

Excerpts from "The Detective Fiction of Emile Gaboriau" by Jill Thompson

Emile Gaboriau (1832-1873) was a French novelist, best known for creating the literary detective Monsieur Lecoq. His career as a successful novelist was short - he published his first detective novel in 1865 and died only eight years later. Though he gained instant fame with the publication of *The Widow Lerouge*, his popularity was nearly as short-lived as his writing career. By the early part of the 20th century, Gaboriau had become a place-holder in the history of detective fiction, occupying the space between Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Though his stories of love, honor and human folly faded into obscurity just like the century they described, it is easy to see how they captured the attention of readers across the world. Gaboriau's detectives are as extraordinary today as when they first appeared.

... Gaboriau's "Roman Judiciaire"

Gaboriau called his novels "romans judiciaire" (Bleiler xv; Cooper) because they described judicial procedure in great detail. The novels are separated into two distinct parts. The first describes the discovery and investigation of the crime. The second provides the back-story, with a description of the characters and their histories, and concludes with the successful prosecution of the criminal. The two parts work together to present the crime from both a legal and human perspective, but this structure also divides the story. Gaboriau's approach was considered innovative when he first published his novels (Cooper), but modern literary critics describe Gaboriau's novels as "bifurcated" between the crime investigation and family drama (Sims 212), "a split narrative" with long sections providing a detailed history of the characters included within the events of the crime and its investigation (Scaggs 22). Gaboriau's detective novels were unconventional in another respect - Gaboriau made no effort to hide the identity of the true criminal. Dorothy Sayers, in her 1935 review of Gaboriau's work in the Times Literary

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Supplement, suggests that Gaboriau's work is afflicted with "a division of interest and ... lack of the 'surprise' element to which we have become accustomed" (Sayers).

These criticisms are aptly applied to Gaboriau's earliest novels, especially his most famous – *Monsieur Lecoq* – in which the entire second volume relates to the back-story. However, Gaboriau did not intend to write just crime stories. On the contrary, he considered himself a novelist, writing novels in which crime played only a part (Sayers; Wells, 280). The real division was not in Gaboriau's purpose but in his structure. After *Monsieur Lecoq*, Gaboriau wrote one more detective novel, *Within an Inch of His Life*. In this novel he achieved his best and most balanced integration of story and crime. Unfortunately, because this story does not feature either of his two most well-known detectives, Lecoq or Tabaret, it has not gained much attention from modern critics.

... The Detectives

A "touch of abnormality, of superhuman reasoning ... makes a Transcendental Detective" (Wells 48). Monsieur Lecoq, Gaboriau's best-known detective, has more than a touch of abnormality. He first appears in *The Widow Lerouge* as "an old offender, reconciled to the law" (Gaboriau, Lerouge 10). Gaboriau develops this character further in *The Mystery at Orcival*, where Lecoq appears an odd mixture of vanity and deception, someone who "practice[s] the feigning of all emotions of the human soul, just as he accustom[s] himself to wearing all sorts of costumes" (Gaboriau, Orcival 81). Lecoq's history as a reformed criminal and his penchant for disguise suggest that Gaboriau may have used Vidocq's memoirs as a starting point when he invented Lecoq. Vidocq used many disguises in his life as a criminal (Wells 203), and was responsible for the formation of the first brigade of plainclothes detectives in 1811 (Morton 96).

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Along with a flair for acting, Lecoq possesses an exceptional ability to arrive at the truth from a collection of clues and seemingly unrelated facts. In *Monsieur Lecoq*, by examining a line of footprints in the snow and fabric pieces snagged near a woodpile, Lecoq ascertains that the criminal's accomplice was a middle-aged man wearing a soft hat and a brown overcoat and that he was accompanied by two women. When Lecoq realizes it is about to rain, he rushes inside to scrape plaster from the wall so he can take a cast of the footprints, something he had heard about but never tried. Like Vidocq, who was credited with such innovations as analyzing ballistics and fingerprints (Morton 237), early fictional detectives analyzed physical clues and minute details in order to construct a theory of the crime that fit the facts. Footprints, fallen clocks, scratches, broken furniture and empty cups all revealed their secrets in the detectives' quest for the truth.

This use of clues to reconstruct the events of a crime is often described as deductive reasoning, but Gaboriau's detectives go far beyond classic deduction. Tabaret, who appears as Lecoq's mentor in *The Widow Lerouge*, is an enthusiastic amateur who engages in what appears to be contrarian thinking. When considering the evidence against the prime suspect, Tabaret is shocked to find that the man has no alibi. He says, "We must be mistaken: He is certainly not the criminal" (Gaboriau, Lerouge 269). His thinking defies convention because an alibi usually proves innocence, not guilt. What drives Tabaret's reaction is the idea of exploring the plausible instead of the probable – it is plausible that a suspect would have no alibi because, being innocent, he would not have prepared for his defense. This type of thinking recurs in *Monsieur Lecoq*, when Lecoq describes "a maxim which he had framed in his early days... always suspect that which seems probable; and begin by believing what appears incredible" Holmes. (Gaboriau, Lecoq 79).

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Exploring the realm of possibility has its mathematical basis in Bayesian logic, which examines the probability of certain events given that other events have occurred. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is the master of this type of logic; eliminating all possibilities until only one - the truth - remains (Kadane 242). Gaboriau's detectives engage in this process in a more informal sense by refusing to be lured by what is most probable (Kadane 238). In *The Mystery of Orcival*, Lecoq describes a German lunatic who repeatedly turned out a deck of cards, one by one, until he arrived at the correct order on the 4,246,028th attempt. Lecoq advises, "Don't forget ... that the field of conjecture has no bounds" (Gaboriau, *Orcival* 128).

Gaboriau's interest in probabilistic thinking can also be seen in *The Little Old Man of Batignolles*. This story features a detective, Mechinet, who is unconventional enough to consult on his cases with his wife and to bring his friend, a doctor named Godeuil, along on his investigations. As Mechinet and Godeuil analyze the scene of a murder, they become suspicious when they realize that the blood letters on the floor – the first five letters of the supposed murderer's name - were sketched by the victim's left hand. Mechinet and Godeuil surmise that the scene has been staged. In an ironic twist, the real criminal reveals at the end that the victim really was left-handed; a fact that might have forestalled the investigation had it been known from the start. A Bayesian approach would have been to evaluate both possibilities - first that the victim was left-handed, as suggested by the evidence, and then that he was right-handed, which was more probable in an empirical sense. It appears that Mechinet violated Lecoq's maxim of suspecting what was probable, although perhaps not, if the most likely case was the one suggested by the evidence in the first place. Transcendental they may have been, but sometimes Gaboriau's detectives succeeded by pure luck.