Women authors and their publishers in the nineteenth century: A long struggle for the recognition of the right to be a writer


Did the status of “woman writer” exist in the nineteenth century, a period when many women used male pseudonyms in order to become known and recognized? From George Sand to André Léo, from the 1830s to the Belle Époque, was the position of the woman of letters in society radically different from that of her opposite-sex counterpart? Reading the Goncourts’ Journal or the ubiquitous diatribes published in this period makes the answer obvious. An unfair competitor in the eyes of some, a bluestocking for others, any woman who intended to live by her pen typically provoked reactions of outright opposition and rejection. Despite the attitudes of Gustave Flaubert, who viewed George Sand as a comrade, and Victor Hugo, who encouraged the women who wrote to him to persevere in their desire to produce literature, the appearance en masse of a new contingent of writers in the literary arena was not received positively. The Société des Gens de lettres and Société des Auteurs dramatiques were willing to admit a handful of women to their company, but only on the understanding of an implicit and limited quota.

This state of affairs, while frequently remarked on,¹ nonetheless deserves to be re-examined, but by abandoning the standard approach – the study of the attitudes of men of

letters to the women writers at their side – and instead investigating a figure who often appears in the correspondence of both men and women writers as the one with the real power: the publisher. Although the period 1750–1830 had seemed to some to be that of the rise to prominence of authors, their reign was short-lived, according to historians. By the early 1840s Elias Regnault was calling publishers the “barons of industrial feudalism.” Balzac had already prompted such a description, portraying his character Dauriat, a bookseller in the Palais Royal modeled on the real Camille Ladvocat, as an Eastern satrap before whom all the participants in the various branches of the book trade would tremble. Even though some among this new type of cultural intermediary (publishers in the modern sense of the term first appeared around 1830) escaped criticism on account of their generosity, charisma, or encouragement of literature, the letters of so many writers contain serious allegations against them that we are forced to conclude that the times were hard for authors. Baudelaire wrote at length to this effect, Leon Bloy was even harsher, and to ascertain George Sand’s views we need only recall her visceral distrust of the “Jew” Michel Lévy at the start of their relationship. In short, author-publisher relations in the Romantic period were anything but romantic.

At the same time, seeing the subject in this new light may help to add nuance and perspective to the unique status of the woman of letters: Comtesse Dash, Louise Colet, and

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their younger sisters may well have been the victims of a system rather than human sacrifices dispatched by male writers in concert with their publishers. After all, when George Sand sought to organize the profession better than the Société des Gens de lettres had done, it was to a man, Émile Aucante, her former secretary, that she turned. She in effect encouraged him to open a literary agency in Paris, which would function as the intermediary between writers and publishers. This arrangement, which was introduced in England in 1850 and subsequently copied in the United States, ultimately failed to take root in France, but its relevance for our inquiry is that it would have united male and female authors, without distinction of sex, in a firm, tightly knit group in order to resist the rapacity – as George Sand called it – of the publishers. In a way, it was an implicit recognition of the fact that an iron law, implacable but even-handed, afflicted both male and female writers by imposing absolutely unacceptable terms for publication of their work. Flaubert received a flat 400 francs for each of the two volumes of *Madame Bovary* only because Michel Lévy promised him the same (bad) deal that Louis Hachette offered the Comtesse de Ségur, whom he paid 500 francs outright for each volume of her stories.

To answer our initial questions, we will begin by reassessing the century that saw men of letters reduced to a position of dependency – of “alienation,” to use a fashionable term. Rather than being a free-for-all in which men kept their prey – women – under observation to discourage them from taking part, the field of literature, already clearly autonomous by mid-century, very soon came to be taken over by the “mercantis.” This term, applied pejoratively to publishers by the breakaway avant-garde during the polemics of the 1890s, is useful in that it emphasizes that the chief cause of the clashes was money, not relations between the

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sexes. Next, the contemporaneous examples of George Sand, published by Michel Lévy, and the Comtesse de Ségur, published by Louis Hachette, help us to judge whether the particular personality, education, beliefs, or opinions of a first-rank bookseller-publisher played the dominant role or whether these were secondary to the standard treatment handed out to any writer, male or female. Lastly, by examining the case of a long-forgotten “slave of literature,” Comtesse Dash, we avoid focusing purely on the luminaries of the age, who were perhaps atypical with respect to author-publisher relations, and instead examine more closely the fate of the “proletariat of literature,” as Octave Mirbeau liked to refer to himself at the start of his career. At the end of this journey, we will return to our initial question: did publishers adopt the approach they took to male authors when they dealt with women whose work they considered for acquisition, or did they condemn them to the fate that seems to have been accorded to the “gutter press,” the – male – writers of pamphlets against the Austrian Queen Marie Antoinette in 1780–90?

