



# The Notorious Life of Gyp: Right-Wing Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle France

*Willa Z. Silverman*

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The aristocratic French writer known to her readers as "Gyp" was acclaimed by Henry James as "Mistress...of one of the happiest of forms" for her satirical dialogue-novels of fin-de-sie[accent]le Parisian society, but Octave Mirbeau declared her work "filth," as did Ezra Pound, who found it "unreadable...a sort of lady-like slither about sex." Gyp herself was as contradictory as the reactions she provoked. She wrote over one hundred novels, twenty plays, hundreds of articles, and four volumes of recollections, yet in 1908, only midway through her long career, she declared "What I insist on making explicitly clear for posterity is that I took no pleasure in writing." She denounced corsets and arranged marriages, but violently repudiated any suggestion that she might be a feminist. Politically, she was that most contradictory of contradictory figures, a right-wing anarchist. Called to testify at the trial of purported nationalist conspirators in 1899, at the height of the national disgrace of the Dreyfus Affair, Gyp defiantly chose to identify her profession not as "writer," but as "anti-Semite."

Who was this impossibly prolific, fanatically nationalistic writer and activist whose polemical novels and caricatures significantly encouraged the development of popular antisemitism in France, and who made such an extraordinary mark in an era when women were still denied the vote or access to public office? In the first critical biography ever written of this gifted and troubled woman, Willa Z. Silverman brilliantly illuminates the life and times of Gyp, otherwise known as Sibylle-Gabrielle Marie-Antoinette de Riquetti de Mirabeau, comtesse de Martel de Janville (1849-1932). Gyp's eccentricities alone make for colorful reading: she went to bed at 5 a.m. after writing all night with a goose quill dipped in violet ink, raised eyebrows with her outlandish sleeveless gowns that exposed her muscular arms, and was once doused with sulfuric acid by a mysterious veiled woman. At age fifty she fell victim to a bizarre kidnapping, and in 1932, at age 83, she retained enough of her old dramatic flair to inform one of her favorite correspondents, "I am not buried, but I am already dead, or almost, and I have come to bid you adieu." Drawing on a rich cache of previously unpublished correspondence and other documentation, Silverman probes beneath Gyp's many scandals to reveal the deep psychological and political conflicts in her make-up. A descendant of both the great revolutionary orator Mirabeau and the equally impassioned counter-Revolutionary Mirabeau-Tonneau, Gyp emerges as someone who defined herself, above all, by what she was not. Silverman shows how Gyp's anti-Semitism, anti-Republicanism, and her complicated rejection of both traditional femininity and feminism were rooted in her own self-loathing, and became the creative hatreds that drove both her life and work.

Providing a fascinating window into the deep-seated anxieties and political turbulence of turn-of-the-century France, *Gyp* is the unforgettable story of a woman writer whose passionate energy, cynicism, and cruelty left an indelible impression on her age.

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