

Introduction



In 1898, French writer Jane de La Vaudère (1857–1908, née Jeanne Scrive) appeared before a judge and demanded a divorce. Armed with correspondence between her husband and his mistress, she claimed that her husband's neglect and reckless spending had forced her to rely on writing to support her son. For the widely published author, this argument was strategic: in casting her literary production as an expression of maternal self-sacrifice, La Vaudère averted accusations of domestic neglect typically directed at female intellectuals. Her pursuit of financial justice and autonomy from her husband ultimately prevailed and the judge ruled in her favor. La Vaudère extended this skillful negotiation of personal convictions and social norms to her writing, where she balanced transgressive and conservative narratives while continually shaping her mutable and alluring public image.

La Vaudère published more than forty novels, plays, and volumes of poetry, and hundreds of her editorials, short stories, and serial novels appeared in periodicals throughout her career. She always remained relevant to the times, adapting to the trends of Decadent, Naturalist, and Orientalist fiction, or integrating topical or provocative subjects like feminism, divorce reform, or the nascent automobile industry into her texts. Today, like other prolific female authors of her time, she remains relatively unknown, despite the controversies—and ensuing renown—that were once associated with her life and writing. She had a reputation as a plagiarist, and nearly all of her novels and short stories contain passages from previously published works. She was both the plaintiff and defendant

in several lawsuits for theft of creative property that involved prominent contemporary figures. In 1907, she claimed to be the original author of the *Rêve d'Égypte* mummy pantomime, whose notorious Moulin Rouge production featured a kiss between Colette and her lover Missy de Morny that ended in uproar (and increased publicity). As reflected in the titles *Les demi-sexes* (1897), *Les androgynes* (1903), *Le harem de Syta* (1904), and *Sapho, dompteuse* (1908), La Vaudère's fiction often depicted subversive sexualities and betrayed a preoccupation with nonnormative versions of womanhood. Like many of her fictional characters, La Vaudère broke from traditional standards of femininity. Following her divorce, she continued to enjoy her ex-husband's family estate, the Château de La Vaudère, which had also been the inspiration for her pen name. Despite her personal and professional independence, La Vaudère's relationship with contemporary feminism was complicated. Her texts advocated for gender equality in education and marriage, and she once referred to herself as a "féministe farouche" but spent years critiquing organized movements and their agendas.¹ She adopted misogynistic fin-de-siècle discourses that characterized women as malevolent manipulators whose ultimate downfall (ostracization, death) represented satisfying justice for bourgeois readers. Her unconventional lifestyle and corpus attracted the attention of her peers, and she was consistently parodied in literary periodicals, newspapers, and *romans à clef*.

Until now, there has been no monographic study devoted to La Vaudère's life story and collective works. *Resurrecting Jane de La Vaudère* attempts to remedy this neglect and examine how she molded and adapted her persona to shifting literary trends and readership demands, branding a controversial image that captivated public curiosity and advanced her sales. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, when La Vaudère came of age as a writer, women were publishing at record numbers. This trend can in part be explained by a series of educational reforms in France that gradually increased girls' access to education, literacy, and new professional possibilities. The Press Law of 1881 loosened censorship restrictions, and advances in printing technology boosted the publishing industry and gave rise to a plethora of new periodicals. Women such as La Vaudère contributed poems, editorials, and *feuilletons* to newspapers and magazines in unprecedented numbers.² Several anthologies about women writers appeared in response to these new trends, and critics attempted to classify and make sense of the evolving gender demographics of the writing profession.³ Some of these anthologies were relatively reverent in their discussion of women authors, and others were more vitriolic in their analysis, taking issue with those

who broke from conventional gender roles in their own lives or depicted “unsavory” themes in their texts. La Vaudère’s name appeared in both types of collections.

