

Mérimée's Literary Anthropology: Residual Sacrality and Marital Violence in "Lokis"

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(1) Merimée's "Lokis," like many 19th-century fantastic tales, features an implausibly violent marriage: the half-man/half-bear protagonist, Michel Szémioth, apparently attacks his wife, Ioulka, at the conclusion of their wedding ceremony.(1a) In Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille," a similarly peculiar event occurs when the protagonist, Alphonse de Peyrehorade, appears to die at the hand of his accidental bride, a Venus statue, as he attempts to consummate his union with his "real" bride, Mlle de Puygarrig.

Why does marriage—a sacramental ritual whose traditional function was to spiritually unite "two souls and bodies"—trigger violent death and radical separation? What theory or vision of marriage motivates Mérimée's "fantastic" depictions of modern nuptials?

If we adopt a thematic approach to this mystery (affirming, for example, that Michel inherited his animalistic characteristics from his father, who was, in fact, a bear), we merely displace the problem at hand. It would then be necessary to explain how the marriage of a bear and a human female could produce such an outlandish hybrid, why Michel's bloodthirsty appetite becomes evident only at the precise moment of his marital union, and so on. One could resort to a formalist (or generic) explanation and say that the metamorphoses and implausible violence are merely part and parcel of the fantastic genre. We would then need to discuss various formal questions raised by the tale (to what extent does it correspond to such and such model of the fantastic? does it produce the necessary "hesitation" described by Todorov? etc.). But such a formalist approach also displaces our attention away from the specific problem of marriage raised by Mérimée.(2) Marital catastrophe, as we shall see, is a point of entry into the real issue that concerns Mérimée, namely the persistence of the sacred (and its potentially violent effects) in a supposedly

modernized and secularized France. As a threshold experience, the event of marital union works to visually dramatize the psycho-social consequences of the border-crossing between traditional and modern worlds. It serves as a useful metaphor or allegory to focus attention on the precise limit between sacred and secular, irrationality and reason.

We know that Mérimée, as a son of the Enlightenment, was a sober rationalist. If he chose the fantastic genre for many of his tales it is no doubt because he discovered in it a narrative strategy that permitted him to communicate the complexity of his paradoxical, counter-Enlightenment view of human nature. Although most philosophers and human scientists in the wake of the Enlightenment believed in human perfectibility and considered Reason to be the supreme faculty of consciousness, Mérimée viewed humans, including sophisticated academics, as fundamentally irrational and eminently susceptible to self-deception and mystification. In particular, he thought that humans externalize, and thus hide from themselves, their potentially violent desires via mythical or ritualistic projections of violence onto super- or sub-human “others” (such as the violent man-bear “Lokis,” or a statue of Venus). At the same time, Mérimée recognized that his anthropological insight would make no significant impact if uttered purely discursively or theoretically, such as in a treatise.⁽³⁾ Mérimée opted, then, for literary mystification as a strategic means to combat mystification; he encourages readers to fall into his narrative traps with the aim of exposing both our potential for violence and our propensity to hide these tendencies with self-deceptive myths about our humanity and our rationality. As we shall see, he also exposes the necessity of this self-deception. In the case of the catastrophic marriage in “Lokis,” Mérimée induces readers to “reasonably” conclude via narrative contiguity that the metamorphosis of Michel into a bear and the ensuing bloodshed is *caused by* marriage, although we know that this cannot be the case. The marriage event thus appears to trigger a rupture not only between the characters’ desire for sacred union and its traditional outcome, but between conventional Reason and the hidden relation between sacred ritual and violence. As in “La Vénus d’Ille,” it is as if a magical or metaphysical force from the past snatches one of the spouses at the very moment he or she crosses the symbolic threshold into marital union.

What is this invisible limit? Why does crossing it appear to coincide with violence, death and mystification?

If we turn to criticism devoted to the question of failed union, we find two principal lines of inquiry: (1) the feminist approach, which considers representations of failed marriage as thinly veiled critiques of an obsolete patriarchal institution⁽⁴⁾ and (2) the psychoanalytic approach, which considers failed marriage as an allegory of the Oedipal complex or as a manifestation of the death-drive.⁽⁵⁾

A third approach, as yet unexplored, is to situate Mérimée's works within an historical and anthropological problematic of marriage. Mérimée's failed unions, as we suggested above, allegorize his thoughts on cultural modernization and, in particular, the attempt by France to dechristianize its traditional institutions. Mérimée lived through a moment of severe crisis, when the future of sacred institutions like marriage were a source of heated legislative, philosophical, and scientific debate. At the risk of oversimplification, the kinds of questions being raised about marriage were: what is the nature of marriage (secular or sacred)? what is marriage's link to the social or political order (contractual or religious/metaphysical)? what are the psycho-social effects of its desacralization (traumatic or liberating)? and so on.[\(6\)](#)

