

The imaginary Middle Ages of the opera house: when the Jacques were honest fellows

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When the two Édouards – Lalo, the composer, and Blau, his librettist – got to grips with Prosper Mérimée's *La Jaquerie, scènes féodales*, they made some notable adjustments to it. Indeed, 'adjustments' is putting it mildly, for the retouches affected even the title of the piece: the archaising tone intended by Mérimée (*Jaquerie* without a 'c') was – in the most literal meaning of the verb – corrected to conform with modern French spelling. In itself, the insertion of this consonant reveals two very different visions of the peasant revolt and, more generally, of the Middle Ages: on the one hand, the Middle Ages of the historian (Mérimée); on the other, the Middle Ages of the storyteller (Lalo, Blau, Coquard).

In using the term 'Jaquerie', Mérimée seems to speak the language of the period of which he is writing, as if he had been an eyewitness. He thereby gives his discourse a scientific aura. His invention becomes reality. But if there is a sentiment of truth here, it derives above all from the systematic process of asceticism by means of which the author tends to hide behind his object. What is said, is said in the most neutral fashion possible. Thus the play was published without an author's name, neutralising any potential scenarisation of the 'artistic ego', of that originality which could have hindered the intended objectivity. As to the articulation of the text in prose, following an unconventional linear format in an

infinity of scenes without acts or tableaux, it confronts the spectator with an untreated narrative matter, a raw material untransformed by the style: nature itself, as it were. To return to the title: just after the word 'Jaquerie' comes the term 'scènes', and this too has a programmatic value. 'Scenes' implies that the work does not originate in the method of invention that has been the accepted norm since Aristotle's *Poetics*: the choice, in nature, of the characteristic to the detriment of the contingent, a choice that lies at the heart of the theory of *imitation*. These 'Scenes' or 'episodes' selected at random are an insult to the classical tradition. Does it come as a surprise that we meet this terminology again in the titles of the great landmarks of pictorial Romanticism, such as Géricault's *Scène de naufrage* (The Raft of the Medusa) of 1819 and Delacroix's *Scène des massacres de Scio* (The Massacre at Chios) of 1824? Whether these diverse scenes are of decisive importance for the unfolding of the narrative or merely peripheral, they are recounted on the same level and with the same precision, in thirty-six phases of totally irregular duration. Finally, and perhaps most curious of all, sixty-five footnotes written by the author himself (rather than some editor or other) accompany the text of the play, blurring still further the frontier between historical study and poetic invention. With the aim of justifying himself and forestalling possible hostility on the part of the reader, Mérimée precedes his work with a brief preface explaining his method, in which he also resolves an implicit aporia. For if the author wishes to borrow the historian's tools while doing the work of a poet, he still needs to have something to say. Something the historian has not already dealt with. Otherwise, how could there be invention? Hence the preface begins with the words: 'Almost no historical information exists on the Jaquerie.' Having thus noted a historiographical vacuum, Mérimée can introduce history into the theatre. The outcome is a new dramaturgical language, a factual prose, economical with its resources, that 'non-style' which Victor Hugo found so unbearable.

By contrast with Mérimée, even though they chose to base themselves freely on his work, Lalo and Blau revert to a storybook vision of the Middle Ages, 'storybook' in the sense of fanciful, not to say 'conventional'. A

cultural critic of the time might well have described it as a 'jacquerie d'Opéra-Comique'. To be sure, with this well-behaved libretto laid out in rhyming verse and four acts, we are very much in the opera house; but, then as now, everything rings hollow without shocking anyone. For the norm is to renew a corpus of rules sanctioned by tradition. And, in this case, the canon to be respected is that of 'le grand opéra'. Formally, therefore, Mérimée's text is ennobled: prose gives way to verse, and the infinite succession of scenes to four regular acts. The plot itself is simplified and refocused on a love story that was wholly secondary in Mérimée's original text. With the result that, if *La Jaquerie* of 1828 rides roughshod over the codes of classical tragedy, its 1895 counterpart, on the contrary, asserts its filiation with the mainstream operatic repertory. The critics immediately recognised its models, notably the shadow of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, both in the overall plot and in the bravura number in the second act setting mother and son at loggerheads: Jeanne and Robert here replay the roles of Fidès and Jean de Leyde. From the literary point of view, Blau and Lalo owe more to Scribe than to Mérimée. For what remains of the latter's attempt to 'give some idea of the appalling mores of the fourteenth century' in this peasant romance? Even the final scene, violent by nature, cannot give the spectator the slightest frisson, so dependent is it on stock formulas. Who can still be thrilled by the sight of a ruined chapel in the midst of a forest? There remains the essence of the work, the musical material, by means of which Lalo and his successor Coquard follow brilliantly in Mérimée's footsteps. Here we perceive the very same qualities of rhythm and synthesis: the style of the composers is no less 'vigorous, rapid and taut', no less shorn of 'all superfluous expression, all verbal profusion', than the work of Mérimée that drew these comments from the *Revue française* in May 1829.

