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REPORT

Two French Books Belonging to Katherine Mansfield

Gerri Kimber

Two French novels owned by Katherine Mansfield have recently come to light (now in a private collection): *La Femme de Trente Ans* (*A Woman of Thirty*) by Honoré de Balzac (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, c.1900), and *La Jeune Fille Bien Élevée* (*The Well-Bred Young Girl*) by René Boylesve (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, c.1919).

Both spines are backed with brown paper with autograph titles inscribed in ink by Mansfield and John Middleton Murry respectively; given the publication date of the Boylesve volume, the repairs must have been carried out post-1919. The Balzac novel has Mansfield's signature on the first inside blank page, dated and located 'at Marseilles, March 1916'. The Boylesve volume has her signature on the front wrapper. Murry has also written 'Q7' and 'P3' in pencil on the first inside blank page of each volume, as a shelf mark for his own library.

During the winter of 1915–16, Mansfield and Murry were to be found in Bandol on the French Riviera, initially at the Hotel Beau Rivage and subsequently from January 1916 at the Villa Pauline, where Mansfield started revising her story 'The Aloe', which would eventually be transformed into 'Prelude'. Her sister Chaddie had written to her there, announcing she would be passing through Marseilles in late March; thus on 20 March, Mansfield travelled to Marseilles, taking a room at the Hotel Oasis where she and Murry had briefly stayed the previous November, on their way to Bandol. From there she wrote to Murry on 21 March: 'Cooks [...] referred me to the P and O people Rue Colbert (opposite the Post office). And I found out that the Sardinia is *definitely* expected at 8.30 AM. on Thursday morning'.¹ Mansfield met Chaddie, who had sailed in from Bombay on the *Sardinia* en route to England, on 23 March. She then

rejoined Murry at Bandol. They returned to England together on 27 March, following a request by the Lawrences to move to Cornwall with them.

Conceivably, the Balzac novel might have been purchased to while away the time whilst waiting for her sister's ship to dock in Marseilles. In *A Woman of Thirty* (1842), Balzac provides a fascinating commentary on the position of women in marriage in the early 1800s. With Mansfield's own thirtieth birthday less than a year and a half away, the book's title might also have resonated with her.

In an early notebook from 1909, Mansfield had written:

'[Balzac] makes his characters so demean themselves that their slightest gesture shall be the expression of their souls. So there is more colour. It is a portrait, but the flesh covers the bones. He was trained under the severe eye of Flaubert'.²

She had read a good deal of French literature, including Balzac, as a young woman in New Zealand during 1907–8, borrowing books from the library at Parliament House in Wellington as a special concession, obtained through contacts of her father Harold Beauchamp (a Governor of the Bank of New Zealand and friend of R. J. Seddon, the then New Zealand Prime Minister). Records from this time show that she was reading Maupassant, Balzac, Mérimée and Flaubert – all in French.³

There is evidence that in 1919 Mansfield started translating a French novel into English: 'I am idiotic from translating. I am turning into English *La Jeune Fille Bien Elevée* [sic] for an American publisher, and every moment one wants to say: but it's so much better in French – do let me leave this little bit in French'.⁴ Unfortunately, there is no record of this translation of René Boylesve's novel of 1909 (a *Bildungsroman* depicting the education and subsequent marriage of a young girl called Madeleine), ever being published, or any evidence of the actual translation in her papers. Her work on the project was almost certainly abandoned, given that after page 69 the

pages are mostly uncut. By late May 1919, Mansfield was living in Hampstead with Murry in the tall, thin grey house, which they nicknamed 'The Elephant'. It is possible that her translations of Chekhov's letters, in collaboration with S. S. Kotliansky, also being worked on at this time and serialised in the *Athenaeum* from April–October 1919, coupled with her worsening health, forced her to abandon the French translation. By mid September 1919, she would be back on the Riviera, initially in Italy and then in France, once more in search of a healthy climate to assuage the symptoms of her tuberculosis.

Ultimately she would turn away from France and the French as evidenced by a letter she wrote to Ottoline Morrell on 2 February 1921:

But I mean to leave the Riviera as soon as possible. I've turned *frightfully* against it and the French. Life seems to me ignoble here. It all turns on money. Everything is money. When I read Balzac I always feel a peculiar odious exasperation because according to him the whole of Life is founded on the question of money. But he is right. It is – for the French. I wish the horrid old Riviera would fall into the sea. It's just like an exhibition where every single side show costs another sixpence. But I paid goodness knows what to *come in*.⁵

This quotation epitomises Mansfield's love/hate relationship with France and the French and her own vacillating response to the country which, nevertheless, enriched both her life and her aesthetic response in so many ways.

Notes

¹ Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984-2008), Vol. 1, p. 253, 21 March 1919. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*, followed by volume and page number.

² Margaret Scott, ed., *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Vol. 1, pp. 165-6, April 1909.

³ The enduring importance of French literature to Mansfield is well documented. See in particular my book, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁴ *Letters* 2, p. 321, late May 1919.

⁵ *Letters* 4, p. 171, 2 February 1921.