

## Finn on Peyrebrune, ed. Sanchez (2016)

Peyrebrune, Georges de. *Correspondance. De la Société des gens de lettres au jury du prix Vie heureuse*. Edited by Nelly Sanchez, Classiques Garnier, 2016, p. 177, ISBN 978-2-8124-3321-4

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As we continue to investigate women's writing of the fin de siècle and the Belle Époque, we encounter certain writers who, in spite of their early success, tend to be eclipsed by younger colleagues fighting more overtly for gender and sexual autonomy. Such is the case of Georges de Peyrebrune (1841–1917), author of some thirty-five novels, some of them initially published in the prestigious but conservative *Revue des deux mondes*, others by the famous Naturalist press Charpentier. Peyrebrune's reputation waned after 1900 and she died, apparently penniless, as the Great War drew to a close.

The *fonds* bearing her name at the Médiathèque Pierre Fanlac in Périgueux contains the papers and correspondence of this prolific *femme de lettres*, member of the jury of the *Vie heureuse* prize, friend and sometime confidante of many other female writers, including the novelist Rachilde. Just a dozen of the letters in the volume under review are *from* Peyrebrune (these are held at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand), the majority having been sent to her by her female correspondents. Some of the most interesting exchanges are with Juliette Adam (who refused to publish Peyrebrune's early novel *Gatienne* in *La Nouvelle Revue* because the story finished unhappily, but later became a friend), the recently widowed Gabrielle Réval (one of her letters is a passionate tribute to her love for the married Henri Houssaye), and Marcelle Tinayre (who briefs Peyrebrune relaxedly on her happy relationship with lover Louis de Robert). The volume also contains a varied trove of letters from Anaïs Ségalas, Séverine, Clémence Royer, Daniel Lesueur, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, and Julia Daudet, among others.

Taken as a whole, these exchanges are too scattered in their focus to help elucidate how the *Vie heureuse* prize came into being, but what they do underline is the elevated level of mutual support that female writers enjoyed, often initially through their membership in the Société des gens de lettres. The edition features a useful set of mini-biographies and an introduction that confirms our sense that Peyrebrune was incredibly discreet about her private life.

The most powerful revelation of this volume is a series of letters from Rachilde to Peyrebrune, who at times played mother figure for her younger colleague. Long known about, but published here for the first time, the letters from the 1888–89 period reveal a desolate Rachilde, terrified by her mother's developing mental imbalance, disgusted by the venalities of book publishing (see her novel *Le Mordu*, 1889), and fearful about her own mental state. At age twenty-nine, she has decided she must have the stability and support of marriage. Her letters in the months preceding the event are raw and desperate; they lift the veil on our image of what Rachilde called her “masques de cabotine,” her actor's disguises. For her, marriage is “a suicide.” She admits she has loved only one person in her life, and the loss of the latter, “un être vil et misérable” (I suspect it was Léo d'Orfer) still tears her up three years after the breakup. And what of her husband to be? “J'ai beau être intime avec lui .... Il me fait l'effet quand même d'un étranger.... C'est un Monsieur pour moi, rien de plus.”

Unfortunately, the editing of the letters from Rachilde is slipshod. Misreadings abound, *La Presse* for the newspaper *La France*, “recevoir” for “revenir,” *Nous quatre* for *Tous quatre* (an 1885 novel by Paul Marguerite), “torts” for “tact,” “Je conserve” for “de conserver.” Grammatical and other oversights not in the manuscript letters surprise: “Rachilde entretenaient alors,” “je vous répondrez.” There are also faulty page numbers in at least one Index entry (Aurel).

A second collection edited by Nelly Sanchez from Peyrebrune's Périgueux archive, this one an online-only correspondence, is [Les Lettres de Camille Delaville à Georges de Peyrebrune](#). Delaville (1838–88), a journalist and novelist who founded two periodicals, *Le Passant* and the *Revue Verte*, was a close friend of Peyrebrune but also defended Rachilde against critics when *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade* were published. What brought Delaville and Peyrebrune together, in part, was their status as women separated from apparently brutal husbands, struggling to survive by their pen in a cutthroat, male-dominated journalistic environment. Delaville, whose fortune was placed under a *conseil judiciaire* for fifteen years after her separation, had two daughters who eventually married, had children, and were often supported by their mother. This volume, with its Letter 50 where Delaville summarizes her life in some detail, is the best document we have to date on the life of a powerful woman writer, troubled by ill health, whose epigraph to her best novel, *La Loi qui tue*, is a saying by Beaumarchais: “La femme est majeure par ses fautes, mineure par ses droits.”

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