whose words he will collect:

O vieux paroleurs, maîtres de la blague, conteurs des hautes veillées, oui vous cueilleurs du verbe dessous les désespoirs, je reprends la parole où vous l’aviez laissée, aussi libre et infidèle que vous l’étiez vous-mêmes.<sup>228</sup>

Here, transmission does not even involve the storyteller’s active participation or consent. A close look at the text raises the question of exactly where these “vieux paroleurs” left their “parole”: this preface is immediately followed by a list of bibliographic sources—published folklore collections from which Chamoiseau adapted these tales. And, far from concealing these printed sources, Chamoiseau even cites one nineteenth-century collector by name: “Voici l’histoire du nègre Yé, qu’entendit Lafacadio Hearn.”<sup>229</sup> In this light, the example of storytellers as “libre et infidèle” serves the writer well as he reinscribes these stories within a tradition not of collecting but of creating.

Could a certain brand of literature, while not reproducing the oral, do more justice to its art, context, and story than artificial spectacles of orality, isolated folklore collections, or distanced ethnographic accounts? Could *not* trying to reproduce orality sometimes lead to a more accurate picture of the storyteller and his stories? *Solibo Magnifique*, taken as a whole, contains both these questions and Chamoiseau’s affirmative answer to them. By appending a recreation of Solibo’s last story to his novel, Chamoiseau points out the limitations of folklore collections published in isolation. Here, the literary text provides a necessary context—one that a performance on stage or even a folklore collection could not provide—to give meaning to

<sup>228</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *Au Temps de l’antan: Contes du pays Martinique* (Paris Hatier, 1988), 9.

<sup>229</sup> Chamoiseau, *Au Temps de l’antan*, 68. Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) was born in Greece and died doing folklore study in Japan. For Chamoiseau and other writers of *créolité*, he is remembered as a folklorist of the Americas. A writer, journalist, and social observer, he was fascinated with Creole language, culture, and lore, both in New Orleans and Martinique. See, for example, Simon J. Bronner, “‘Gombo’ Folkloristics: Lafcadio Hearn’s Creolization and Hybridization in the Formative Period of Folklore Studies,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 42, no. 2 (2005): 141-184 and Mary Gallagher, “The Creole folktale in the writings of Lafcadio Hearn: An Aesthetic of Mediation” in *The Conte: Oral and Written Dynamics*, ed. Janice Carruthers and Maeve McCusker (Peter Lang, 2009).

seemingly incomprehensible storytelling of a man whom the police finally conclude was “la vibration d’un monde finissant [...]” (227). Furthermore and of great importance, the novel provides a context for understanding its own problematic production, as the narrator realizes that literary and ethnographic models of writing or documenting will be insufficient. As a “marqueur de paroles,” he foregrounds the interstices that define narrative transmission. He lays claim to plurality of voices and of words—not just his own. His title implies less active personal agency than an author and less distance than an ethnographer. He continues the analytical work of studying beliefs and practices but breaks away from the ethnographic model of impersonal writing. He creates all the while enjoying collective authority. In this amalgamation of functions, the “marqueur de paroles” embodies the openness, fusion, and refusal of specificity that defines *créolité* itself.

More than an investigation of the causes of one storyteller’s demise, *Solibo Magnifique* is an investigation of the aftermath of such a disappearance. The text itself is a product of this aftermath and part of the narrator’s struggle to reconcile his cultural obligation to transmit tradition with the limits of his written medium. In *Solibo Magnifique*, Chamoiseau shows the necessity not of rendering the oral but of responding to it—and to earlier models for rendering it. He makes literature a site of dialogue between the written and the oral, the past and the present. The Creole writer—regardless of what he title he claims—must be willing to venture into the mysterious but creative spaces between language and genres. Or, as Chamoiseau so concisely concludes in “Que faire de la parole?” “Je veux dire qu’il doit se faire Poète.”<sup>230</sup>

### Djebar’s *Arabian Nights* and *Algerian Days*

Far from Chamoiseau’s Martinique and “maîtres de la Parole,” the Algerian writer Assia Djebar also centers her literary project around the spoken word. Born Fatima-Zohra Imalayène in 1936 in Cherchell, Djebar was educated in Algeria and France and now holds the distinction of being elected to the *Académie Française*. Her first novel was published in 1957, and she continues to produce films and write prolifically. In her work, the interrelationships between the past and present, the collective and the personal, and, inevitably, the written and the oral take precedence over linear narratives. Her fiction is often interspersed with historical documents which she combs for echoes of women’s voices. Indeed, the “voice” in Djebar’s work is not necessarily attached to the commanding presence of a storyteller, but often to a distant and anonymous cry, a voice of no consequence for the men who controlled women’s bodies—and who wrote history. Djebar never devalues oral traditions in the sense of familiar folktales. But orality figures in her work less often for its traditional content and more often for its traditional function as the primary outlet for women’s expression.

One facet of orality does not exclude the other, however, as seen most notably in Djebar’s fascination with the *Arabian Nights*—both as an ancient Eastern oral tradition and a staple of Western literature.<sup>231</sup> By not finishing a story she begins, Schéhérazade buys herself

<sup>230</sup> Chamoiseau, “Que faire de la parole,” 157.

<sup>231</sup> Another example might be the short story “Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement” which opens the eponymous collection (1980), where a young Algerian woman records and transcribes the songs of women whose relationship to language is vastly different than hers—both because they cannot write and

another day to live until the sultan renounces his vow to take a new wife each night and have her killed in the morning. The first Western translation, Antoine Galland's *Mille et une nuits*, predates formalized folklore study by a century, but it is, nonetheless, more than a sterile exercise in manuscript translation. Galland had worked for Louis XIV in Constantinople and then at the court of Versailles as an antiquary. He was no stranger to collecting artifacts—or stories, like those he included in *Les Nuits* after hearing them from a visiting informant in Paris.<sup>232</sup> As my first chapter shows, Schéhérazade enjoys an impressive literary legacy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France with spin-offs of *Les Mille et une nuits* appearing even before Galland's final volume was printed. The legendary storyteller's popularity hardly fades in the twentieth century. Djebbar is not alone among Francophone writers, especially from the Arabic world, who find special interest in this storytelling cycle sometimes called the *Arabian Nights*. Leïla Sebbar, another Algerian woman writer, puts her own modern twist on Schéhérazade. Her trilogy of novels features a witty and runaway teenager Shérazade, a gifted storyteller whose adventures span France and the Middle East.<sup>233</sup>

For Djebbar, the *Nights* do not generate one recurring character like Sebbar's Shérazade but a multitude of other stories, storytellers, and Schéhérazades. For instance, her 1987 novel *Ombre Sultane* (translated in English as *A Sister to Scheherazade*) inscribes into the *Nights* the contemporary story of a man's wives Isma and Hajila to explore how one woman's complicity with social or familial structures impacts the other woman—and perhaps many other women. Schéhérazade's sister Dinarzade, who accompanies the storyteller into the nuptial chamber and wakes her each morning, appears as a model of sisterly solidarity. The analogy between the sisters of the *Nights* and the sisterhood of all women—exemplified in “sister” wives Isma and Hajila—culminates in a series of hypothetical questions:

Et si Schéhérazade était tuée à chaque aurore, avant que sa voix haute de conteuse ne s'élève?

Si sa sœur qu'elle avait installée, par précaution, sous le lit de noces, s'était endormie? Si elle avait ainsi relâché sa garde et abandonné la sultane d'une nuit à la hache du sacrificateur dressé en plein soleil?

Si à son tour elle prenait la place de Schéhérazade disparue, muette, et si, sous le même lit d'amour et de mort à transformer en trône de diseuse, une autre, une seconde sœur insomniause, s'oubliait à nouveau? Si celle-ci négligeait de veiller, en éveilleuse qui préparerait la parade, qui assurerait l'unique salut?

Si notre premier malheur était ancré dans cette première défaillance?

Si, à chaque aube présente ou à venir, une fois ou mille et une fois, tout sultan, tout mendiant, en proie à l'ancestrale peur mutilatrice, assouvit encore son besoin de sang virginal?

Oui, si Schéhérazade renaissant mourait à chaque point du jour, justement parce qu'une seconde femme, une troisième, une quatrième ne se posait pas dans son ombre, dans sa voix, dans sa nuit?<sup>234</sup>

---

because their oral communication is constrained by veils and cloisters which deprive them of interlocutors.

<sup>232</sup> Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland*, 96.

<sup>233</sup> See Leïla Sebbar, *Le Fou de Shérazade* (Paris: Stock, 1991), Leïla Sebbar, *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (Paris: Stock, 1985), Leïla Sebbar, *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (Paris: Stock, 1982).

<sup>234</sup> Assia Djebbar, *Ombre sultane* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987), 203-204.

Schéhérazaïde and Dinarzaïde become emblematic of this succession of women who stand in their sister's shadow, who become the bearer of another's story, or prepare the way for women who will follow.

