

Forgotten Women of France 1900-1914

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a report on work in progress on the women novelists writing at the turn of the century: Miriam Harry, Jeanne Marni, Rachilde, Gabrielle Reval, Marcelle Tinayre, Renée-Tony d'Ulmès, Colette Yver *et al*, all of whom deal in different ways with the same problems, namely that the traditional description of the ideal, pure woman - the perfect *bourgeoise* - is neither satisfactory nor natural, and that a woman who refuses to diminish herself to fit that image is not necessarily "bad." Some authors explore the problem in terms of woman's sexuality and emotional development, others in terms of intellectual freedom and professional development. Examples are drawn from the works of Rachilde, Colette Yver, Marcelle Tinayre and Louise-Marie Compain.

In France, contrary to popular belief and equally contrary to the evidence supplied by the programmes of French literature across the Western world, and by histories of literature¹, there is a long tradition of women writing novels. In France, as elsewhere, however, these writers have been set aside because they have been perceived as writing for women about women's concerns, and because, for the most part, they have not been interested in playing the same literary games as men. The women novelists, whether travelling around Europe as exiles during and after the Revolution² or working in Paris at the beginning of this century, wrote to earn their living, not to win literary prizes or gain election to the *Académie Française*. The fact that, at the turn of the century, some of these women saw as many as seventy re-editions of a book in less than ten years after publication while their male counterparts took much longer

to reach a wide public³ and did nothing to redress the balance that was tipped by dictates of taste and significance governed by groups of professional *hommes de lettres*. The best selling women have been ignored by history and hence forgotten as soon as they disappeared from public view while the "malestream" has continued to enhance its own reputation beyond the grave, with the result that male writers of the period are studied almost exclusively⁴, and generations of students go through life thinking that French society was in fact as it was described by men; go through life with no thought that their subtle and sophisticated readings of major works are distorted by the fact that they remain ignorant of the women writers of the same period; women whose works were known by the men, women amongst whom the men were living and against whom they were often reacting in their writings.

The period that interests me - 1900-1914 - was a period of great feminist activity in France, and at that time there were at least two dozen well-known women novelists - only two of whom, Colette and Anna de Noailles, are read to any significant degree today. For the record the others are: Compain, Coulevain, Delarue-Mardrus, Ferval, Gyp, Harlor, Harry, Houville, Landre, Lemaître, Marbo, Marni, Mesureur, Pert, Peyre-brune, Pommerol, Rachilde, Reval, Saint-Point, Tinayre, Ulmès, Vivien, Yver⁵. These women wrote and sold enormous numbers of books (they published on average two novels every three years over twenty or thirty years each)⁶, books which must have been lying around in every bourgeois household during the formative years not only of Simone de Beauvoir, (who mentions M. Tinayre's *Hellé* in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*), Colette Audry, Violette Leduc, Hélène Parmelin *et al.* but also of Mauriac, Giraudoux, Montherlant and Sartre, and so we may assume that their influence, recognized or unconscious, was very wide indeed.⁷

They are writing about the period described in Proust and the best known works of Gide; nonetheless it has not occurred to critics that a comparison of the role of women and the relationships between men and women in the works of the male and female authors, to take but simple examples, might prove an interesting exercise. Yet when you look at both you find that the male authors tend to accept the dichotomies imposed by society on women of the period whereas the women novelists explore these same dichotomies in an attempt to discover possible ways by which women can become whole beings living integrated lives.

Novels of the period written by men tend to accept the view that the ideal wife is pliant, comforting and pure; that women with sexual desires are exciting, wicked and unmarriageable, and that professional women do not exist. Thus they support the 19th century bourgeois views on respectability and sexuality by which a wife

was expected to make of her home a literal and metaphorical nest of repose for her husband, wherein all her wishes were subordinated to his and all her spare time was spent embroidering cushions for his head and footstools for his feet.⁸ Yet this is the time when the first *lycées* for girls were being opened and staffed entirely by women teachers, when the first women doctors and lawyers began to work; the period when manuals of advice to brides suggested that wives who were interesting lovers were less likely to have husbands who kept mistresses; when women were apparently being offered the chance to develop both their intellectual and their physical needs and desires. The male writers denied both the possibilities and the problems inherent in this social change by omitting any reference at all to a shift in the status of women⁹, whereas this shift in one form or another was the central concern of the women writers.

Roughly speaking, as far as I can tell so far (and this paper is a report on work in progress), the women writers I listed all deal in different ways with the same problem, namely that the traditional description of the ideal, pure woman is neither satisfactory nor natural, and that a woman who refuses to diminish herself in order to fit that image is not necessarily bad.

