

## Machelidon on Laporte, ed. (2014)

Sand, George. *Œuvres complètes. 1861. La Famille de Germandre*. Ed. Dominique Laporte. Paris: Éditions Champion, 2014. Pp. 321. ISBN 978-2-7453-2297-5

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*La Famille de Germandre* is the latest publication in the comprehensive series of George Sand's *Œuvres complètes* directed by nineteenth-century French literature scholar Béatrice Didier. The text of this lesser-known novella, based on the 1872 Michel Lévy (fifth) edition, was established by Dominique Laporte. The volume includes a lengthy "présentation," the richly annotated text, a list of variants, external documents, and a short but helpful bibliography.

First published in serial form in the *Journal des Débats* in 1861, the novella was reprinted throughout the nineteenth century. Yet the bibliography included in this edition, and research on Worldcat, suggest that the short novel has fallen into near-oblivion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Laporte's scholarly edition will hopefully reverse this trend.

The novella tells the story of an aristocratic family torn apart by the French Revolution and reunited in July 1808 for the funeral and reading of the testament of the eccentric and misogynistic Marquis de Germandre. Sand succeeds in creating suspense around the question of inheritance as the marquis has arranged to bequeath his mansion, his land, and the rest of his fortune to the relative skilled and educated enough to open a sphinx-shaped safe box by deciphering its ancient multilingual inscription. The marquis' challenge thus builds on the new popularity of Egyptology in France, which followed Bonaparte's expedition and the discovery of the Rosetta stone in 1799. The aristocratic family reunion also allows Sand to examine the varying fortunes of the French nobility impacted by the turmoil of the Revolution and obliged to adapt itself to changing times and social roles. As the plot unravels in the compact time-span of three days, Sand develops her favorite theme of the regeneration of the aristocracy through the good sense, humility, hard work, and ingeniousness of the peasantry, a theme she would return to in her novel *Nanon* (1872).

In *La Famille de Germandre* peasantry is represented by the *déclassé* and impoverished "chevalier" Sylvain de Germandre, the son of the marquis' youngest brother, who was originally excluded from inheritance by the rule of primogeniture prevailing under the *Ancien Régime*. The well-named Sylvain's class transgression and demotion is further emphasized by his love marriage with a local shepherdess. Now widowed, he survives with his sister and two children on a family farm, land which he tills with his own hands and sweat. The renewing power of the peasantry over a fairly useless rural aristocracy deprived of its past social and political roles is affirmed in a double marriage at the end of the work. Sylvain proves to be the only deserving heir when he solves the marquis' riddle through his self-acquired education and he wins the love of his cousin Hortense de Sévigny. The cynical and embittered Octave, the descendant of the Count de Germandre, "sans ressources et sans instruction," serves as a foil to Sylvain. Though he has put his military skills and patriotic pride at the service of Napoleon I (like Sand's own father), his life lacks meaning and he avoids suicide thanks to the love of Corisande, Sylvain's sister, who helps manage the farm and raises the children. The Republican idea of the rejuvenation of old blood nobility through exogamic marriage with lower classes remained an important theme in Sand's life and work.

Another Romantic and Sandian theme of the contradictory power of nature (as source of life and death) also prominently figures in the novella, together with what Dominique Laporte documents as a very "modern"-sounding plea to protect natural landscapes and ecosystems endangered by regional industrialization (29–30).

*La Famille de Germandre* is therefore an important, timely, and welcome republication, which encapsulates in compact form several themes representative of Sand's oeuvre. Stylistically, it is structured around dialogues where characters reveal themselves in dramatic manner. This characteristic is explained by the novella's genesis, born of a play created for the Nohant theater and which Sand was hoping to rewrite for the Paris stage. As a result, the novella would be good for young readers and language students seeking access to Sand's fictional universe through a fairly short text. Dominique Laporte's careful and well-researched critical edition follows the format of Champion's *Œuvres complètes* series, intended for scholars, academics, and other well-read Sand fans. The fifty-seven-page presentation is packed with fascinating details that would be more effective if it were placed after the text itself, to point to further avenues of scholarly inquiry.

The selected documents from the 1850s and 1860s, which the editor has included at the end of the volume, point to the intersection between Sand's fiction and nineteenth-century interests and developments in architecture, archeology, numismatics, physics, chemistry, and the sciences more generally. Together with the footnotes, they reflect the breadth of

Sand's documentation, readings, and interests. The merits of Laporte's edition are clear and numerous; we hope it will pave the way for a less academic, more user-friendly version for French and American students, who will find *La Famille de Germandre* to be a rich, attractive, and suspenseful introduction to Sand's late work.

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