

# The Republic and the Witch

*By Vincent Bourdeau*

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**In order to fix a society, it is not necessary to wield the “civilising” stick of republicanism. The novels of George Sand, far from being mere rustic tales, propose a clandestine way of doing politics – a democratic project undertaken with no preaching or violence.**

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*Reviewed : Vincent Robert, La Petite-Fille de la sorcière. Enquête sur la culture magique des campagnes au temps de George Sand, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2015, 318 p.*

Our era sometimes produces paradoxical images: when the horrific attacks of January and November 2015 took place, the public space came alive with invocations to the Republic with a capital R and calls for republican values that needed to be instilled in some and revisited by others, with the intention of solidifying a national union perceived not just as necessary but urgent. The mere fact of living in a Republic, the sole line of defence for institutions, was no longer sufficient. A cultural identification with the Republic needed to take place in order to overcome the religious, ethnic and political antagonisms that were generally considered to be undermining French society. Based on the discourse of secular and republican clerics, a top-down effort to educate the public in the values of the Republic was needed.

However, in a singular response, it was Philippe Faucon’s film *Fatima* that received the Cesar Award for Best Film in February 2016. For, if Philippe Faucon’s cinema – *Samia* (2000), *Two Ladies (Dans la vie)* (2007) and *The Disintegration (La Désintégration)* (2011) – is interested in one thing, it is understanding how a society is *one* without ever seeking the construction of that *unity* in a culture imposed from above and propagated by clerics. His films try to show how it is possible to find the shared and shareable in the ordinary lives of people and, particularly, among those who are all too often said to occupy the “lost territories of the Republic”.

Perhaps Philippe Faucon would say he is only interested in characters, their lives, their ecosystem and the relationships they form, and that he does not do politics. He would be right,

but, even so, he is still doing politics in his own way. At least, this is what we learn, paradoxically, from reading Vincent Robert's last book, *La Petite-Fille de la Sorcière* (The witch's grand-daughter), which speaks of neither Philippe Faucon nor the era in which we live.

## **Rural ethnography as a substitute for politics**

This clandestine way of doing politics was indeed what George Sand embraced when, after the bloody repression of June 1848, she spoke of a simple “story to put little children to sleep” in the preface of *La Petite Fadette* (dated September 1848)<sup>1</sup>. She was even clearer in the second preface of 21<sup>st</sup> December 1851, when she stated: “Preaching unity to men who are cutting one another's throat is crying in the wilderness. There are times when souls are so agitated that they are deaf to every appeal.”<sup>2</sup> Do not preach, even if there would appear to be a deliberate discrepancy in relation to the urgency of the situation: write “stories” rather than controversial political tracts, republican lampoons or philosophical treatises. Follow what Vincent Robert calls “a process of civilisation” (p. 297) rather than wielding the “civilising” stick.

Seeing this modest approach, which shied away from politics, as a real political project is the driving force behind Vincent Robert's latest book, a remarkable analysis of George Sand's writings and the historical context they portray. It has emerged in a specific political context, in which questions of social and political integration are urgent but poorly addressed.

The book's aim is to revisit the magical culture of the countryside based on an updated re-reading of George Sand's “rural” works. “Magical culture” does not mean a mental universe rooted in superstition but, rather, ways of existing within one's environment, and beliefs that imply certain social attitudes. As Vincent Robert notes, “belief in fate and witchcraft, fairies and werewolves was a strong part of what the British historian E. P. Thompson called the moral economy of the Ancien Régime crowd, because it supplemented in some measure the precepts of common morality and the positive teaching of the Church” (p. 212).

Seeing this culture as something other than mere superstition means giving oneself the opportunity to see in it a form of compatibility with the fraternal foundations for which the Republic became the mouthpiece in February 1848. In this way, suggests Vincent Robert, one can read *Fadette* as the “account of a process of modernisation, undertaken with no symbolic violence or cultural split” (p. 299).

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<sup>1</sup> *Les Veillées du Chanvreur* series, which also included *La Mare au Diable* and *François le Champi*.

<sup>2</sup> G. Sand, *Fadette*, Charleston, BiblioBazaar, 2009, p. 7.

## Between witchcraft and republic

Divided into three parts, the book proposes a fresh interpretation of *La Petite Fadette* (part I, “Precautions”), in particular by situating this work in a literary context that prevents one from seeing it as a mere “rural” tale that projects the fantasies of urban and bourgeois writers onto the countryside. The book then invites us to make a series of “decodings” (“Décryptages” is the title of the second part) of *La Petite Fadette* itself, fuelled by the initial precautions. Finally, *La Petite-Fille de la Sorcière* draws a set of teachings from its reading of Sand, both with regard to the history of mentalities and political history (part III, “Beliefs and tales in history”).

The first part of the book provides a summary of George Sand’s story: the tale of identical twins, Sylvinet and Landry, who grow up with a very close relationship, which the midwife Mother Sagette, who is also something of a witch, had warned against. When they are finally separated during their adolescence, Landry is sent to another farm but escapes and flourishes, while Sylvinet pines for his twin. They come to blows over the matter. Sylvinet then disappears and Landry, sick with worry, goes looking for a witch, Mother Fadet, to ask her to help find his missing brother. In the process he meets Fadette (the witch’s grand-daughter) who saves him from almost certain drowning and with whom he falls in love. After several setbacks, Landry and Fadette succeed in making everyone accept their love, starting with Sylvinet.

Vincent Robert refuses to limit himself to what the summary of the story might suggest: a rural tale, a “pastoral story” revisited. On the contrary, Vincent Robert shows how Sand rejects a fantasised description of the countryside and makes use of her close familiarity with the rural world, having detailed past and present knowledge of the Berry countryside. He emphasises the fact that this makes her part of a still-undefined trend of “folkloristic” studies, where names such as Laisnel de la Salle and Émile Souvestre were well known to Sand. She thus carried out an epistemological shift, so to speak, by placing herself *in medias res*.