Marriage suffered a number of major shocks in the early to mid-19th century, beginning with its official desacralization in 1791, the legalization of divorce in 1792, various modifications to family and marriage law under Napoleon, and a de facto re-sacralization of marriage in 1816, when the Restoration legislators reinstated indissoluble marriage. Despite the complexity of these changes, let me emphasize this essential point: before the Revolution of 1789, marriage in France was controlled by the Catholic church. As a sacramental ritual, Catholic marriage was designed (in theory) to bind the couple spiritually via the intervention of grace as well as to anchor the couple to France's Christian cosmology. During the Revolution, marriage was ripped from its Christian heritage, transformed into a civil "contract," and emptied of its sacred or transcendent dimension. According to historian Darrin McMahon, the revolutionary legislators intentionally exploded the sacramental model of marriage in order to dramatically mark a symbolic rupture between a modern and secular Republic and the historically obsolete, "superstitious" mentality of the Old Regime.[\(7\)](#) Even if the royalist legislators in 1816 suppressed the right to divorce granted in 1791-92, it is important to underscore the fact that France never fully returned to the sacramental concept of marriage as it existed under the Old Regime. The symbolic and juridical priority of the marriage contract remained intact throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. At the same time, the 1816 law produced a curious "hybrid" solution (a contractual but indissoluble marriage?) that no doubt reflected the cultural tensions and political contradictions of a radically divided France. It helped keep alive a belief in access to sacred transcendence via marriage long after this access had been officially renounced.

How did these juridical changes to marriage (and the cultural conflicts that they reflected) influence Mérimée's conceptualization of marriage? It's difficult to know with any certainty, but we can surmise that it would have been nearly impossible to remain indifferent to the marriage debates of his time, just as it was no doubt difficult to remain indifferent to recent debates on the PACS or on homosexual

marriage: people tend to be for or against and the position adopted usually reflects an underlying (sacred or secular) political vision. It is rare, for example, to find 19th-century monarchists who were for contractual/civil marriage or republicans who supported the Catholic/sacramental version.

There is another reason to believe that Mérimée had given serious thought to the nature of marriage: he defended a thesis for his law degree in 1823 titled *De Matrimonio*. The thesis is now lost, so we have no way of knowing with certainty his thoughts. One might speculate, given Mérimée's anti-religious, anti-clerical, anti-Restoration sentiments, that he would have sided intellectually with the republican cause. At the same time, we know that, like an anthropologist, Mérimée was sensitive to local culture and to the role that collective mentalities play in the formation of the tastes, thoughts, and political judgments of individuals. In each of his tales he goes to great lengths to describe local settings and customs in order to show the involuntary and often hidden socio-cultural influence on human thought and action. Even if Mérimée might have defended in private the secularist thesis of the republicans, he would have been careful, from a scientific perspective, to consider the relation between the deeply-ingrained religious mentality of the Old Regime and the persistence of anti-modern views on marriage into the modern era. He understood that the modernization of consciousness did not occur in a single event like the Revolution; residual sacred sentiments and desires from the Old Regime continued to animate modern consciousness without its awareness.

It is helpful when interpreting Mérimée's fictional portrayals of catastrophic marriage to recall that Mérimée defended his law thesis just a few years after the publication of Louis de Bonald's important treatise on divorce and after the juridical abolition of divorce in 1816. In this debate, the conservatives promoted a "catastrophic" and even "lethal" vision of divorce and desacralized marriage. Bonald, who furnished the theoretical justification for suppressing the right to divorce, considered desacralized marriage as a "principle of death" that was corroding the nation's foundations: "Divorce was decreed in 1792 and surprised no one since it was the inevitable and long predictable consequence of the destructive system pursued with so much passion during this time. But now that we have embedded divorce as a principle into the very foundation of the social edifice, it must make those who are destined to live within it tremble." (8) Bonald adds: "[The nations that are] being agitated internally by this principle of death will find peace only when they return to the order they have abandoned" (259).

It is, of course, unlikely that Mérimée would have personally espoused such an extreme position. Bonald, however, was an important touchstone for the conservative position at the time, as he clearly exposed the vital socio-political stakes of marriage for Catholic monarchists: the very survival of France and of the

French.

We may be tempted to laugh off Bonald's paranoia about cultural modernization, but the idea of a link between the secularization of marriage and the destruction of the moral and metaphysical foundations of France were not uncommon. Marriage debates were a symbolic way of debating the destiny of France itself. The curious fact, of course, is that even though from a juridical point of view, the metaphysical link between marriage and the state had already been officially ruptured, the popular imagination persisted in its belief in sacred marriage to maintain social order, a belief that went beyond the power of a simple contract. The sociologist, Irène Théry explains the hidden logic of this mentality: "The traditional marriage, whether it be religious or secular, has always expressed a profound link between a moment of our history and the rules of alliance, the idea that a common, fundamental referent grounded all of society, whether one thought of it as divine, natural or founded, as modern society is, on a contract. It was the matrimonial institution's task to be the symbol of this referent. Thus, over the course of centuries, not everything was marriage, but everything referred to it . . ." [\(9\)](#) According to Théry, there is a kind of "sacred residue" attached to marriage that persisted into the modern era and that continues to irritate the modern spirit. It is for this reason that changing the definition of marriage is always perceived as changing the very nature of society.

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In a previous article on "La Vénus d'Ille," we have already demonstrated that the indissoluble marriage between Alphonse and the Venus statue (a common allegorical figure for the Virgin Mary during the Middle Ages) and the conventional marriage with Mlle de Puygarrig illustrates the two conceptions of marriage-sacred and secular-in play during the 19th century and how Mérimée allegorizes the psychic ambiguity produced by the historical border-crossing from a superstitious world (grounded, for example, in religion) into the skeptical world of modernity. [\(10\)](#) The violent obstacle to marriage (visually thematized by the Venus statue strangling Alphonse to death) marks the impossibility of reconciling two radically opposite worlds; the violent failure exposes the institutional and juridical obstacle to the expression of a residual desire for religious transcendence in a secularized world.