Readers may be tempted to ask why a plagiarist such as La Vaudère deserves our attention. To dismiss La Vaudère is to miss a crucial opportunity to examine how one of many women writers of the Belle Époque navigated the demands of a bourgeois readership and cultivated a complex writer’s persona to attract and profit from media attention. As this book demonstrates, La Vaudère’s sales relied on her chameleonlike adaptability to evolving literary and social trends. The diversity of her collected works attests to her shapeshifting throughout her career. From her sentimental verse poetry to her salacious Naturalist, Decadent, or erotic Orientalist fiction, the contents of La Vaudère’s *œuvre* exemplify her continual transformation and instinct for the literary market. Consequently, the challenges of documenting La Vaudère’s life begin with her persona, which she incessantly shaped and reworked in interviews, advertisements, and photomontages. These original sources are some of the few that remain from her lifetime and play a crucial role in mapping out her biography and professional trajectory. They also point to the paradox inherent in trying to “pin down” La Vaudère, whose slippery positions manifested themselves not only in divorce court (described above) but also in opinion pieces about contemporary women’s issues. In editorials, for example, she advocated for women’s sexual fulfillment and reforms to divorce laws, yet countered any explicit identification with feminist movements by parodying well-known activists and denouncing their agendas as impractical. Ultimately, she transcended classification by inhabiting multiple genres (poetry, short stories, plays, novels, editorials), literary movements (Naturalist, Decadent, and Orientalist fiction), and social questions (feminism, marriage, divorce, education) to deftly appeal to readers’ interests. Her plagiarism facilitated this malleability. As one critic marveled, “Toute l’œuvre de Jane de la Vaudère a ce caractère double, ou, pour parler en pédant, cette *dualité* difficile à saisir, et attirante comme tous les mystères.”⁴ In the context of this fluidity, La Vaudère’s plagiarism points to an element of her savvy self-construction. Mummy-like, she wrapped herself in a patchwork of voices and drew from a myriad of discourses to preserve her persona from the artistic and social demands placed on women writers.

In fact, mummies are central to this study, in literal and metaphorical form. The burial chapel at the Château de La Vaudère contains the embalmed corpses of three of La Vaudère’s family members, their faces on

display under a glass plate. In late nineteenth-century France, the practice of embalming provided affluent families like La Vaudère's the possibility of preserving the body of a deceased loved one. Methods relied on chemical compounds, evisceration, and dehydration to impede the natural process of decay. Through artificial intervention, embalmers indulged the idea of immortality and a way for the body to live on but in an altered form. They reworked and transformed the corpse, removing organs and applying various balms, herbs, and chemical substances until the final product was a mere shell of the original. The mummified body moved beyond the confines of time to be available to future generations. In many ways, mummies are simultaneously dead and alive, bearing traces of both the original and new, undergoing perpetual recontextualization. La Vaudère's plagiarism functions in the same way, transforming an original text into a modified format, molding what came before into a new shape in the quest for literary immortality. More broadly, the château's mummies are a poignant reminder of the call for preservation that is at the heart of this study. With the loss of her papers, neglect of her literary *œuvre*, and unawareness of her unique biography, La Vaudère's legacy has suffered near erasure and decomposition. This monograph hopes to reverse this process.

LA VAUDÈRE'S ARCHIVAL ABSENCE

There are no archives devoted exclusively to La Vaudère. Nearly all of her manuscripts, contracts, and general correspondence have disappeared. A small selection of her letters and legal documents have been preserved, but these materials are dispersed throughout collections in Paris and Le Mans, requiring both luck and resourcefulness to locate. There is no evidence that La Vaudère's materials were ever saved, purchased, auctioned, or donated collectively. This lacuna is especially surprising considering the frequency with which she published in France, as well as in German-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking countries where her most popular works appeared in translation. Locals in Parigné-l'Évêque have long speculated about the fate of La Vaudère's belongings, and some recall hearing that her papers were burned by her in-laws in retribution for the shame that her writing and lifestyle brought upon the family. The likelihood that the entirety of her manuscripts, letters, contracts, and personal library was destroyed in such dramatic fashion seems small. Nonetheless, the absence of a single, comprehensive archive indicates that a surviving relative—perhaps her sister or