Vincent Robert shows how this attitude was part of an intellectual climate in which “popular antiquities” were flourishing around the Celtic Academy at the beginning of the century; in addition, although this is sometimes rather obscured, they experienced a certain longevity – albeit more fragmented – in former Saint-Simonian circles that George Sand frequented, as seen from the *Encyclopédie nouvelle* founded by Leroux and Reynaud. Something akin to a philosophy of the people, rooted in popular practices and knowledge, gradually infiltrated republican and socialist networks. Within this popular culture, Sand thus sought “progressive – in other words democratic and feminist – possibilities” (p. 48).

Vincent Robert shows to what extent Van Gennep, who initiated folkloristic studies in France in the 1920s, was unfair in his assessment of George Sand, whom he considered an idealist. Robert draws on the work of contemporary anthropologists, particularly that of Jeanne Favret-Saada<sup>3</sup>, to prove the perspicacity of George Sand’s view of cultural practices in the rural environment. *La Petite Fadette* can then be read as an “affair of witchcraft” (p. 80), but one in

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<sup>3</sup> *Les Mots, la Mort, les Sorts. La sorcellerie dans le bocage*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977.

which the “witch” is no longer attached to the imagery created by romanticism, becoming a category that belongs to the realm of rural political anthropology.

It is within this framework of analysis that Vincent Robert plunges into the narrative of *La Petite Fadette* in the second part of his book. He shows us how Sand makes Fanchon Fadette – “la petite fadette” – an outstanding social mediator who enables the peasant society to which she belongs (even if only marginally) to become reconciled with itself. While she does not fully integrate with that society at the end of the story, it is only thanks to the discovery of an inheritance bequeathed by her grandmother, the witch. The inheritance is as much material as it is spiritual, since Fadette, as Robert states, possesses “the knowledge”, being both “a disenchantress and a diviner” (p. 185). She has therefore inherited not only a fortune but also powers.

It is likely that the social mission that George Sand assigned to novelists and poets also made them, in their own way, sorcerers like Fadette, working to help societies become reconciled with themselves.

## **Reconciling society with itself**

It is in the latter part of this book that Vincent Robert draws more general conclusions on the social and political history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on Sand’s story (p. 189-285). In chapter X, he invites us to reconsider the image of a countryside that was undermined by superstition, insofar as popular beliefs are also a clear vector for “group cohesion” (p. 213): “What both the sorcerer and the people who had faith in his powers wanted to ward off was impotence and despair” (p. 214).

As Vincent Robert highlights, at a time when it was important specifically not to yield to one or the other, it is notable that a strategy that showed empathy for peasant beliefs should have been implemented. It was important that she should not give in to bourgeois condescension or to “dispute a priori the experience of readers or of those who could be read to at the risk of making her own message completely inaudible” (p. 235). George Sand took part in a strategy that was implemented by a group of actors who were disappointed by the conservative shift that took place in the autumn of 1848.

This dialogue between well-educated republicans and popular beliefs was not one-sided: Vincent Robert shows how the republican political culture was partly born of “the intertwining of the republican culture of the 1848 generation and witchcraft; a paradoxical association between the most archaic forms of thinking and political modernity” (p. 250). In particular, the double figure of the Republic (which may be conservative and repressive, or democratic and emancipatory) thrived on the psychology attributed to witches in rural areas, capable of making good or bad spells. Marianne herself, the symbol of the Republic, was constructed on the model

of the witch: “Ambivalent divinity arising from the depths of centuries, a magician and witch from the Midi and central France, Marianne resurfaced under the Second Republic (p. 264).

In the final chapter (Myth, history and politics), Vincent Robert gives his political interpretation of *La Petite Fadette*, which should no longer be read as “a novel of disenchantment and withdrawal” (p. 266). The fact that the book was dedicated to Armand Barbès was proof enough of this; but its application in the book still needed to be deciphered, beyond any political aim. Robert suggests that the story itself is “another way of talking about politics” (p. 267), particularly in the way it makes two heroes the founders of a “new dynasty” (p. 274) even though nothing had socially predestined them to create their own world. They thus prove that anything is (still) possible, beyond appearances – just like in stories.

Anything is possible, provided one overcomes the constraints that society forces upon itself. In *Jeanne*, who rather marks an acknowledgment of failure, George Sand has her character say “Leave us as we are. When you change us it brings misfortune upon us” (p. 299), a technique that Vincent Robert highlights a number of times. In *La Petite Fadette*, Sand tries to avoid the impasses of “forced acculturation” (p. 299). These impasses are such that one inevitably becomes confined if one ignores the fact that “one cannot transform what one does not understand, or understands wrongly, especially when one tries to do so from a position of social and cultural superiority” (p. 299).

## **George Sand’s political philosophy**

In this book we find a true unveiling of a Sandian political philosophy incorporated into fictional writing. This political philosophy is not unique to Sand, since it is also found in the work of some contemporary philosophers to whom she was often very close, but Sand makes use of the literary medium in a highly original way.

In George Sand’s writing, Vincent Robert thus gives us some insight into the mission that young witches took upon themselves: guardians of bridges and pathways, the linchpins through which social groups communicated with each other – people and worlds that a priori had nothing in common. Witches, like Marianne later on, had the potential to create a link between people and establish a society, thereby proving themselves to be an “instrument of integration” (p. 213). In this respect, this innovative book allows us to understand the complexities of nineteenth-century political culture, and republican culture in particular.

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