"Lokis," written about thirty years after "La Vénus d'Ille," represents in our view the flip side of the same problem: it's about two irreconcilable cultures, except that this time the historical trajectory (Christianity -> secularization) is inverted since the failed union of Michel Szémioth and Ioulka represents a pagan resistance to the recent Christianization of Lithuania. The narrator insists here on Michel's attachment to a primitive and overtly violent form of the sacred; his Christian

marriage does not correspond exactly to his sacred aspirations, inculcated by Lithuanian customs and traditions. And it does not suffice to realize his desire for transcendence. His pagan reflexes (for example, his desire for blood sacrifice) become visible at the precise moment when he realizes the emptiness of the Christian ritual.[\(11\)](#)

The cultural hybridity that Mérimée describes in Lithuania isn't exactly what it is in "La Vénus d'Ille": 19th-century France is exiting Christianity and entering pagan modernity, whereas Lithuania is repressing its pagan dimension in order to civilize itself under the tutelage of Catholic Poland and the civilizational values of the Enlightenment. Michel's mentality, for example, is clearly split between the local influences of Samogitian culture and the broader values of European culture. He is presented, on the one hand, as a man of the Enlightenment, an art and book collector, a cosmopolitan and a speaker of many languages (including French); on the other, he seems to be a traditional Lithuanian who takes pleasure in speaking Jmoude and who is deeply attached to the old rituals and traditional dances. Michel is also fascinated by his country's traditional sacred sites, such as the "Tumulus," the ancestral burial ground and former site of sacrificial rituals. We also detect an animalistic dimension hidden beneath the veneer of his humanity, suggested by the fact that he climbs trees and makes animal-like sounds, he is brutish and ultimately he is a wife-killer (or so it seems).[\(12\)](#)

But Michel is not the only hybrid in the tale. Ioulka, his fiancée, is also torn between two cultures: she is cultivated, knows several languages, orders her clothing from Paris, is gracious and distinguished. At the same time, she is described as the "Lithuanian Muse," she speaks and writes Jmoude, and she incarnates the "ideal woman" described by the Lithuanian "Legend of Boudrys": "playful like a cat, white like cream." If we follow the metaphors attached to Ioulka (a gazelle, a cat, a dove, etc.), she also carries traces of an underlying animality.

To the extent that the narrator, Professor Wittembach, a pastor and an intellectual, is torn between Christian/European culture and the paganism of Lithuania, Mérimée seems to be commenting on the incapacity of western Reason to apprehend sacred violence while at the same time exposing Christianity's inability to repress completely the "fascination" generated by pre-Christian forms of the sacred. The professor is himself clearly fascinated by the old Lithuanian rituals and by the mystery of the violent events that he observes. His "hesitation" between attraction and repulsion is, as Todorov describes, the formal source of "Lokis'"s fantastic dimension. [\(13\)](#) Yet any purely formalist approach to "Lokis" misses the underlying anthropological insight that secretly informs the tale's dualistic (sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent) tension.

Let us return, then, to the question of marriage since it is via marriage that Mérimée visually dramatizes the collision of sacred and secular worldviews and provides an entryway into his theory of the relation between violence and the sacred. We should note, in this connection, that the theme of marriage is announced from the very beginning, when we learn on page 2 that the professor is supposed to soon marry but that he chooses to delay the ceremony in order to travel to Lithuania to prepare a Jmoude translation of a gospel. The ironic significance of this observation becomes clear only later, when we see the professor criticize the frivolous attitude of Michel and Ioulka toward their marriage. We naturally wonder if the professor isn't guilty of the same frivolity when he chooses to defer his own marriage in order to study Jmoude grammar and vocabulary. And how do we interpret the fact he never returns to the subject of his own marriage although he goes to the trouble of insisting on its importance at the outset? Is the silence an oversight? A strategic omission?

Given the alignment of narrative events, we could speculate that the deferral of the professor's marriage is secretly linked to Michel's marriage to Ioulka since this second marriage is announced immediately after the professor's arrival in Lithuania and because the professor is clearly attracted to Michel's fiancée. The professor, in fact, seems to be Michel's rival or even his double.[\(14\)](#) It is after all the professor who calls Ioulka "the Lithuanian Muse." And it is she who teaches him to recite by heart the "Legend of Boudrys" concerning the three marriages after convincing him that the legend is a founding document of Samogitian culture. She seems to know everything about the traditional dances and rituals and is thus the main source of information for his linguistic study. The professor, in fact, views Ioulka as a kind of "mysterious center" of Jmoude language and culture. And she eventually becomes the object of his erotic and conjugal fantasies.

