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Thomas Cragin, *Murder in Parisian Streets: Manufacturing Crime and Justice in the Popular Press, 1830 – 1900*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006. 273 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8387-5579-8.

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In *Murder in Parisian Streets: Manufacturing Crime and Justice in the Popular Press, 1830-1900*, Thomas Cragin examines French *canards* published between 1830 and 1900. The term *canard* encompasses the English-language terms of broadsheet and chapbook, as these precursors to tabloid newspapers took both forms throughout the nineteenth century. Cragin's purpose in examining these texts is to draw attention to this popular and long-lived genre as a source for examining popular attitudes toward a range of subjects, including the nature of criminality, attitudes toward women and children, views on the police and attitudes toward the judicial process. In addition, Cragin uses the *canards* to examine the relationship between popular and elite cultures and between tradition and modernity. As Cragin puts it, "each *canard* was the product of the mediation between a rich diversity of apparent influences stemming from oral and written, urban and rural, elite and popular cultures" (p. 89).

Cragin begins by challenging Michel Foucault's influential account of the transformation of punishment from the public spectacle of execution to private mechanisms geared toward reform. The *canards*, as Cragin demonstrates, kept the spectacle of crime and punishment before the eyes of countless avid readers throughout the nineteenth century. Cragin also takes on Foucault by challenging "the Foucaultian assumption of the insignificance of cultural resistance" (p. 15). Yet while Cragin's use of the concept of resistance shapes his narrative in some fruitful ways, causing him to emphasize the persistence of popular attitudes and practices, it also results at times in a contradictory analysis of the relationship between popular and elite, traditional and modern.

As early as the sixteenth century, Cragin tells us, the term *canard* was applied to all printed news sold in the streets. Although the term took on a pejorative meaning of false news in the eighteenth century, the *canard* retained its popularity. Indeed, as Cragin's work demonstrates, the *canard* was one of the most popular literary genres throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, with 4,000 to 15,000 printings of each *canard* during this time. In the second half of the nineteenth century, newspapers began to rival the *canards*, but "only by imitating the *canards'* emphasis on the *faits divers* did the new tabloids build an audience to rival the old news genre" (p. 218). This imitation included the use of street peddlers, who sold most of the *canards* until the Third Republic, when *canards* were more frequently sold in news kiosks or bookshops.

The persistence of the street peddler is important to Cragin, who sees him as one who, "preserved part of France's oral traditions, fighting off change in order to hand down this legacy to [his] children well into the twentieth century" (p. 98). The peddler provided the means by which "popular culture could resist modernization," while also serving as a conduit to the popular classes (p. 98). As Cragin argues, the peddler's profits depended upon his ability to correctly anticipate and meet the interests of his public; as he came into constant contact with this public, he was able to gauge this interest through the feedback of his customers. This constant interaction with the public makes the *canard*, "an invaluable source for our understanding of [the popular] classes' beliefs and practices" (p. 90).

In addition to selling the *canard*, peddlers contributed to its writing. The *canard* was composed of two texts, a narrative that expounded the facts of the case, along with the arrest and eventual trial and punishment, and a *complainte*, or ballad, which highlighted the broad strokes of the crime in song. The peddler attracted customers' attention by singing the *complainte*, which Cragin argues was more akin to the traditional folktale in its emphasis on a moral battle between good and evil. The narrative, on the other hand, with its lack of emotional language and emphasis on the facts of the investigation, "read more like a crime drama" (p. 93). Cragin argues that these two parts of the *canard* may have been written by different individuals, citing journeymen printers and peddlers as the most likely authors. While evidence concerning authorship is hard to come by, Cragin suggests that peddlers were more likely to have written the *complainte* and printers the narrative because "one [was] tied to rural tradition and urban street culture and the other to a culture of urban elites" (p. 89). While this claim is most likely impossible to prove, Cragin's analysis of the differences between the two texts is fascinating, and contributes to proving an important aspect of his overall argument, that the *canards* existed at a "nexus point of cultural traditions" (p. 89).

The close analysis of the two elements of the *canards* provides compelling evidence that the *canard* "spoke" in two cultural registers, one that emphasized a moral struggle between good and evil, appealed to the emotions, and provided clear indicators of how readers/listeners were supposed to react and another that employed a more objective, investigatory tone and provided more details of the case. While Cragin's argument concerning the narrative's similarity to either newspaper reporting or the crime drama is convincing, his insistence on the "folkloric" elements of the *complainte* is less so, given the seemingly evident similarity to the melodrama. Cragin, in fact, makes this connection at another point in the book when discussing the *canards'* depiction of victimization as, "melodrama with social meaning" (p. 170). Yet in his discussion of the cultural origins of the *complainte*, this connection is not made, despite the fact that, as Sarah Maza has demonstrated, melodramatic structures became increasingly popular in the writing of late eighteenth-century judicial briefs.[1] There is, therefore, a reasonable argument to be made that melodrama had an impact on the writing of the *complainte*. Making such a connection, however, would complicate Cragin's analysis of the ballad as a holdover of a rural, popular and oral genre. While the melodrama was, by the early nineteenth century, also a largely popular genre, at its origins it was a genre embraced by all classes of society. It was, in addition, a specifically urban genre, whereas Cragin wants to argue that, "the *complaintes*, as cultural products, bear witness to their authors' rural roots" (p. 92).