Djebar again turns to the *Arabian Nights* in her 1997 short story "La Femme en morceaux." The domestic violence of Isma and Hajila's world gives way to the more widespread menace of Algeria's civil war of the 1990s. Published in the collection *Oran, langue morte*, the story closes the first part "l'Algérie, entre désir et mort" and points towards the second part "Entre France et Algérie." The title of the collection references the city of Oran, which the protagonist in the first story finds void of any memory of its violent past—a past now forgotten and unspeakable, like a dead language. Typical of Djebar's style, the "La Femme en morceaux" alternates between roman and italic fonts to juxtapose different time periods and different stories—or at least stories and times that *seem* different: Schéhérazaïde's tales "Les trois pommes" and "Histoire de la dame massacrée"<sup>235</sup> and Djebar's own story of Atyka, a modern Algerian high school teacher, reading these stories with her students. On paper or in Atyka's imagination, Schéhérazaïde's stories pose little threat in the eyes of the Islamist order. When she puts her authority as a teacher behind the stories and presents them to her students, they become a daring affront to standards of *public* behavior.<sup>236</sup> In the *Arabian Nights* tradition, Schéhérazaïde lives but her storytelling ceases once the sultan lifts his death threat against the women of the kingdom. In Djebar's story, Atyka is put to death by Islamic militants, but her severed head keeps speaking as she continues the story for her class.

This short story's rich condensation of typically Djebarian themes like violence, women's voices, hybridity, and resistance makes references to it understandably frequent in studies of Djebar's *œuvre*. But Djebar's choice of intertexts places "La Femme en morceaux" in a much larger literary tradition as well. For Djebar's story asks us not only to read her rewriting but to rethink *Les Mille et une nuits* as an on-going story. For even after Atyka's murder, a haunting uncertainty projects her storytelling into the future: "Mais la voix? Où s'est réfugiée la voix d'Atyka?"<sup>237</sup> The decapitated storyteller dramatizes questions that had lingered behind the stages of literary production for earlier writers: when storytelling ceases or changes, what happens to the storyteller's voice and stories? And by extension, what happens to literary representations of them?

"La Femme en morceaux" opens with no mention of Schéhérazaïde, only a scene from one of her tales rendered in Djebar's own style:

---

<sup>235</sup> These tales correspond to parts of nights XC-XCII in Galland, *Les Mille et une nuits*, 292-302. Other translators give them different titles, explaining why Djebar claims to have given her story "La Femme en morceaux" the same title as the tale she rewrites (381).

<sup>236</sup> Storytelling as a tool of education or edification is nothing new. Atyka, however, transposes it from a traditional familial setting, typical of Francophone literature, to a classroom: "By moving the storyteller to public space—the classroom [...] Atyka's storytelling becomes highly political, subversive and dangerous. The Algerian storyteller puts her own life in danger: eventually she is murdered because she dares to speak out" (Mildred Mortimer, "Transforming the Word: The Storyteller in the Works of Calixthe Beyala, Malika Mokeddem and Assia Djebar," *Nottingham French Studies* 40, no. 1 [2001]: 92).

<sup>237</sup> Djebar, "La Femme en morceaux," 214. Henceforth, all quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically by page number.

Une nuit à Bagdad. Au fond, tout au fond du cours du large, légèrement en pente du fleuve, un endroit entre la ville et le palais. Là, au fond de ce fleuve, le Tigre, dort un corps de jeune femme.

Un corps coupé en morceaux. (163)

It is a calm beginning; the woman's body "sleeps." Only the brusque interruption of "Un corps coupé en morceaux" interrupts this calm. In the story that unfolds, we learn about the mystery of the mutilated woman. A young husband foolishly trusts a slave's lies about his wife's infidelity and kills the supposed adulteress, cutting her body into pieces and placing it in a trunk that he throws into the river. The *calife* is wandering around his city one night when he finds the trunk containing the woman's remains. Profoundly saddened by this gruesome discovery, he gives an ultimatum to his minister, the *vizir*: find the woman's murderer within three days or take the murderer's place at the gallows. The young man comes forward and confesses to his wife's murder. Since the husband does not know the identity of the deceitful slave who instigated the tragedy, the *vizir* begins his hunt for the slave—only to find him under his own roof. To win his slave's pardon, the *vizir* proposes to tell the *calife* a story, one whose interest will surpass the story they have just witnessed of the "femme en morceaux."

In Djébar's text, Schéhérazade is referenced only at the end of the introduction. The narrator describes the scene as the *calife* and his entourage ponder the mystery behind the mutilated body of an unknown woman: "L'inconnue qu'ils contemplent est, nous précise le récit de la sultane mythique, 'blanche comme le vierge argent'!" (166).<sup>238</sup> But the version of the story that readers receive is not that of the "sultane mythique." Instead, we are introduced to Atyka, who tells us Schéhérazade's ancient tale as it plays out in her imagination. The chronological jump between Baghdad long ago and Algiers in 1994 is condensed into a parenthetical remark:

Tandis que, devant le palais, les charpentiers, le troisième jour, commencent à clouer le bois pour les hautes potences à dresser, il est temps (c'est Atyka, aujourd'hui, dans une autre ville arabe, qui imagine tout en marchant dans la rue), oui, il est temps de revenir à la jeune femme; à l'inconnue vivante; vivante et heureuse. (167)

In the place of an explicit transition, the gallows serve as the pivot point between the two stories and places. From the start, violence is the link between the past and the present.

The first passage in italics follows immediately and affirms this new place and time: "*Alger, 1994. Atyka, professeur de français: une langue qu'elle a choisie, qu'elle a plaisir d'enseigner*" (171). As a storyteller, Atyka hardly fits a traditional model. She speaks for Algeria as a French teacher. Her raw materials may derive from oral traditions but her very presentation of them stresses their peregrinations through the pages of literature—literature that must be read as artistic production, not as a document of religion or political science, as she once reminds her students (198). Born the year of Algerian independence, Atyka enjoys a freedom that her parents did not. Her father hopes to see her distinguished as an Arabic linguist or specialist in Islamic law. Sharing her mother's passion for stories and literature, she *chooses* to be a French teacher: "*le français me servira pour aller et venir, dans tous les espaces, autant que dans plusieurs langues!*" (168). She shows that French is a deliberate choice for her, not an obligation as it had been for her parents. Atyka's decision to teach literature in French is

<sup>238</sup> Galland describes "le corps d'une jeune dame, plus blanc que de la neige et coupé par morceaux..." (Galland, *Les Mille et une nuits*, 293). Djébar is quoting instead from J.C. Madrus, *Le Livre des mille nuits et une nuit*, fourth ed., vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions de la Revue Blanche, 1899), 237.

reminiscent of Djébar's own decision to write in French, described in her essay collection, *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent*:

En 1979, quand je me réinstalle à Paris pour écrire [...] je prends conscience de mon choix définitive d'une écriture francophone qui est, pour moi alors, *la seule nécessité*: celle où l'espace en français de ma langue d'écrivain n'exclut pas les autres langues maternelles que je porte en moi, sans les écrire.<sup>239</sup>

In a sense, Atyka's French classroom concretizes this linguistic openness, all the while allowing an examination of it. Students ask questions in Arabic while others answer in French. She invites students who so desire to bring Arabic versions of the text (180). Ultimately, Atyka's goal is to illustrate the variations in the *Nights* that are inherent in folkloric transmission as well as those variations that result from different French "translations."

Atyka's students find a particular fascination with problems of translations and the divergences between two translations of the *Nights*—presumably Galland's translation marketed to early-eighteenth century audiences and Jean-Charles Mardrus' more sexualized late nineteenth-century rendering:

*Et deux ou trois adolescents décident de raccompagner Atyka dans sa marche. On continue de parler... des Mille et Une Nuits, bien sûr et des traductions françaises, de la première, si expurgée, de la seconde, au contraire foisonnante! La conversation s'éparpille de tous côtés; il fait beau sur la route et Atyka est étonnée de ce naturel retrouvé si aisément avec ces jeunes: devant elle, à un carrefour, un convoi militaire qui passe leur rappelle le présent et ses alarmes.* (190)

The rude reminder of the civil war that rages around them cuts the conversation about translations short. Atyka parts ways with her students, not wanting them to see the "*sourde inquietude*" (190) that weighs on her. The text returns to the voice of the young husband in Schéhérazade's story who describes his wife's murder:

Mon sang ne fit qu'un tour. Emporté par ma fureur jalouse, je plongeai un couteau dans la gorge de celle que je crus infidèle... Fut-ce moi, fut-ce vraiment moi qui, dans la même rage aveugle, la décapitai, mutilai son corps, puis, saisi par une froideur nouvelle, décidai d'envelopper le corps en morceaux dans un voile de lin?... (190)

There is no explicit transition from "le présent et ses alarmes" to the world of Schéhérazade's story, only the visual change to roman type. But the text moves forward as if there is an apparent link between the Atyka's fears and mutilated woman of a fictional past—one that would render transitions unnecessary. As Mireille Calle-Gruber notes, it is not without significance that this rapid "transition" to the intertext occurs while Atyka and her students are literarily in transit and discussing translation:

Lecteurs, nous prenons conscience que nous sommes constamment en traduction, dans le passage interlope de zones mal définies. Nous sommes en traduction *tout le temps*, ni

---

<sup>239</sup> Assia Djébar, *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent: en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 39. Much has been written about Djébar's choice to describe Algeria in the language of the "Other." See, for example, Ana de Medeiros, "Hegemony and Hybridity in Assia Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Oran, langue morte*," *Journal of Romance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 6-7.

autrefois ni aujourd'hui, ni en arabe ni en français, *et* autrefois *et* aujourd'hui, *et* en arabe *et* en français.<sup>240</sup>

For the reader, this perpetual translation compounds the already destabilizing chronology of “La Femme en morceaux.” Violence, of which the military convoy is a reminder, stands as the primary constant.