son—did not believe that her papers were worth preserving. The disappearance of her materials may be a clue about the final years of her life and may verify evidence of tension with at least one family member. Her notary files, housed in the Archives nationales in Paris, indicate as much.⁵ From her deathbed, La Vaudère amended her will to bequeath her own portrait to her sister Marie. However, Marie rejected the bequest, claiming she had no need for it. It may be that La Vaudère had a sense about her impending invisibility, both within the family and literary history. Her tongue-in-cheek gesture irritated Marie, whose refusal of the portrait was equally symbolic (and perhaps foretelling of her intentions for La Vaudère's archive). The amendments to La Vaudère's will also implicate her friend and writer Théodore Cahu, whom she acknowledged for managing a selection of her manuscripts. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 1, there are no traces of the manuscripts in question in Cahu's archives, and they have since disappeared. La Vaudère's remaining papers—other manuscripts, letters, related ephemera—were likely left to her immediate family. In the end, it was La Vaudère's surviving relatives who had the last word, and to this day her name remains absent from the family grave in Paris's Montparnasse cemetery.

This book seeks to bring order and cohesion to La Vaudère's scant and scattered archival catalogue. It compiles a diverse selection of materials and leads for future research and includes library references and call numbers when applicable. At the end of this book, readers will also find an exhaustive bibliography of La Vaudère's publications across genres and media. In assembling all available pieces, I offer the first detailed profile of La Vaudère that includes important elements from her childhood, marriage, and writing career. I also consider her reception by her contemporaries, whose depictions both shaped and perpetuated her notoriety. In turn, La Vaudère exploited disparaging media coverage to construct a provocative writer's persona—a marketing strategy that ultimately led to more publicity and sales. What other people thought about La Vaudère—and how she co-opted these narratives—is an important part of her selling power. This book therefore gives equal weight to “authoritative” sources like civil records and notarized documents and “unofficial” sources like editorials, *romans à clef*, and book reviews. In his work on Belle Époque dancer Cléo de Mérode, Michael Garval emphasizes the value of informal, secondhand accounts for contextualizing celebrity: “Serious reporting can clarify important details. But spurious journalism can be more broadly revealing. Like caricatures, parodies, or apocryphal ‘biographies,’ such fanciful evidence plunges deep into the imaginary, offering insights into the star's larger impact and place within the history

of fame.”⁶ To complement written accounts, I also consider rumors and anecdotes that still circulate today in the village of Parigné-l’Évêque. Inevitably, the diversity of these materials has produced conflicting perspectives and information, testimony to the breadth of La Vaudère’s renown. These contradictory accounts can be traced to La Vaudère as well, who often lied about her age or embellished childhood stories for interviews. I posit that these contradictions and their points of intersection inform our understanding of La Vaudère’s evolving celebrity and skillful fluidity. This study does not privilege certain materials over others or rank their accuracy or value. Instead, it examines them critically and in relationship to one another to build a holistic, complex portrayal. Collectively, the materials illuminate how La Vaudère navigated and negotiated readership demands, marketing strategies, and a public image.

Given La Vaudère’s limited archives, the research for this project involved creative problem-solving and an open mind. France’s national library, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF), contains a large selection of La Vaudère’s published works and an occasional letter, and served as a good point of departure for the general details of her life and works. To piece together the basic elements of her biography, I consulted archives in Paris (the Archives de Paris and the Archives nationales) and Le Mans (the Archives départementales de la Sarthe) that house “official” records such as legal registers, notarized documents, marriage certificates, and contracts. While these collections verified major biographical junctures—her birth, marriage, and divorce—they did not convey the nuances of her relationships with contemporary writers nor how she navigated the growth of her celebrity. To cast a wider search net, I visited a range of specialized collections in Paris, some off the beaten path: the Société des gens de lettres (SDGL), the Archives de la Préfecture de police, the Archives de l’assistance publique-hôpitaux de Paris, the Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra, the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, the BnF’s Département des arts du spectacle, the Service historique de la Défense, the Institut historique allemand, and the Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques (SACD). I also traveled to the Abbaye d’Ardenne outside of Caen to consult publishing records at the Institut mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (IMEC). Some of these collections were dead ends, but others housed hidden gems that informed new perspectives of La Vaudère’s place in French literary history. To supplement the archival research, I considered her coverage in the contemporary press (interviews, photos) and reviews of her works in literary periodicals or anthologies, many of which have been digitized by

the BnF and are accessible online. Other pieces of information came by random strokes of luck through booksellers' and collectors' websites selling the rare La Vaudère letter. Geneanet, a French website for genealogy enthusiasts, was a useful starting point for tracing La Vaudère's ancestry and identifying family names for supplemental archival research.

