

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

A scholarly journal devoted to the study of French literature and related fields

For articles: [ncfsarticles@gmail.com](mailto:ncfsarticles@gmail.com)

For reviews: [ncfsreviews@gmail.com](mailto:ncfsreviews@gmail.com)

[www.ncfs-journal.org](http://www.ncfs-journal.org)

Sand, George. *Gabriel*. Ed. Kathleen Robin Hart. MLA Texts and Translations series. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010. Pp. 193. ISBN: 978-1-60329-077-7

Sand, George. *Gabriel*. Trans. Kathleen Robin Hart and Paul Fenouillet. MLA Texts and Translations series. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010. Pp. 190. ISBN: 978-1-60329-078-4

*Françoise Ghillebaert, University of Puerto Rico*

Another important nineteenth-century work has been made accessible to the public thanks to a new scholarly edition of George Sand's play, *Gabriel*, published in the MLA Texts and Translations series. The base text is the original French version of the play first published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1839. In a note on the translation the editor and translator Kathleen Robin Hart explains the differences with the translation published by Gay Manifold (*George Sand's Gabriel*, 1992) and the challenge to retain the French text's original meaning through the correct choice of words in contemporary English. The editor also justifies her decision to translate the familiar "tu" and formal "vous" in French as the more modern "you" for both pronouns, and footnotes give detailed and recurrent explanations about the use of different registers in French.

The introduction common to both editions and written in English by Hart presents a short biography of Sand's opposed ancestries: her father was a descendant of the Count Maurice of Saxe and her mother a commoner; the masculine-oriented education that she received from her tutor, Deschartres, also, incidentally, her late father's tutor; the formal instruction provided by nuns at the convent of "Les Anglaises" in Paris; and her marriage with François Casimir Dudevant with whom she had two children: Maurice and Solange.

From this introduction the reader will bear in mind Sand's experimenting with masculine attire and boots when she rode horses in her native Berry and walked swiftly on the streets of Paris dressed as a young student after she separated from her husband (1831) to begin her new life as an artist. Sand is indeed famous for her foray into cross-dressing to eschew the rigidity of feminine roles and their clothes. To this effect, the reader is reminded that Sand transferred her masculine identity to her authorial voice by adopting the masculine pen name "George Sand" for her first publication (*Indiana*, 1832) without the collaboration of Jules Sandeau, the companion of her literary beginnings (*Rose et Blanche ou la comédienne et la religieuse*, 1831). But most importantly, Hart points out Sand's desire to give women the opportunity to escape the oppressive male-dominated world by staging a character that transgresses gender identity by way of masculine and feminine clothes, and therefore defines her identity through the self, instead of following dress and behavior codes.

Who is Gabriel/le? asks the bewildered reader at the end of the text. A summary of the plot only serves to situate the action: the prince Jules of Bramante has ordered his servant to raise his granddaughter, Gabriel, as a boy in order to pass on his estate to her instead of to Astolphe, the son of his elder child who fell into disgrace. The subversion of inheritance law that favored boys over girls is hardly convincing. The play is rather an invitation to reflect on whether sexual identity is constructed or determined by nature. Hart recalls that the representation of an androgynous character linked with transvestism is inscribed in a trend among Romantic authors of the time (Henri de Latouche's

*Fragoletta*, Honoré de Balzac's *Séraphita*, Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*), but that the real inspiration came from Pierre Leroux's notion of an ideal human being in a truly egalitarian society in which members would all possess the three faculties of sensation, sentiment, and knowledge. As Hart aptly states, what distinguishes *Gabriel* from other works about an androgynous character's struggle against the rigid enforcement of gender roles is the correlation between its subject matter and its hybrid generic status as neither altogether play nor novel.

*Gabriel* is a "roman dialogué," that is to say a novel written in dialogue, or a closet drama, because it is well-suited for the stage, where Sand intended to have it performed. The author's attempts to have it played on stage were quite unsuccessful. Hart goes on to show that *Gabriel* is a play better appreciated by modern readers than by Sand's contemporaries. Today we value the play's original resolution of the tension between Gabriel's masculine and feminine identities and suggestion that the practice of cross-dressing is not limited to the stage. Recalling the gender theories of Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber, the editor stresses that the play demonstrated that all men and women play roles for which they must dress the part (xxii). This conception of gender roles, however, may have been too disturbing to Sand's contemporaries and theater directors who refused to play it. In addition, the lengthy play in five acts, which would have lasted five hours and fifteen minutes (George Sand, *Correspondance* 10: 523-524), was prohibitive to theater directors.

The original French text of the play and its companion English translation provide scholars and the general public with a tool through which they can appreciate and gain understanding of George Sand's ideas about the construction of gender identity in the Romantic period.