

Tamango: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts

Slavery and abolition gained newfound prominence as popular subjects in the 1820s after having been suppressed through censorship for the nearly two decades after Haiti gained its independence from France in 1804. Incidents contributing to the renewed interest in these subjects include the attention they received internationally at the Congress of Vienna in 1814; the scandal surrounding the sinking of the *Méduse* off the coast of Africa in 1816; the resumption of abolitionist activity by the Société de la morale chrétienne in 1821; the publication of Thomas Clarkson's *Cries of Africa* in 1822, which brought graphic, empirical evidence of the abuses of the slave trade; the choice of the subject of abolition by the Académie française as the subject of the poetry prize in 1823; and Charles X's recognition of Haiti's independence in 1825. Scores of works about blacks appeared in the 1820s that relate to these events. In many if not most of them, the authors appear to be motivated to a significant extent by wanting to take a position against the oppression of blacks. In this they differ from the two works that have of late assumed nearly canonical status nineteenth-century French studies, Hugo's *Bug Jargal* and Duras's *Ourika*. Because these works emphasize the violence perpetrated during the slave uprisings in Haiti, rather than the injustices committed by whites that provoked that violence, *Bug Jargal* and *Ourika* are not as representative of early nineteenth-century attitudes toward blacks as they are often erroneously assumed to be.

A far more representative example is Prosper Mérimée's short novel *Tamango*. Published in 1829, Mérimée's story bears an important relation to the engagé works of his time that endorsed the abolitionist goal of ending the illegal French slave trade. Despite the mordant irony directed at blacks and whites alike in this story of a slave revolt, Mérimée does not merely tap into a popular subject, as some have accused Hugo of doing; nor does he, like both Hugo and Duras, hold back from endorsing the abolitionist cause. Indeed, as I shall argue here, irony goes hand in hand with engagement in Mérimée's work. That engagement consists of calling attention to the unjust capture, imprisonment, exploitation, and abuse of blacks that were integral parts of the European plantation economic system. The tool for this engagement is irony, which can be defined, following Vaheed Ramazani, as

“a double-layered . . . phenomenon. At the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victim of irony . . . or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or the ironist. The upper level . . . need [not] be more than a hint that the ironist does not quite see the situation as he has presented it at the lower level . . . or that the victim does not see the situation quite as it really is.

To bring out through contrast the centrality of irony for Mérimée's engagé purpose, I will consider his novel along side the distinctly non-ironic film adaptation of *Tamango* which the American filmmaker John Berry directed and co-wrote in 1959. The film was made in France where Berry, targeted by Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Unamerican Activities Committee, had found exile. Although similarly engagé within its historical context, I believe, Berry's work replaces Mérimée's ironic approach with one that promotes black heroism. The comparison

between the two works is an instructive reminder of how embedded Mérimée's work is in its historical context and how relative engagé strategies are to the period in which they are deployed.

A brief summary of the story may be helpful to those who are unfamiliar with either the story or its film version. *Tamango* recounts the story of a revolt aboard a slave ship. It begins with the capture and imprisonment of the slave Tamango, a slave trader himself in Mérimée's story and merely an enslaved warrior in Berry's film. It is in attempting to get back his wife Ayché, whom he gave to the captain in a moment of drunken rage, that Tamango himself becomes enslaved. In contrast, in the film, Ayché bears no relation to Tamango; she is merely the captain's enslaved mulatto mistress who eventually joins with Tamango and the other rebellious slaves in the cause of obtaining their freedom. The ending of the two works differs dramatically. Mérimée's work stages a rebellion in which the slaves are victorious. But their victory is a hollow one since, unable to navigate the ship, they eventually all die at sea, with the exception of Tamango, who is rescued, brought to Jamaica, and emancipated, dying an unheroic death "d'une inflammation de poitrine." In sharp contrast, Berry's film ends at the moment the revolt is put down with the result of the death of all the slaves as well as Ayché. But the film elevates their defeat to a symbolic victory. As a champion of the downtrodden, Berry glorifies their revolt, allowing them to die with dignity as martyrs and to stand as models of hope in the future for other oppressed blacks. The captain lives on, victorious but alone, having sacrificed the slave woman he truly loved.