The century of the dependent writer

The history of French literature in the golden age of the novel has been written in two ways: in the textbooks that, from Lanson to Lagarde and Michard, contributed to the “Pantheonomization” of great writers and the establishment of the canon, and in more modest but more academically rigorous studies that begin with social analysis and then place literary figures in that context. In 1978–80 the *Histoire littéraire de la France* attempted to do this, though with mixed results, but it was chiefly the trend initiated in 1952 by Lucien Febvre, in

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13 See the “Multiple histoire littéraire” dossier in *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, 3 (2003) and this author’s article in the same issue, “Histoire culturelle et histoire littéraire”, 597–612.
conjunction with the journal *Annales*, that gave the first impetus to a series of promising works. *L’apparition du livre* in 1958, the *Histoire de l’édition française* in 1983–86, and *L’argent et les lettres*, subtitled *Histoire du capitalisme d’édition*, continued in this direction and took up the investigation, not of the sacred literary text itself, but of the conditions of its production, the state of the various forces involved, and the motivations and strategies of the players in the field. The extensive bibliography published in 1999 in Bourdieu’s journal, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, is an indication of the wealth of material and the variety of studies that have resulted from this initial impulse.

For a long time the excessive focus on the nineteenth century’s key figures, the prophets and enchanters of Romanticism, contributed to obscure the subject of author-publisher relations. The story was told of how Victor Hugo refused the 150,000 francs offered by Louis Hachette to publish *Les Misérables*, and in 1862 sold this literary property, with a renewal option limited to ten years, for 240,000 francs, 1.3 million euros in today’s money. Earlier, Adolphe Thiers, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Chateaubriand made fortunes from the terms they secured for the *Histoire de la Révolution française* followed by the *Histoire du Consulat et de l’Empire*, the *Histoire des Girondins*, and *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* respectively: all these works were indeed acquired on terms that neither Françoise Sagan nor Mary Higgins Clark would have turned down. To these celebrity defenders of property law we could add Balzac (even though he died in debt), Ernest Renan, thanks to the success of his *Life of Jesus*, Émile Zola, and several others including some playwrights: the case of Eugène

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17 Jean-Yves Mollier, *L’argent et les lettres*.
20 *Lettres inédites d’Ernest Renan à ses éditeurs Michel et Calmann Lévy*, annotated by Jean-Yves Mollier (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1986), for details of the amounts received.
Scribe as studied by Jean-Claude Yon is a good example of the theater’s possibilities in this respect.  

 Bernard Grasset continued along the path described by Renan in his *Souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse*, in which he sang the praises of courageous publishers, those tireless seekers after new talent.  

 The views of Charles Péguy, the editor of the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, were firmly reinforced by Grasset in a book published shortly before his death, the *Évangile de l’édition selon Péguy*, which gave his imprimatur to that hagiographic portrait of the publisher as cultural mediator in the age when the book was king. The publisher is seen neither as a P. T. Barnum of the sort to be found in the world of the theater, nor as an impresario touting his music-hall singers; rather, the publisher functions as a kind of priest, struggling to secure an audience for the authors he believes in, and he deserves a share of the glory achieved by the writers he anoints.  

 In fact, Diderot had railed against the villainous Le Breton who emasculated his *Encyclopédie*; Pierre Larousse appointed himself author, publisher, and printer in order to avoid the same fate; Baudelaire found it almost impossibly difficult to convince Poulet-Malassis to publish *Les Fleurs du Mal* using the format and typography he wanted. All to no avail: the publisher remained a bright star in the heavens, remembered with nostalgia in Peguy’s time, around 1900, and even more so in that of Bernard Grasset, after 1950.  

 Publishers’ initially reluctant, later more amenable, opening up of their archives after 1980 has enabled historians to produce a large body of work that casts a shadow over these earlier portrayals. The same Albert Lacroix who borrowed from the Oppenheim bank in Brussels to pay Victor Hugo never paid Zola a penny for the publication of his *Contes à

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Ninon two years later; instead, he made Zola pay all the costs of launching the work in the critical press, and got him to secure highly laudatory reviews by leveraging his official position as head of publicity at Hachette.\textsuperscript{25} Michel Lévy, who had “discovered” Renan, seeking him out in his “garret,” was called a “Jew” and “foul” by Flaubert after the failure of *L’Education sentimentale*. Alphonse Lemerre, at first idolized by the *Parnassiens*, found himself dragged into court when the fin-de-siècle poets realized that he was far fonder of money than they had ever suspected.\textsuperscript{26} As for the successors of these prestigious publishing dynasties in the 1930s – Bernard Grasset, Robert Denoël, and Gaston Gallimard – we have merely to peruse their correspondence with their authors or, better still, the authors’ private letters to their friends, to discover that from Céline to Montherlant by way of Giono they all ended up by damning the businessmen who published them. Not everyone possessed the fortune or the exquisite urbanity of Marcel Proust, who thought nothing of paying a high price for the publication of the first volume of his own *A la recherche du temps perdu*\textsuperscript{27}; the publishers’ (bad) reputations were broadcast far and wide.

