

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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26. Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, Baronne Dudevant [George Sand] 1 July 1804–8 June 1876



Fig. 26. Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, baronne Dudevant [George Sand], by A. Charpentier. Photo by Mathiasrex (2010). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ee/George_Sand.PNG, CC BY 4.0.

Les Maîtres Sonneurs

Première veillée

Je ne suis point né d'hier, disait, en 1828, le père Étienne. Je suis venu en ce monde, autant que je peux croire, l'année 54 ou 55 du siècle passé. Mais, n'ayant pas grande souvenance de mes premiers ans, je ne vous parlerai de moi qu'à partir du temps de ma première communion, qui eut lieu en 70, à la paroisse de Saint-Chartier, pour lors desservie par M. l'abbé Montpérrou, lequel est aujourd'hui bien sourd et bien cassé.

Ce n'est pas que notre paroisse de Nohant fût supprimée dans ce temps-là ; mais notre curé étant mort, il y eut, pour un bout de temps,

réunion des deux églises sous la conduite du prêtre de Saint-Chartier, et nous allions tous les jours à son catéchisme, moi, ma petite cousine, un gars appelé Joseph, qui demeurait en la même maison que mon oncle, et une douzaine d'autres enfants de chez nous.

Je dis mon oncle pour abrégé, car il était mon grand-oncle, frère de ma grand'mère, et avait nom Brulet, d'où sa petite-fille, étant seule héritière de son lignage, était appelée Brulette, sans qu'on fit jamais mention de son nom de baptême, qui était Catherine.

Et, pour vous dire tout de suite les choses comme elles étaient, je me sentais déjà d'aimer Brulette plus que je n'y étais obligé comme cousin, et j'étais jaloux que Joseph demeurait avec elle dans un petit logis distant d'une portée de fusil des dernières maisons du bourg, et du mien d'un quart de lieue de pays : de manière qu'il la voyait à toute heure, et qu'avant le temps qui nous rassembla au catéchisme, je ne la voyais pas tous les jours.¹

Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, Baronne Dudevant [George Sand] was born in Paris in 1804 and died in the château of Nohant-Vic in 1876. Daughter of Maurice Dupin de Francueil, who died in 1808, and of Sophie Victoire Delaborde, she wrote over seventy novels and fifty volumes of diverse works including tales, plays, and political tracts, a lady of infinite variety. Sand caused scandals in her love life and also in fashions she started: masculine dress, a male pseudonym. At Nohant,

1 George Sand, *Les Maîtres Sonneurs*, ed. P. Salomon and J. Mallion (Paris: Garnier, 1980), pp. 7–9.

Translation: First Watch

I was not born yesterday, said, in 1828, Old Étienne. I came into this world, as much as I can believe it, in the year 54 or 55 of the last century. But, not having great recollection of my first years, I will speak to you of me only from the time of my first communion, which happened in 70, in the parish of Saint-Chartier, then served by M. the abbé Montpérou, who today is quite deaf and quite broken.

It is not that our parish of Nohant was suppressed in that time; but our curate being dead, there was, for a patch of time, a union of the two churches under the conduct of the Saint-Chartier priest, and we went every day to his catechism, me, my little cousin, a lad named Joseph, who lived in the same house as my uncle, and a dozen other children from our village.

I say my uncle to be brief, because he was my great-uncle, my grandmother's brother, and his name was Brulet, which is why his granddaughter, being the only heir to his line, was named Brulette, without our ever using her baptismal name, which was Catherine.

And to tell you at once things as they were, I already felt myself loving Brulette more than I was obliged to as a cousin, and I was jealous that Joseph stayed with her in a little lodging a rifle shot away from the last houses of the town, and a quarter of a league of countryside from mine: so that he saw her at all hours, and before the time that brought us together for catechism, I did not see her every day.

she welcomed Liszt, Chopin, d'Agoult, Balzac, Flaubert, Delacroix, and others. She corresponded with Hugo, though the two never met, and sought his pardon from Napoléon III.² She inspired Ledru-Rollin and helped found three newspapers. Her works often feature the Berry countryside, from her first feminist novels of revolt—*Indiana* (1832), *Lélia* (1833)—to her novels describing proletarians—*Le Compagnon du Tour de France*, *Mauprat* (1837)—or peasants—*La Mare au diable* (1846), *François le Champi* (1848), *La Petite Fadette* (1849), *Les Maîtres sonneurs* (1853). She also wrote autobiography—*Histoire de ma vie* (1855). Her plays were largely unpublished in her lifetime. Aurore was raised in Nohant by her mother and grandmother, with two years in a convent from 1818 to 1820. In 1822, her mother broke with the paternal family to bring Aurore to Paris. The two soon quarreled; Aurore met François Casimir Dudevant, a lawyer at the royal court, and married him that same year. A prenuptial agreement preserved for Aurore her 500,000-franc fortune. The couple returned to Nohant. In 1824, Casimir slapped her in public; he also began drinking and having affairs. Aurore's first liaison, between 1827 and 1828, raises some questions about the paternity of her daughter Solange. She met Jules Sandeau during July 1830, moving to Paris in 1831 for a sort of *vie de Bohême*. She and Sandeau wrote the novel *Rose et Blanche* (1831) for the *Figaro* run by Henri de Latouche and signed it J. Sand. *Indiana* followed in 1832, then *Valentine* three months later, making George Sand famous. She broke with Sandeau and had a brief, unhappy liaison with Mérimée. In 1833, *Lélia* followed, to great success. That year, Sand formed an intimate friendship with Marie Dorval which caused some scandal; she also met Alfred de Musset, who moved in with her. In December, they left for Italy, where both fell gravely ill and each was unfaithful, ending their liaison but not their correspondence. Sand wrote *Mattea* (1835), *Leone Leoni* (1835), *André* (1834), and *Jacques* (1833), then returned to France. Attempted reconciliations followed, and later, memoirs on every side. A liaison with Michel de Bourges helped to make of Sand a republican, under police surveillance. Musset also introduced Sand to Liszt, who became a close friend; come 1836, Sand was visiting d'Agoult's salon alongside Liszt, Lamennais—excommunicated after his *Paroles d'un croyant* (1834)—Heine, Mickiewicz, and Chopin.