Critics have already noticed, for example, the sublimated eroticism of the "game" in which the professor inserts his finger in Ioulka's pot of honey.[\(15\)](#) Yet isn't this also a ritualization of his displaced marital desire? If honey is the preferred food of the bear, and if honey here is a metonymy for Ioulka, Mérimée seems to be establishing an identity between the conjugal desire of Michel, the bear-man, and that of the professor, *who plays the role* of a bear-man. The distinguishing feature of the two bears is that the professor, who is on the side of civilization, knows the "rules of the game": he knows that the goal of ritual is to simulate the penetration of the woman and to exhaust only symbolically his desire for union with the "sacred center." Michel, outside of civilization, bursts beyond the limits of ritual in order to express his natural desire without constraint.

Let us recall here that by leaving his fiancée, Mlle Weber, the professor has effectively "deferred" his contact with the sacred center furnished traditionally by

Christian marriage and thus leaves his residual sacred desire open to new possibilities.⁽¹⁶⁾ Mérimée, in fact, seems to be suggesting that the professor/pastor sublimates his Christian desire for transcendence by expressing it along the deviated pathways available to him in his new setting in Lithuania. For example, his immediate project after deferring his marriage is to translate the gospel into the Jmoude language. This is a project whose explicit purpose is to install the Christian sacred within the heart of Samogitian culture and thus to displace a pagan form of the sacred that is viewed as more primitive. This project of translation and of evangelization in fact winds up distancing the professor from his own culture and drawing him closer to an archaic and more fascinating world. The discussion of the professor's deferral of marriage is therefore not merely a detail for the purpose of producing a "reality effect"; it underscores the fact that the professor is availing himself of an alternative form of the sacred and perhaps even of an alternative spouse through which to access it. To the extent that the professor is a double of Michel, he enters into a rivalry with him to gain the affection of Ioulka as well as to get closer to the "sacred center" that she symbolizes, either by the founding myth of the "three marriages" that she recounts in Jmoude, the dances and rituals that she reenacts, or by a potential marriage with her. The tale's final event, the murder of Ioulka the day of her marriage with Michel, is in fact *the mystery*—the manifestation of sacred violence—that motivates the professor to write the story "Lokis" whose reading motivates us to find the hidden meaning of the name as well as a rational explanation for the irrational logic of events that he portrays.

Mérimée spotlights here an "anthropological" problem that would later preoccupy thinkers such as Mauss, Durkheim, Bataille, Caillois and the members of the Collège de Sociologie, namely: how can we understand sacred violence by purely rational means? How can we approach it without being overly "fascinated"? without falling under the spell of its contagion? Before the birth of "sacred sociology" or cultural anthropology, no offshoot of Enlightenment science or philosophy seemed equipped to deal with this intellectual problem, and Mérimée is clearly aware of this fact.⁽¹⁷⁾ He appears to be seeking solutions to questions that official scientists, given the predominance of materialist and rationalist epistemologies of the time, were not asking. The domain of literature offered an alternative communicative strategy through which to explore the emergence of a divided consciousness, animated by residual sacred aspirations in a world that had renounced the sacred as pure superstition. By doubling characters (Michel and Wittembach, Wittembach and the main narrator, the narrator and "Mérimée"), Mérimée is able to represent the psychological oscillations between the "abyss" of fascination for the sacred center (the professor) and a detached and objective understanding of the cultural emergence of this inaccessible center via the professor's double, the ideal narrator or Mérimée.

The professor, who presents himself as a comparative linguist and a cool-headed scientist, is thus mesmerized, in spite of his better judgment, by the world of pre-Christian sacrality seemingly embodied by Ioulka and ultimately rendered inaccessible by ritual violence (symbolized by the violent marriage). He enters into this world through three main pathways: language, myth and ritual. He discovers the myths by studying the language's origins and he confronts the rituals via Ioulka's games and dances, by the visit to the sacred burial site, and at the marriage ceremony, where pagan customs, which were believed to be repressed and dormant, erupt into violence.[\(17a\)](#)

The professor, who claims neutrality vis-à-vis Samogitian culture, discovers that by studying the origins of its language, he is at the same time studying the origins of culture. What he does not at first understand is that his exposure to this culture diminishes his scientific objectivity and in fact, winds up involuntarily influencing his tastes, desires and actions.[\(18\)](#) For example, even if the professor seems initially to be interested in the "Legend of Boudrys" only for its documentary and linguistic value, we later see that he becomes interested in its *content*. The legend recounts among other things the story of the ideal woman whom a Lithuanian father desires for his three sons: a Polish woman who is "as playful as cat" with "skin as white as cream." The irony here of course is that the legend is not at all a linguistic sample of ancient Jmoude, as the professor is led to believe; it is a translation into Jmoude of a famous poem by the Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, prepared offstage by Ioulka.

The professor's error reveals two things: (1) he is not as competent in Jmoude as he has led us to believe and (2) that he is mystified by the seductive charms of Ioulka.[\(19\)](#) Let us note that Ioulka "translates" Mickiewicz's poem not only linguistically, from Polish into Jmoude, but also physically: she incarnates the traits of the "marital ideal" that the poem lauds. The narrator repeats that Ioulka is as "playful as a cat" and that she has the white skin of a Polish woman, although she is ethnically Lithuanian. What this means is that the professor's desire for the sacred center of Samogitian culture that Ioulka embodies is based on a linguistic effect. His desire for her is a second-hand desire, inherited from another language and culture (Polish), that he unwittingly projects onto her. Caught up in the web of poetic language and illusions, the professor's desire to "unite" with the incarnation of the sacred center remains unsatisfied. The desired center, in fact, becomes lost within the infinite play of signification, especially once she is murdered (or sacrificed).