In reality, neither the portrait etched in acid nor its polar opposite, the gilded medallion, are appropriate formats for an account of the state of publishing in the nineteenth century. Depending on the circumstances, a publisher could be very supportive or very demanding with respect to the same writer, and both attitudes are expressed profusely in their archives and personal papers. Louis Hachette extended unlimited credit to Émile Littré, and supported him financially for nearly twenty-five years before the first volume of his *Dictionnaire de la langue française* even went on sale.\textsuperscript{28} Michel Lévy managed to sort out the


\textsuperscript{28} Jean-Yves Mollier, *Louis Hachette*, 430–32.
horribly tangled affairs of Alexandre Dumas père before taking over the distribution of his books. What matters is not to collect evidence of the magnanimity or wickedness of publishers in earlier times, but to understand the growing constraints governing this sector of the French economy and forcing all those within it to live by its rules, at the risk of bankruptcy or the loss of one’s publishing house – as happened to Pierre-Victor Stock and Pierre Bordas in the twentieth century, and before them Auguste Poulet-Malassis and the directors of the Librairie nouvelle during the Second Empire.

As we noted at the start of this section, the nineteenth century was the age of the dependent writer, since in most cases authors no longer had private sources of support. In the past, Voltaire had occupied a social sphere from which his bookseller-publisher was excluded. With Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, the publisher of d’Alembert and Diderot, things had begun to change: it was in his own mansion and at his own table that this unofficial minister of information received the writers admitted to his stable. Viewed by some as an early exploiter of the industrial proletariat, Panckoucke was the harbinger of figures such as Ladvocat, Charpentier, Hachette, and Dentu in the 1830s and the brothers Lévy and brothers Garnier of the 1850s. The time had come for the methodical, rational management of the book business, and although the term “publishing house” with its connotations of welcome and conviviality continued in use, the house was no longer open at all times and to all comers. The first heads of book series appeared at L. Hachette et Cie in 1848–55, and soon afterwards at their competitors, while the personnel departments began to manage an army of sales representatives, less unruly than their predecessors, in a highly disciplined and orderly way.31

29 Jean-Yves Mollier, Michel et Calmann Lévy, 280–86.
The clearest result of this development, though the hardest to accept for anyone with a more elevated conception of literature, was the determination of the market price for a first-book manuscript or one by someone new to a particular field. In 1857 Michel Lévy paid Flaubert 800 francs for all rights in perpetuity to *Madame Bovary*, but he acted out of neither excessive selfishness nor a sudden and acute attack of greed. At the end of 1855, he too was forced to reduce the price of his series of books intended for the general public from two francs to one franc each, and in order to secure an adequate profit margin he had to increase the press run and minimize his production costs. At 400 francs per volume, 800 francs for two volumes, he thought he could get his accounts to balance, even though the author was a beginner whose success was not certain. The same calculation of profitability had just recently led Louis Hachette and his son-in-law Émile Templier, who was in charge of the firm’s literary series, to estimate that they should pay a novice author between 300 and 500 francs, that is, an average of 400 francs. The Comtesse de Ségur received 500 francs for each of her first books.\(^{32}\) This was not because she was a woman or an aristocrat, but because the iron law of capital (as Marx and Lassalle would say) or the logic of economics (in the language of Adam Smith and his disciples) entails the fixing of an average or market price for each product in each sector of the economy.

Approaching a work of literature on this petty level may repel the reader, but to ignore this analysis encourages an idealistic dichotomy of good and bad publishers, whereas all of them – or at least those who were successful economically – were sooner or later obliged to adopt the same criteria for managing their business and calculating costs and profits. What mattered, then, were not their origins, religion, education, or opinions, but their greater or lesser degree of integration into the economy of their day. Michel Lévy was the son of a

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 383–85.
Jewish peddler and had no education; Louis Hachette, a Catholic, graduated from the École Normale Supérieure. Both were Orléanists, but the latter became more of a republican while his fellow-publisher remained close to the Duc d’Aumale and the princes in exile. They saw each other at the Cercle de la Librairie, their professional club; they owned land, country houses, and mansions; and they ran their businesses as they would have managed a factory or a department store, apparently not treating the women in their catalogs any worse than their male counterparts. A final example of this point: when Julien Viaud began his career as a writer under the name of Pierre Loti, in 1878, he received 500 francs for the rights to Aziyadé, and the novel was substantially reworked to erase its latent homosexuality. Whether the author was male or female, the demands of efficient management of a large publishing house were applied; no other considerations crossed the mind of Émile Aucante as he directed the novice author’s rewrite of his story.