2 *George Sand. Victor Hugo. Correspondance croisée*, ed. Danielle Bahiaoui (Nîmes: HB Éditions, 2004), pp. 19–26.

Lamennais and, by Sainte-Beuve's intermediary, Pierre Leroux had a great impact on Sand's move toward socialism and mark her novels, as did her later friendship with Louis Blanc. Her liaison with Chopin began in 1838; it lasted ten years, ending when Solange married the sculptor Clésinger and broke with her mother. The failure of the 1848 Revolution left Sand wondering whether peoples can be happy; in 1852, she wrote several letters to the new emperor asking for clemency for his political opponents. In 1857, she met Flaubert at a dinner with Gautier, the Goncourt brothers, Renan, Taine, Dumas *filis*, and Sainte-Beuve. Sand is among the first Frenchwomen to live by her pen, a life made possible by the spread in literacy during the nineteenth century. She faced misogyny, indeed scandal, and overcame it, though neglected for decades after her death, and even Virginia Woolf questions her use of a pseudonym.³ She reinvented herself more than once, becoming in the end the *bonne dame de Nohant* whose works now appear in the Pléiade. No woman writer in this book better engineered her posterity.

This is our only text published under the Second Empire. In brief, the July Monarchy fell in February 1848 to a revolution that brought in the Second Republic. On 10 December 1848, Louis Napoléon Bonaparte won a surprise 74% of the popular vote for president. He then proclaimed himself president for life, and emperor in January 1852. "History repeats itself," wrote Marx about these exact events, "first as tragedy, then as farce." *Les Maîtres Sonneurs* appeared the following year.

In 1853, Sand was the best-known woman writer in France, famous since *Indiana* in 1832. From early scandal she had moved to socialism and republicanism around 1836, and then later retired to Nohant to write novels about peasant life. Since Sand began her career as a *révoltée*, one may ask whether this was the settling of age or rather a new revolt, a reinvention of herself as *la bonne dame de Nohant*, a demonstration of mastery and independence. Perhaps it was both. In any case, above is the opening of *Les Maîtres Sonneurs*.

On 10 December 1848, the French intelligentsia discovered to its surprise that 74% of France wanted no part of their republic; they wanted an emperor back. Sand remarked in 1849, "mon cœur est un

3 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, ed. David Bradshaw and Stuart N. Clarke (Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 37.

cimetière,”⁴ and one imagines that the crushing of her republican hopes had their share in her disappointment. It seems reasonable to argue that Sand’s series of peasant novels (1846–1853) reflect in part this nagging truth. If Sand is to speak for France, how can she ignore three quarters of the nation? This is perhaps one reason our extract not only focuses on peasant life; it is narrated by *le père Étienne*, in a Berry dialect that rings true to me at least—*souvenance, mes premiers ans*. That is part of the enduring appeal of this text, and it distinguishes Sand’s voice here from, say, Duras’s *Ourika*, who speaks with the elegance of the Beauvau family, or Daniel Stern’s *Nélida* (1846), which opens on a peasant scene described by an urbane narrator. There is of course more to this great novel—it leaves us wondering, for instance, whether Joset sells his soul to the devil for his art—but it is perhaps fitting to resituate the play of the fantastic, as in those two other novels in Sand’s peasant series, *La Petite Fadette* (1849) and *La Mare au diable* (1846), in the rural landscape from which they all spring. Just as Sand hears the true voice of her peasant narrator, so she works hard to indicate his mindset, the milieu he inhabits in which magic is perhaps less startling than to a Parisian reader. Perhaps this work of discovery and reclamation would let Sand and her readers better understand how the nation chose Napoléon le Petit to end the republic of which she had dreamed, preferring to have that little man sit on a throne above it.

Selected Works

Sand wrote over a hundred novels and short stories, from 1829 as Aurore Dudevant (some with Jules Sandeau), then from *Indiana* in 1832 as George Sand. A critical edition of her complete works is in progress.

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4 Évelyne Bloch-Dano, *Le Dernier Amour de George Sand* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2010), p. 11.

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- Consuelo*, 8 vols (Paris: L. de Potter, 1843)
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