Irony threads its way through Mérimée's novel, starting with the first sentence: "Le capitaine Ledoux était un bon marin." The author thus introduces the literal meaning of "doux" which will be opposed in the next few pages with another level of meaning, that of an inhuman slave trader. The double-layered irony at the beginning of the novel consists in the apparently benign nature of whites at one level and their profound indifference to the cruelty they inflict on other human beings at another. In contrast with *Ourika*, in which the Enlightenment values of humanity, tolerance, and education attached to the black protagonist's aristocratic benefactress are held up for the reader's admiration and emulation, those same qualities are mocked in the description of Ledoux and his state-of-the-art ship, in which the slaves do not even have enough room to stand up. "Arrivés aux colonies, disait Ledoux, ils ne resteront que trop sur leurs pieds!" And, although he could conceivably squeeze more men into the ship, he desists, observing that "il faut avoir de l'humanité . . . les nègres, après tout, sont des hommes comme les Blancs." Ledoux can similarly be contrasted with captain Léopold d'Auverney in *Bug Jargal*. As in *Ourika*, whites placed in close proximity with blacks in Hugo's novel manifest kindness and compassion. D'Auverney's dog Rask serves as a symbolic stand-in for its former master, the black leader Bug Jargal, himself a stand-in for the leader of the Haitian revolution, Toussaint Louverture. The respect and sympathy for blacks of which D'Auverney shows himself capable mirrors the feelings of Mme B... toward Ourika. Unlike Duras or Hugo, Mérimée refuses to excuse or ennoble white participants in the drama of slavery or revolt. His condemnation of the inhumanity of whites, and his willingness to depict the slaves' revolt as an understandable response to their ill treatment by whites, are clear markers of his sympathy for the abolitionist causes that he and other liberal thinkers of his time endorsed.

A number of other ironies emerge in the scene of the revolt. Tamango is the victim of irony because he fails to understand that he lacks the training and knowledge that would enable him to navigate the ship. Ironic meaning also attaches itself to the equality that he gains by

defeating the whites. At one level he appears to be equal, having thrown off his chains and proven his ability to outsmart his captors. But Tamango is, after all, a former slave trader himself; and the reader shares in Mérimée's lack of sympathy for the equality that he has acquired: not only because he never cared about equality to begin with, but also because through his violent actions he becomes equal to whites who are as unworthy as he. Ultimately, as Mérimée presents them, blacks and whites are equal in the sense that they are equally indifferent to others and equally capable of inhuman acts. As Fainsworth observes, "the sum of the tale, clearly, sets in parallel savagery and civilisation, to the greater glory of neither." A further irony results from the fact that blacks and whites are equally incapable of functioning in each other's world: Tamango behaves stupidly in the white world of alcohol and navigation; the captain is incapable of surviving in the black world of revolt, as were the French in the Haitian revolution. And like the Haitians after independence, Tamango knows how to win but not how to steer a course toward a truly free and viable future for himself or his people.

Through the use of irony in *Tamango*, Mérimée succeeds in joining in the chorus of condemnation that was voiced in the 1820s against the illegal French continuation of the slave trade. But at the same time he is able to avoid some of the dangers that such condemnation brought with it such as expressing opposition to the conservative political regimes of the Restoration or offending figures of power and authority. Moreover, by claiming ironically that blacks and whites are equal—equally capable of self-interest, misusing power, putting the lives of others at risk, mistreating women—he condemns slave trading in a more comprehensive way than other writers at the time. His point is that the immoral nature of that practice is such that all groups involved or complicit with it are doomed. By granting blacks the equality of being as wretched as whites he suggests that perhaps equality is not the right goal at all. The goal should be that human qualities of compassion, solidarity, and concern for others are practiced across all races. Instead of naively glorifying blacks or ignoring their moral and intellectual limitations, Mérimée provides a lucid, sober assessment of the future dismantling of the system of slavery in which there are no easy answers. Alcohol, which is emphasized at the beginning and end of his story, is emblematic of the extent to which blacks have been perverted by whites. For Mérimée Tamango is not a hero. But that doesn't change the fact that the cause of enslaved Africans is just and their oppression needs to end. Nor does their inability to function in the white world that the sea symbolizes detract from the intelligence of which their successful revolt, like that of the Haitian insurgents, provided tangible proof.