**George Sand, a woman writer or a real author?**

George Sand’s first steps in the world of literature, in the wake of François Buloz at the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and her subsequent career in association with Hetzel and then Michel Lévy, offer several lessons. Women in literature had become more numerous over the previous century, and the rising tide of fiction in Europe during the eighteenth century had encouraged them to become writers. Raymond Trousson has identified 261 novels written by 105 women between 1735 and 1825, the numbers increasing after 1750 and again after 1800. Germaine de Staël was world-famous, and Napoleon himself had to acknowledge her, seeking to obtain her support in his plan for conquering hearts and minds. However, anyone

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34 Ibid.
who was not lucky enough to be the daughter of Minister Necker or to possess a famous name found it less easy to acquire a publisher, let alone to make him accept anything except lending-library novels. Balzac had figured this out by 1830, when he abandoned the profession of literature, recognizing that the market was saturated. 36 George Sand took her first name from England in order to be “fashionable,” and her surname from her companion at the time, Jules Sandeau 37; but she had to obey the law, that is to say, be “authorized to do so by her husband,” in order to “negotiate on her own behalf” with her publisher. 38 A publisher could not freely dispose of a woman’s literary property unless he possessed such a written agreement, but it was the law – the Civil Code – that required this, not the bookseller-publishers’ association.

George Sand had rapidly become famous, and many people took an interest in the achievements and adventures of this extraordinary woman; she obtained just as much as any male writer could hope for from a publisher. When we look at the treatment she and Balzac were subjected to by the young Michel Lévy in the late 1840s, we see that it was absolutely identical. Just as he harassed Balzac to let him publish one of his plays, even following him into the colonnade of a theater in Paris to get his way, Lévy also traveled to Nohant in 1849 to get his hands on Sand’s La Mare au diable. 39 That someone as audacious and ambitious as this young publisher should express the same admiration and gratitude with respect to both Balzac and Sand proves that in this case at least he made no distinction between male and female authors. The important thing in his view was to have these literary stars appear in his catalogs and ultimately to keep them there by offering them exclusive contracts. Lévy was in fact one of the first publishers to develop a real publishing program and to institute what is

38 This wording appeared in all the author contracts at the time, and George Sand accepted it as did others.
39 Jean-Yves Mollier, Michel et Calmann Lévy, 148 and 168.
now known as the “first option,” a contractual provision that enables publishing houses to
prevent novelists from ever leaving them. He succeeded in this tactic with playwrights in the
period 1845–50, and a little later with their counterparts in the Société des Gens de lettres.

After Pierre-Jules Hetzel migrated to Brussels, Lévy put a great deal of effort and
perseverance into becoming Sand’s exclusive publisher. However, she had mixed feelings
about him, and was suspicious of this “Jew” whom she found to be too demanding a
businessman when he was negotiating her inclusion in his most popular series.40 But when she
gathered from Hetzel that her future would be assured in Lévy’s house on the Rue Vivienne,
she made up her mind and never regretted it. Not only did Lévy publicize her work
effectively, he provided her with the means to devote her life to writing. By paying her a
monthly stipend he freed her, as she was happy to acknowledge, of all the everyday worries
that had previously afflicted her.41 Her author account was balanced annually and Sand never
had to complain about the arrangement. Lévy was sure that he had acquired one of the best
writers of the century, and he and his brother Calmann took care of Sand and even of her
friends and relatives, agreeing to publish her son, Maurice Sand, as well as her protégés,
Thérèse Blanc in 1866 and Madame de Voisins in the following year. She was the only one of
their authors to be treated in this way, and in her later years one of the happiest moments of
her life was due to Lévy, who proposed to publish an edition of her complete works,
meticulously re-edited and corrected. Lévy’s own death put an end to this fine project; Sand
herself died only a year later, and her negotiations with his successor had dragged on
indefinitely, but she had been immensely pleased with the plan, an indication of the
improvement in their relations over the previous fifteen years.42

40 Ibid., 271–72.
42 Jean-Yves Mollier, Michel et Calmann Lévy, 416–21.
A comparison of the relations of Flaubert and Sand with the publisher they shared shows that it was she who gained not only Lévy’s esteem but also his overwhelming admiration. He sought persistently to become her friend, and in the end was successful, while he did nothing to retain Flaubert when the latter, with a virulent outburst of anti-Semitism, wanted to leave him for the publishing house of Georges Charpentier.\(^\text{43}\) It was obvious that Lévy did not regret this, even though he was aware that he had lost a significant author, because he essentially shared the public’s judgment of Flaubert: the reaction to *Salammbô* in 1862 and *L’Education Sentimentale* in 1869 had failed to live up to expectations, because Flaubert had been unable to rediscover the secret that had made *Madame Bovary* a winner in 1857. In subjecting Flaubert to a kind of early Nielsen ratings, Lévy demonstrated his profound conviction that the public is always right. This reinforced his belief that George Sand was superior to her male counterpart and that he had been right to persevere in order to acquire her as one of his star authors. Moreover, Flaubert belonged to the old school of non-exclusive publishing and sold his books one at a time, whereas Sand had accepted the system of exclusive contracts with a single publisher, which she never regretted.