If "Lokis" is approached in the manner we are suggesting we suddenly begin to see other "effects" of the professor's displaced desire for sacred transcendence. In his attitude toward Samogitian books in Michel's library, and especially when he thinks he has discovered *the book* that will permit him to translate the gospel, Mérimée underscores that the professor is animated by a mysterious force: "Imagine my joy

when one of the first volumes I pulled from the armoire happened to be the *Catechismus Samogiticus* ! I couldn't restrain my cries of pleasure. A *mysterious attraction must have been exerting its force on me without my knowledge*" (278, my emphasis). This involuntary attraction to a sacred book that leads to "cries of pleasure" would seem to be a transfer of his original attraction to his fiancée and, later, to loulka. The locution "without our knowledge" (à *notre insu*) points to an unconscious sublimation of a deeply ingrained, but frustrated, desire for the sacred in search of alternative outlets of expression.

Mérimée would seem to confirm the idea of a displacement and "transfer" of desire, since at the very moment the professor expresses his joy over the book, he must displace this sentiment once again to go visit the "Tumulus" with his host, Michel. From that point forward, the professor will scarcely spend any time in the library, *although this was precisely his stated objective in going to Lithuania*. Why does Mérimée underscore the professor's desire to study Jmoude only to go on to have him recount a story about a sacrificial site and a violent marriage? What is the function of his digressions?

When rereading the tale we notice that the professor announces early on that marriage is a cause of bad luck: it is the source of Michel's migraines and the origin of Michel's mother's madness. When the professor asks the doctor if loulka is Michel's fiancée, he responds: "Fiancée? . . . I have no idea. A real coquette! She will make him lose his head, just like his mother" (262). Later, when Michel and the professor visit the Tumulus, they encounter a sorceress who attempts to warn Michel about the dangers of marriage with "the little dove" (loulka). She even consults with her snake and her pagan God, Pirkuns, who confirm that his marriage augurs "a sinister adventure" (289).

Michel tries to rationalize the prediction: "The mischievous old lady has seen me more than once on the road to the castle of Dowghielly. . . . There is a marriageable demoiselle there: she concluded that I was in love" (289). Michel knows that her predictions are superstitions and that it would be stupid to lend any credibility to them. Nonetheless, he winds up believing the sorceress and is haunted by fear. He asks the professor to demystify his superstitious thoughts, but the professor says only: "in matters of marriage, I give no advice" (289). In addition to the malefic view of marriage announced by the sorceress, we find a curative view, offered by the doctor. He thinks that marriage would be healthy for Michel as it would be an outlet for his pent-up desire. "No, he has no mistress. He doesn't marry, but he's wrong. He needs an outlet" (304). The professor is mildly scandalized by the doctor's reduction of marriage to sexual expenditure, but he at the same time seems to agree that marriage has a civilizing effect on men.

Given the outcome of the story, Mérimée seems to side with the malefic view of marriage, which brings us back to our original question concerning Mérimée's linkage of marriage to violence. The doctor—one of the few rational voices in this tale—explains that Michel's mother, a countess, was kidnapped and raped by a bear two days after her marriage and that the product of this implausible union, Michel, inherited certain ursuline characteristics from his "father." But is the countess's madness the result of the bear's aggression, as many critics have claimed? The text suggests that it results from the "terror" she experienced from the proximity of the bear's death (it is shot while still grasping the countess) and from her fixation on this bloody event. The doctor offers as a remedy a second and equally significant act of violence—a thorough beating. But, alas, beating is no longer permitted!

Michel, we repeat, inherited his madness from his mother. Mérimée characterizes it as "a mania . . . transmissible by blood" (303). Is Mérimée suggesting a hereditary transmission or rather a "taste for blood" linked to the culture of sacrificial ritual? The text remains ambiguous on this point, but we can suppose from textual details that his strange behaviors are animated by a repressed taste for blood sacrifice.[\(20\)](#) His familiarity with mysteries of the forests and especially with the Tumulus suggests that Michel is strongly attached to the ancestral customs and rituals that modern-day, Christianized Lithuanians had abandoned. We also see that Michel is fascinated by the professor's story of drinking his horse's blood as a source of nourishment while stranded in the Argentine countryside. The professor, who confesses to liking the taste of blood, nonetheless points out his moral distaste. Michel remains intrigued by the story and asks several questions about how to go about sampling animal blood. This discussion upsets Ioulka and wants the professor to refrain from explaining the procedure for fear that Michel might try it on the people around him, including her. Michel, moreover, remains overly fascinated by Ioulka's white skin, which is so transparent that the flow of her blood is visible: "This is everything that is good in her . . . the skin, above all. . . . Without a doubt, we can say that she is a beauty. . . . Her skin is marvelous! . . . Professor, the blood that runs beneath this skin, mustn't it be better than a horse's blood" (307)? Later, when Michel is sleeping, he bites his pillow and mutters in his sleep that Ioulka is better than a horse, as if he were trying to suck the blood of Ioulka from the edges of his pillow.