The lack of reference to melodrama does not undermine Cragin's detailed analysis of the differences between the two elements of the *canard*, and his underlying argument that the *canard* constituted a blend of different cultural elements is convincing. It is important, however, because it speaks to his characterization of the *canards* as a vehicle for popular resistance against both "elite" and "modern" elements in nineteenth-century French culture. Cragin argues, for example, that the *canards*, "stood as a media [sic] that expressed a popular resistance to the ideas of the elites as the French read their narratives, sang their *complaintes*, and hung them up on their apartment walls" (p. 218). Cragin here and throughout the book depicts both elites and the popular classes as rather monolithic entities. In addition, he continually contradicts his assertions that the *canard* provided a means by which the popular classes "resisted" elite beliefs and practices. For example, the sentence immediately following that quoted above is the following: "Rather than a wholesale rejection of all elite ideas, however, the genre blended a few elements of these theories with a larger body of old ideas that had dominated their [sic] pages for centuries" (p. 218)

Similar contradictory statements are made concerning the relationship between tradition and modernity, for example: "[The *canardiers*] not only resisted modern journalistic style and form, but actively fought off efforts by the state to control their products. [...] But the *canardiers* were not wholly opposed to all the changes taking place in French printing and publishing during the century" (pp. 217-18). The problem here, it seems, is an unwarranted attachment to the notion of resistance.

Cragin wants to criticize both Foucault's dismissal of the *canard* as a relevant cultural form in the nineteenth century, and his notion that an all-encompassing field of power relations created a situation in which "policing mechanisms and the ideas of the elites that informed them," dominated all manner of cultural production (p. 15). Cragin fully proves his claim that the *canard* remained a significant cultural product throughout most of the nineteenth century, and influenced the development of the popular press.

However, Cragin does not explicitly engage with Foucault's rather subtle notion of culture as a field of discourses and practices that constantly renegotiated, only to ultimately reify, power relations. Instead, the language he uses to describe resistance suggests a sort of heroic agency, possessed by printer, peddler and the popular public, who were able to actively and consciously resist the imposition of dominant cultural norms and forms. The problem with this portrayal of resistance is that it first of all does not explicitly help us understand the limits of Foucault's analysis concerning the ubiquitous nature of power, and secondly, that it is difficult to prove, given the lack of sources indicating resistance on the part of either producers or consumers of the *canards*. Finally, it is constantly contradicted by Cragin himself as he provides evidence of both modernization of the form of the *canard* and a partial inclusion of cultural discourses that emanated from cultural elites.

Most importantly, Cragin's portrayal of resistance as a conscious act obscures a more significant argument that emerges from his work, and that he makes quite eloquently and convincingly. This argument concerns the persistence of traditional cultural forms and beliefs in quintessentially modern genres. As Cragin puts it, "the *canard* was the child of both traditional oral and modern literate cultures. The product of those steeped in the oral traditions of modernizing France as well as those immersed in elite cultural production, produced for and certainly heard by all classes, it represents a critical intermediary between tradition and modernity, between elites and the lower classes" (p. 103). Here, the key concept is not resistance, but rather continuity, as Cragin demonstrates how the inclusion of both ballad and narrative, the adoption of modern typographical techniques by printers of the *canards*, and the persistence of beliefs concerning women's dangerous nature and punishment as divine retribution in texts that also contained more modern notions of the relationship between parent and child served to create a curiously hybrid genre. The *canard* was, according to this argument, "a medium through which new ideas were introduced and old ones sustained for a vast and eager audience" (p. 176). Or, if we want to preserve the concept of resistance, it is not the sort of active, conscious resistance that Cragin repeatedly evokes, but rather a sense that the *canards*, and the popular beliefs and tastes that they both reflected and shaped, were resistant to certain forms of cultural modernization.

In this sense, Cragin's work does indeed challenge Foucault, by demonstrating the continuing importance of older cultural forms throughout the nineteenth century. It also helps us understand why and how the sorts of mass cultural products of the type described by Vanessa Schwartz could and did appeal to all classes so as to create a unified sense of community.[2] Cragin's analysis of the ways in which the *canards* portrayed criminals, victims, police and the judicial process provides a fascinating window into this blend of cultural traditions, demonstrating how different currents of thought concerning each of these topics came together in what was clearly an enormously popular genre. While an analysis distinguishing the characterization of each of these topics in the *complainte* and the narrative would have been welcome as a means of testing Cragin's claims that the first was more popular and the second more "elite," these chapters nonetheless demonstrate the hybrid nature of the *canard* as a cultural product. Cragin's attention to the profit motive is also useful, as it reminds us that attention to audience reactions may have shaped the content of the *canards*. For example, he argues that notions of criminality that saw it as endemic to the popular classes were likely to offend large numbers of readers, and that this, in addition to popular tradition, may explain why the *canards* focused on crime as an individual act.

At the same time, Cragin argues that the *canard* could also serve a didactic function, disseminating "elite" notions concerning appropriate behavioral norms for women, for example, throughout the

popular classes. This didactic function brings us back to Foucault, for Cragin argues that the *canards* portrayed the police as omnipresent and responsive to the population, and “empowered its readers/singers to act as investigators working with the police” (p. 193). Perhaps the relative lack of censorship exerted against the *canards* was due to the useful purpose they served in galvanizing the community to support and aid in police investigations? In this sense, at least, nineteenth-century *canards* do seem to differ from those that were disseminated in an earlier period which, according to Foucault, required suppression because they “glorified the criminal.”[3]

In addition to providing a thorough examination of a little known, and even less understood, popular genre, *Murder in Parisian Streets* is a compelling study of the roots of mass culture. If the reading of Cragin’s work raises so many questions, it is in part because we know so little about how urban mass culture functioned in the period before the Third Republic. The inclusion of ninety-seven illustrations (some of them unfortunately of poor quality) makes this text a valuable resource for anyone interested in the histories of publishing, crime and punishment, and popular culture.

#### NOTES

[1] Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[3] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 68.

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