As a real author, not a mere woman writer, in the eyes of both Hetzel and Lévy, George Sand’s relationships with her publishers were increasingly cordial. Her work was never sullied by the slightest editorial intervention; it was she who in 1875 refused to include articles from the *Bulletins de la République* she had composed in 1848, while it was her publisher who proposed to incorporate them. In this case, she was rejecting her socialist past, whereas the Orléanist Lévy felt no qualms at the idea of reprinting inflammatory writing typical of the Second Republic.\(^\text{44}\) The publisher’s unconditional surrender to the wishes of his favorite author shows that the author’s gender played no part in their relationship: all that

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 401–03.  
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 418–19.
mattered was the special aura that Sand possessed in the eyes of her readers. This aura was so
great that she was given the benefit of ideal conditions, including the personal attention of
Lévy’s editor-in-chief, Noël Parfait, and extremely careful copyediting and proofreading by
all the staff. Other writers envied this special treatment; the Goncourts, for example, would
have given anything to be treated so well by those whom they denounced as the “vampires of
literature” and accused of being responsible for the decline of morals.

Sophie de Ségur and “literature for governesses,” or the denial of legitimacy to
children’s book authors

Émile Templier’s determined refusal to give the Comtesse de Ségur the same conditions he
granted to women he published in other series raises a number of questions. It might be seen
as a straightforward desire to increase his company’s profits by buying all her manuscripts for
a flat fee; it would be easy to estimate the exorbitant profits Hachette made from these, since
it sold tens of millions of her books, an aspect that should not be ignored. Indeed, while we
can understand why novelists with a first book – Flaubert with Michel Lévy, Sophie de Ségur
with Louis Hachette – were forced to pay a kind of entrance fee to the world of literature, by
forfeiting the proceeds of their first literary property and only later receiving royalties on the
percentage of books sold, it is harder to see why Flaubert reached this beneficial position with
his second novel while the Comtesse de Ségur was persistently denied it.46 We should
remember that Salammbô earned Flaubert 10,000 francs, while the Comtesse de Ségur
received at most 3,000 francs for any of her stories – Les Deux Nigauds à Paris, L’Ange

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gardien, and *Le Général Dourakine* fell into this category\(^{47}\) – but she was never paid a percentage of royalties, increased as sales figures improved, although this had become standard by the 1850s and 1860s.

Despite her many letters on this subject, and her requests for better conditions, which almost led to a break with the Librairie Hachette, Émile Templier refused to yield.\(^{48}\) For him there was no question, nor had there ever been, of treating Sophie de Ségur as other than a writer of children’s books, someone whose status was utterly unrelated to that of the male or female novelists of his day. The line dividing them was so clear-cut that the pink covers of the children’s book series included in the “Bibliothèque des chemins de fer” were soon deemed inadequate to distinguish it from the six other series, and it was detached to become the separate “Bibliothèque rose illustrée.” Sophie de Ségur, like General de Gaulle’s grandmother with Lefort in Lille, their counterparts at Éditions Mame in Tours and Mégard in Rouen, and Casterman in Tournai and Paris, was a victim of the prejudice that led Hetzel to dismiss most works written specifically for children as “literature for governesses.”\(^{49}\) In fact Hetzel wanted to market a different kind of children’s literature; in March 1864 he launched his own magazine, *Le Magasin d’éducation et de récréation*, to publish the novels of Jules Verne and Erckmann and Chatrian along with other less bland tales.

The records of the contracts drawn up at L. Hachette et Cie contain indications of this overt hierarchy applied to women authors, who were treated differently depending on whether they wrote school textbooks, novels for adults, or stories for children.\(^{50}\) Madame Pape-Carpantier, a school inspector, and Madame Ulliac-Trémadeure, head of the respected (and


\(^{50}\) Records of the Librairie Hachette contracts, vol. 1 (1826–57); vol. 2 (1857–64); IMEC: Hachette archives.
respectable) *Journal des Demoiselles*, thus usually received royalties in proportion to the sales of their books. For example, in May 1859 a book titled *La Maîtresse de maison*, a compilation of articles from her magazine, brought Ulliac-Trémadeure 500 francs per 3,000 copies printed.\(^{51}\) Similarly, in 1859 Léonie d’Aunet, a woman author who was for some time close to Victor Hugo, received 0.15 francs per copy printed for her *Historiettes*, since her stories were not written for children. In July 1858 Louise Colet negotiated a royalty of 300 francs per 3,000 copies of her *Physionomie de la Hollande*, because the book was specifically for travelers, not their offspring.\(^{52}\) Clearly there was a line dividing the authors of novels for children, who lacked both legitimacy and culturally symbolic capital, from the regular writers, even little-known ones, who enjoyed higher status.

