



Marie Dorval.

Dorval, Marie (1798-1849)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A popular French actress in the Romantic style, Marie Dorval spent most of her life in the theater. In her thirties she enjoyed an intense romantic friendship with the writer George Sand that fueled much speculation among Parisian gossips at the time, as well as among later historians.

Born Marie-Thomase-Amélie Delauney on January 6, 1798, she began life on tour, the child of unmarried actors in an itinerant troupe passing through the coastal town of Lorient, in Brittany. Abandoned by her father when she was five, and losing her mother to tuberculosis while still young, the young Marie learned to cope through protective alliances with men.

At 15, she married Allan Dorval, a much older actor and manager. The economic security the marriage provided, however, did not last. He died five years later, leaving her with two children and the surname she would use from then on.

Dorval had been on the stage since she was four; thus, a career in theater was a natural option for her, though her success did not come without struggle. Her first breakthrough came when she was 29, playing opposite a popular male actor in a Paris production of Victor Ducange and Prosper Goubaux's *Trente ans, ou la vie d'un joueur* (Thirty Years, or the Life of a Player).

At 31, Dorval made another strategic marriage, this time to Jean-Toussaint Merle, a journalist with financial interests in the theater. Other important roles came her way probably due, at least in part, to her affairs with influential writers Alexandre Dumas (the elder) and Count Alfred de Vigny.

Dorval worked primarily in the Romantic style, acting in popular melodramas with a sincerity that endeared her to her audiences. Eventually, she also attained recognition in classical theater with her performances at the Comédie Française, and might have continued with that company had she not incurred the jealousy of its resident doyenne, the formidable Mademoiselle Mars.

Writer George Sand was so impressed with one of Dorval's performances that she wrote her a letter of appreciation. The two women met soon afterward, in January 1833, and initiated an intimate friendship. Dorval was 35 years old, Sand 29. Whether the pair's relationship was sexual or not has been debated, but it became the subject of much gossip in Paris. Rumors of lesbianism had already swirled about both women. Critic Gustave Planche warned Sand against a "dangerous friendship"; de Vigny urged Dorval to stay away from "that damned lesbian."

Robinson notes that such gossip was endemic in the theater world. Actors in general were assumed to lead promiscuous lives, and any salacious news was quickly seized upon by an avid public. Faderman notes that male writers of the time, such as Théophile Gautier and Honoré de Balzac, were much taken by the idea of lesbianism, and this type of speculation had popular currency.

On the other hand, the intimate endearments of Sand's correspondence with Dorval, while not different in

kind from that customarily written between women friends of the time, express a passion not present in her letters to other women. Indeed, they imply that Dorval was the great love of Sand's life. Moreover, certain of Sand's writings during this period suggest a preoccupation with female sexuality. Her prose piece "A l'ange sans nom" (To the Angel without a Name) is infused with sensual references, and her controversial novel *Lélia* explores a woman's quest for erotic fulfillment.

Whatever the nature of the relationship, it matured into a friendship that lasted until Dorval's death. If they were sexually intimate, such intimacy may have been extraordinarily passionate, but not of long duration. The women remained confidantes in their subsequent heterosexual affairs.

Dorval's theatrical career burned brightly for another dozen years. In 1834, she triumphed in the role of Kitty Bell in de Vigny's play *Chatterton* at the Comédie Française, stunning audiences with a dramatic swoon down a flight of stairs. In 1840, Sand wrote the play *Cosima* with Dorval in mind for the lead role and the two collaborated on the script. However, the production was not well received and had to be canceled after only seven performances.

Otherwise, Dorval had many successes, especially in popular productions at the Odéon Theater. Her last two major appearances were in the 1843 title role of François Ponsard's *Lucrèce*, and in Adolphe d'Ennery's *Marie-Jeanne, ou la femme du peuple* (Marie-Jeanne, Or the Woman of the People, 1845). After that, however, fashions shifted and Dorval's career ended as it began, with a touring troupe in the provinces.

Her health broken by the rigors of life on the road, and devastated by the death of a grandchild, Dorval returned to Paris and died penniless at the age of 51. Sand was among the first to be notified. She assumed the financial support of Dorval's surviving grandchildren.

Dorval's life exemplifies the precarious existence of nineteenth-century actresses. Objects of public fascination and subject to the mercurial tastes of their audiences, they assumed the risks of celebrity just as their successors do today. Her relationship with Sand, though the subject of salacious gossip, was nevertheless an acceptable form of same-sex bonding at the time, at least between women, a romantic friendship.

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