
H-France Review Vol. 23 (September 2023), No. 164

Sharon Larson, *Resurrecting Jane de La Vaudère: Literary Shapeshifter of the Belle Époque*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022. xiii + 190pp. Notes, bibliographies, and index. \$99.95 (hb). ISBN 9-78-0271094441.

Review by Melanie Hawthorne, Texas A&M University.

As someone who has long been fascinated by the quantity of French turn-of-the-century women writers who have been unearthed (a metaphor to return to) in the recent past, I was primed to approach Sharon Larson's new monograph on Jane de La Vaudère with great interest. The name was one I had come across when I started working on Rachilde, back in a time when the only nineteenth-century French women writers most experts could name were Mme de Staël and George Sand. We have come a long way since then, and this book drives one more nail into the coffin of the received idea that women writers were somehow exceptions.

Although I knew the name La Vaudère, I knew little of this author beyond the vague orientaling reputation associated with her. *Resurrecting Jane de La Vaudère* provides much-needed biographical information about its subject, a useful review of her literary career, reflections on the context of the woman writer in the Belle Époque, and more, including some fascinating details that won't be forgotten in a hurry.

In outline, Larson's book consists of a brief introduction followed by six chapters, each tackling a different aspect of La Vaudère's life and work, beginning with a biographical overview. Life itself provided the would-be writer with a better name than any pseudonym she could have come up with on her own. Her birth name was Jeanne Scrive, and one could be forgiven for thinking that Scrive, with its connotations of (in)scribing and scrivening, ought to have been the pen name while de La Vaudère should have been the more banal (if pseudo aristocratic) real name. But Larson is clear that as a writer, Vaudère left her unmarried as well as her married name (Crapez-one understands why she might have wanted to divest herself of that one) behind in favor of the anglicized and then popular *prénom* Jane, that she adopted, along with the "de La Vaudère," in 1889. Vaudère was drawn from the name of the château she inhabited with her husband Gaston, so it was hardly an opaque *nom de plume*. Though Jane's identity was an open secret, the name Vaudère maintained a certain veil of respectability (a ruse that would come in handy, as we shall see).

Larson has dug deeply in the extant records to find out as much as possible about Jeanne Scrive, but she is forced to concede that beyond some obvious mentions in the *état civil* (birth, marriage, death), there is precious little to go on. Born in Paris in 1857 to well-connected, upper middle-

class parents, orphaned at an early age and raised by a grandmother, educated in a Catholic convent, Jeanne married Gaston Crapez as soon as she turned eighteen, most likely in an arranged marriage of convenience. The following year (1876), Jeanne promptly gave birth to a son who would remain an only child. In 1898 Jeanne divorced the adulterous Gaston, and just ten years later, Jeanne herself died at age fifty-one of an unnamed illness.

These are the bare facts, but Larson mines what information there is to maximum effect in chapter one, "The Makings of a Biography." Larson is quick to acknowledge how little material seems to have survived (one always holds out hope that the proverbial suitcase full of documents is tucked away somewhere yet to be discovered), but she makes good use of what is available, most notably the legal papers documenting and following up on La Vaudère's divorce, still an unusual initiative for a woman in 1898. La Vaudère was able to argue that her husband's infidelity had caused financial hardship, which is why she had been obliged to support the family with her pen (even though her son was already an adult by this time), so that rather than appear a denatured mother ambitious for fame, La Vaudère shifted the blame "away from the professional authoress and instead targeted the irresponsible spouse" (p. 29). "Under this lens," writes Larson, "La Vaudère's writing career was not just 'acceptable'—it was commendable" (p. 29).

Larson ends the cradle-to-grave narrative with La Vaudère's burial in the family tomb in Montparnasse cemetery. Official records confirm the resting place, but La Vaudère's name is nowhere to be found on the sepulcher. It's a mildly interesting biographical fact, but in Larson's book it carries further weight by underscoring the theme of resurrection foregrounded in the title. "Like lost biography, the absences of La Vaudère's name from her burial site is emblematic of her disappearance from cultural memory" (p. 38). This claim serves as an organizing principle of the book as a whole. Resurrection, in various forms, represents a key: Larson is resurrecting the lost woman writer; the writer herself resurrects literary texts through plagiarism (more on this below); and finally, in an account of her visits to the château de La Vaudère, Larson describes (and illustrates) how the dead, if not literally resurrected, are, disturbingly, not quite gone and buried either.

