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The Most Womanly Woman

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“The Most Womanly Woman”¹

Lily Keener

Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History, Dr. Jeanne Buckley

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¹ Quoted from Alfred de Musset

This paper analyzes the life of 19th century French woman Aurore Dupin, otherwise known as the author George Sand. It largely details the events of her life, especially her adolescent and early 20's, with a specific focus on how the people and events that occurred during those times affected Dupin's sense of independence and general deviance from the social customs of 1800s France. I also discuss the impact the writings of George Sand had on the people and literature of 19th century France and beyond concerning the portrayal of women and the concept of Idealist writing.

“The Most Womanly Woman”

Although a man’s name dons the covers of over 45 books and a dozen plays, 19th century author George Sand was born Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin on July 1, 1804 in Paris, France, but for most of her life close friends and family knew her simply as Aurore, the third in the blue-blooded Dupin lineage. Her own father, Captain Maurice Dupin, was the son of Marie-Aurore de Saxe, a commandeering woman who maintained the Dupin estate in Nohant, France just a few hours southeast of Paris. This second Aurore herself was descended from a sort of royalty; her father, the Comte de Saxe, was the bastard son of August II, a King of Poland and distant relative of Louis the XVI, who was notorious in his belief in the worthlessness of marriage and dismissal in the sanctity of relationships. (This trait, while diluted, later seemed to resonate in the ways of his great-granddaughter.) French aristocracy accepted Aurore as one of their own, but never entirely, as she also identified as one with the common people from her mother’s side. As the daughter of a bird vendor, Sophie-Victoire Delaborde came from no lofty background, and often bears accusation of working as a courtesan before her marriage. Aurore took pride in both perspectives of living that life awarded her, yet was often the victim of dispute within her own family, especially after the death of her father during a military campaign when Aurore was only three years old (Maurois, 1953). After Maurice’s death, Aurore and Sophie-Victoire moved back to Paris for a number of years on their own, which gave may have given Aurore her first example of a strong woman in her life and a taste of independence at a young age. Marie-Aurore, however, balked at the idea of her granddaughter living in a decrepit Paris apartment with her common daughter-in-law and took the child to raise herself at Nohant

under the teachings of philosophers, literature, and the natural sciences, which Aurore readily took to along with the life at the estate. She often spent hours reading, daydreaming, and playing in the countryside with the children of the local village, and even created her own religion, called Corombéism, from the influences of nature, which proves that even from a young age Aurore’s deviance from the normal ideas of her society was present. She was also, on the contrary, a devout Christian in her youth and produced some of her earliest writings literally on the walls of her room while attending Christian boarding school as a teenager. Young Aurore threw herself into a fervor of Godly love and worship under the convent’s order of nuns, which she quite seriously contemplated joining, while her grandmother’s health began to fail due to a series of strokes. In 1820, she withdrew Aurore from the convent to the estate once more to prepare her to take over her inheritance. (Maurois, 1953)

After one particularly nasty stroke Marie-Aurore was confined to her sickbed for the remainder of her life, and young Aurore became the young mistress of Nohant in her stead. Alongside close family friend Deschartres, who had helped to educate her as a young girl, Aurore managed the physical and financial upkeep of the estate at only 17 years old, already showing herself to be a formidable young woman. When not concerned with Nohant affairs, she continued to read incessantly. She preferred to read mostly religion and philosophy, as introduced by her grandmother, and pursued talents in the piano and harp. Her older half-brother from a prior relationship of her father’s, Hippolyte, took leave from the army to visit her for a time and taught her how to hunt and ride astride on a horse rather than the typical ladies’ side saddle (Orr, 2003). From then on, Aurore began to dress often in men’s clothing not only to take part in activities with her brother, but also on her own time, to the shock of the Nohant villagers.

Wearing men’s clothing was not, however, a recent undertaking in her life. At the time of Maurice’s death during a military campaign, Aurore and her mother had been travelling with him and Aurore had become the pet of the French army. The commanding general had even given her a miniature military uniform, which she had worn proudly. Aurore relished and thrived on the independent estate lifestyle, but her grandmother’s passing in 1821 appeared to quickly limit her freedom. With a fortune of 500,000 francs left to her, the young woman soon began to see suitors lining up at her doorstep, and married at 18 to Casimir Dudevant in 1822. Although marriage was not her optimal choice (“I...had entertained a very poor opinion of marriage [Maurois 1953 67]), she found Dudevant “so good, so honest...You never spoke to me of love. You never thought about my fortune, but tried, with wise advice, to open my eyes to the dangers by which I was threatened. I was grateful for your friendship” (Maurios 1953 63). By the year 1823, Aurore had borne their first son, Maurice, and the young couple appeared content in their domestic life together. Within the first few years after Maurice’s birth, however, Aurore began to see past the kindness that gilded Casimir’s exterior. She soon found him coarse and “a fool, a drunkard” (Orr, 2003), and fell into a depression that made her disgusted with the thought of emotional and physical love for her husband, which only intensified when she confirmed his unfaithfulness to her with Maurice’s nurse. In her writings, Aurore confessed that she had even lost faith in the very ideas of romantic and physical love themselves, although not before the mysterious birth of her daughter Solange in 1828. As Casimir and Aurore’s relationship had quickly deteriorated, historians doubt that Solange’s real father was the Baron Dudevant as records state, but Aurore’s close friend Stephen Ajasson de Grandsagne. (Aurore and many of her friends, according to some accounts, often referred to Solange as “Little Stephen” in private.)

