This essay examines the practice of theatrical adaptation of narrative texts in early nineteenth-century France. A comparison of Madame Charles Reybaud’s short story, *Les Épaves*, first published in 1838, and Antier and Decomberousse’s five-act melodrama, *Le Marché de Saint-Pierre*, performed at the Théâtre de la Gaîté in 1839, shows that a text adapted for the theater is no mere reproduction of its narrative source. Various types of modifications and adjustments are required to make the narrative text intelligible to a theater audience, to make it fit within the generic norms and performance conventions of drama.

As numerous studies have clearly shown, appropriation, adaptation, and parody were regular features of the literary landscape in nineteenth-century France. At that time, short stories and novels were routinely transformed into dramatic works and successful plays were often parodied or replicated. Whether such “borrowings” were openly acknowledged or not, they were almost always recognized by drama critics and by audience members whose appreciation of the resulting work depended to a considerable extent on its individual merits rather than its origins. Only rarely did the comments about these derived or

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1 For a brief overview of theatrical adaptation in nineteenth-century France and a select bibliography on the subject, see Cooper.
imitative texts include a condemnation of the appropriative practices that led to their creation.²

Consider, for example, the case of Frédéric Soulié, whose short story, *Le Lion amoureux*, was adapted for the stage — without his consent or collaboration — by Eugène Scribe under the title *Cicily ou le lion amoureux* (Théâtre du Gymnase, 8 December 1840). The drama critic for *L’Artiste*, like many of his peers, was perfectly aware of the source of Scribe’s play. Indeed, he began his review of *Cicily* by reminding his readers that

Il y a un an ou deux [1839], M. Frédéric Soulié a consacré le Lion dans une nouvelle le meilleur goût insérée dans le *Journal des débats*. M. Scribe a pris l’idée de M. Soulié; il l’a arrangée à sa façon, et chose inouïe, il en a fait quelque chose de charmant [...] (403).

The critic then went on to outline the plot of the play and to applaud the skill of its actors. “Cependant,” the reviewer concluded, “pour notre compte, nous aimons mieux la nouvelle de M. Frédéric Soulié” (404). His preference for the original story was not, however, accompanied by a denunciation of the unauthorized use of Soulié’s narrative.

I begin this examination of dramatic adaptation with the example of Soulié’s *Lion amoureux*, not because I intend to study that work in detail, but because, in this instance, we have a record of the original author’s feelings about the appropriation of his text. According to Jules Janin, the celebrated drama critic of *Les Débats*, Soulié was much distressed by Scribe’s unsanctioned reworking of his story, but had too much “respect” for the dramatist-Academician to express his views on the matter straightforwardly. Soulié thus used the example of other authors who had fallen victim to the same kind of infringement of their artistic property rights to publicly denounce the practice. Janin records Soulié’s position on such unauthorized borrowings in his *Histoire de la littérature dramatique*, from which I shall quote at some length here.

Il se passe, dit [Soulié], en ce moment, un grand mystère littéraire. Madame Charles Reybaud rencontre une idée dramatique et pleine de situations vives et compliquées; elle en a fait une nouvelle; ceci est bien. À peine la

² For one denunciation of this practice, see Luchet.