LA VAUDÈRE'S LITERARY ASSOCIATIONS AND RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

In the last few decades, while considered a minor genre of obscure authors, the Decadent novel has elicited renewed interest among nineteenth-century scholars and the general public alike. Though La Vaudère's corpus reflects a wide and diverse range of literary production, her name is commonly cited among a small group of Belle Époque women writers like Rachilde, with whom she shared an interest in the moral and sexual pathologies typical of Decadent fiction. But La Vaudère's habitual association with Rachilde denies the heterogeneity of her corpus, which encompasses a multitude of genres beyond the confines of Decadent literature. Rachilde herself seemed to recognize this: in her reviews for the *Mercur de France*, she instead compared La Vaudère to women writers Camille Pert and Daniel Lesueur.⁷ Like La Vaudère, contemporaries Pert and Lesueur privileged woman-centered themes in their popular novels and underscored tensions between a woman's social (i.e., marital and maternal) duties and her quest for emotional and sexual fulfilment.⁸ However, La Vaudère stands out for the remarkable fluidity of her public image and constant adaptability to a variety of literary genres (Decadent, Naturalist, Orientalist, erotic fiction). In many ways, regardless of Rachilde's attempts at classification, La Vaudère cannot be placed. Nonetheless, her name has recently benefited from her association with Decadent literature, and the genre's revival has presented an opportunity to finally showcase its otherwise marginalized writers. Decadent scholarship has found momentum in the work of Jean de Palacio, whose publications have brought to light the aesthetic and thematic trends of the *fin de siècle*. Unfortunately, Palacio has been dismissive of La Vaudère's literary merits and has argued that she holds minimal interest for nineteenth-century literary studies.⁹ The inclusion of La Vaudère in his well-regarded scholarship has nonetheless brought attention to her name and paved the way for alternative perspectives of her literary, cultural, and historic value. Where Palacio has failed, feminist scholars may take over

and bring to light figures like La Vaudère who maneuvered and exploited the contradictory expectations placed upon the Belle Époque woman writer.

There is little information available about the literary or artistic circles that La Vaudère frequented. Her memberships in organizations like the Société des gens de lettres (SDGL) and the Société des poètes français (SPF) provided her access to a diverse group of authors and ample opportunities for networking. We know from internal documents and newspaper blurbs that she often attended SDGL and SPF meetings and dinners alongside renowned and prolific writers, both male and female, as well as those who were in the early stages of their careers. More specifically, she maintained strong professional ties to writer Théodore Cahu throughout her career, and her last-minute addition of him to her will suggests that their artistic relationship likely extended to friendship (if not more). With the exception of Émile Zola, whose *Pour une nuit d'amour* she adapted for the stage, La Vaudère's collaborative projects involved writers of popular literature or marginalized genres (such as Félicien Champsaur, Gaston Derys, or Cahu) that did not share the artistic prestige of the father of Naturalism.¹⁰ Many of the writers who wrote laudatory pieces on La Vaudère (Cahu, Champsaur) fell into these categories, as did those who parodied her in their fiction (such as courtesan Liane de Pougy and gay dandy Jean Lorrain, whose texts I discuss in chapter 2). These literary intersections suggest that La Vaudère moved in circles with artists who defied social conventions or were on the fringes of elite artistic groups. She does not appear to have belonged to any community of women artists, nor to have collaborated or networked with other popular women authors of the period (like Camille Pert, Daniel Lesueur, Rachilde, Georges de Peyrebrune, or Marcelle Tinayre). With one or two minor exceptions, her name, like Rachilde's, was notably absent from *Femina* and *La vie heureuse*. These women's magazines regularly featured articles on contemporary women writers like Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Anna de Noailles, Lesueur, or Tinayre, whose paths La Vaudère had certainly crossed at literary readings or conferences. However, *Femina* and *La vie heureuse* endorsed a model of femininity that integrated Belle Époque modern womanhood with the conventional bourgeois values of the domestic sphere. Colette Cosnier and Rachel Mesch attribute La Vaudère's exclusion from the magazines to the risqué and salacious themes of her texts; neither she, nor Rachilde for that matter, fit the magazines' image of the respectable woman author.¹¹ And yet La Vaudère's conflicting, noncommittal views on gender roles led to ostracization from feminist circles as well: Marguerite Durand's newspaper *La fronde* went