Where does this need for (or attraction to) blood come from? Mérimée suggests that it is linked to the primitive reflexes of human nature, reflexes that society seeks to ritualize in order to ward off collective violence. Mérimée could have picked up this idea from a reactionary proto-anthropological thinker, Joseph de Maistre. We know from Mérimée's correspondence that he was familiar with Maistre, and we can easily see Maistre's ideas at work in the sacrificial logic of his narratives.[\(21\)](#) The rituals linked to the traditional dance, to the Tumulus, to marriage, etc. are

supposed to tame desire by deferring it and exhausting it symbolically. But it is precisely in Michel's failed approach to ritual that his desire leads to violence. During the traditional dance with Ioulka, Michel is supposed to simulate a kiss, fall to the ground and play dead. The purpose of this ritual is obviously to simulate a symbolic refusal of the desired object and thus a displacement of desire. But Michel does not play his "role," and he attempts to express his natural desire with Ioulka. His refusal to adopt the rules of the game "animalizes" him in the eyes of Ioulka, a fact made clear by her renaming him "a bear." Mérimée suggests that Michel will repeat the same error during the marital ceremony by unleashing his repressed animality and bloodthirsty appetite. Like all sacraments, one of the purposes of Christian marriage was to transcend natural desire by "spiritualizing" it. The idea, according to Maistre, is that by symbolically accepting Christ's blood as a stand-in for real blood, the desire for sacrifice is ritually exhausted. The Christian marriage of Michel and Ioulka, which obviously did not exhaust Michel's sacred desire, is insufficient to hold back his ancestral appetite.[\(22\)](#)

This Maistrian idea which opposes primitive blood sacrifice with Christian, non-violent (or simulated) sacrifice seems very close to Mérimée's thinking since it is the weakness of imported Christianity, on the one hand, and the stubborn persistence of the taste for blood and ritual sacrifice, on the other, that structures Michel's consciousness and that animates his desire and behaviors. At one point, Michel and the professor openly discuss human nature and wonder how an "enlightened" person can be fascinated by evil and by acts of senseless violence. One example they discuss is this: "You hold a loaded firearm. Your best friend is present. The idea occurs to you to put a bullet through his head. You hold in total horror the idea of assassination. Yet you have the thought" (305). The many other examples of Michel's violent desires seem to underscore Mérimée's Maistrian idea that man is involuntarily attracted to violence and blood. The professor, who is also a pastor, agrees with Michel. But he believes that man can control his violent tendencies by rational reflection and above all via the imitation of Christ: "I tried to talk to him about our responsibilities as men and as Christians, about the necessity of imitating the 'warrior of the Scriptures', always ready for combat" (306).

The professor's stand on the power of religion obviously does not reflect Mérimée's authorial stand because Michel's irrepressible desire for blood ultimately fails to be "civilized" by Christian ritual. The violence that explodes within the couple during the marriage is the proof that Mérimée considers Christianity ultimately impotent in the face of man's inherent primitivism. Mérimée dramatizes this point further by extending the violence to the crowd of guests. The professor claims that he would have liked to stay at the wedding to observe the traditional dances but that he was afraid of an overflow of violence.

When investigating the hidden causes of the failed union, we might note the unusual comparison between Ioulka and a dove. We already saw that the sorceress had predicted a catastrophe linked to the marriage with the “little dove.” Mérimée picks up this image again at the moment of marital union: “The count, taking her into his arms, carried her to the top of the stairs as easily as if he were carrying a dove” (313). According to Christian tradition, the dove symbolizes the Holy Ghost that descends from the heavens to communicate grace during sacred events, such as baptism, the “annunciation,” or sacramental union. In this case, the metaphorical dove dies at the precise moment it should have achieved its sacred and unifying function. According to the interpretation we are advancing, this death of the “spirit” allegorizes Christianity’s inability in the modern era to accomplish its traditional effects; Mérimée visually dramatizes via failed marriage and death the displacement of religion by secular modernity; he exposes the historical and cultural limits of the traditional desire for transcendence and spiritual “life” via sacred marriage.

Let us further explore now the idea that Michel is a double of the professor and that Michel’s fiancée is an object of the professor’s sacred desires. We have already seen that professor has a taste for horse’s blood and a predilection for “cats” (282) and that he vicariously expresses his own fascination for sacred violence via the desires and actions of Michel. We have also seen that he openly recognizes man’s evil tendencies, although he thinks they can be managed through the imitation of Christ. He appears to view himself as an example of Christian self-transcendence.

Mérimée, nonetheless, attempts to expose the professor’s self-mystification by showing us how he displaces and projects his own violent tendencies onto Michel-the-bear. The professor positions himself on the side of rationalism and scientific objectivity in order to secure sufficient credibility with readers to recount the irrational violence of Michel. A scapegoating and cover-up, however, emerge as a possibility when on the final page the narrator explains the odd title “Lokis” by equating the name with Michel. As we noted above, this equation does not explain anything; it merely confirms what the reader already thinks. What we really want to know is *why* Michel is (or seemingly turns into) a bear and wife-killer.

Again, the typical way of solving the mystery of “Lokis” is in the most implausible way suggested to us: we conclude that Michel is Lokis, the man-bear. Yet by encouraging us to equate a human with a bear, the narrator is tacitly asking us to *dehumanize* Michel while having us deceive ourselves into believing that we and the professor are exempt from violent tendencies and therefore innocent. Most of us are reassured by the narrator’s equation, even though we know that it makes little rational sense. And even if we consciously recognize the doubling between the professor and Michel, and suspect that the professor may be susceptible to

violence, in the end he appears more human to our eyes because he has learned to “defer” and transcend his impulses. We are content to see Michel/Lokis expelled from his world to the extent that we accept the moral division that the narrator draws between the professor and Michel.