Why did John Berry choose to adapt Mérimée's story while at the same time leaving out what is perhaps its most salient narrative feature, its irony? Raymond Borde, writing in *Les Temps modernes* at the time when the film was produced, maintains that slavery seemed to be an innocuous historical subject that would avoid censorship, although as it turned out the French authorities banned the movie because of its depiction of an interracial love affair. Also, Berry was a filmmaker whose career focused on issues of injustice. A Jew by the real name of Jack Szold, Berry had strong sympathy for blacks: he acted in an adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*; he depicted a white woman kissing a black man on the lips in his 1945 film *Deep Are The Roots*; he directed *Blood's Knot* by the South African dramatist Athol Fugard in the early 1960s; and he achieved success in 1974 with *Claudine*, starring Diahann Carroll and James Earl Ray, becoming one of the most famous actors and directors of African American film. "For John Berry, [the black] ... community and its problems were emblematic of all the other social and political problems in America and throughout the world." Because of its literary complexity

and ambiguity, irony would not have been an appropriate strategy for such a filmmaker who was producing a film about blacks in the years immediately preceding the civil rights movement in the United States. Instead, he glorified and romanticized Tamango in much the same way that another Jewish film figure of the time, Kirk Douglas, did in playing the slave Spartacus in movie made from the novel of that name written by another victim of the House Unamerican Activities committee, Howard Fast.

Even if Berry had wanted to more faithfully adapt the novel, he probably would have had great difficulty capturing the irony that results from features of Mérimée's *Tamango* that are strongly embedded in the historical context in which the work's appeared. One aspect of that context is France's relationship with England. The abolitionist circles in France that Mérimée frequented were fervent admirers of the role played by British figures such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson in bringing about the end of the British and the international slave trade. At the same time, however, England's role of policing the seas and inspecting French ships for suspected violations was increasingly considered in France to be intrusive and humiliating. Mérimée takes a jab at this process of policing at the beginning of *Tamango* when inspectors, whom the nineteenth-century reader would have known to have been English, visit the French ship and find excessive quantities of water, which they incompetently fail to see as a sign of a slave expedition: "enfin le trop de précautions ne peut nuire". Moreover, English abolitionism was suspected increasingly of being motivated by economic interests: having themselves ceased practicing the slave trade, they had commercial, not just moral, reasons to want the French to follow their example. Accusations of actually profiting from discovering slaves on French ships were also leveled against them. Writing in 1830, the French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher wrote: "Les Anglais, toujours philanthropes aux dépens des autres, font bien la guerre aux négriers; mais ils s'emparent de leurs noirs, et loin de les rendre au pays natal, ils les portent dans leurs Indes pour les livrer de nouveau à la servitude."(Hoffmann, 252-253). Mérimée mocks this practice at the end of *Tamango*. The British are all too eager to free Tamango from the bonds of slavery "puisque après tout il n'avait fait qu'user du droit de légitime défense; et puis ceux qu'il avait tués n'étaient que des Français." But his freedom, ironically, is as hollow as his victory on board ship. His life in Jamaica is joyless and subjected to a routine imposed by the British who rescued him: "On lui donna la liberté, c'est-à-dire qu'on le fit travailler pour le gouvernement." Unwilling to endorse the simplistic dichotomy between English and French that was popular among fervent abolitionists earlier in the decade, Mérimée suggests a shared responsibility in which the French must rise to the challenge of being equal partners in the international movement to end the injustice of slavery.

A second specific feature of *Tamango* that would have been lost on Berry's audience concerns the sinking of the ship *La Méduse* in 1816, one of the great scandals of the Restoration government. En route to Senegal, *La Méduse* was part of the colonizing effort to develop an African work force to replace the slave labor lost after the French defeat in Haiti. Captain Chaumareys, an inexperienced former émigré who was given command of the *Méduse* through favoritism, ultimately ran the ship aground on the reefs off the African coast. Due to his negligence there were too few lifeboats and a raft was constructed for the 152 people who could not be accommodated by the lifeboats. But instead of returning to rescue those people after he and the others who had found places on the lifeboats had reached the African coast, the captain left the unfortunate persons on the raft adrift for twelve days, at the end of which time only fifteen survivors, including the black soldier Jean Charles, remained. This tragic story of indifference to