Building on Calle-Gruber’s apt observation about the reader’s experience, however, it becomes possible to ask a corollary question about the writer’s role. Many authors who seek to write orality will attempt to resolve this seeming paradox by redefining their writerly role through a process of comparison. For some, the point of comparison is someone who collects narrative: an ethnographer, folklorists, historian, or simple eavesdropper. Chamoiseau shows this most clearly as the narrator bearing his name tries out varying approaches to ethnography and writing. For others, the point of comparison is, instead, someone who produces narrative: usually storytellers themselves. For example, in the early nineteenth-century, Nodier addresses his readers as listeners or invites them to his “veillées.” Frequently, in criticism of Francophone literature the writer is assumed to be taking on the storyteller’s role, without much regard for what that role might be. For example, in concluding her article “Transforming the Word: The Storyteller in the Works of Calixthe Beyala, Malika Mokeddem and Assia Djébar,” Mildred Mortimer places Djébar and “La Femme en morceaux” into one such critical narrative:

The storyteller’s descendant is the writer who, following the path traced by early writers such as Camara Laye and Mouloud Feraoun, becomes a master of the written word.

Therefore, the storyteller has become an increasingly important voice in postcolonial African women’s fiction today because the writer, in the process of finding her own voice, is reconnecting to her foremothers.<sup>241</sup>

Undeniably, the storyteller is important throughout the Francophone world. And folklore has long been used to construct narratives of history and lineage, be it familial, cultural, or national. But what, exactly, are writers reconnecting with when they turn to the storyteller? Is this critical genealogy and unproblematic chain of transmission from storyteller to storywriter actually reflective of how folklore figures into Djébar’s fiction—or anyone else’s?

“La Femme en morceaux” is surprising in that Djébar aligns herself not with the great female storyteller Schéhérazade but with the translator. The story cannot be a translation in the modern sense of rendering one text in another language for, as Atyka has sought to show her class, there is not even one fixed version of the *Nights*. Yet, as Atyka’s students observe, translation, for Galland and Mardrus, is a work of imagination, of combining versions, and creating one’s own. Is Djébar’s act of writing and rewriting not a similar process? In the essays of *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent*, she expounds on this explicitly. Regarding role of writing in mediating orality of the past, she concludes:

Certes, l’écriture littéraire, parce qu’elle s’accomplit sur un autre registre linguistique (ici le français), peut tenter d’être un retour, par translation, à la parole traditionnelle comme

<sup>240</sup> Mireille Calle-Gruber, “Refaire les contes dans la langue adverse: Assia Djébar, *Oran, language morte*,” in *Assia Djébar, ou, la résistance de l’écriture: regards d’un écrivain d’Algérie* (Paris: Mouton-Roulet et Larousse, 2001), 142.

<sup>241</sup> Mortimer, “Transforming the Word: The Storyteller in the Works of Calixthe Beyala, Malika Mokeddem and Assia Djébar,” 91.

parole plurielle (parole des autres femmes), mais aussi parole perdue, ou plutôt, *son de parole perdue*.<sup>242</sup>

Translation, in this light, need not be a strictly linguistic: Djebbar purports to “translate” a collective feminine voice into transmittable written form. In “La Femme en morceaux,” she leaves her own mark on the texts of those translators or storytellers who have gone before her. She, too, writes in French, but in comparison to the models she evokes, it is a different brand of French, not in its level of language but in its function. By including the very intertext that she adapts, Djebbar spotlights her own creative process, situating her act of writing within these varying levels of translation. Far from claiming to produce a faithful translation of one text, Djebbar makes the messy process of recovering orality—or even the sound of the oral—part of the story. Her writing returns to the model of those translators who had transformed and Westernized *Les Nuits* in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century France, all the while foregrounding their mediation of the text in her version for late-twentieth-century Algeria.

Translations are, not coincidentally, the subject of the last question a student asks before Atyka’s assailants storm into the classroom: “*Nous parlerez-vous, madame, ensuite, des différentes traductions françaises, après celle de Galland? Celui-ci paraît-il, aurait beaucoup édulcoré, disons même censuré le texte original...*” (206). Wanting to have sufficient time to address this question that she deems “si pertinente,” Atyka decides to “*suspendre le récit jusqu’au lendemain*” (206). In this pedagogical choice, she echoes the strategy of Schéhérazade whose storytelling is governed by similar time constraints. Atyka looks at her watch. Twice she asks herself “*Demain, aurai-je fini le conte?*” The first time is in the context pedagogical concerns: “*Aurons-nous épuisé ses niveaux de lecture?*” (207) When Atyka repeats this question a second time, noises outside of her classroom door provoke a deep sense of alarm. The text suddenly shifts to roman type. This would seem to indicate a return to Schéhérazade’s tale for which it had previously been reserved. But the model breaks down. Instead, the scene is still Atyka’s classroom. Five armed men enter. One student thinks they are characters from *Les Mille et une nuits*. “*Vous êtes bien Atyka F., soi-disant un professeur, mais qui raconte, paraît-il, à ces jeunes gens, des histoires obscènes?*” asks one intruder (209). These “histories obscènes” condemned by modern Algerian Islamists are, of course, the very tales that earlier times celebrated. Schéhérazade, entertaining the sultan in his chamber, is saved by these tales. Atyka, teaching them to her class, is shot and then decapitated. She dies because her story is good, because it reaches the ears and hearts of others.

Yet, Atyka, unlike the pardoned Schéhérazade, is not silenced. The italics return: “*Atyka, tête coupée, nouvelle conteuse. Atyka parle de sa voix ferme. Une mare de sang s’étale sur le bois de la table, autour de sa nuque. Atyka continue le conte. Atyka, femme en morceaux*” (211). Atyka recaps the tale her class has been studying and then proceeds to the ending she had wanted to share with her students, reciting from memory one version of the end of *Les Mille et une nuits* in which Schéhérazade ceremoniously presents three sons to the sultan.<sup>243</sup> “*Le souverain fondit en larmes, serra les petits contre sa poitrine,*” concludes Atyka, her voice

<sup>242</sup> Djebbar, *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent*, 77.

<sup>243</sup> The story of Schéhérazade’s pardon that constitutes the epilogue varies from one version to another. As noted in my first chapter, Galland’s epilogue diverges in giving Schéhérazade’s neither children nor a written version of her tales. Though Atyka’s account of the epilogue is necessarily abbreviated, it is interesting to note that no mention is made of the sultan having Schéhérazade’s stories written down, in essence transferring them to a realm of male domination.

beginning to fade “*comme si les mots, étouffés par le sang qui s’était mis à s’égoutter, à ruisseler sur le bois de la table, se noyaient eux-mêmes*” (213). Omar, one of Atyka’s students, runs forward and implores the severed head of his beloved teacher: “*Entendre, je veux l’entendre jusqu’au bout!*” (213) But Atyka does not continue with the sultan’s tearful pardon of Schéhérazade:

*Il [Omar] dira plus tard—que sa dernière phrase n’était plus celle de Shéhérazade, non, mais la sienne, elle Atyka, leur professeur tellement aimée: ‘La nuit, c’est chacun de nos jours, mille et un jours, ici, chez nous, à....’* (213)

With this unfinished sentence, Atyka falls silent.

Is the story, in fact, finished? Where exactly does the story lie? These are not unfamiliar questions in short fiction in French. In a very different way, the conversational ricochets of Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Diaboliques* beg the question of what the real story or if there is even one. In “La Partie de tric-trac,” Mérimée leaves the framed story unresolved, only to make his tale the story of this incomplete telling. On the other hand, Djébar’s initial alternation between roman type and italics creates the immediate visual impression of two *separate* but related levels of narrative. At the end, they merge in form and content: roman font previously applied to Schéhérazade’s tale now describes the classroom scene. There is no time left for Atyka to guide her students’ debate and discussion so that they might reach a conclusion on their own. Instead, with her last words, Atyka shows that the real story is found in the links between the two stories, in the necessity of reaching into the past to understand the present. For Atyka’s students, the menace does not disappear at sunrise as it does for Schéhérazade. Instead, it is the light of day that brings one’s words or actions into scrutiny.