Sometime after the birth of her daughter, Aurore claimed in her writings and letters to friends to begin to abhor the idea of romantic love in general, but still yearned for some kind of relationship of respect, without requirements or expectations of emotional and marital duties like those that had betrayed her and had since lost their luster as a result. She found a companion like this one in Bordeaux in 1824, where the Dudevants were passing the summer, in a young lawyer named Aurelien de Seze, but the relationship was doomed from the start. Aurore guarded her wounded emotions carefully and kept their relationship strictly platonic, which the young man seemed to understand, but it quickly fizzled through distance and Aurore’s own self-doubt (“I felt I was becoming a terrible drag on him, or, at best, that I was now no more to him than a source of intellectual amusement” [Maurois 1953 91]). Aurelien was only the first, however, of many of the platonic affairs she would entertain for a time. The most notable of them, furthermore, would lay the foundation of her writing career; In 1830, Aurore met an aspiring author named Jules Sandeau through a group of male friends visiting Nohant. The Dudevant marriage had long been in shambles, so Aurore, drawn as a thinker and writer herself to Sandeau, took up with him as a comrade, and eventually a lover. They often met in Nohant’s summer house to speak of poetry and philosophy, which Aurore could never have done with Casimir, and she was soon enamored with his mind. When she could no longer bear to stay at Nohant mired in a miserable sham of a marriage, she made a bold request, which Casimir quickly granted, for an allowance of her fortune and her time: 1500 francs and six months a year she would spend in Paris, away from the estate. To unapologetically leave her husband was scandalous in accordance with early 1800s customs, but Aurore was never one to adhere to the impressions of others, and soon struck out for Paris alongside Sandeau (Orr, 2003).

For the longtime privileged Aurore, living on less than tenth of her fortune was truly roughing it, and she often depended on friends for food and firewood in Paris, despite the fact both she and Sandeau had both begun to peddle their writings to Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*, of which she was the only female member. She was, however, thrilled with her freedom from marital unhappiness and continued to assert her new independence as a woman by making room in her tiny apartment for Sandeau, with whom she began to collaborate on her first major published work, titled *Rose et Blanche* (Maurois, 1953). The book, under the agreed name of Jules Sand, received generally positive praise, but Sandeau and Aurore never again collaborated. Aurore instead continued to write for *Le Figaro* and sent her own books to publishing houses for the first time. To her chagrin, her womanhood often led them to turn down her work, so she devised a male pseudonym under which to publish her books. This pen name (echoing with influences of Sandeau) still bears her fame today. The first novel, *Indiana*, under the name George Sand met high praise from Parisian critics, and with the release of further books like *Valentine*, *Lélia*, *Mauprat*, and *Simon* amongst other early works, George Sand became of one 18th century France’s most celebrated upcoming authors (Orr, 2003). Sand was daring within “his” novels to tackle characters and plots relevant to the plights of women (often of the lower class) and wrote them as more than flighty socialites or damsels in distress. These female characters often embodied Sand’s own views on love, sex, and sexuality, and explicitly explored them within her books (Jack, 2000); In *Lélia*, the titular character often ponders the concept of love in humanity and bemoans her own ability to love. Through her characters, Sand also questioned religion and its place within humanity and the concept of God. These thoughts make

for a stark contrast to the absolute religious devotion she practiced in her early teenage years, but became a hallmark of her work (Renard, 2004).

During her years in Paris, Aurore continued to embrace the independence and masculinity that she had never quite left behind from her childhood years and only fortified with her writer’s identity. Aurore “became” Sand while dressing in men’s clothing like she had during her youth at Nohant and inherited the freedom a lack of skirts and corsets allowed. Sand walked freely in the streets of Paris, accompanied by only a cigar, and attended Paris’ academic salons to discuss the literary and political events of the day. Her actions, alongside her writings and her multiple “infidelities” (for she did abandon Sandeau to “his lack of passion” and the arms of another woman and take up with a number of men during her lifetime), were often the talk of select literary circles in Paris, scandalizing a great many people. The mother of another of her lovers, poet and playwright Alfred de Musset, apparently asked of Sand: “Has the woman never in her life met a gentlemen?” (Orr, 2003). Some critics of Sand and her lifestyle called her a “loose woman” and went so far as to deem the dozens of novels and thousands of letters she wrote “unfeminine”, but she was brave in heeding no words but her own, and even setting them to paper.