so far as to condemn her as an antifeminist.¹² Too audacious for respectable women writers and too conservative for leading feminist activists, La Vaudère courted contradictions and eschewed any one political narrative. As we shall see repeatedly through this study, La Vaudère was and remains deliberately difficult to classify.

The interdisciplinary fields of gender, literary, and cultural studies have witnessed a growing commitment to recovering neglected marginal writers of the past and salvaging their stories and works. Nineteenth-century France in particular has appealed to feminist scholars across disciplines who have written extensively on evolving discourses on sexual and gender difference.¹³ Female figures such as Marie Krysinska, Gisèle d'Estoc, Georges de Peyrebrune, André Léo, and Marc de Montifaud have elicited recent attention in academia and publishing.¹⁴ La Vaudère's works have earned her references in studies on gender transgression in Decadent literature, and a selection of scholarly articles address her writing in particular.¹⁵ She has gained increased visibility through the digitization of her works on Gallica, a digital library run by the BnF that is available to online readers from around the world. An assortment of her novels and short stories have recently been translated by Snuggly Books, a publisher specializing in Decadent and Occultist fiction, and are now available to Anglophone readers for the first time. French author Lyane Guillaume, who specializes in historical and documentary fiction, is also preparing a work on La Vaudère that reimagines her life in the Belle Époque.¹⁶ A scholarly study devoted to her life and works has been long overdue. As La Vaudère's renown and readership begin to expand across disciplines and genres, this monograph emphasizes the deft shapeshifting inherent to her writing and public image. With a particular focus on the plagiarism and diversity of literary styles that characterize her *œuvre*, as well as the transgressive and bourgeois narratives of womanhood that she carefully constructed, I hope to show the uniqueness and value of La Vaudère's literary production. While La Vaudère is in many ways exceptional, I also encourage readers to consider her as representative of the skillful social, artistic, and ideological negotiations demanded of the woman writer during her time period.

STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT

Resurrecting Jane de La Vaudère interweaves biography and literary study. To give context to the discussions that follow, the first chapter is devoted

to a detailed profile of La Vaudère's life. To this day, there exists no extensive biography on Jane de La Vaudère. Though condensed chronicles of her life are scattered throughout the Belle Époque press or today's limited scholarship, these abridged accounts are often fragmentary or erroneous and underscore the need for a detailed life history of La Vaudère—and Jeanne Scrive. The title of this chapter, "The Makings of a Biography," is an intentional double entendre that draws attention to the process of biography. This chapter also provides an important foundation for the larger book and allows readers to trace the development of La Vaudère's complicated persona and feminist positions alongside critical moments in her personal life. Chapter 1 serves as a complement to chapter 2, "Becoming Jane de La Vaudère," which examines the clichéd representation of La Vaudère's persona in contemporary fictional works and the press. In considering her own agency in these seemingly one-dimensional constructions, chapter 2 also brings to light La Vaudère's marketing tactics, which exploited a troubling reputation in order to sell more books. I draw from the work of Mary Louise Roberts and argue that La Vaudère's varied performances of womanhood exposed the arbitrariness of gender codes and exemplified the mutability of her persona. It may be tempting to view chapters 1 and 2 as foils: whereas chapter 2 considers discursive, ideological, and subjective depictions of La Vaudère's works and public image, chapter 1 pieces together "hard" facts (dates, addresses, finances) from "authoritative" archival sources (notary files, birth certificates, court documents). Both chapters, however, encourage critical interpretations and readings of primary sources, including La Vaudère's own interviews, which exhibit her tendency to exaggerate or lie to maintain a certain persona. As Arlette Farge reminds us, archival documents should not be taken for granted as decisive bearers of "truth" but as a foundation for further interrogation: "Qu'on entende bien: à de rare exceptions près, le document, le texte ou l'archive ne sont pas la preuve définitive d'une vérité quelconque, mais butte témoin incontournable dont le sens est à bâtir ensuite par des questionnements spécifiques."¹⁷ The elements of La Vaudère's life that I have uncovered in these chapters open the door to new and evolving understandings of a woman writer's agency in crafting a multidimensional and marketable persona.