(I began this project by reading works by Marcelle Tinayre because some of her novels were in the University of Victoria library. I would finish what I had to do and pick up a 300-page novel at about 9:30 p.m. and finish it before I went to bed. I did this for a week before it occurred to me to wonder why I enjoyed her work so much: they were the first novels I had ever read in French that had heroines who were emotionally rich, sexual, thoughtful, active women who had lovers, made mistakes, "fell" and who came out unpunished, competent and *alive* at the end of the book.)

In the works of some authors the development is towards expression of sexuality and a wo-

man's sense of her own body and emotions, in the works of others it is toward the physical and intellectual freedom offered by a profession, but in both cases the point of departure, explicit or implicit, from which everything is measured is the vital virtuous bourgeois wife.

Rachilde gives an extraordinary example of the sexual woman, in a novel called *La Jongleuse*¹⁰ (The Female Juggler), that has just been republished by the Editions des femmes (Paris). The story is a man's nightmare. Léon Reille is enraptured by Eliante Donalger, a Creole widow with a stepdaughter called Missy. Sometimes Eliante seems to be utterly perverse: showing Léon erotic statuettes made in her image for her husband, caressing a life-sized alabaster vase in an unmistakably sexual way, dancing as a gypsy with bared breasts; at other times she appears to be the irreproachable bourgeois widow. He never knows which *persona* will appear and in neither role does she let him touch her. She shows herself as extremely sensual and utterly self-contained - indeed the perfect symbolic representation of the male fantasy that under her impeccable exterior every woman is a castrating siren.

Missy, meanwhile, is presented as a "modern" young woman: she has a teaching diploma and rides a bicycle, and these are two overt signs of emancipation at the turn of the century. However, she is usually dressed in white, looks and behaves in a way suitable for a child rather than a young adult and is outwardly the symbol of youth, purity, and innocence, though she flirts naively with Léon, and is aided in this by Eliante.

Léon gets more and more confused but finally Eliante promises him one night of love before she returns to Martinique. She takes him to her dark room and he gets into bed. Next morning he thinks he is dreaming because she is both beside him and at the foot of the bed juggling with knives. As he realizes he has passed the

night with Missy, Eliante lets a knife fall on her throat and dies. A year later Léon and Missy, married, have a daughter.

The novel is a strange combination of a surrealist imagination and perverse eroticism used both to re-inforce the siren myths and lamia myths while using them to denounce marriage practices by which a mother's role is to ensnare a man for her daughter. The combination of the snake-like woman coldly exhibiting her sensuality and the falsely pure young girl avid for a husband is the most extreme description of female sexuality I have found so far. It is also the most deliberately symbolic and violent. Other works by other authors treat very similar themes: *Pierre Tisserand* by Jeanne Marni¹¹, for example, where Claire LePlaine loses her lover to her stepdaughter who marries him without ever knowing that he is the man Claire told her about, but most of them remain in the tradition of the realistic novel. In whatever mode they are recounted, however, these novels do not offer a description of women that bears any resemblance to those we find in novels by men of the period.

In contrast to the novels concerning the heroine's preoccupation with the flesh are a group of novels centered on intellectual women, of which the most interesting for my purposes today are Colette Yver's novels *Les Cervelines*¹² (The Brainy Ones), *Princesses de science*¹³ (Princesses of Science), and *Les Dames du Palais*¹⁴ (The Ladies of the Law Courts). All three treat the question of whether and how a woman can have both a profession and a husband. *Les Cervelines* is a psychological novel about a historian who falls in love. The other two tell the story of the marriage of a doctor and a lawyer to a doctor and a lawyer, each set in the context of a panorama of the profession.

In *Les Cervelines*, Jeanne and Marceline are young professional women. Jeanne is a doctor doing her internship at the hospital where her

“patron” Paul Tisserel falls in love with her. His love is a nuisance and an inconvenience to her professional development as, when she refuses him, she has to change hospitals, but it is no more than that to her, and her situation in the novel serves as a comparison to that of Marceline.

Marceline is a young historian who teaches at the *lycée*, gives public lectures in the evening, and dreams of going to the Middle East to do original research for a new history of the Ancient World. Teaching in a *lycée* is already suspect in 1900, because women should not work, nor should they be deprived of religion (*lycées* are lay institutions), but that a woman should make a spectacle of herself in public and be talked about, as was Marceline (for her classes were considered brilliant and half the town attended them) was totally unacceptable by traditional standards.

Paul Tisserel's friend Jean falls in love with Marceline because she is brilliant and independent, courts her and is loved in his turn. He then proceeds to try and reduce Marceline to an ordinary *bourgeoise* by a series of requests and emotional blackmail, while she struggles with the problem of reconciling her intellectual needs and passions with her desire to be loved, to love, marry, and have children. Jean, encouraged by his mother, demands that Marceline give up more and more; she acquiesces until he asks that she cease to teach altogether. This is too much and sadly but firmly she breaks their engagement.