Atyka’s post-mortem storytelling disassociates the storyteller’s death and the end of the story. Her voice outlives her mutilated body. In short, they have different end points: “Le corps est bien recelé, enveloppé, mais la voix? Où s’est réfugiée la voix d’Atyka?” wonders Omar, who relates the bloody scene (214). This confounds usual models of transmission in which the voice is linked to the body. Djébar never directly answers this question, which is repeated again by the third person narrative voice in the description of Omar’s reaction:

Le blanc, le regard d’Omar le quête, pour éviter les mots qui le hantent, qui le font absent, parti loin, si loin, dans le Bagdad d’autrefois où murmure, inlassable, la ‘sultane des aubes,’ et dans son sillage, parfois le vizir anxieux...

—Le corps de la femme coupée en morceaux. Le corps, la tête. Mais la voix?  
(215)

Haunted by the violence he has witnessed, Omar seeks only the emptiness of the color white. For some critics, Omar’s silence suggests that Atyka’s voice is lost, that the disassociation of the voice and the body interrupts transmission.<sup>244</sup> On the other hand, Mildred Mortimer’s reading hails Omar as joining the “link of transmission extending from storyteller to storyteller” which

---

<sup>244</sup> See for, example, Jane Hiddleston, *Assia Djébar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 146: “Omar, one of the pupils, contemplates this disembodiment, but his final reflections suggest that Atyka’s resistant voice is lost. Images of obscurity, of the whiteness and oblivion of Oran recur in the closing pages of the story, and the feminine voice that speaks out against that oblivion seems frail. Djébar leaves hanging Omar’s question, ‘le corps, la tête. Mais la voix?’, and though she suggests that the echoes of Atyka’s voice might resonate beyond the moment of their enunciation, these echoes then lose themselves in the silence of the ‘ville blanche.’”

she argues to be characteristic of several Francophone texts.<sup>245</sup> But the model of transmission advanced in Djébar's text ultimately refuses to conform to critical narratives of definitive silence or unproblematic successions of storytellers.

A close reading of the text shows that the first question "Où s'est réfugiée la voix d'Atyka?" (214) does not ask *if* her voice has disappeared, only *where* it has taken refuge. It is also the last time Atyka's name appears. The next question—"Le corps de la femme coupée en morceaux. Le corps, la tête. Mais la voix?" (215)—ascribes no possessor to the voice. It is a generalizing move: a reminder that one voice builds on so many voices of the past, that the question need not be constrained to the context of this one story. In *Assia Djébar, ou, la résistance de l'écriture*, Calle-Gruber, for example, makes this fluidity of voices central to her reading of how the "myth" of the *Nights* becomes literature and literature becomes resistance. She redefines the premise of the question "Mais la voix?" by considering the text in its entirety:

Avec la littérature, les *données* du conte se transforment en matière de confrontations, d'analyses de fonctionnement, en réélaborations constantes. Femme en morceaux dans les langues déjà, avant que de l'être dans sa chair, Atyka procède à la déconstruction des masques narratifs dans le conte. Elle montre ainsi, désignant le leurre des énonciations emboîtées, la mise en abyme, le jeu de dérivation qui enchaîne le récit du mari puis le récit du vizir, que la voix n'appartient pas à celui qui parle. La voix *n'appartient pas*. Vient de plus loin, toujours en amont.<sup>246</sup>

Calle-Gruber offers as an example an earlier scene in which Atyka points out the feminist implications in her students' remarks about the *vizir* Djaffar acting as Shéhérazade's double: "avez-vous pensé que Shéhérazade, en mettant en avant Djaffar, semble dire à son mari si redoutable: 'Je pourrai être, moi, votre vizir, Seigneur, je pourrai être votre Djaffar [...]?'"<sup>247</sup> (199) The voice has no one single point of origin or transmission—in Schéhérazade's story, in Djébar's account of Atyka's death, or in the non-fictional realm on which this text is a commentary.

Djébar's own postscript to *Oran, langue morte* makes this clear. The written is a necessary passage for the voice, a point of both transmission and resistance:

Dans ces nouvelles (y compris un récit et un conte), qu'ai-je cherché entre deux espaces, entre Algérie et France, ou dans la seule Algérie, tandis qu'elle est de plus en plus écartelée entre désir et mort? Qu'est-ce qui a guidé ma pulsion de continuer, si gratuitement, si inutilement, le récit des peurs, des effrois, saisi sur les lèvres de tant de mes sœurs alarmées, expatriées ou en constant danger? Rien d'autre que le désir d'atteindre ce "lecteur absolu"—c'est-à-dire celui qui, par sa lecture de silence et de

<sup>245</sup> Mortimer, "Transforming the Word: The Storyteller in the Works of Calixthe Beyala, Malika Mokkedem and Assia Djébar," 91.

<sup>246</sup> Calle-Gruber, "Refares les contes dans la langue adverse," 146.

<sup>247</sup> This classroom discussion about the *mise en abyme* of storytelling with the *vizir* Djaffar and Schéhérazade provides some precedent for doubling of storytellers between men and women, making Omar's prominence less perplexing at the end of the story. As Zimra notes, "a study of the full cross-gendering of voices in this stories remains to be done: as the sultan to the sultana, so Djaffar to both, each student in turn 'trying on' one of these personae. Close attention to this pairing would, once and for all, remove the suspicion of (anti-male) binarism sometimes implied in some Djébarian criticism" (Clarisse Zimra, "Sounding Off the Absent Body: Intertextual Resonances in 'La Femme qui pleure' and 'La Femme en morceaux,'" *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 3 [1999]: 123).

solidarité, permet que l'écriture de la pourchasse ou du meurtre libère au moins son ombre qui palpiterait jusqu'à l'horizon...<sup>248</sup>

The reader is not the end point. Djébar hopes that at least the shadow of voices, fears, and cries will go further—to the horizon. The question “Mais la voix?” then also stands as a prompt to the reader, who, like Atyka’s students, has received a lesson and becomes a conduit for the story. In the reader’s silent consumption of the text, silence itself comes into question. Could silence—in its many guises—not be the antithesis of the voice but a complement?

At the end of “La Femme en morceaux,” when Atyka’s murders leave the classroom, her students’ wails and screams meld together into a mournful chorus. But, as the decapitated teacher begins to speak, the students assume a silent attentiveness: “Peu à peu, dans le silence qui forme flaque autour de la voix, les élèves, les uns après les autres, se sont relevés, se sont rassis, se sont figés” (212). Djébar’s word choice is interesting: it is silence—not blood—that puddles around the voice. It is only once these silences converge that Atyka begins to recite the end of *Les Mille et une nuits*. Silence becomes that space that allows the two poles of the narrative to merge. It is silence that makes her story understandable and meaningful—to her students and to Djébar’s readers. Atyka’s last sentence “La nuit, c’est chacun de nos jours, mille et un jours, ici, chez nous, à...” appears incomplete. But silence has long been a strategy of the storyteller: what is unsaid can speak louder than what is said and pauses in speech allow words to resonate with the surroundings and with the listeners. Atyka’s final word, the preposition “à,” with the geographic indication left unspoken, leaves her students to pick up where she left off, a perpetual invitation to break their own silence and speak the decisive word, to remember that the story is an on-going one of their own Algerian days, not far-away Arabian nights.

In her acceptance speech for a literary prize awarded in 1997, the year the *Oran, langue morte*, was published, Djébar herself uses Atyka’s story to speak of her own personal suffering as a woman and a writer who is scorned in her own worn-torn country:

Je vis l'inconsolation: Comment en effet écrire, tout en maintenant à vif le non-oubli? ...Je me dis le plus souvent, à cause simplement de ma souffrance de femme, ‘comment taire l’Algérie?’ La taire pour mieux l’emporter ... bercer sa douleur qui lancine.... La porter en moi comme l’Algérienne du conte, tête coupée qui persiste à parler. En somme, faire de la Mort qui nous devient inséparable, cérémonie de beauté, de parole inventive, de vie ....<sup>249</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Author’s postscript printed on the back cover of Assia Djébar, *Oran, langue morte* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997). As Lise Gauvin remarks, “Dans *Oran langue morte*, la parole est muselée, proscrite, parole qui s’écrit plus qu’elle ne s’écrie, qui doit s’écrire faute de pouvoir s’écrier” (Lise Gauvin, “Les femmes-récits ou les déléguées à la parole,” in *Assia Djébar: Littérature et transmission*, ed. Wolfgang Asholt, Mireille Calle-Gruber, and Dominique Combe [Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010], 62).

