Prosper Mérimée’s “Federigo,” or How to Cheat God and Beat Pascal

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Abstract  Prosper Mérimée wrote “Federigo” in 1829 and republished it in his 1833 collection Mosaique. The story’s protagonist, thanks to a rigged deck of cards, is able to defeat Death, the devil, and to ultimately cheat and gamble his way into heaven. With very few exceptions, scholars have either dismissed the story as derivative or have ignored it entirely. In this article I theorize an explanation for some of the differences between Mérimée’s story and its folk-tale antecedents, consider why Mérimée selected this story to begin with, study the original details he added, and suggest why he added them. By combining faith, gambling, and a can’t-lose wager, “Federigo” calls to mind a fixture of the French philosophical tradition, namely Blaise Pascal’s Pensees. Ultimately I argue that in “Federigo” Mérimée creates a narrative that can be read as an attempt to undermine Blaise Pascal and his famous celestial wager.

Keywords  Prosper Mérimée · Federigo · Blaise Pascal · Wager · Gambling · Literary criticism

Prosper Mérimée wrote “Federigo” in 1829 and republished it in his 1833 collection Mosaique. I use the term wrote fairly loosely here, since Mérimée himself added the following in an explanatory footnote: “Ce conte est populaire dans le royaume de Naples. On y remarque, ainsi que dans beaucoup d’autres nouvelles originaires de la même contrée, un mélange bizarre de la mythologie grecque avec les croyances du christianisme” (1965, p. 319). Because Mérimée left the story out of his second edition of Mosaique some editors have relegated it to the end of their collections and a number of scholars have ignored or dismissed the work—largely...
because of this footnote, assuming that it is for the most part derivative. That “Federigo” should be treated as it has been is surprising because Mérimée scholars should know—if nothing else—to doubt the authenticity of what he writes authoritatively in his fiction. In fact his explanatory footnote can be read as yet one more in his long list of mystifications. By citing other stories from the region and signaling their origins, Mérimée gives “Federigo” an academic frame much the way he does in “Carmen,” “La Vénus d’Ille,” and “Lokis,” to name a few (notably, these are all stories that draw heavily on regional folktales or other sources). The footnote’s superficial erudition gives an aura of authority to all of Mérimée’s narrators and lures the reader into believing that what he writes in the text or what he translates has historical and academic validity. In this case, the narrator goes on to note that the text “paraît avoir été composé vers la fin du Moyen Age,” suggesting he had little to do with writing it (p. 319). But given that Mérimée published a collection of plays under the name of a fictitious Spanish poetess, “Clara Gazul”; that he passed off an original work of fantastic poetry (La Guzla) as a “translation”; and that he signed Mosaique, the very work in which “Federigo” appears, “Par l’auteur du Théâtre de Clara Gazul,” readers should certainly not trust him when it comes to questions of authorship. If anything, in the context of Mérimée’s fiction, this explanatory footnote suggests that “Federigo” is actually a largely original story and that it likely is hiding a controversial message.

Fortunately for my argument, literary criticism went through a phase lasting from the sixties to the early eighties where nearly every work’s sources and possible models were researched. Kathryn Crecelius published an article in 1982 that examines the most likely sources for “Federigo.” Not surprisingly, she theorizes that the story is neither strictly Neapolitan as Mérimée’s footnote claims nor is it a transcription. Crecelius demonstrates that “Federigo” is loosely based on a folktale that “is attested all over Europe and… is related to the Sisyphus myth” (p. 57). But she insists that Mérimée’s version is unique in “ways that are literarily and structurally significant” and she concludes by writing: “‘Federigo’ deserves to be considered a short story and assigned its rightful place in Mérimée’s oeuvre” (p. 63).

What I hope to do in this article is theorize an explanation for some of the differences between Mérimée’s story and its antecedents, consider why Mérimée selected this story to begin with, study the original details he added, and suggest why he added them. Ultimately I argue that “Federigo” is significant as an ironic challenge to Pascal’s famous wager on the existence of God.

1 For A.W. Raitt “‘Federigo’ ‘remains no more than an amusing recital of a blithely and harmlessly irreverent folk-tale’” (1970, p. 135). Maxwell Smith, after comparing the story to “‘frothy whipped cream,’” hypothesizes that Mérimée left “‘Federigo’ out of his second edition of Mosaique because ‘he had followed too closely an earlier folk tale for his work to be truly original’” (1972, p. 110). Jacques Chabot’s L’Autre moi (1983) is a notable example of a text that studies Mérimée’s short stories systematically but does not mention “Federigo.”

2 Though speaking primarily about Zola’s use of the fantastic, Anca Mitroi comments that the use of scientific or academic metadiscourse (in the form of prefaces or footnotes) represents a “‘partie intégrante d’une écriture fantastique’” (2009, p. 50).