Despite the title of the book (a title that was used as a dire warning for years after the publication of the novel), this is not the story of an obdurate feminist. Marceline is warm and feminine; her problem is that she is also intelligent, interested in her work and independent. In brief, she is a whole and integrated adult and would like to remain so. She is also lucid enough, even while in love, to see that Jean cannot bear her to remain the individual who attracted him first, and to recognize all the dishonest emotional

tricks he plays on her for what they are. As a description of male strategies of domination in courtship this novel is unsurpassed. It is no small wonder it has not been republished since 1918: it is too dangerous by half.

In the two later novels, brilliant, dedicated young women give up their independent careers to become their husbands' assistants in order to keep their husbands' love and hold their marriages together. Their compromise has been used to prove by critics that author, Colette Yver, was anti-feminist. Having read the novels, however, I do not believe that this conclusion is true. It is my feeling that she ended the novels as she did in order not to frighten away the more conservative readers after the furor caused by *Les Cervelines*, and thus to be able to go on influencing their attitude. I say this because in each novel the moral dishonesty of the husband, his egoism, jealousy and lack of real understanding of his wife's needs are so evident that what ought to be seen as the wife's return to her right and proper place in life, if Yver were indeed anti-feminist, becomes an unmistakably unjust sacrifice made by a woman under considerable social and personal pressure. She can accept the scandal of a divorce and carry on alone in the teeth of universal disapproval or she can capitulate and remain in her profession as long as she follow's her husband's lead. Yver describes the choices available and pragmatically gives to her women the best they can get in the circumstances. Her only other option would be to make them all super-human and such a stand would not be very useful in the long run. She did give us Marceline first after all.

One of the important strengths of Yver's novels and, indeed, of Gabrielle Revel and Louise-Marie Compain's novels about school teachers¹⁵, is that they give us a wide variety of women in each profession. It is not possible to simplify the issue by saying women doctors are all like Thérèse, lawyers like Henriette or teachers like Marie Fleuret in *Un Lycée de jeunes filles*. Each

author provides a dozen or more women, young, old, rich, poor, French, foreign, married, coquettish, or celibate, who are working for a variety of different reasons, with more or less success. The panorama offered is fascinating and the problems, alas, do not seem to have changed much in the last three quarters of a century.

Although most of the men in the novels I have cited are seen in a bad light - that is, that they are described from a woman's point of view rather than from the point of view of the mainstream canon and criticism - it should not be assumed that these authors are anti-men. The relationships between men and women are the major preoccupation of all the non-lesbian novels and heroines frequently compromise in order to maintain them. It is interesting to note that, the husband-wife relationship aside, the relationship of most interest for the women writers of this period is the one between father and daughter. It is from her father that a girl gets her education and through her education she attains a measure of liberty: be it independence of mind and spirit or physical freedom. We find examples in novels as diverse as Miriam Harry's *La Conquête de Jérusalem*¹⁶, Gabrielle Revel's *La Bachelière*, Louise-Marie Compain's *L'Un vers l'autre*, and Marcelle Tinayre's *Hellé*¹⁷.

Compain and Tinayre are particularly interesting in their treatment of male-female relationships because they each create a hero who struggles to understand the point of view of the woman he loves and changes his ways so that the relationship may continue.

In Tinayre's *La Rebelle*, Josanne Valentin works for a women's newspaper, looks after an ill husband who soon dies, and has a lover. When she gets pregnant, the lover leaves her more or less totally. She starts a correspondence with an author, Noël Delysle, whose book she reviews, meets him, and the relationship develops through friendship to love. Delysle can accept that she has had a lover but the thought

that the child is the lover's is a constant reminder that causes him pain. They pass a miserable six months while he struggles with his reactions to Josanne's past but he does stay and talk out his problems and suffering and they do survive.

Compain's story is even more surprising for the period. Laure Prevel discovers after about six months of marriage that her husband does not consider her his equal. He objects to things she wants to do, interferes in her relationships with other people and cancels an engagement she has made without consulting her wishes; that is, he wants her to spend Sunday afternoon with him instead of running a choir for working girls, forbids her to speak to a woman who lives with one of his colleagues without being married to him, decides she should not run the choir when pregnant - all legitimate prerogatives allowed by society to a traditional authoritarian husband. Laure finds his attitude overbearing and leaves him on the grounds of equality alone. All her family are astounded and no one gives her any support but she does not waver in her intention to live an independent life. She passes the necessary examinations and goes to teach in a teacher's training college. The winter is hard work and she softens in her attitude towards her old life.