<sup>249</sup> From Djébar’s acceptance speech for the 1997 Fonlon-Nichols Prize from the African Literature Association, qtd. in Zimra, “Sounding Off the Absent Body,” 115-116. Zimra’s transcription is based on notes provided by Djébar and thus respects the punctuation and repetition evocative of speech.

Another silence emerges, that of Djébar's deliberately ambiguous expression "taire l'Algérie."<sup>250</sup> Whether this evokes an imposed silence, gentle soothing, or something in between, Aytka's response is to continue the story—after death. Her persistent storytelling, unlike Schéhérazade's, has no self-serving motivation. In death, she cannot hope to save her life, only to bring life to the story. Her storytelling exemplifies the internalization of the essence of Algeria—and the "parole inventive" that Djébar hopes will spring forth from destruction. Like silence, death can mark a moment of transmission and, by extension, of creation. The violence that dismembers Aytka's body also transforms her: she becomes both the storyteller and the object of the ancient story. Death, clearly a condition of being "en morceaux," is also what makes Aytka, never before labeled a storyteller, a "nouvelle conteuse."

To the old story of the *Nights*, which equates the storyteller's survival with the cessation of stories, Djébar's "nouvelle conteuse" introduces death and its potential to generate more stories—and perhaps even new literary forms. Djébar turns the story of the storyteller upside—the much like Aytka had hoped to do with the story of the "femme en morceaux" in an effort to make the character more real for her students: "*Elle a désiré renverser le conte, faire sentir la jeune inconnue vivante, palpitante, et l'amour de l'époux si pregnant*" (180). But Djébar also achieves a broader reversal of "le conte"—a generic label she applies to the story in the subtitle and postscript.<sup>251</sup> Aytka does in death what Schéhérazade could never do in life. She condenses the meaning of her story into an explicit moral, a didactic feature long associated with the *conte* but inconsistent with Schéhérazade's precarious position *vis-à-vis* the sultan. Furthermore, "La Femme en morceaux" allows for discussion and debate of the story—an important element of storytelling forms from Marguerite de Navarre's *devisants*, modeled on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, to Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques* with frequent audience interruptions and superimposed commentaries. "La Femme en morceaux" transposes these commentaries, once implicit models for reading, into the explicitly pedagogical space of a classroom to be lessons for Aytka's class and Djébar's readers.

However, Djébar's most visible formal innovation is not a reversal of the brand of *conte* found in *Les Mille et une nuits*. It is a reversal of the very means by which the genre has usually defined its relationship to the *conteur*'s mode of telling. So often in short fiction, the writer makes at least a cursory nod to the inherent expressivity of the oral and laments the shortcomings of the written. Djébar, on the other hand, seizes the visual component particular to a written text, alternating roman and italic types to simultaneously represent different stories, mark their interstices, and eventually their convergence.

Whereas Chamoiseau self-consciously writes the writer and his problematic relationship to the storyteller into his own text, Djébar seems to see no such contradictions. This is not to say that her texts show no self-awareness of their written status, only that she makes no apologies for writing—or rewriting. She intersperses historical documents or autobiographical passages

---

<sup>250</sup> As Zimra explains, "The apparent awkwardness has to do with the plural connotations upon which she likes to play—in particular, the ambivalence between the subject and predicate object, as in "taire l'Algérie," simultaneously to keep the tragedy of the homeland to oneself, i.e., keep Algeria quiet (to silence her); to forswear speaking/writing about it, i.e., keep quiet about Algeria (to silence oneself); yet through the exorcism of writing, to give it peace and quiet." (Zimra, "Sounding Off the Absent Body," note 12, page 122.)

<sup>251</sup> Other stories in the collection are designated "récit" or "nouvelle." In a note, Djébar indicates that her text is "librement réécrit à partir du conte—portant le même titre—des *Mille et une nuits*" (381).

throughout her renderings of orality, unapologetically integrating this writing of the spoken into her own broader *literary* project. Though this might seem to indicate that Djébar has as an unproblematic view of her own status as a writer, the opposite could also be true. For orality, in the universe of Djébar's *œuvre* is more often than not gendered. It is linked to the female condition in the Islamic world. Writing is not a woman's domain, not because women all were part of a peasant society in which no one read and everyone told tales by firesides but because they were to be silenced, whatever their social class, to keep them in submission to their husbands. Writing was a means of access to the outside world, a way to communicate beyond the harem and the home, and, in short, a way to escape the husband's control. By deliberately integrating orality of the past and writing of the present, Djébar counters these centuries of silence.

In *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), perhaps Djébar's most famous novel, the narrator of the autobiographical portion puts this succinctly:

Écrire en langue étrangère, hors de l'oralité des deux langues de ma région natale—le berbère des montagnes du Dahra et l'arabe de ma ville—écrire m'a ramenée aux cris des femmes sourdement révoltées de mon enfance, à ma seule origine. Écrire ne tue pas la voix, mais la réveille, surtout pour ressusciter tant de soeurs disparues.<sup>252</sup>

The novel's culminating image is a severed hand mentioned in the nineteenth-century French painter Fromentin's journal after a terrible siege in Algeria. Djébar, however, can do more to represent the woman over a century later than Fromentin, who was powerless to paint her in her own day: "Plus tard, je me saisis de cette main vivante, main de la mutilation et du souvenir et je tente de lui faire porter le "qalam."<sup>253</sup> To this severed hand, she brings a pen—not because the Algerian had ever held a pen, but because it is only through writing that Djébar can translate her lost voice into the present, make it resonate with the echoes of other women's voices, and give her the audience that she never had.

Djébar's literary project raises the possibility that the voice can be more durable than history written by men or violence perpetrated by colonizers or husbands—this in spite of Galland, Madrus, modern Islamic militants, or nineteenth-century French soldiers. In "La Femme en morceaux," Djébar uses an ancient text, mediated through centuries of translations and retelling, to critique the social and political upheaval of her home country, to convey lessons in reading, to rethink translation and transmission, and to generate more stories—and new forms for telling them. For, in the end, the tradition to be transmitted may not be Schéhérazade's story, but Atyka's tradition of retelling and resistance. Transmission, therefore, need not be the repetition of a tale until it becomes familiar. It is also the projection of a voice that can speak no more, a transmission inscribed here in violence, death, and even silence—in a text where both the story and the storyteller find their fullness "en morceaux."

---

<sup>252</sup> Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 285. Djébar references *L'Amour, la fantasia* and expounds on this when she retells her linguistic autobiography in the chapter "Entre parole et écriture" in Djébar, *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent*, esp. 72-74.

<sup>253</sup> Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, 313.

### Conclusion: The Francophone Storyteller and the Literary History of Orality

Though vastly different in their geographic origins and literary aesthetics, Djébar and Chamoiseau share in a common struggle to use the French language to create a literary and cultural identity that is not French. But they also share with many writers throughout literary history an old story about the storyteller's death. Regardless of its historical and geographic context, the literary productivity of the storyteller's passing revolves around an imagined break with the past: the end of orality. At different times and in different places, this juncture naturally begs the question of what comes next—and how literature or certain conceptions of it fit into this new cultural landscape. The storyteller's silence prompts a rethinking of the potential for literature to preserve the past, while perhaps renewing itself in the process. Djébar's or Chamoiseau's work is no different in this regard. However, their particular position as Francophone writers, rendering their culture's orality in the language of the colonizer, does introduce a different perspective on many of the classic problems of writing orality that resurface throughout literary history.

Tensions generated by the inherent differences between the written and the oral, for example, predate the nineteenth century or French colonial expansions. But the storyteller in Francophone literature brings new cultural and linguistic baggage to this age-old problem of how to render the oral. In multilingual, post-colonial contexts, French, though often the *written* language of choice, is still the language of the "Other" and co-exists with a local, spoken language. Francophone writers, therefore, face a linguistic decision that nineteenth-century French writers and folklorists did not. And even when they choose to write in French, local, oral languages remain present. Djébar's reflections on her choice of language appear throughout her work, and are even echoed in her character Atyka's motivations for becoming a teacher of French, not Arabic, in "La Femme en morceaux." Chamoiseau, unlike some proponents of *créolité*, does not write in Creole, but uses Creole to enrich French. In appendix to *Solibo Magnifique*, the narrator does not change languages to relate the Creole storyteller's last words. And Chamoiseau's folktale collection, *Au temps d'antan*, presents Creole tales in French. In a letter addressed to anyone who seeks to translate his work, Chamoiseau makes an observation about his literary language of choice:

J'essaie de faire en sorte que la langue perde de son orgueilleuse certitude, de son académisme formel, je veux qu'on la sente tremblante, disponible pour toutes les autres langues du monde; qu'elle ne donne plus l'impression d'être la seule à pouvoir dire le monde mais qu'on la sente relativisée, problématisée, informée de la splendeur possible des autres langues placées désormais sur le même plan. Que la langue soi "ouverte."<sup>254</sup>

Djébar's writing, while lexically rich and sprinkled with occasional Arabic words, does not contain the same dramatic mixing of registers as Chamoiseau's. But both writers share a desire to "open" the French language and to use it for their own purposes, including rendering the storyteller's voice. Only by writing in French, can they simultaneously critique the French language and counter its attendant cultural associations.