As a final piece of evidence we can look at the contracts signed by Balzac’s friend Zulma Carraud, now in the Hachette archives. She is identified there as “Madame Tourangin, wife of Carraud,” in accordance with the law. She was active in both spheres, receiving a percentage of royalties when she sold morally uplifting works to be read in the schools – *Jeanne ou le devoir*, for instance – and a flat fee for stories to be published in the “Bibliothèque rose.” For *Maurice ou le travail*, also for school use, she received 500 francs per 5,000 copies published, while she just managed to sell her *Historiettes* for children at a flat fee of 300 francs.\(^{53}\) In a letter he wrote to her on October 9th 1854, Émile Templier made the distinction even more clear: he spoke of simple “compensation” with respect to the second volume of the *Nouvelles Historiettes*, which he bought for 150 francs, but of “royalties” with respect to the *Lettres de famille*,\(^{54}\) a work which was neither “literature for governesses” nor an example of any other disparaged or delegitimized genre. If we go back to the case of the

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., agreement of May 2nd 1859.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., agreements of May 15th 1859 in the first case and July 28th 1858 in the second.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., agreements of March 4th 1853.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., letter of agreement of October 9th 1854.
unfortunate Sophie de Ségur – whose husband only condescended to allow her to deal directly with Hachette in May 1859\textsuperscript{55} – we can recognize that she was no more victimized than were her sister writers; she even managed (given the conditions of the period, that is), to achieve a status quite unlike that of her female competitors.

We have noted that the volumes of the “Bibliothèque rose illustrée” were each bought for a flat fee of 400 francs, and that the Comtesse de Ségur sold her works for 500 to 3,000 francs, that is to say for substantially more than other women writers after 1859. To get a better understanding of the difference between her and these others, we need only point out that Mathilde de Coninck, a popular author, negotiated the sale of Les Enfants d’aujourd’hui for 300 francs in August 1858 and the Nouvelles Histoires pour les enfants for the same price three weeks later.\textsuperscript{56} The same situation was faced by many other women who, their publishers claimed, had already been paid for their work when it was initially published in La Semaine des Enfants, and who could not even manage to secure the average flat fee for their manuscripts, thus being deprived of some hard-earned income. It is true that a reading of these contracts over time shows some changes taking place, and 1864, the year when Louis Hachette died, marks the beginning of a new era. Zulma Carraud obtained a percentage of royalties for her Historiettes véritables – 250 francs for each 5,000 copies printed – and the same terms for the Métamorphoses d’une goutte d’eau to be published in the “Bibliothèque rose illustrée.”\textsuperscript{57} Julie Gouraud, also known by her pseudonym Louise d’Aulnay, who founded and edited the Journal des jeunes personnes, was accorded a royalty of 0.10 francs per copy printed in her very first book contract with Hachette,\textsuperscript{58} which in some sense brought her into the circle of “legitimate” writers.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., letter of May 20th 1859.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., agreements of August 16th and 29th 1858.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., agreements of March 27th and 28th 1864.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., agreement of August 31st 1864.
In addition to the low level of their compensation and the permanent surrender of their literary property, writers for children found that they had to argue for what are now known as moral rights in copyright law. Sophie de Ségur accused Templier in no uncertain terms of inventing “the right to cut a text without the author’s consent,” meaning quite simply the mutilation of a work on moral, ideological, political, or aesthetic grounds. It is true that the government, with its draconian censorship, had an impact here, as did the railroad companies with their ridiculous moral prohibitions, but the Comtesse de Ségur’s stories hardly needed toning down to make them inoffensive. In fact, the standardization of the various series published by Hachette and its chief competitors had led to a race to the bottom, which other products of serialization were also criticized for. To be sure to please the average kind of reader, publishers sought an equally average kind of writing, with all the rough edges smoothed away. In defense of the publishers, we have to remember that the Catholic church exerted a great deal of pressure: its newspapers dictated what sort of reading matter parishioners should be choosing and the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which in 1864 listed Dumas *père* and *fils*, Feydeau, Soulié, and Sue, along with Balzac, Stendhal, and George Sand, was hardly encouraging for those who published them.

