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**Berry Palmer Chevasco. *Mysterymania: The Reception of Eugène Sue in Britain 1838-1860*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003. US-ISBN 0-8204-5915-1. \$60.95 US; £33.00.**

At the height of his career in the 1840s, Eugène Sue was ranked with the best and most influential writers in France, including Alexandre Dumas and Honoré de Balzac. He was read avidly by Georges Sand and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Dickens made an appeal to a mutual friend to arrange a meeting on a visit to Paris; and he drew fire from no lesser social commentator than Karl Marx. And Sue's popularity crossed not only national boundaries but class ones as well. His novels were serialized in popular periodicals before being published as books and were read by members of the working classes as well as the bourgeoisie and the fashionable elites. His *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-3) was a blockbuster and is the one work for which he is remembered today, if only by scholars and aficionados of nineteenth-century literature. Even before his death in 1857, however, Sue's stock had fallen abruptly. The man who in the mid-1840s had "acquired mythical status" (41) on an international scale, by the mid-1850s was a political exile, isolated, ill and largely forgotten (56). Sue's main claim to fame, it would seem, is as the poster-boy of obscurity, a paradigmatic "forgotten figure" in a 1970s French comedy sketch and in Ogden Nash's 1952 poem, "*Who Did Which? or Who Indeed*" (261-2). Berry Palmer Chevasco seeks to redress what he argues is an undeserved obscurity for an author whose influence on both French and British literature of the mid-nineteenth century was profound.

The title of this detailed apologia for Sue's life and work - *Mysterymania* - is somewhat misleading. "Mysterymania" was coined in an article in *Bentley's Miscellany* in May, 1845 to characterize the new craze for mystery and crime fiction (119-20). Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* was undoubtedly a major part of that craze and is still regarded as one of the foundation texts of the detective story genre. Chevasco largely ignores the reputation of *Les Mystères* and its author as pioneers in this genre, however, in favour of placing Sue more securely in the context of mainstream nineteenth-century literary culture. Chevasco sets out to "chronicle the reception of Sue's fiction in Britain . . . with a view to understanding what impact his works may have had on British writers of the period" (13). Chevasco accordingly attempts to demonstrate Sue's influence on social problem novels and on the works of other prominent authors, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, engaged with social or moral justice. He is at pains to downplay the conventionally accepted parallels between G.W.M. Reynolds' sensational *The Mysteries of London* and Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, arguing, no doubt correctly, that Reynolds was exploiting the wild popularity of Sue's book, which had been translated into English and loosely adapted for the stage in numerous dramatic productions.

The great strength of this study is its outlining of the history of Sue's career, as a

writer respected by the French *litterati* and loved by a diverse reading public. He was read and admired by other authors on both sides of the Channel, notably, as mentioned above, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Georges Sand, who conducted a lengthy correspondence with him. The weakness of this study is that it carries its argument for Sue's significance and for his influence on subsequent writers too far. It is probably true that Sue's reputation was unfairly and permanently damaged by contemporary British critics who denigrated *Les Mystères* because of its association with sensational popular dramatizations and with Reynolds' rather lurid knock-off. Chevasco goes on to exhibit something like vicarious paranoia, however, when he suggests that some of the unfavourable commentary in both France and England was the result of professional jealousy on the part of the critics. The argument for Sue's influence on British social novelists is also something of a stretch, based as it is on very tenuous connections between texts and on highly qualified observations - e.g. "*Alton Locke* still follows somewhat the pattern partly set out in *Les Mystères de Paris*" (213). In reality, the parallels between Sue's works and those of other nineteenth-century authors are generally not the result of the direct influence of one on the others but are, rather, the effect of similar social and cultural influences on Sue and his contemporaries. Chevasco does acknowledge these common influences - e.g. eighteenth-century novels, stock characters and situations from contemporary melodrama - but then underplays their significance when he interprets virtually all sympathetic portrayals of beleaguered working-class families as variations on the Morel family in *Les Mystères* or makes claims for Sue's impact on, for example, Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* because, like *Les Mystères*, it incorporates "tensions of frustrated love" (218) into the plot. What nineteenth-century novel does not?

In the argument propounded in *Mysterymania*, in which authors as far-ranging and as dissimilar as Thackeray, Barrett Browning, Dickens, Disraeli, Gaskell, Kingsley and George Eliot all are indebted to Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris* emerges as the virtual Ur-text for the nineteenth century. This argument is simply not supportable and is certainly not substantiated by any compelling or convincing evidence in *Mysterymania*. Chevasco nevertheless gets his point across; he does convince his reader that Sue has been underrated and underappreciated as an author and that his masterpiece, *Les Mystères de Paris*, deserves recognition as a significant cultural text.