Meanwhile, Henri, her husband, goes home to his parents for the summer and gradually, as he realizes how he is reacting to his father's way of treating his mother and sister, he begins to see what Laure was talking about when she complained of being treated as an inferior. Living by himself in a new town, teaching in a new school the next winter, he reflects, and comes to understand his wife's position. He goes to find her at Easter and there is a splendid reunion on a mountain peak in the sunshine. Each having moved towards the other's way of thinking through direct experience of the other's way of life: Laure having worked as a teacher, Henri having suffered from an excess of another's authority, the prognosis is for a happy future.

I have simplified the concerns of each of these authors enormously in order to draw attention to the number of women writing and to give a brief introduction to the concerns of the group. In terms of social history alone the novels are important for the information they offer. In terms of literary history they are essential to complete our knowledge of the period and as literature I do not think they are negligible either. The women I have referred to were competent novelists producing very readable work. They were not interested in the overt exploration of technical conceits, the structural patterning and narrative subtleties that interested their major male contemporaries; instead they offered well-crafted works, fine characterisation and interesting social panoramas. Their novels are realistic because the reality of women's lives, women's views of themselves and of their situation were changing a great deal, and the descriptions of the new status of women and the ensuing problems had not yet been explored. Their concerns were fresh and exciting, and are of great interest to us today.

It is curious to realize how little the social upheaval touched the male writers, and how different the heroines and heroes of Proust and Gide seem in the light of the relationships between Marceline and Jean (*Les Cervelines*), Josanne and Noël (*La Rebelle*), and Laure and Henri (*L'Un vers l'autre*). Further study of these women will throw light on both the female and the male attitudes and imagination at the turn of the century.

Once again the new information about women cannot just be added to what is known about men; the whole period needs to be re-thought and written about in a different way; a way that can encompass the whole spectrum of perspectives, and restore these forgotten women to their rightful place in the history of modern literature.

NOTES

1. To give but one traditional example the 4 volume *Ecrivains célèbres* published by Mazenod, Paris, 1965 includes no women at all in the 29 chapters devoted to contemporary French literature and none in the 37 chapters on 19th and early 20th century literature. The 32 chapters on earlier French literature do include Mme. de La Fayette and Mme. de Sévigné.
2. Mme. de Duras and Mme. de Genlis for example.
3. M. Tinayre's *La Rebelle* was published in 1905 by Calmann-Lévy; I have in my possession a copy of the 73rd edition printed in 1916. C. Yver's *Mirabelle de Pampelune* was published in 1917; my copy, printed the same year, is marked 9th edition. M. Proust: *Du Côté de chez Swann* (1914) was in its 2e edition in 1919 and A. Gide *Les Caves du Vatican* (1904) in its 15th edition in 1922.
4. For a different project, L. Forsyth (Western), M. Verthuy (Concordia), and I undertook a survey of the texts taught in the French departments of Canadian universities in 1983. At that time, our own courses aside, Marie de France, Mme. de la Fayette, George Sand, Colette, S. de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras were the only women listed in the responses we received and it was rare indeed for any departmental offering to include more than three texts by women in any given year. (Courses in Quebec literature are not included here.)
5. See Jules Bertaut, *La Littérature féminine d'aujourd'hui*, Librairie des "Annales politiques et littéraires," Paris, 1909.
6. See H.P. Thième: *Bibliographie de la littérature de 1800-1930*, Paris, 1933, Genève 1971, Slatkine Reprints.
7. Hypothesis based on conversations (some that I had and some reported to me) with a number of elderly, bourgeois, Parisian women.
8. Anne Martin-Fugi's book *La Bourgeoisie*, Grasset, Paris, 1983 is a mine of such information. See also Marie-Christian Perillon: *Vies des femmes*, Editions Horvath, Roanne, 1981.
9. For example A. Gide: *L'Immoraliste* (1902), R. Rolland: *Jean-Christophe*, (1908), R. Martin du Gard: *Jean Barois* (1913) and M. Proust too though *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is deliberately nostalgic.
10. The only edition listed for any text is the first edition unless there is a new edition in print now. Rachilde, *La Jongleuse*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1900, and Editions des Femmes, Paris, 1983.
11. Jeanne Marni, *Pierre Tisserand*, Ollendorf, Paris, 1907.
12. Colette Yver, *Les Cervelines*, Félix Juven, Paris, 1903.
13. Colette Yver, *Les Princesses de Science*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1909.
14. Colette Yver, *Les Dames du Palais*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1909.
15. Gabrielle Reval, *Les Sévriennes*, Ollendorf, Paris, 1900; *Un Lycée de jeunes filles*, Ollendorf, Paris, 1901; *Lycéennes*, Ollendorf, Paris, 1902; *La Bachelière*, Editions de "Mirasol," 1910; Louise-Marie Compain, *L'Un vers l'autre*, Stock, Paris, 1903.
16. Miriam Harry, *La Conquête de Jérusalem*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1903.
17. Marcelle Tinayre, *Hellé*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1899.
18. Marcelle Tinayre, *La Rebelle*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1905.