

Powers on Decourcelle and Barbier (2016)

Decourcelle, Adrien, and Jules Barbier. *Jenny l'ouvrière: drame en cinq actes*. Edited by Janice Best and Nicole Corbett, APFUCC, 2016, *Les Public' de L'APFUCC*, pp. 151, ISBN 978-2-9811847-4-0

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Within the field of nineteenth-century French studies, there has been growing interest in so-called minor works of literature: texts that, despite reaching bestseller status in their day, have been largely excluded from the literary canon. From the sentimental novels of the First Empire and Restoration periods, to what Walter Benjamin called the “panoramic” literature of the July Monarchy, to the *feuilletons* that inundated the media landscape via the modern newspaper, popular literature has recently been the subject of important research asking what were people actually reading and why? *Jenny l'ouvrière*, a drama written by Adrien Decourcelle and Jules Barbier and performed to sold-out audiences in 1850–51, is an excellent example of this influential but largely forgotten corpus. In providing an annotated edition of *Jenny*, Janice Best and Nicole Corbett contribute to a growing number of texts that help us understand public tastes in mid-century France. Their archival research not only makes the uncensored version of the play available for the first time in print, it also gives insight into Second Republic censorship practices.

Jenny l'ouvrière tells the story of a working-class girl who must prostitute herself to a kind but thoughtless nobleman, Maurice d'Ornay, in order to save her struggling family from complete destitution. Disowned by her father, whose primary concern is the family's honor, the seamstress-turned-courtesan finds ways to put money in the family coffers without their knowing. Focusing on Jenny's competing duties towards her own virtue and her family's well-being, the playwrights combined a sentimental plot structure with the *couleur locale* of the urban social tale, inspired no doubt by Eugene Sue's international hit, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43). Popular works like *Jenny* were successful because of their topicality, their ability to capture the zeitgeist of the moment through the use of *argot* and inside jokes. However, these very features can perplex modern readers. Without adequate contextualization, cultural references often go unnoticed or misunderstood, a difficulty that Best and Corbett seemed to have in mind when putting together this scholarly edition. With a well-documented introduction and several annexes, including the official censors' report, numerous footnotes, and even press clippings and drawings, this edition provides the documentary support to bring the cultural moment to life.

In their “Présentation,” Best and Corbett situate the play within the landscape of Paris theater in 1850, a time when vaudeville and melodrama were on the decline and dramas were gaining in popularity. They also point out the growing presence of the kept woman (*la demi-mondaine*) in the popular imagination. This social type had become ubiquitous in mid-century literature, made famous by Dumas fils's novel *La Dame aux camélias* (1848) and its numerous stage adaptations. *Jenny l'ouvrière* was itself the subject of several reincarnations in novels, songs, and stage productions throughout the Second Empire. Best and Corbett rightly point out the significance of *la demi-mondaine* within the context of the post-1848 clashes between the labor and women's movements. Unlike the hardworking *grisette* from the first half of the century, the *demi-mondaine*'s economic value came not from her labor but from her use as a commodity, situating her safely in the world of feminine leisure.

The editors' plentiful footnotes perform several functions. Some notes provide helpful definitions of slang and other terms that have fallen out of favor, such as *un mirliflore* for dandy or *la dédine* for poverty (38, 70), while others offer context. For instance, Best and Corbett explain that when Jenny's brother is drafted as a *pioupiou*, or rank and file soldier, he is unable to contribute to the household income (34, 86). Additionally, they expand upon many of the cultural references tossed about in the text, from the obscure vaudeville, *Le Gamin de Paris* (42), well-known authors such as George Sand and Paul de Kock (43), to the *fièvre métallique* (the California Gold Rush) of 1849 (116). The nineteenth-century specialist will find some of these notes unnecessary (definitions of *ébéniste* (32), *agent de change* (47), *omnibus* (114), or the riding directions *hop* and *hue* (108), for example), but others provide precious information, such as the details of the popular song Jenny sings as she bids her suffering family farewell to become the mistress of Maurice d'Ornay (63).

For the specialist, however, the most interesting footnotes are those that indicate where the censors intervened. Some of their redactions are to be expected: a line where the outspoken doorman calls Bonaparte “the good one” in order to distinguish him from the current president and future emperor, Napoleon III (45–46); all possible offenses to religious or moral values (57, 124); and the scene where Jenny explicitly decides to prostitute herself (59–61). More surprising is the removal of all references to bread. For instance, every time Jenny justifies her prostitution with some form of “Mon père aura du pain,” the censors change it to “Mon père sera sauvé” (52, 67, 68, 85, 101). In the same vein, when referring to the family's creditors,

the metonymic “le boulanger” is replaced with “nos fournisseurs” (58). It is clear that, in the popular imagination, bread represents not merely a concrete need but a revolutionary symbol, a signifier for class antagonism. In fact, all references to class are barred. The doorman Simon is not allowed to use the term “aristos” (33), and elsewhere the term “misère” is redacted (130). In another scene, the censors transform the d’Ornay household servants’ grumbling into solicitude about the couple’s happiness (81). These changes give insight into the moral and political concerns of Louis-Napoleon’s Second Republic.

Finally, it is worthwhile to highlight the adaptability of this little paperback. In keeping with the objectives of the book’s publishers, the Association des professeur.e.s de français des universités et collèges canadiens (APFUCC), the informative notes and supporting documents provide important linguistic, literary, and cultural information. Best and Corbett’s edition will therefore serve equally as a pedagogical tool and as a primary source for researchers.

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