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**The Comtesse Dash and the sufferings of the faceless ghost-writer**

Gabrielle Anne de Cisterne, Vicomtesse de Saint-Mars, was born into a family of the minor Angevin nobility. She married a cavalry officer, who no doubt rode his horse well and looked fine but did not, in her eyes, possess any other good qualities; she soon left him in order to live the life of a journalist and woman of letters in Paris. At the magazine *Le Mousquetaire*,

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founded by Dumas in 1854, she associated with Adèle Esquiros, Théodore de Banville, Roger de Beauvoir, Philibert Audebrand, Aurélien Scholl, and many other literary lights of the Second Empire. Before signing up with Michel Lévy frères, where 39 of her novels, in 48 volumes, figured in the catalog for 1868, she had drifted from one publisher to another and had to accept the most taxing conditions imaginable. Since the 1845 publication by Eugène de Mirecourt of his pamphlet, *Fabrique de romans. Maison Alexandre Dumas et Cie*, everyone knew that the ogre Dumas, the inventor of the “steam-powered serial novel,” was the general of an army of literary ghost-writers, and Comtesse Dash was better placed than anyone to confirm this. The agreements later taken over by Michel Lévy show that she sold Gabriel Roux the manuscripts of *Les Deux Reines* and *Mademoiselle de Luynes* as well as *La Comtesse de Verrue*, which Dumas père published under his own name, first in serial form in *Le Constitutionnel* and then as a book. When Jules Rouquette, Roux’s successor, ceded his rights to Michel Lévy in 1863, he informed him that the original title of a work published as *Mémoires de Mademoiselle de Luynes* was in fact *La Comtesse de Verrue*; Lévy then reprinted it as *La Dame aux voluptés* in an attempt to give Dumas père’s rather worn-out garments a new lease of life.

Comtesse Dash had consented to all these subterfuges because she was constantly short of money and her writing brought in very little. Between 1856 and 1860 she received on average 300 francs per volume from Roux and Rouquette, for works selected to be published in a low-cost series. *La Princesse de Monaco* and the *Mémoires de Mme du Deffand* reveal her liking for historical fiction and the influence of Dumas. After the “Librairie nouvelle” was acquired by Lévy, she handed over thirteen novels for a total of 2,500 francs—not a lot per

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 371.
65 Ibid.
66 Calmann-Lévy archives, contracts of Comtesse Dash; Jean-Yves Mollier, *Michel et Calmann Lévy*. 
volume – and authorized him to reprint some of them under another pseudonym, Jacques Reynaud, with only the titles altered. In the same year, 1863, she handed over six more novels for a total of 1,000 francs; in 1865 three for 500 francs and three more for 1,000 francs; in 1866 two for 800 francs; and in 1868 fourteen for 2500 francs.67 This gives an average per volume of 202 francs, or half of what was supposed to ensure publishers’ obedience to the laws of liberal economics. If we make the same calculation for all 53 works sold by Comtesse Dash to Lévy, the average is 232 francs, which is still far from the 400 francs paid to Flaubert or the 500 paid to the Comtesse de Ségur for their first works. This confirms the impression that while writers of children’s books were the victims of delegitimization, the writers for adults published in mass-market series were not treated any better from the strictly material perspective. They were viewed as magazine writers but did not benefit from the salaries paid by major newspapers to their authors; they were despised by their publishers and hence badly paid and bound by contracts full of clauses that now seem outrageous.

This was the “proletariat of literature” pitiéd by Mirbeau – forced to allow publishers to edit their texts as they pleased (even Ernest Feydeau, in spite of his prominence, agreed to this68), to cut or rewrite them, to change the titles, and, in Comtesse Dash’s case, to attribute their authorship to a better-known writer who was likely to generate bigger sales. Mirbeau himself had experienced the slavery of the pen after 1870, and he did not hesitate to sell some of his manuscripts – albeit dearly – to local worthies who wanted to impress their circle by publishing “their” work in Paris.69 The less fortunate Comtesse Dash sold, very cheaply – but still at the going rate, we may be sure – works that she chose not to put her name to. The more highly respected Comtesse de Ségur did not go to such lengths, but as we have seen she was forced to agree to “the cutting of a text without the author’s consent,” opening the door to

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 364–65.
69 Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, Histoire littéraire de la France.
every kind of mistreatment, which has only grown worse since then: today we colorize black-
and-white film, and a twenty-first publisher like Bernard Fixot makes himself the judge of
what should be kept or cut in a nineteenth-century novel.\textsuperscript{70} It is undeniable that the application
of modern economics to the field of literature was born in the mid-nineteenth century, and in a
sense it was France that saw the invention not so much of the “industrial literature”
denounced by Sainte-Beuve in 1839 but rather of the entertainment industry, wrongly
supposed to have come into being with the cinema and the major Hollywood studios.\textsuperscript{71}

The Calmann-Lévy and Hachette archives contain other dossiers that throw light on
the underbelly of literary life during the Second Empire and the early Third Republic. Like
Comtesse Dash, the prolific woman novelist Clémence Robert allowed her publishers to
change the titles of her works to deceive the public. \textit{Les Mystères de la Bastille}, first
published by Calmann-Lévy, was resold to the head of \textit{L’Éclipse}, Georges Decaux, who
reissued it with the title \textit{Latude ou les Mystères de la Bastille}.\textsuperscript{72} Taking this analysis further
would require access to the archives and papers of the mass-market publishers, who were the
most fragile economically and felt the most need to put pressure on their authors. A survey of
the Havard, Bry, and Boisgard files for 1848–50, or those of Ferenczi, Decaux, Rouff,
Tallandier, and other publishers at the end of the century would probably confirm this moral
decline and worsening conditions for both male and female writers.