By writing storytelling in a language other than the storyteller's, Djébar and Chamoiseau offer a new perspective a longstanding problem that follows folklore throughout literary history: can—or should—literature be an instrument of cultural transmission? Francophone authors face

<sup>254</sup> Wandrille Micaux, "Le lexique des 'marqueurs de paroles' antillais Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphaël Confiant," *Études créoles* XX, no. 2 (1997): 61.

an additional question of whether documenting oral traditions in writing and in French is actually a betrayal of their storytellers. The circumstances that give rise to this question may be particular to the post-colonial Francophone world, but the critical implications that it raises about a writer's artistic autonomy and cultural obligations are not.

For Djébar and Chamoiseau, their mere choice to write in French is a visible affirmation that cultural transmission involves more than the reproduction of traditions or the transcription of stories, either in literary or ethnographic texts. Literature can be a cultural conduit precisely because it transcends this documentary function. Writers must be more than narrative relays for the storyteller; they must provide reflections on the contexts of oral traditions, their uses, their transformations, and even their integration into literature. To do this, Djébar and Chamoiseau move further away from established categories of writer and teller. They advance a hybrid vision of the writer's role and use forms that encompass a multitude of voices. In a sense, they pick up where the nineteenth-century short story left off: they do not align themselves with the storyteller like Nodier nor do they use the narrator's account of a storyteller's tale as the structural basis for their texts. They make the mediation of the story part of their text. Djébar highlights the many centuries and translations through which the story of Schéhérazade passes by including the intertext in her story. In this self-proclaimed "conte," she constantly questions the relationship between the two poles of her narrative until the two merge, typographically and thematically, to find their meaning as one story. Chamoiseau makes his novel *Solibo Magnifique* a reflection on the limits of folklore collection, ethnographic descriptions, and literary texts by "écrivains." His narrator rejects all available models to forge an intermediary role of collector and creator, that of a "marqueur de parole." If narrators have related storytellers' stories for centuries, this narrator's appended "écrit du souvenir" provides a written synthesis of the story that actually distances him from the storyteller. His telling of Solibo's story is positioned as the culmination of the experiments with writing that he describes throughout the entire book.

Finally, both Djébar and Chamoiseau illustrate a somewhat ironic twist in the evolution of discourses on orality in France and the Francophone world. They use the French language to turn the tables on the very narratives that fueled French folklore study in the days of colonial expansion. The lexicon of ownership, loss, and recovery that nineteenth-century French folklorists once used to discuss folklore in colonies or former colonies resurfaces on the other side of the colonial fence in the literary recuperation and redeployment of traditions. The "chants créoles" that Ampère claimed for *French* folklore collection become an ingredient of writing *créolité*. The tales of *Les Mille et une nuits* that delighted Galland's French audiences become a passkey to the long silenced voices of women in the Arabic world. And cultures that Ampère once called "populations françaises qui n'appartiennent plus à la France" use folklore to affirm their own identity, to critique the colonial influences, and to shape their own literature—adding, along the way, an interesting chapter to the literary history of the storyteller's life and death.<sup>255</sup>

---

<sup>255</sup> Ampère, *Instructions relatives aux poésies populaires de la France: décret du 13 septembre 1852*, 3-4, Cheyronnaud, ed., *Instructions*, 87.

## Bibliography

- Abdel-Halim, Mohamed. *Antoine Galland, sa vie et son oeuvre*. Paris: Nizet, 1964.
- Aboul-Hussein, Hiam. *Cheherazade, personnage littéraire*. Alger: Société nationale d'édition et de diffusion, 1981.
- Adam, Villiers de l'Isle. "Deux Augures." In *Contes Cruels*, 74-90. Paris: Gallimard, 1983.
- Agulhon, Maurice. "Le problème de la culture populaire en France autour de 1848." *Romantisme* 9 (1975): 50-64.
- Ampère, Jean-Jacques. *Instructions relatives aux poésies populaires de la France: décret du 13 septembre 1852*. Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1853.
- Asseline, Alfred. "Critique Littéraire: *Les Mystères de Paris*." *Revue de Paris* 4, no. 11 (1842): 109-119.
- Azar, Amine A. "La ruse nuptiale de Shéhérazade." *Cahiers de l'Orient* 5 (1987): 160-180.
- Balzac, Honoré de. *Nouvelles et contes*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 2005.
- Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jules. *Les Diaboliques*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003.
- . *Lettres à Trebutien*. 2 vols. Paris: Blaizot, 1908.
- . *Œuvres romanesques complètes*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.
- Beaufort, François Louis Charles Amédée d'Hertault. *Legendes et traditions populaires de la France*: Debecourt, 1840.
- Bellos, David. "Barbey d'Aurevilly et les pensées de Balzac." *Revue des lettres modernes* 10 (1977).
- Belmont, Nicole. *Aux sources de l'ethnologie française: l'Académie celtique*. Paris: Éditions du C.T.H.S., 1995.
- . *Paroles païennes: mythe et folklore*. Paris: Imago, 1986.
- Benichou, Paul. *L'École du désenchantement: Sainte-Beuve, Nodier, Musset, Nerval, Gautier*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- . *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*. Paris: J. Corti, 1970.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 83-109. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
- Bernabé, Jean. *La fable créole*. Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge éditions: GEREC-F/Presses universitaires créoles, 2001.
- Bernabé, Jean, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant. *Éloge de la créolité*. Paris: Gallimard/Presses universitaires créoles, 1989.
- . *Éloge de la créolité / In Praise of Creoleness*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993.
- Blémont, Emile. "Notre programme." *La Tradition: revue générale des contes, légendes, chants, usages, traditions et arts populaires* 1 (1887): 1-8.
- Bowman, Frank Paul. *Gérard de Nerval: la conquête de soi par l'écriture*. Orléans: Paradigme, 1997.
- Bronner, Simon J. "'Gombo' Folkloristics: Lafcadio Hearn's Creolization and Hybridization in the Formative Period of Folklore Studies." *Journal of Folklore Research* 42, no. 2 (2005): 141-184.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.
- . "The Storyteller." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 1, no. 1 (1987): 21-38.

- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989.
- Byatt, A.S. *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Calì, Andrea “Stratégies narratives dans *Les Diaboliques*.” In *La narration et le sens: études sur Barbey d’Aurevilly, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Maupassant et Balzac*, 7-75. Lecce: Milella, 1986.
- Calle-Gruber, Mireille. “Refaire les contes dans la langue adverse: Assia Djébar, *Oran, langue morte*.” In *Assia Djébar, ou, la résistance de l’écriture: regards d’un écrivain d’Algérie*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larousse, 2001.
- Carnes, Pack. “Introduction.” In *Proverbia in Fabula: Essays on the Relationship of the Fable and the Proverb*, edited by Pack Carnes, 11-36. Bern: Peter Lang, 1988.
- Carpenter, Scott. *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France: Frauds, Hoaxes, and Counterfeits*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.
- Castex, Pierre-Georges. *Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant*. Paris: J. Corti, 1951.
- Cellier, Léon. “De Sylvie à Aurélia, structure close et structure ouverte.” *Archives des lettres modernes* 131 (1971): 1-48.
- Certeau, Michel de. *L’Invention du quotidien*. Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1980.
- Chamarat, Gabrielle. “‘Un petit roman qui n’est pas tout à fait un conte’: Peut-on parler d’un réalisme de Sylvie?” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 108, no. 3 (2008): 593-606.
- Chambers, Ross. *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Au Temps de l’antan: Contes du pays Martinique*. Paris: Hatier, 1988.
- . *Manman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse*. Paris: Caribéennes, 1982.
- . “Que faire de la parole.” In *Écrire la “parole de nuit”: la nouvelle littérature antillaise*, edited by Ralph Ludwig, 151-158. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- . *Solibo Magnifique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- Champfleury. *De la littérature populaire en France: recherches sur les origines et les variations de la légende du bonhomme Misère*. Paris: Poulet-Malassis et De Broise, 1861.
- . *Histoire de l’imagérie populaire*. Paris: E. Dentu, 1869.
- . *Le Réalisme*. Paris: Michel Levy, 1857.
- Champfleury, and Jean-Baptiste Théodore Weckerlin. *Chansons populaires des provinces de France*. Paris: Lécivain et Toubon, 1860.
- Cheyronnaud, Jacques, ed. *Instructions pour un recueil général des poésies populaires de la France, 1852-1857*. Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1997.
- Cissé, Mouhamadou. “Les Glissements policiers dans les romans de P. Chamoiseau, R. Confiant et F. Chalumeau.” *Présence Francophone* 77 (2009): 66-85.
- Cogman, Peter. “Cheating at Narrating: Back to Mérimée’s ‘La Partie de trictrac’.” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 26, no. 3 (1997): 80-90.
- . *Narration in Nineteenth-Century French Short Fiction: Prosper Mérimée to Marcel Schwob*. Durham, UK: University of Durham, 2002.
- Crébillon. *Le Sopha*. Paris: Flammarion, 1995.
- . *Oeuvres Complètes*. Edited by Jean Sgard. 4 vols. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1999.