How then are we to explain the paradoxical mixture of intersections and divergences between our two *Jacqueries*? There is, first of all, the idea, dear to the young guard of the 1820s, of the *total work of art* in which nothing is unimportant, an idea that results, in Mérimée's case, in the new preoccupation with taking account of the visual aspect of the performance

(acting, costumes, sets, staging). In 1890, the heirs to this desire for synthesis of the arts were no longer to be found in Paris, but in Germany. For Lalo and Coquard, Blau's text had no importance in itself, and it did not matter if it was hackneyed. In their eyes, the interest of the work lay elsewhere: in pure musicality. Moreover, the period of the Middle Ages evoked by the *Jacquerie* of 1358 did not have at all the same signification in 1828 as in 1895. In Mérimée, the medieval era is cloaked in a character of 'modernity'. From the Comédie Française to the Salon de Peinture, the Middle Ages then represented that 'other', non-academic history, in which all or almost all subjects were still virgin territory, since no one had yet illustrated them. In short, a past by means of which it seemed possible to create something new. Obviously enough, such was no longer the case sixty years later. And indeed, from one *Jacquerie* to another, has the very nature of the subject not been transformed? Have we not moved on from the cult of the Middle Ages to that of the peasant?

Let us just consider the parallel between the denouements of the two texts. In 1828, the play ends on an act of cowardice: the irresponsibility of the routed Jacques who turn on their own leader, even though he is irreproachable and totally disinterested. Here the peasant is clearly infantilised: at once powerless to shake off the oppressor's yoke and incapable of taking responsibility for his acts. There is a significant difference here from the final scene of 1895, where the death of the leader is caused by a series of misunderstandings: for Guillaume and the Jacques, everything points to Robert's being a traitor. The dramatic motivation here is the oath he has sworn. Mérimée's *jaque* is pretty much the bogeyman described by the historian Michelet and depicted visually by Georges Rochegrosse in his own *La Jacquerie*: 'The peasant, maddened by hunger and destitution, took the castles by force and slaughtered the nobles. The Jacques paid their lords back a debt of several centuries; this was the vengeance of desperate, damned men. God seemed to have so completely abandoned this world! ... They not only slaughtered their lords, but attempted to exterminate the noble families, killing their young heirs, killing their honour...' Comparison of this picture of 1885 with Lalo's work is all the

more interesting in that it marks something of a swansong for history painting and, in any case, the first failure experienced by its creator, who from that time on was dropped once and for all by the critics. Yet, barely two years earlier, Rochegrosse had been unanimously saluted as the saviour of academic painting. What can explain so abrupt a change of fortune? The causes are multiple, of course, but there can be no doubt that exaggeration of the figures' pose and of the fixed grimace on their faces was the principal reproach levelled at the painter. The action is 'frozen' at the fleeting moment when victims and murderers confront each other physically for the first and last time, at the point of maximum dramatic intensity which precedes the vile deed itself: the Jacques about to pounce on their prey, the chatelaines recoiling in horror. The principal figure, standing with her arms thrown back in an attitude mingling fear and dread, is perhaps the most expressive of all – too expressive, even. The critics saw in this the height of 'theatricality': the naïveté of the painter who, wishing to convince the public at all costs, overdoes things and lapses into caricature. We are far from the elegance of gesture taught at both the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique and the École des Beaux-Arts, that 'camel-like solemnity' ironically stigmatised by Sarah Bernhardt. And it is by no means insignificant that the central figure in question, slim, tensile, with an 's'-shaped silhouette, just happens to remind the viewer of Bernhardt. Elegance of gesture also implied grandeur of spirit. Yet Rochegrosse, for his part, shows humanity only in the worst light, morally debased (frenzied Jacques, terrorised chatelaines). This imagery, degrading for both sides of the conflict, appeared at a particularly inopportune moment, just as the first centenary of the Revolution was approaching. In 1889, the Third Republic wished to calm current tensions, and certainly had no wish to recall the September Massacres of 1792.

Blau's Jacques is light-years away from this iconography of massacring monsters. He is the sturdy, upstanding but fatally oppressed peasant: the hero of George Sand and Millet. A fundamentally pious and hard-working man whose picture honest people hang up in their homes and to whom the state allots a privileged place in its museums (one need only think of

Millet's *L'Angélu*). For the France of that era, the peasant was the living bastion of the nation, the reflection the country wanted to give of itself. The figure of fear, by that time, was the industrial worker. For having failed to understand that fact, Rochegrosse suffered a terrible setback in 1885. In counterpoint with this, today's music lover can better understand the slightly later success of Lalo and Coquard. In short, as far as pretext, the plot, the libretto (the 'why') are concerned, everything divides Mérimée from Blau; but as regards the essence – the writing, the style (the 'how') – Lalo and Coquard show themselves fully the equals of their predecessor.



Engraving of *La Jacquerie* by Rochegrosse, painting presented at the Salon of 1885.
L'Univers illustré. Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Gravure de *La Jacquerie* par Rochegrosse, tableau présenté au Salon de 1885.
L'Univers illustré. Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.