human life finds echoes in *Tamango* that contemporary readers would surely have recognized. Not only is Tamango's crew, like that of the *Méduse*, left to drift at sea after the revolt. At one point, Tamango comes up with the preposterous idea that by using two small vessels on the ship they will be able to navigate their way back to Africa. Many are left behind to die since there is not enough room on the small boats; and almost all who do find a place perish, with the exception of a few survivors including Tamango. The degree to which Tamango's incompetence and indifference to human life mirrors that of Captain Chaumareys would undoubtedly have been apparent to Mérimée's readers. It seems plausible that one year short of the end of the highly unpopular Restoration government Mérimée chose to include one of its most embarrassing moments as the target of the mockery in his story.

Neither of these historically specific situations—French relations with the English and the scandal surrounding the sinking of *La Méduse*—would have had resonance for John Berry's audience. But was he aesthetically or politically wrong to depart as much as he did from the original, as Raymond Borde suggests in his review of the film in the *Temps modernes* at the time when it was released? Borde calls attention to the ways in which Berry erases or blurs the specifics of the historical context, for example by identifying Ledoux's point of origin as Rotterdam, which Borde sees as an attempt to not offend the French who had welcomed Berry in his exile. In an even greater departure from Mérimée's story, Berry replaces Mérimée's Ayché's, a minor African woman character, with a mulatto love object played by the Hollywood star Dorothy Dandridge. Whereas Ayché is nothing more than a catalyst for Tamango's capture in Mérimée's work, Berry's Ayché evolves from submissiveness to solidarity, her evolution becoming as important in the film as is the plot to gain control of the ship. Indeed, when she finally decides to throw in her lot and die with the slaves, the story seems to reach its logical conclusion. This perhaps explains why Berry chose to end the story with the massacre of Ayché and the slaves, thereby omitting almost a third of the original story in which the slaves wander at sea before their eventual demise and Tamango's rescue. For Borde, the love interest in Berry's film not only detracts from the historical meaning of Mérimée's story; he interprets it as showing the captain and other whites in a good light, which, as noted earlier, occurs in works such as *Bug Jargal* and *Ourika* but not in Mérimée's *Tamango*. Speaking of Ledoux's love for Ayché in the film, Borde states: "Il y a là, gentiment déguisé, un plaidoyer pour le colonialisme: les colonisateurs ne sont pas des machines à coloniser, ils conservent leur libre arbitre, ils souffrent comme vous et moi, il sont fait de chair et de sang... On se demande soudain si le sens profond de *Tamango* n'est pas celui-ci: justifier les guerres coloniales, légitimer la répression et renvoyer à leur chères études les intellectuels à l'âme trop sensible."

My conclusion about what John Berry did with Mérimée's novel is far less negative than Borde's. Indeed, I see Mérimée and Berry as having produced similarly engagé works aimed at different audiences at different historical moments. Berry has said that when his *Tamango* was distributed about three years after it was made, it became an enormous hit in the United States and was one of the first black pictures to get distributed by the major chains. One can sympathize with a critic like Borde who saw Mérimée's work stripped of its most distinctive features: its irony and its historical engagement. How could he have suspected the historical significance of Berry producing a film about blacks on the eve of the civil rights movement? His own anticolonial ideology undoubtedly made it even harder for him to understand that an ironic technique put to the service of blacks in France in the 1820s was inappropriate for the same cause in the United States in the 1950s. Borde was probably one of the critics that Berry referred

to when he said about *Tamango*: “The French intellectuals kicked the shit out of that movie. First of all because it was from a Mérimée novel. Then because it was very expensive.” At issue, in part, was probably a difference in taste between French and American reading and viewing publics. But it was also, I believe, an unwillingness in France to acknowledge that undoing the effects of slavery had not come to an end after the nineteenth century and that it was an on-going struggle in the United States and the former French colonies, as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon were bringing to the attention of the French at the time of Borde’s review. That that struggle continues to exist today, two centuries after Mérimée’s birth, is a tragic reminder that the significance of his and other works about blacks from the 1820s has not diminished.