A writer with Sand’s level of daring certainly made an impact on 19th century Paris and French literature as a whole, but Sand did not reach her level of influence on her own. Her relationship with Jules Sandeau made one of the greatest impacts on her adult life because he sparked her decision to move to Paris for the sake of her independence and writing career and collaborated with her on her first published work. Sandeau facilitated many of the greatest changes in Sand’s life, including those related to her writing, but another man truly pushed her

writing abilities to grow; During Sand’s years in Paris, Henri de Latouche ran the newspaper, *Le Figaro*, where Sand found her first position as a writer. Sand later recalled that de Latouche was a taskmaster (“He would fling subjects for treatment at this ‘eagles’, together with scraps of paper...into which they were expected to fit articles” [Maurois 1953 117]), but his high demands of her did indeed improve her writing and disciplinary abilities, and they kept in contact long after her success had grown. Sand’s own fame led her to become an influence in turn, beginning in her own lifetime; History often remembers Sand just as much for her romances as for her writings, and one of her most known relationships with composer Frederick Chopin left a lasting impression on him and his music even after they had parted ways; During what musical scholar Catherine Kautsky (2012) calls a “disastrous” sojourn to Majorca, Chopin composed his celebrated work “Raindrop Prelude”, still known by musicians today, when he believed for a short period of time that Sand had somehow died in a rainstorm. Chopin’s biographer and friend Frederick Niecks once described the composer as a “lady-like” opposite to Sand’s more masculine personality and attributed to him a sort of dainty grace that only increased during the couple’s years together . By contrast, their friends claimed Sand as the manlier half of the duo, with Chopin usually taking on the role of an emotional, sickly damsel as Sand cavorted about Paris. This near gender-swap allowed George Sand to truly take on the persona of a man, leave the constraints of womanhood behind for a time, and truly embrace the independence she had always pursued. The relationship only lasted a few years, but as artists both author and composer had a deep respect for one another, and long after they were no longer together, Sand supposedly said of Chopin: “Chopin's genius is the deepest, the most sensitive and the most emotional in existence. He made a single instrument speak the language of the infinite” (Kautsky, 2012).

Apart from her relationships, platonic and not, Sand left her greatest mark on French literature through the distinctive style of writing in her books, which manifests most notably in the portrayal of intelligent, philosophical, and often sexually empowered female and lower-class characters. Another staple of Sand’s writing, however, is not explored nearly as much, and approval of her writing style varies by author. Some, like poet Charles Baudelaire, found her frivolous, but others, like essayist Naomi Schor (1993), find Sand’s writing, classified as Idealist style, one of her greatest literary strengths. In idealist writings, an author stresses, even exaggerates, the beauty of a subject. Some realist authors find Idealism useless and, because many female authors once preferred the style, criticize that women adopted it because they were unable to cope with the harsh reality of the real world. Sand, ever the deviant, embraced the style and, according to Schor, set herself apart from other writers of her age with its use (Schor, 1993).

One of the earliest memories I have of my mother is of her standing in front of a bookcase to a couple of spines towards the end of a shelf. “The name on the book is George Sand”, she says, “but this author was actually a woman”. She then told me, very simply and delicately, I now realize, that Sand was a French writer who knew Chopin for a long time and dressed up in men’s clothing. Being so young I did not grasp the importance of Sand in terms of women’s history and rights. I could only wonder why a woman wanted to dress in men’s clothing, or take a man’s name for her writings. Even when my mother tried to explain to me that Sand did so for people to take her seriously, I was only more confused; Why would a woman not be taken seriously? That conversation, and George Sand, have remained vividly in my mind throughout my entire life, and as I have grown older and become more invested in women's rights and the feminist movement, I realize why my mother spoke to me of Sand; As an

intelligent, hard-working, determined woman herself, she always encouraged me to learn about and emulate other women in history who lobbied for their rights to learn, to think, and speak freely, and to live out from under the thumb of men who do not see them as equals.

Sand certainly, in accordance with the feminine values of her lifetime, was no ordinary woman. An ordinary woman of her age would have silently accepted her husband’s infidelities or brushed it off as something men just do, or kept her thoughts on life and humanity to herself instead of showing them to the world, but Sand allowed few social mores to govern how she lived her life, and fought during most of it against customs that constrained other women who did not have her willpower and liberty. History could consider her a feminist icon, but Sand always decried the title of feminist (Renard, 2004), though never in a way that would demean her womanhood, which would have gone against her very nature; For despite taking a man’s name and mannerisms to benefit herself, the driving force behind some of the francophone world’s longest lasting literature and one of its best known authors was the womanhood of Aurore Dupin.