H-France Review Vol. 25 (October 2025), No. 79

Bouchet, Thomas, *L'aiguille et la plume, Jules Gay et Désirée Veret, 1807-1897*. Paris: Anamosa, 2024. 624 pp. References, illustrations, and facsimiles. $37.81 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9782381910932.

Review by Máire Fedelma Cross, Newcastle University.

Although two occupations and two individuals figure in the book content as described by the title, there is an additional component in the work of Thomas Bouchet: Veret and Gay as a couple, which means this biography is multi-layered. Bouchet's methodological interrogation of his sources is an attempt to portray all these layers, but how to understand why the married couple relationship is so obscure in the archival evidence of the lives of two political activists? How important was marriage to this radical pair? How did they influence each other in their separate political identities, how did they support each other in practical matters of their professional affairs, and how does the history of the couple feature in the wider scope of the history of activism? Even as individuals, there is scant information on Désirée Veret and Jules Gay in official registers or in any family papers. Bouchet found more evidence of their separate political identities and their respective occupations of dress-making and book publishing and searched for evidence of any cross-over of mutual assistance and collaboration. To assist the reader through his ambition of writing a biography of an activist couple, the author embeds it firmly into a full historical context of radicalism in the tumultuous nineteenth century. The reader is also provided with a set of facsimile illustrations from the press on the dressmaking and book trades as well as newspapers.

In the introductory chapter Bouchet sets out the constraints to composing a biography of an activist couple, citing the precedent of other examples, of political partnership, notably that of Siân Reynolds (*Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland*, 2012). Searching for primary sources to make the story of Veret and Gay as an activist couple visible is fraught with hurdles: the lack of survival of any letters between the couple; the geographical spread of their lives (Paris, London, Geneva and Brussels), and the longevity of their existence during which there are gaps in traceability of their activities. That said, the author has constructed his account by combing through the papers of fellow activists whose legacy is more prominent in radical history, with whom Veret and Gay were associated from their youth and in some cases, right until their old age, namely, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Prosper Enfantin and Victor Considerant. Bouchet has also used as a source the writings of Veret and Gay, their publications, and any surviving papers that show their place in the groups with which they were associated, Saint-Simonian feminists in Paris where Gay began her public life and Owenites in England with

whom Gay corresponded closely. In doing so Bouchet offers an exemplary technique of fluidity to look at the entire lifetime of two individual activists whose existence lasted well beyond the radical groups of their youth.

How did they view their long lives? Bouchet uncovered some self-reflections by Desirée Veret on her own efforts as an activist. On 17 September 1890, then aged eighty, she wrote in a letter to an old acquaintance, the Fourierist Victor Considerant: 'Je suis simple spectatrice du mouvement social et je n'y coopère que par ma petite obole et ma vive sympathie.' (p. 507). *L'aiguille et la plume* is indeed about what Veret achieved in her long life and shows that her effort was far from being a mere morsel as the 'obole' image might suggest. From the time when she was a leading feminist in France in the Saint-Simonian movement, Veret was active in promoting the interests of working-class women in any socialist collective initiative that was going, from the national workshops of 1848 to the Association internationale des travailleurs (AIT) in 1866 in Geneva. In her last letters written to Considerant in 1890-91 she reflected on what motivated her to be so involved in the lives of others, striving with them and for them, to create a better world. These letters are the last known penned by Veret. Right up to the end of her life she was a self-declared dreamer but had an analytical mind, was passionate in her beliefs but pragmatic about what she could achieve in her approach to socialist and feminist ambitions. Her reputation in feminist history was as a woman of action.

Because of that, of the two, Veret and Gay, Veret is better known since the growth of the history of feminism as recovered by Laure Adler, Claire Goldbeg Moses, Susan Grogan et al in the 1980s; Veret had led the creation of the first feminist newspapers and participated in the setting up of women-seamstress groups and women-worker associations demanding to have equal rights with men in the new Republic of 1848. A needlewoman by profession, she also used her pen. She was a faithful correspondent. By including lengthy extracts of her letters Bouchet demonstrates how, throughout her life, she kept in close contact with socialist theorists and leaders, with Charles Fourier, Prosper Enfantin, Victor Considerant and Louis Blanc, among others. Furthermore, in addition to writing about her political opinions she wrote letters as a daughter and a mother to plead for the welfare of her family. As a result, enough epistolary evidence exists for Thomas Bouchet to construct a political biography of the long life of Desirée Veret. Equally important is the fact that she was married to Jules Gay by whom she had children, two of whom survived into adulthood: her sons Owen and Jean, both of whom predeceased their parents. She dwelt in several cities: Paris, London, Geneva and Brussels, sometimes with Gay, but sometimes not.

