

Sullivan on Chabrillan, ed. and trans. by Verhoeven et al. (2015)

Chabrillan, Céleste Vénard de. *Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul's Wife*. Edited and translated by Jana Verhoeven, Alan Willey, and Jeanne Allen, Melbourne UP, 2015, pp. 166, ISBN 9780522868845 (paperback), 9780522868852 (ebook)

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With the publication of her *Adieux au monde* (1854), in which Céleste de Chabrillan recounts her ascension from poverty to fame and riches in the *demi-monde*, the courtesan-turned-countess ignited scandal in both Europe and Australia, where she had just relocated with her new husband. As expected, she found herself ostracized in her new home. Although painful, she benefited artistically from this isolation since she had so much time to work on her writing—and during those fruitful two years, she made notes in a journal that she would later publish in *Un deuil au bout du monde* (1877), her second set of memoirs. In spite of the uproar over her candid revelations, Céleste's works inspired other courtesans such as Valtesse de la Bigne and Liane de Pougy to write autobiographical fictions about their experiences as prostitutes. And now, her long-lost third set of memoirs—*Les Deux Noms*—has been published in English as *Courtesan and Countess* thanks to a discovery by Jana Verhoeven. With the help of Alan Willey and Jeanne Allen, Verhoeven translated and annotated the memoirs. For those unfamiliar with Céleste's first two memoirs, Verhoeven concisely summarizes them in a well-written and informative introduction, contextualizing the period and glossing major players.

On several occasions in her previous memoirs, Céleste related the Sisyphean task of rehabilitating herself in the eyes of both men and women. She managed to win over some powerful men such as the Comte de Naurois, who bankrolled for her a home for girls orphaned by the disastrous Franco-Prussian war. She first received help with her writing from her attorney Desmarest who convinced her to pen her the story of how she worked her way out of poverty to rise to the top of the *demi-monde* (Verhoeven deftly points out that Céleste is not telling the whole story about her tangled and lengthy relationship with him). Her friend Dumas *père* also helped her revise a stage version of her best-selling novel *Les Voleurs d'or* (1857). She even earned a public tribute from the women who volunteered with her in the *Sœurs de France*, an organization she founded and which provided ambulance services to the wounded in 1870–71. As Céleste fondly notes, the fact that these women never pestered her about her scandalous past contributed to her own sense of rehabilitation.

Unsurprisingly, however, there were powerful men who tried to crush Céleste's spirit with no concern for the dire financial consequences of their actions. Her memoirs painfully document her being denied a widow's pension even though her husband had worked as an important government employee. They also recount how the Chabrillan family tried to prevent her from publishing books, staging plays, and running her own theater. She usually managed to overcome such obstacles, but on several occasions, she toiled so hard that she ended up in the hospital.

While she emphasizes the personal hurdles she faced trying to prove herself to others, she also bears witness to the struggles of a female autodidact to achieve literacy and to improve her social standing in nineteenth-century France. Writing would buoy her through her darkest hours during the fifty years she soldiered on without her companion. Although Céleste took great pride in the twelve novels, thirty plays and operettas, and dozen poems and patriotic lyrics she authored, they never provided her with a stable income and, sadly, she struggled financially at several points in her life. Rich in ideas, however, Céleste boasts: "If my numerous works are not outstanding through their literary brilliance, they are so at least by their quantity. I have never imitated anyone and never borrowed from other writers. Maybe I was wrong, but what I wrote is truly mine" (154). Likely cognizant of the critics who doubted whether a courtesan could really write, and certainly angered by the tendency of male writers to "kill off" courtesans at the end of their novels and plays, Céleste proudly recounted her life beyond prostitution and was ultimately recognized as a writer by her peers. As she notes in the last line of her memoirs, her greatest joy was the memory of "my illustrious protectors from the Association of Stage Authors, who accepted me as one of their own and granted me a pension until the end of my life" (154).

Much to her disappointment, Céleste failed to find a publisher for her last set of memoirs; luckily however for today's scholars of literature, history, and gender studies, we finally have access to them. Céleste's colorful narration of the dramatic episodes in her life and her insightful remarks about historical events make this excellent tome an ideal work to counter the doomed courtesan paradigm touted by canonical novels of prostitution. As Verhoeven aptly notes: "Unlike the heroine in her friend Dumas *fil's* play *La Dame aux camélias*, she does not do the thing decent courtesans would do: she keeps on living" (17). Lastly, Verhoeven's dedication to uncovering Céleste's missing memoirs provides a stellar model sure to inspire budding scholars to do their own sleuthing: not only in dusty attics, but also in archives since there are still so many stories to be

gleaned and voices to be recovered in nineteenth-century studies.

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