- Cropper, Corry. *Playing at Monarchy: Sports as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
- . “Prosper Mérimée Reassessed: The Evolution of the French Short Story.” *Romance Notes* 40, no. 3 (2000): 351-360.
- Cuvillier-Fleury, Alfred-Auguste. “M. Eugène Sue. *Le Morne-au-Diable ou l’Aventurier*.” In *La Querelle du roman-feuilleton: littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)*, edited by Lise Dumasy, 65-79. Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999.
- Dahab, Elizabeth. “Théophile Gautier and the Orient.” In *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 1999.
- Dahan, Jacques-Remi. *Visages de Charles Nodier*. Paris: Presses de l’université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008.
- Destruel, Philippe. *L’Écriture nervalienne du temps*. Saint-Genouph: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 2004.
- Djebar, Assia. *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent: en marge de ma francophonie*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1999.
- . *L’Amour, la fantasia*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.
- . *Ombre sultane*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1987.
- . *Oran, langue morte*. Arles: Actes Sud, 1997.
- Dumas, Alexandre. “Charles Nodier et le Salon de l’Arsenal.” In *Mademoiselle de Marsan de Charles Nodier*, 85-95. Paris: Editions de Montsouris, 1944.
- Dundes, Alan. “The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory.” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 6, no. 1 (1969): 5-19.
- Dunham, Paul. “Bored on Board: Sea Travel and the Poetics of Narration in Mérimée’s *La Partie de Trictrac*.” *Essays in French Literature* 37 (2000): 1-16.
- El-Shamy, Hasan. “The Oral Connection of the *Arabian Nights*.” In *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, edited by Irich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, 9-13. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004.
- Ellison, David R. “The Place of *Carmen*.” In *GEO/GRAPHIES, Mapping the Imagination in French and Francophone Literature and Film*, edited by Freeman G. Henry, 73-85. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.
- Gallagher, Mary. “The Creole folktale in the writings of Lafcadio Hearn: An Aesthetic of Mediation.” In *The Conte: Oral and Written Dynamics*, edited by Janice Carruthers and Maeve McCusker, 133-151. Peter Lang, 2009.
- Galland, Antoine. *Journal d’Antoine Galland pendant son séjour à Constantinople*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002.
- . “Journal parisien d’Antoine Galland (1708-1715).” *Mémoires de la Société de l’histoire de Paris et de l’Ile de France* 46 (1919): 1-156.
- . *Les Mille et une nuits*. 3 vols. Paris: Flammarion, 2004.
- . *Les Paroles remarquables, les bons mots, et les maximes des Orientaux*. Paris: Benard, 1694.
- Gautier, Théophile. “Après le feuilleton.” In *Émaux et Camées*, 117. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- . *Correspondance générale*. Edited by Claudine Lacoste-Veysseyre. 12 vols. Geneva: Droz, 1985.
- . *Émaux et camées*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.

- . *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*. 5 vols. Bruxelles: Hetzel, 1859.
- . "La Mille et Deuxième Nuit." *Le Musée des familles, lectures du soir* 9 (1842): 321-330.
- . "La Mille et deuxième nuit." In *Œuvres*, 667-686. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995.
- . "Poésies nouvelles." *Revue des deux mondes* (1841): 906-918.
- Gauvin, Lise. "Les femmes-récits ou les déléguées à la parole." In *Assia Djebar: Littérature et transmission*, edited by Wolfgang Asholt, Mireille Calle-Gruber and Dominique Combe, 55-64. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010.
- Godenne, René. *La Nouvelle*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995.
- Gordon, Rae Beth. "Dentelle: Métaphore du texte dans *Sylvie*." *Romanic Review* 73, no. 1 (1982): 45-66.
- Grotzfeld, Heinz. "Neglected Conclusions of the *Arabian Nights*: Gleanings in Forgotten and Overlooked Recensions." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 16 (1985): 73-87.
- Guissard, Michel. *La Nouvelle Française: Essai de définition d'un genre*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 2002.
- Harries, Elizabeth W. "Simulating Oralities, French Fairy Tales of the 1690's." *College Literature* 23, no. 2 (1996): 100-115.
- . *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Harvey, David. *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Hiddleston, Jane. *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006.
- Hirschi, Andrée. "Barbey 'conteur'." *Revue des lettres modernes* (1969): 7-30.
- Huet, Pierre-Daniel. *Traité de l'origine des romans*. Paris: Jean Mariette, 1711.
- Humphreys, Karen. "Dandyism, Gems, and Epigrams: Lapidary Style and Genre Transformation in Barbey's *Les Diaboliques*." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 31, no. 3 & 4 (2003): 259-277.
- Irwin, Bonnie D. "What's in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling." *Oral Tradition* 10 (1995): 27-53.
- Johanneau, Éloi. "Discours d'ouverture." *Mémoires de l'Académie Celtique* 1 (1807): 28-64.
- . "Épître Dédicatoire à sa Majesté l'Impératrice et Reine." *Mémoires de l'Académie Celtique* 1 (1807).
- Jullien, Dominique. *Les Amoureux de Schéhérazade: variations modernes sur les Mille et une nuits*. Geneva: Droz, 2009.
- Kanbar, Nabih. "Évolution de la figure du témoin dans *Les Diaboliques*." In *Barbey d'Aurevilly: cent ans après (1889-1989)*, edited by Philippe Berthier, 255-294. Geneva: Droz, 1990.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. "Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning." In *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*, edited by Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes, 111-121. New York: Garland, 1981.
- Knepper, Wendy. "Remapping the Crime Novel in the Francophone Caribbean: The Case of Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*." *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2008): 1431-1446.
- Laisney, Vincent. *L'Arsenal romantique: Le Salon de Charles Nodier (1824-1834)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002.
- Larat, Jean. *La tradition et l'exotisme dans l'œuvre de Charles Nodier*. Paris: Champion, 1923.

- Larzul, Sylvette. "Further Considerations on Galland's *Mille et une Nuits*: A Study of the Tales Told by Hanna." *Marvels & Tales* 18, no. 2 (2004): 258-271.
- Legros, Elisée. *Sur les noms et les tendances du folklore*. Liège: Éditions du Musée Wallon, 1962.
- Madrus, J.C. *Le Livre des mille nuits et une nuit*. Paris: Éditions de la Revue Blanche, 1899.
- Magloire, Marie-Christine. "De la voix à l'écrit créole, une langue de l'écart." In *L'Oralité dans l'écrit, et réciproquement*, edited by Robert Gauthier, 209-218. Toulouse: C.A.L.S., 2002.
- Magu. *Poésies de Magu, tisserand à Lizy-sur-Ourcq*. Paris: Charpentier, 1845.
- Mahdi, Muhsin. "Exemplary Tales in the *1001 Nights*." In *The 1001 Nights Critical Essays and Annotated Bibliography*, 1-4, 1985.
- Maixner, Rudolf. *Charles Nodier et l'Illyrie*. Paris: Didier, 1960.
- Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. "Review of *Les Mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland ou le chef-d'oeuvre invisible*, Georges May." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 1 (1991): 196.
- . *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Marin, Louis. "Les Enjeux d'un frontispice." *L'Esprit Créateur* 29, no. 3 (1987): 49-57.
- Mathon-Baudel, Céline. "Nodier et les traditions populaires." In *Charles Nodier: colloque du deuxième centenaire*. Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 1981.
- Maupassant, Guy de. *Bel-Ami*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.
- May, Georges. *Les Mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland, ou, le chef-d'œuvre invisible*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986.
- . "Schéhérazade et la paralittérature." In *Lettres et réalités*, 227-245. Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 1988.
- McCusker, Maeve. "Translating the Creole Voice: from the Oral to the Literary Tradition in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*." In *Reading Across the Lines*, edited by Christopher Shorley and Maeve McCusker, 117-127. Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 2000.
- McLaughlin, Kevin. *Writing in Parts: Imitation and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Medeiros, Ana de. "Hegemony and Hybridity in Assia Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Oran, langue morte*." *Journal of Romance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 5-20.
- Mérimée, Prosper. *Correspondance générale*. Edited by Maurice Parturier. 17 vols. Paris: Le Divan, 1941.
- . "Des mythes primitifs." *Revue contemporaine* XXII, no. October 15 (1855): 5-21.
- . *La Guzla, ou, choix de poésies illyriques, recueillies dans la Dalmatie, la Bosnie, la Croatie et l'Herzégowine*. Strasbourg: J.H.E. Heitz, 1926.
- . *Théâtre, romans, et nouvelles*. Edited by Jean Mallion and Pierre Salomon. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1978.
- Micaux, Wandrille. "Le lexique des 'marqueurs de paroles' antillais Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphaël Confiant." *Études créoles* XX, no. 2 (1997): 59-69.
- Mickelsen, David. "Travel, Transgression and Possession in Mérimée's 'Carmen'." *Romanic Review* 87 (1996): 329-345.