Bouchet underwent similar archival research for Gay in the construction of this double biography. Jules Gay also corresponded with political figures and wrote for the press. For instance, during the 1830s he was most attracted to Robert Owen's movement in Britain where their Owenite publication *The New Moral World* reported on Gay's activism. For Veret and Gay, political setbacks and repression, financial failure of their occupations as dressmaker and bookseller and publisher respectively affected them both and silenced their voices from time to time, forcing them to move countries, with the result that any attempt to retrieve their story is beset with difficulties. Unlike their more illustrious correspondents, the couple did not leave for posterity any personal papers. Since they were on the margins there are few official papers from which to draw. Indeed, we can see from the years that each of the nine chapters cover: 1831-34,

1832-39, 1839-48, 1848-49, 1849-50, 1851-56, 1867-69, 1870-77, 1890-91, that there are long periods when there is no trace of either Gay or Veret. Yet, from the evidence found in papers of other activists, Bouchet argues there has emerged an expanding number of primary sources where traces of their lives can be found. The same is true of the press; fruitful searches through a growing number of digitised resources from the nineteenth century have breathed new life into the biography of two figures doubly marginalised by their peregrinations and absence from the history of political activism.

Bouchet's biography is an excellent original account cleverly making sense of what is and is not known about the couple. He has forged new ground in three ways. First the longevity of the activism stretches from the 1830s to the 1890s. While there is a strong body of scholarship in French and in English dating from the 1970s onwards, of the high moments of early feminism and socialism of the early 1830s and the early months of the Second Republic in 1848 and 1849, rare are the accounts that take in the lives and the facts of those who lived on until the 1890s. Second, the narrative covers the context of two professions alongside each other, needlework and publishing, in addition to a geographical spread as the protagonists moved dwellings for political reasons and when their livelihoods were affected by financial woes. Third, Thomas Bouchet has written the first ever biography of the life and times of husband and wife, who worked tirelessly from youth to old age for socialism. The title itself indicates that there was a division of labour, the needle symbolising the practical skills of the wife who was a seamstress, the pen being that of the husband: publisher, bookseller, and author of political doctrines.

We see from the outset that the book's structure is text-based; the chapters each discuss an aspect of the life of Veret or Gay, or both. In addition to narrating the historical background, Bouchet prioritises the voice of each separate one by foregrounding extracts of their writings, either in letters or from their publications. Each chapter provides detailed historical context for those unfamiliar with the period.

Visually the book is attractive and informative about the resources used with a bibliography and reference section (pp. 557-602), facsimile images of a handwritten letter, sewing instructions, and materials from their professional occupations, such as frontispiece title pages of Jules Gay's sexuality treatise, *Le Communiste*, or Desirée Veret's paper *La politique des femmes* which adorn the first seventeen pages of the book and elsewhere. Italic font is used to highlight the extracts from primary sources used and a typewriter font accentuates extracts from official documents such as death certificates. The visuals in the biography reinforce the multi-layered narrative of the sympathy of Veret and Gay for the cause of the people and contextualise technical progress in their respective skills.

The book follows their whole life involvement. Their life journeys were as militants and as labourers. Bouchet has overcome the difficulty of discontinuity of activity when political repression made it impossible to remain active by weaving in detailed accounts of their work that became central to their political afterlives that had been silenced by the Napoleon III regime of the Second Empire. The reader can follow the change of topic as Bouchet contextualises the background to the economic and technical evolution of the book trade and of dressmaking in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Jules Gay, who had ceased his radical activism for the time, was restricted and prosecuted by the authorities for his business activities when he operated as a

publisher of rare old texts of 'erotic' literature. That being the case, Bouchet could use public records accounts to investigate bankruptcies of both Veret and Gay, censorship and the court cases against Gay for moral depravity.

This history goes well beyond the movements of two individuals in their political and social activism as it narrates the complex network of Veret and Gay's associates mainly through letters. The irony of the structure of these epistolary relationships is that the voices of the lesser-known Veret and Gay have been preserved within the collections of letters of their more famous associates such as Fourier, Owen, Enfantin or Considerant. The Veret and Gay letters are of greatest interest to Bouchet but even if he had wanted to include evidence of the effect of their letters, there is no record of any reply from their more famous correspondents since a similar epistolary archive containing letters to Veret and Gay has not come to light. Even so, the epistolary archived collections of those leading radicals contain the core documents used by Bouchet. The correspondence received by Enfantin, for instance, was deposited by him shortly before his death in 1864 in the Arsenal library in Paris. The Arsenal also contains the letters of Saint-Simonian women used in a key text edited by Michele RiotSarcey, *Lettres des dames au Globe*, published in 1995. To overcome the lack of evidence the author is speculative here and there, but to his credit rarely so: he has enough material to put texts under the spotlight to compose a biography of two individuals who were a married couple. Did they act as an activist couple? Did they influence one another's political thoughts, opinions and writing? Here lies the greatest obscurity and most significant lack of sources. These questions are the biographer's greatest challenge. Bouchet concludes with this topic; he must admit that he found no correspondence between Veret and Gay. Yet the work is so rich and complex that his intention of writing a double biography is an experiment that has produced interesting and unexpected results. True, when searching for evidence of how the couple met, how they communicated with one another or influenced each other's philosophy, he can only present circumstantial evidence. The needle and the pen are representative of the spheres of labour of the woman seamstress and the man, writer and publisher. Well-annotated references and a rich biography make this a serious scholarly work that is ground-breaking in its approach. The book is a rich tapestry of Veret and Gay's lives.

Máire Fedelma Cross
Newcastle University
m.f.cross@newcastle.ac.uk

Copyright © 2025 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