Having sketched out the life, Larson moves on in chapter two to the writing career, on "Becoming Jane de La Vaudère" (the chapter title). Here Larson focuses on the public personae (yes, plural) that Jeanne Scrive forged for herself and the stages of her career: her early failures to make a mark as a poet, a decadent period capitalizing on the gender-related fears and instability of the fin de siècle, and finally a switch to orientalism inspired by the 1900 Paris Exhibition. La Vaudère is presented as a savvy manipulator of her public image, catering to popular taste and justifying it by throwing accusations back in the face of her critics: she writes erotica because that's what sells. She is not responsible for the public's appetites; she merely supplies a pre-existing market.

This is an argument that Larson returns to repeatedly: how the internal contradictions of the images that La Vaudère presents "challenged the legitimacy and stability of dominant discourses about femininity and the woman writer" (p. 40). It's the central theme of chapter three, "La Vaudère's Plagiarism," with its subtitle "Subversion Through Copy." The prevalence of plagiarism in La Vaudère's work presents a conundrum for critics. To begin with, it is everywhere, and Larson declares that "I have yet to find a novel by La Vaudère that does not contain passages from other published works" (p. 73). What is the contemporary reader to make of the effort to "resurrect" La Vaudère in light of this cardinal failing? Surely plagiarism is one of the worst intellectual crimes, and besides, if La Vaudère is somehow not the author of the works

published under her name (or at least her pseudonym), what does it mean to talk about “her” body of work? A partial answer is that not all of the material is lifted from elsewhere—only selected passages—but more to the point, Larson stresses that this strategic plagiarism has ulterior effects that problematize and justify the practice. Larson is not bringing anything new to the table in leveling accusations of plagiarism against La Vaudère, and she is quick to point out that already during La Vaudère's lifetime, the “curious coincidences,” as one critic called them (p. 73), were noticed, but Larson maintains that people “have been quick to dismiss her as a plagiarist without considering the larger literary, theoretical, or aesthetic implications of her copying in the context of her persona and *oeuvre*” (p. 73).

This is the more nuanced exposition that Larson undertakes in this chapter, focusing on a couple of what we might call case studies, both deriving from the echoes of Maupassant's *Notre Coeur* (1890) in La Vaudère's *Les demi-sexes* (1897), one of her most well-known novels that dates from her “decadent” period. It should be noted that part of the novel's notoriety (both then and now) is its theme of women who deliberately have their ovaries removed so that they can enjoy a sex life freed from fears of pregnancy, and this topic of “nonnormative sexuality” (p. 75) is central to Larson's argument. In her reading, Larson first focuses on an in-depth comparison of the way the Mediterranean landscape is depicted in the two texts, before moving to a broader claim about how La Vaudère's novel “subversively reappropriates *Notre coeur*'s underlying warnings against the malevolence of modern femininity to privilege female subjectivity” (p. 74). The novel takes place in Sicily, and a description of the landscape is one of the moments when La Vaudère lifts a passage from Maupassant, but with a twist. Maupassant compares the wild and savage landscape of the island to a mistress that “tous les peuples” (p. 81) desire to possess, so when La Vaudère uses the same trope (with almost identical language) at a “crucial moment,” Larson sees “a pivotal symbolic intrusion of male-authored constructions of female sexuality” (p. 82). Again, comparing a specific passage word for word in the two texts, Larson notes that La Vaudère basically changes only a pronoun (from “il” to “elle”) and makes the perspective that of a woman rather than a man, but the consequences are far from trivial: “La Vaudère's plagiarism reveals a complicated rewriting of conservative male-authored discourses on femininity, sexual difference, and sexual fulfillment,” she writes (p. 87).

Larson makes a good case for re-evaluating La Vaudère's inconvenient looseness around intellectual property issues, but it's a thorny subject. On the one hand, something as seemingly trivial as a pronoun can have immense implications. The difference between “he kissed her” and “she kissed her” can set off a firestorm. On the other hand, we seem, as a culture, to manage to live with contradiction quite comfortably. One only has to look at the swirl of contradictions in contemporary discourse, where appeals to supposed freedom lie cheek by jowl with draconian laws regulating the bodily autonomy of some individuals, for example, to see that most of us are bad readers when it comes to spotting contradictions, let alone deconstructing an entire ideology based on them. How many of La Vaudère's readers had an “aha” moment if and when they recognized her re-appropriation of Maupassant? How many re-evaluated their opinion of gendered discourse based on that perception? That said, we live at a time when musical “sampling” and all sorts of creative borrowing and re-appropriation are widespread practices that have a well-articulated theoretical basis, and in that sense perhaps La Vaudère could be seen as ahead of her time.