Chapters 3 and 4 are connected by the common theme of plagiarism. As some critics had already discovered during her lifetime, La Vaudère was a frequent plagiarist. Today, with the help of plagiarism software, we can identify hundreds of passages in La Vaudère's fiction that were lifted from nineteenth-century literary and scientific texts. Chapter 3 reads the trends

of plagiarism through a feminist and postmodern lens. In examining her plagiarism of Guy de Maupassant's Sicilian travel memoirs and his novel *Notre cœur*, I demonstrate how La Vaudère's novel *Les demi-sexes* reappropriates masculine discourses on femininity, exposes their precariousness, and proposes new models of womanhood, all through the subversive act of copying. As we will see throughout this study, La Vaudère's plagiarism facilitated her fluid movement between the diversity of discourses (i.e., medical, feminist), narrative structures, and literary genres that defined her *œuvre*. In an ironic reversal, chapter 4 considers La Vaudère in a new role: as a victim of plagiarism. The 1907 production of *Rêve d'Égypte* brought Colette and Missy added fame and notoriety, but La Vaudère claimed (rather convincingly) that their piece was based on her own Egyptian pantomime *Le rêve de Mysès*. Though her legal case was eventually dropped, La Vaudère published a novella version of *Le rêve de Mysès* a few months later with titillating erotic content and nude photographic illustrations intended to recall the Moulin Rouge scandal and boost sales. In light of the couple's plagiarism, La Vaudère's revisions point to an ongoing, intertextual exchange and exemplify her calculated marketing of nonnormative female sexuality. In a strange twist, this chapter is informed by discoveries that I made while visiting the small burial chapel at the Château de La Vaudère that houses the embalmed remains of her relatives. For the larger project, I consider the "mummified" corpses at the château to be a metaphor for the possibility of La Vaudère's own artistic immortality and the resurrection of her story.

La Vaudère's feminism is contradictory and inconsistent, both radical and conservative, but always engaged with contemporary campaigns and debates. Chapter 5 deciphers the ambivalence of La Vaudère's feminism in relation to organized feminist movements. More specifically, it considers her strategies for promoting female sexual and emotional fulfillment while clinging to some traditionalist views of womanhood, a tactic that many activists also employed. To tease out the nuances of La Vaudère's brand of feminism, I have divided this chapter into three sections and consider her engagement with contemporary feminist movements, her critique of marital conventions and divorce laws, and her adoption of spiritist conceptions of gender difference. Finally, in the book's concluding chapter, we return to the present day to consider La Vaudère's lasting legacy at the Château de La Vaudère and how she is remembered in the village of Parigné-l'Évêque. The point of departure for this section is a photograph from *Le carnet de la femme* of La Vaudère seated behind the steering wheel of a car. Though

we cannot confirm that La Vaudère was a pioneer female motorist at the turn of the century, she regularly incorporated automobiles into her writing and often linked the expanding car industry to the modern woman. In a notable coincidence, Anne-Charlotte Rousseau, the current owner of the Château de La Vaudère, is an aficionado of vintage automobiles and is one of only a handful of women to compete in international rally racing. This chapter examines the history of the Château de La Vaudère, its lineage of autonomous women, their cars, and the emancipation afforded through driving.

The resources that informed this book have been widespread and varied, ranging from rare archival documents from the nineteenth century to personal connections formed more recently. Through the extensive nature of this research, which spans the parameters of time, media, and genres, we can better recognize the literary and historical importance of authors like La Vaudère and the avenues that they open for interdisciplinary study. These discoveries have shown why it is critical for stories like La Vaudère's to be studied and shared and have brought important attention to a dynamic woman writer whose contributions to fin-de-siècle literature have unjustly been forgotten. Though her gravestone remains unmarked, it is my hope that this book may serve as a headstone of sorts, with her story finally engraved in its pages.