Yet the narrator’s story—the story that we read—is paradoxical since he is in fact attempting to expose his understanding of the *universality* of the desire for blood sacrifice (even within himself). If the narrator quite obviously focuses our attention on Michel/Lokis as the savage killer, while he secretly points to professor as a possible culprit, is he not at a deeper level of reading exposing the professor’s awareness of his own self-deception? The reader’s task, I would argue, is precisely to pierce through his linguistic and narrative game in order to discover via the complexity of the narrator’s example both the inherent violence of human nature *and* our natural tendency to hide this violence from ourselves through self-deception and self-serving myths. The narrative demonstrates our tendency for sacred violence by having us tacitly participate in the sacrifice of Michel/Lokis and by providing subtle clues that can lead to the self-understanding of our participation.

It is important to note that Mérimée’s view of human duality does not follow the typical Christian or metaphysical duality (i.e., the traditional soul-body or mind-body split). His view of it is *anthropological*: the duality emerges from the uniquely human capacity to symbolize and to substitute the natural appetite for violence by language, myth, and ritual.[\(23\)](#) The production of a transcendent symbol, ritualized by narrative, reflects, in fact, the Gansian insight into the origins of language and culture: the linguistic sign emerges as a solution to defer mimetic violence via substitution and collective sharing. The shared sign verticalizes desire and embeds it in language while simultaneously cordoning off the desired object as “sacred.” Yet in order for this sacralizing process to work the origins of the symbol’s emergence must remain obscure.[\(24\)](#)

It is in this sense that “Lokis” can be read as Mérimée’s self-conscious staging of the sacralizing potential of language. Mérimée keeps readers in the dark from the outset about the meaning or identity of the name “Lokis.”[\(25\)](#) For the duration of the narrative, the narrator plays on the ambiguity of Michel’s identity and strategically defers the identification of the human, Michel, with the sub-human creature, Lokis, until the very end. At the same time, if we accept this reduction furnished on the final page, we unwittingly participate in a sacralizing process that transforms a human being into an emissary victim.[\(26\)](#) We deny Michel his humanity while denying our own animality; we remain mystified by the word “Lokis” as we search for its significance along various deviated paths. We, in fact, revert to the traditional metaphysical dualities of good/evil, soul/flesh, human/animal without

understanding the anthropology of their emergence—the very anthropology that Mérimée is attempting to expose.

Here the ontological difference between the narrator and the professor and between the narrator and Mérimée begin to play a crucial role: once we notice it, we can escape the trap of our inherent fascination with the sacred (and the mystifying explanations for it) into which we have obviously been led. We can also now better appreciate the narrator's double game: he mimetically arouses our fascination for the sacred center (and the violence that can ensue if one reaches for it) via the professor's fascination with loulka. But then in order to break the sacred's spell he indicates the more objective and detached position of the ideal narrator. It is only when we recall that this ideal narrator is actually *Mérimée*, the creator of the fictional professor and of the narrator, that we begin to perceive that he has mystified us via a fantastic account of marital violence in order to make us self-aware of our own residual desire for the sacred and the various ways language and culture work to deflect this desire. In the end, his point is to have us to discover an apparently unavowable truth about human nature while showing us how we lie to ourselves in order to avoid discovering it.

Notes

1. The present article is a translation of “Rituel et violence: le mariage raté dans ‘Lokis’ de Mérimée,” *Otrante*, 24, 2008, 111-127.
- 1a. Christina Risco underscores this point in “Noces sanglantes chez Mérimée: ‘La Vénus d’Ille’ et ‘Lokis’,” *Littératures*, 2, 1990, 83-91. Her approach is mainly thematic and descriptive with some psychoanalytic explanations. [\(back\)](#)
2. For an analysis of the limits of the formalist approach, see Roger Bozzetto et Arnaud Huftier, *Les Frontières du fantastique*, Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2004. [\(back\)](#)
3. For a more sustained development of why literary anthropology is more effective at exposing the paradox of communicating anthropological theory than a discursive treatise, see Scott Sprenger, “Balzac as Anthropologist,” *Anthropoetics*, 6, 1 (Spring/Summer), 1-9, available online at <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0601/balzac.htm>. [\(back\)](#)
4. See, for example, Eléonore Roy-Reverzy, *La Mort d'éros: la mésalliance dans le roman du second XIXe siècle*, Sedes, 1997. [\(back\)](#)
5. See Jacques Chabot, *L'autre moi: fantasmes et fantastique dans les nouvelles de*

Mérimée, Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1983 or Jean Bellemin-Noël, *Vers l'inconscient du texte*, PUF, 1979. [\(back\)](#)

6. We are simplifying a complex field into its essential features only in order to indicate in broad strokes the mental geography of the time. For more details on the cultural politics of marriage in 19th-century France, see Francis Ronsin, *Les Divorciaires*, Aubier, 1992; Jean Gaudemet, *Le Mariage en occident*, Cerf, 1987; et Alex Lascar, *Les Problèmes du mariage dans le roman français (1830-48)*, Lille: Presses Universitaires de Septentrion, 1998. [\(back\)](#)