- Mihram, Danielle. "La Partie de trictrac, nouvelle aux résonances tragiques." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 8 (1979-1980): 53-61.
- Milne, Lorna. *Patrick Chamoiseau: espaces d'une écriture antillaise*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.
- Mont-Rosier, Déjean, ed. *Fab Lafontèn, Fables de La Fontaine*. Matoury (Guyane): Ibis Rouge Éditions, 2002.
- Montolieu, Isabelle de. "Conte de la princesse Una, ou Les Talismans, Suite et conclusion des Mille et une Nuits, contes Arabes." In *Recueil de contes*. Genève: Paschoud, 1803.
- . *Le Serin de Jean-Jacques de Rousseau*. Edited by Claire Jacquier. Carouge-Genève: Minozoé, 1997.
- Moran, John F. "Finding One's Way Between Descartes and Zombis: Making Sense of the World in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*." *Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 9, no. 32 (2004): 219-229
- Mortimer, Mildred. "Transforming the Word: The Storyteller in the Works of Calixthe Beyala, Malika Mokeddem and Assia Djebar." *Nottingham French Studies* 40, no. 1 (2001): 86-92.
- Moudileno, Lydie. *L'écrivain antillais au miroir de sa littérature: mises en scène et mise en abyme du roman antillais*. Paris: Editions Karthala, 1997.
- Naddaf, Sandra. *Arabesque: Narrative Structures and the Aesthetics of Repetition in the 1001 Nights*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991.
- Nerval, Gérard de. "Chansons et légendes du Valois." In *Œuvres complètes*, 569-579. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- . *Œuvres complètes*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- Nicollier, Alain, and Henri-Charles Dahlem. "Isabelle de Montolieu." In *Dictionnaire des écrivains suisses d'expression française*. Geneva: Editions GVA, 1994.
- Nisard. *Histoire des livres populaires ou de la littérature de colportage*. Paris: Imp. Simon Baçon, 1864.
- Nodier, Charles. *Contes*. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1961.
- . *De l'utilité morale de l'instruction*. 12 vols. *Œuvres*. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1998.
- . "Du fantastique en littérature." *Revue de Paris* (1830): 205-226.
- . "La Littérature populaire: opinion de Charles Nodier." *La Tradition: revue générale des contes, légendes, chants, usages, traditions et arts populaires* 1 (1887): 177-209.
- . *Nouvelle Bibliothèque bleue ou, Légendes populaires de la France, précédées d'une introduction par M. Charles Nodier et accompagnées de notices littéraires et historiques par M. Le Roux de Lincy*. Paris: C. de Batines, 1842.
- . *Smarra, ou Les démons de la nuit, songes romantiques, traduits de l'esclavon du Cte Maxime Odin, par Ch. Nodier*. Paris: Ponthieu, 1822.
- Paige, Nicholas. "The Storyteller and the Book: Scenes of Narrative Production in the Early French Novel." *Modern Language Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2006): 141-170.
- Paray-Clarke, Geeta. *La féerie érotique: Crébillon et ses lecteurs*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Perrault, Charles. *Contes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- Perret, Delphine. "La Parole du conteur créole: Solibo magnifique de Patrick Chamoiseau." *The French Review* 67, no. 5 (1994): 824-839.

- Perrin, Jean-Francois. "Les Transformations du conte-cadre des *Mille et Une Nuits* dans le conte orientalisant français du début du XVIIIe siècle." *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 104 (2004): 45-58.
- Petit, Jacques. "Le Manuscrit des *Diaboliques*." *Revue des lettres modernes* 600-604 (1981): 158-159.
- . "Notice." In *Œuvres romanesques complètes de Barbey d'Aurevilly, 1274-1298*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.
- Prat, Michel. "Patrick Chamoiseau, un émule martiniquais de Gadda." *Francofonia: Studi e ricerche sulle letterature di lingua francese* 9, no. 17 (1989): 113-125.
- Prendergast, Christopher. *For the People by the People?: Eugène Sue's Les mystères de Paris*. Oxford: Society for French Studies, 2003.
- Proust, Marcel. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.
- Queffelec, Lise. *Le roman-feuilleton français au XIXe siècle*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989.
- Rancière, Jacques. *La nuit des prolétaires*. Paris: Hachette littératures, 2006.
- . *La parole muette*. Paris: Hachette, 1998.
- Rearick, Charles. *Beyond the Enlightenment: Historians and Folklore in Nineteenth-Century France*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974.
- Rosbach, Susanne. "Dandyism in the Literary Works of Barbey d'Aurevilly: Ideology, Gender, and Narration." *Modern Language Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 81-102.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Essai sur l'origine des langues*. Paris: L'École, 1987.
- . *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967.
- Rowe, Karen E. "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale." In *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, edited by Ruth Bottigheimer, 53-74. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986.
- Sainte-Beuve. "De la littérature industrielle." In *La Querelle du roman-feuilleton: littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)*, edited by Lise Dumasy, 25-43. Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999.
- Sangsue, Daniel. "Nodier et le commerce des vampires." *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 98, no. 2 (1998): 231-245.
- Segrais, Jean Regnault de. *Les Nouvelles françaises, ou, les divertissements de la princesse Aurélie*. 2 vols. Paris: Société des textes français modernes, 1990.
- Seifert, Lewis C. "Entre L'Écrit et l'oral: la réception des contes de fées 'classiques'." In *Le Conte en ses paroles: la figuration de l'oralité dans le conte merveilleux du Classicisme aux Lumières*, edited by Anne Defrance and Jean-Francois Perrin, 21-33. Paris: Desjonquères, 2007.
- Senn, Harry. "Folklore Beginnings in France." In *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Alan Dundes, 66-75. London: Routledge, 2005.
- . "The French School of Folklore to 1935." Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 1972.
- Senn, Harry A. "Gaston Paris as Folklorist (1867-1895): The Rise and Decline of French Folklore Studies." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 12, no. 1 (1975): 47-56.

- Sermain, Jean-Paul. "Le Rapport du conte de fées à l'oralité: trois modèles (Perrault, Galland, Hamilton)." In *Le Conte en ses paroles: la figuration de l'oralité dans le conte merveilleux du Classicisme aux Lumières*, edited by Anne Defrance and Jean-Francois Perrin, 34-44. Paris: Desjonquères, 2007.
- . "Les Mille et une nuits de Galland dans le cadre de la culture française classique du conte et de la fiction." In *Les Mille et une nuits: du texte au mythe*, edited by Jean-Luc Joly and Abdelfattah Kilito, 223-236. Rabat: Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, 2005.
- . *Les mille et une nuits entre Orient et Occident*. Paris: Desjonquères, 2009.
- Szemerkenyi, Agnes. "The Use of Proverbs in Hungarian Folktales." *Proverbium* 7 (1990): 233-239.
- Taine, Hippolyte. "Introduction." In *Lettres à une inconnue. Précédées d'une étude sur Mérimée par H. Taine*. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1874.
- Troubat, Jules Auguste. *Une amitié à la d'Arthez: Champfleury, Courbet et Max Buchon*. Paris, 1900.
- Trumpener, Katie. *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Unwin, Timothy. "Barbey d'Aurevilly conteur: discours et narration dans 'Les Diaboliques'." *Neophilologus* 72, no. 3 (1988): 353-365.
- Veen, J. van der. "Autour des *Chansons et légendes du Valois* de Gérard de Nerval." *Neophilologus* 44, no. 1 (1960): 90-115.
- Verdier, Gabrielle. "Figures de la conteuse dans les contes de fées féminins." *Dix-septième siècle* 180 (1993): 481-499.
- Voltaire. *Zadig*. Paris: Larousse, 1998.
- Weber, Edgard. *Le Secret des mille et une nuits: l'inter-dit de Sheherazade*. Paris: Eché, 1987.
- Weinberger, Eliot. "The Man Who Wrote Everything." *New York Review of Books* (November 25, 2010).
- Wieser, Dagmar. *Nerval: une poétique du deuil à l'âge romantique*. Geneva: Drosz, 2004.
- Zimra, Clarisse. "Sounding Off the Absent Body: Intertextual Resonances in 'La Femme qui pleure' and 'La Femme en morceaux.'" *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 3 (1999): 108-124.