The tables are turned on the plagiarist in chapter four where Larson takes up the story of Colette, her lover Missy, and their notoriously scandalous stage performance in the *Rêve d'Égypte*. Here

Larson tells an important and original tale, one that, as she notes, has been hitherto absent from scholarly accounts of the scandal, despite its notoriety. For while much has been written about this sensational moment of Colette's career, no one seems to have noticed before that La Vaudère was (or claimed to be) the author of that play, despite Missy's assertions to the contrary. La Vaudère maintained she had written (and circulated) a drama with the same plot though a different title (*Le rêve de Mysès*) some months earlier. Alas, this original is lost, and despite Larson's best efforts, no such manuscript can be located today, though there is circumstantial evidence (contemporary media reports) to support La Vaudère's claim. But almost as interesting as the irony of the plagiarist being plagiarized is the way La Vaudère turned around and re-appropriated the *Rêve d'Égypte* for her own ends. Capitalizing on the scandal that Colette and Missy had generated, and without abandoning her condemnation of their supposed theft and the related legal action, she rolled out her own prose version within a few months (in June 1907, also under the title *Le rêve de Mysès*). In this venture, she not only re-positioned the stage performance as a kind of advance publicity for her own novel, but she one-upped Colette and Missy by illustrating the work with "photographs of women posing naked in natural and domestic scenes, and at times with each other or animals" (p. 103). With this and subsequent publications, La Vaudère helped establish the genre of the *photo-roman*, while also catering to the market for soft porn masquerading as art, a lucrative if dubious literary departure. In reporting this chapter, I have somewhat condensed a complex and multi-layered series of events in order to capture the flavor, but the fuller version that Larson provides is richly researched and detailed. It makes La Vaudère henceforth an essential figure in any account of Colette's theater career, as well as shining a light on one aspect of fin-de-siècle publishing history.

Stories about mummies and mummification provide a natural segue from orientalism as a literary theme and its place in La Vaudère's evolving oeuvre to "larger questions of artistic creativity and preservation" (p. 105) and thoughts about immortality. Larson suggests that mummification is an apt description of La Vaudère's process, in which plagiarism rearranged and rewrapped a body (of work) "so that it would live on in some other immortal form" (p. 106). But in addition to living with literary mummies, La Vaudère lived among literal mummies, the bodies of relatives buried in the chapel of the Château de La Vaudère, some of whom were embalmed and remained on view (as photographs illustrate). Larson argues that La Vaudère's deployment of the theme of mummification in her fiction was therefore more than just pandering to a fleeting fad: "What remains of the mummy reflects a powerful statement about artistic creation and lasting recognition" (pp. 111-112). The reminder here that La Vaudère's own grave remains unmarked ties the overview of life and work neatly back to the theme of resurrection.

Given these contradictions, what is one to make of La Vaudère as a feminist, as Larson discusses in chapter five? Partly it depends on how one defines "feminism." Still today there are plenty of people who reject the label but express feminist sentiments. Larson looks at the way La Vaudère used the word(s) and at the feminist themes in her fiction, noting a clear evolution. Around 1905 there seems to have been a turning point, after which "La Vaudère came to fully embrace the label of feminist in her fiction, without parody or ambiguity" (p. 125). The issue closest to her heart (not surprising given her own experience) seems to have been the need for marriage reform, especially around women's ignorance in sexual matters that, for many brides, made the wedding night tantamount to legalized rape. Larson also examines the way La Vaudère borrowed the discourse of spiritism, which gave women a voice (even if it was a "ventriloquized" male one). Whether or not La Vaudère assumed the feminist label, then, there are multiple ways she challenged gendered norms.

The final chapter, “Driving into the Future,” seems at first glance to go in a different direction, but as Larson shows, the topic of women and driving fits perfectly with La Vaudère’s career. Although there is no hard evidence that the writer was a pioneer *chauffeuse* (a photo shows her at the wheel, but that’s not necessarily proof of driving), the anxieties aroused by the independence cars might allow women echo those aroused by *bas-bleus* in general. The car also links La Vaudère to her château and to its current owner, a woman rally-driver and car collector, preserving her name in preparation for the resurrection that Larson’s book nimbly effects.

While this is the first (to my knowledge) study of La Vaudère, one hopes it will not be the last. But while there may be more to come (further critical work, more biographical information), this monograph lays the groundwork and sets the benchmark. It will be a must-read for anyone working not only on this writer, but on women writers at the fin de siècle in general and on Colette and the Rêve d’Égypte in particular. It is a most welcome enrichment of the field.

Melanie Hawthorne
Texas A&M University
m-hawthorne@tamu.edu

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172