\textbf{Women in the mirror of publishing}

The nineteenth century was the golden age of European publishing. Modern publishing was
born with the Industrial Revolution, the railroad, and the newspaper, but the publisher as one

\textsuperscript{70} Just a few years ago this publisher launched a series of novels in “reformatted” versions, to answer the needs of readers pressed for time.
\textsuperscript{71} Jean-Yves Mollier, “Les éditeurs français à l’assaut du marché de masse,” in Jacques Marseille and Patrick
\textsuperscript{72} Jean-Yves Mollier, \textit{Michel et Calmann Lévy}, 439.
type of cultural mediator had begun to appear with the publication of the Encyclopédie – of which 24,000 copies in all had been sold across Europe by 178973 – and an army of them burst onto the scene between 1830 and 1850. Like the captains of industry who were their contemporaries, they benefited from unusual possibilities for growth, and some of them built prodigious fortunes and business empires.74 A 15% annual return on investment was considered the lowest acceptable; to achieve this, authors were increasingly subjected to standards of treatment similar to those in factories and department stores. Louis Reybaud, a specialist in socio-economics clearly saw how the entertainment industry would develop. In César Falempin, a novel published serially in 1845, he introduced the industrialist Granpré, the inventor of the “steam-powered serial novel.” To provide readers with their daily dose of fiction, he took writers who specialized in each component of a serial novel and shut them up in his factories. The principle of rationality dear to Adam Smith thus reached its zenith, in a clever – and amusing – anticipation of television sitcom writing teams.75 “Everyone processes the parts he is best at, the industrialist asserted, and as Adam Smith would say, the serial novel thus reaches its highest degree of perfection.”76

This was the general framework within which publishing in France developed, but it did not exclude atypical behavior or brilliant exceptions. Poulet-Malassis was an example in poetry publishing, Hetzel was another with his determination to encourage real children’s literature. Louis Hachette believed in educational reform and campaigned to introduce universal education as early as 1826, seven years before the Guizot law was passed to that effect. Michel Lévy believed in a future society in which the desire to read would be as strong as the desire to eat and drink. A simplistic, caricatured, or schematic picture cannot accurately

74 Jean-Yves Mollier, L’argent et les lettres gives an overall picture of this period.
75 Jean-Yves Mollier, Michel et Calmann Lévy, 76–77.
represent this unprecedented growth in mass readership. It led to the standardization of book series and the rationalization of publishing procedures, and in consequence some dehumanizing of relations between authors and their publishers, who were increasingly also their editors. The Goncourts were up in arms at this development – a descent into hell, as they saw it – and Baudelaire was dismayed to hear that the 1861 sale of the “Librairie nouvelle” to Michel Lévy threw the authors in with the furniture and inventory. The laws of liberal economics had radically transformed the relationship between writers and those who sold their works, who no longer had to behave like the patrons they had once been, asking for nothing more in exchange than a laudatory preface in their honor.

Women, who came upon the literary scene later than men, faced extreme difficulty in gaining acceptance and making a decent living from their craft. However, there is no evidence that they were viewed differently from men by their employers. A study of hundreds of individual dossiers in the archives of Hachette, Michel Lévy frères, and Calmann-Lévy shows no instances of male and female writers being approached differently. Perhaps it was because the purchase price or the market price for manuscripts had fallen so low that there was no need for differential treatment of the two sexes. However, in the sector where they formed the majority – children’s books – women were the victims of prejudice with respect to the status of this genre. In children’s books, delegitimized, despised, and excluded from the pantheon of great literature with only rare exceptions, women could confirm the inequality of gender relations. If men had been more numerous in this sector, they would probably have reacted more forcefully and demanded, at least, to be decently remunerated. Women authors did not manage to do this, which explains why the Comtesse de Ségur never got what she asked for: a percentage of sales. When she died in 1874, her literary copyrights should have been passed

77 The anonymous article in the Revue anecdotique, 24 (second half of December 1861), 268, which denounces this sale, certainly took its inspiration from Baudelaire; cf. Jean-Yves Mollier, “Baudelaire et les frères Lévy: auteur et éditeur”, 160, n. 70.
on to her heirs for the next 57 years, until their expiration in 1931 or 1932. This did not happen, and even if Émile Templier’s attitude toward her on this issue was not a case of sexism, we have to admit that, on the unconscious and the societal levels, the feminization of children’s book authorship played a role in the deterioration of the conditions imposed on these authors.

Translated by Linda Gardiner