7. See chapter 1 of his *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. [\(back\)](#)

8. *Du Divorce, Considéré au XIXe siècle, relativement à l'état domestique et à l'état public de société*, Librairie d'Adrien Le Clere et Cie, 1839, 67. [\(back\)](#)

9. Irène Théry, *Le démariage*, Odile Jacob, 1996, 14. [\(back\)](#)

10. For more details, see Scott Sprenger, "Consummation as Catastrophe: The Case of Mérimée's 'La Vénus d'Ille,'" *Dalhousie French Studies*, 51, 2000, 26-36. [\(back\)](#)

11. Anne Hiller insists briefly on a similar point when she describes the goal of Christian marriage removing "l'impureté de la sexualité en définissant une enceinte à l'intérieur de laquelle l'acte sexuel cesse d'être une souillure. . . . Par son mariage avec loulka, il semblerait donc que Michel Szémioth ait pour objectif de spiritualiser son désir sexuel" [the impurity of sexuality by defining a sphere within which the sexual act ceases to be sinful. . . . It would therefore appear that Michel Szemioth's goal in his marriage to loulka was to spiritualize his sexual desire] in "Une lecture de *Lokis*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 7, 1978, 17-31. [\(back\)](#)

12. For a more detailed discussion of Mérimée's use of animal figures, see Paule Petitier, « L'Animalité dans *La Jacquerie* » in Antonia Fonyi, éd., *Prosper Mérimée: écrivain, archéologue, historien*. [\(back\)](#)

13. See Jean Decottignies' excellent article, "Lokis: fantastique et dissimulation," *RHL*, 71, 1971, 19-29. He adopts, without saying it, an anthropological approach by insisting on the relation between the fascination with dance and ritual and the hidden persistence of Samogitian barbarism into the modern era. He also notes that calling Michel a "bear" is an alibi for excluding human nature as a cause for the violence (p. 28). [\(back\)](#)

14. Tobin Siebers explores the idea of the professor as a double or rival of Michel in "Fantastic Lies: *Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*,

1983, 28, 1: 92. See also Magdalena Wandzioch, "Le Double du héros dans la littérature fantastique," in Gabriel A. Pérouse, éd., *Doubles et dé-doublement en littérature*, Université de Saint-Etienne, 1995, 203-212. [\(back\)](#)

15. See Scott Carpenter, "Supercherie et violence: Mérimée, ou le texte piégé," *Romantisme* 116, 2002, 49-57. [\(back\)](#)

16. Daniel Leuwers makes a similar commentary about deferred marital desire in "Une lecture de *Lokis*," *Europe*, 1975, 557, 70-76. [\(back\)](#)

17. Some previous critics have already suggested various "anthropological" dimensions of Mérimée's fiction. See Thierry Ozwald, "Le Récit endiable de Mérimée," in Antonia Fonyi, éd., *Prosper Mérimée: écrivain, archéologue, historien*, 153; Tobin Siebers, "Fantastic Lies: *Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence," and James F. Hamilton, "Pagan Ritual and Human Sacrifice in Mérimée's Mateo Falcone," *The French Review*, 55, 1, 1981, 52-59. [\(back\)](#)

17a. See Corry Cropper's *Playing at Monarchy*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2008, pp. 65-67 for an alternative view on the role of games in "Lokis." For Cropper, games point to a randomness of historical experience that cannot be contained by the narrative conventions of Mérimée's academic narrators. [\(back\)](#)

18. Théophil Spoerri describes a similar process when noting the hidden power of culture on humans. The strategy of Mérimée's art, claims Spoerri, is to push us toward the "abyss" of violence, nature and primitivism without pushing us in. See "Mérimée and the Short Story," *Yale French Studies*, 1949, 4, 9. [\(back\)](#)

19. Robin Mackenzie has already pointed out the professor's linguistic weaknesses in "Space and Self in Mérimée's *Lokis*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 2000, 36, 2, 196-208. [\(back\)](#)

20. Théophil Spoerri discusses an instinct linked to the desire for blood, 8. [\(back\)](#)

21. To discern the influence of Maistre on Mérimée see Maistre's *Sur les sacrifices*, Agora, 1993. [\(back\)](#)

22. Jean Bellemain-Noël interprets the cause of this failure in a similar way, although he uses a psychoanalytic perspective, 23. [\(back\)](#)

23. For other approaches to the duality of human nature in *Lokis*, see Hiller or Mackenzie. [\(back\)](#)

24. See, for example, Part I of Gans's *Signs of Paradox*, Stanford, 1997. Paolo

Tortonese describes a similar linguistic phenomenon in “L’Ours et le comparatiste,” Antonia Fonyi, ed., *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 2003, 270, 39-59. [\(back\)](#)

25. For an excellent discussion of the problem of translation and the “indicibilité” of the origin of culture, see Ora Avni, “L’OEdipe de la traduction: Lokis,” *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, XV, 189, 1983, 137-145. [\(back\)](#)

26. Jean Decottignies suggests the idea calling Michel a bear perhaps obscures the identity of the professor as a possible murderer, 28. Siebers similarly suggests this possibility, 92. [\(back\)](#)