Middlebrow Matters

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CHAPTER TWO

The Birth of French Middlebrow

It is during the period known retrospectively as the Belle Époque that the conditions emerged for the large-scale production of middlebrow fiction. In the decades between the establishment of the Third Republic (1871) and the outbreak of the First World War (1914), France saw the growth of a mass reading public with an apparently insatiable appetite for the printed word, and developed the technologies and commercial infrastructure to feed this demand. In an era of economic expansion and intense modernisation, the growing middle class sought reading material that would both help to explain their changing *habitus*, by recasting it in legible form, and provide that paradoxical combination of self-recognition and escape from the boundaries of the self that characterises immersive fiction.

The literary market: lowbrow and highbrow

Literacy rates in France rose from 60 per cent in 1870 to 95 per cent in 1900,¹ in part thanks to the new Republic’s introduction of free, mandatory, universal state education up to the age of 13 (1881–82). Progress in the technologies of paper and printing enabled a massive expansion of both the press and the publishing industry, and production both responded to and further swelled the market for news and stories. By the 1900s France had four popular dailies each selling close to a million copies a day: *Le Petit Parisien, Le Petit Journal, Le Matin* and *Le Journal*, and a plethora of smaller dailies, magazines and reviews. Virtually all of these carried at least one *feuilleton* or serialised novel, for the need to

know ‘what happens next’ ensured customer fidelity; some of the weekly magazines were largely composed of serialised fiction. After publication in episode form, most of these novels were then repackaged in single volumes and marketed by one of the entrepreneurial publishers, such as Calmann-Lévy, Dentu, Fayard, Rouff or Tallandier, who flourished under the economic and social liberalism of the new Republic.

Decades previously, in 1847, writing in passionate defence of the then quite recent phenomenon of the roman-feuilleton, editor Louis Desnoyers had claimed, with perhaps more eloquence than accuracy, that novel reading overcame barriers of class and education, uniting the nation in the shared pleasure of a good story:

il n’y a plus qu’une seule classe de lecteurs […] – vous trouverez partout, dans les mains du banquier comme dans celles de l’artisan, sous les yeux de l’érudit comme sous ceux du vulgaire, les mêmes histoires et les mêmes romans. (cited in Dumasy, 1999, 146)

(there is only one class of reader […] – you will find the same stories and the same novels everywhere, in the hands of a banker and those of a workman, read equally by the scholar and the plebeian)

By the end of the century, the frontiers between categories or levels of literature were certainly porous, as the cross-class popularity of Zola, Jules Verne or, later, Allain and Souvestre’s Fantômas series (1911–13) demonstrated. But the market was also strongly differentiated, as publishers responded to readers’ diverse tastes and preferences for stories that affirmed them in their own sense of social and personal identity.

The novels that reached the largest audience were undoubtedly the popular feuilletons published in the major dailies or in wide-circulation story magazines such as Les Veillées des chaumières. Set mainly in contemporary France, but also in some instances in earlier periods or other countries (including, for example, the rugged landscapes and Gothic castles of a Walter Scott-inspired Scotland), these novels told stories of love, crime, murder, family break-up and reunion, structured to produce a series of cliff-hanging narrative moments that would leave the reader eager for the next episode. They employed the techniques of melodrama to produce a satisfying sense of a world full of meaning and emotion yet, in the end, morally coherent. Thus stories were peopled by strong, brave heroes and diabolical villains, by vile seducers and

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2 For example Les Veillées des chaumières, founded in 1877, or the publisher Jules Rouff’s Les Grands Romanciers, Journal Populaire Illustré, from 1903.
virtuous virgins, by devoted mothers often cruelly parted from their angelic children; the pathetic fallacy was extensively deployed so that weather and landscape always held figurative meaning; emotional crises translated into physical symptoms as lovelorn heroines wasted away, whilst happiness took the visible form of rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes; coincidence moved the narrative on in ways that defied credulity yet affirmed some deeper pattern in the apparently random nature of experience. These fictional worlds in which every element is thick with meaning bespeak what Marc Angenot calls a ‘frénésie sémiologique sans retenue’ (1975, 65; ‘an uncontrolled semiological frenzy’). The narrative voice is normally omniscient and addresses the reader directly, though without disturbing the fictional illusion, evoking that complicity between narrator and listener reminiscent of oral storytelling: ‘Laissons le jeune homme en observation et retournons, rue de Seine, au rendez-vous des Boulangers’ (‘Let us leave this young man to his watching and return to the cafe on the rue de Seine’) exhorts the narrator, taking the reader by the hand, in Xavier de Montépin’s bestselling La Porteuse de pain (1885, 473).

Women feature strongly in the majority of plots, largely as lovers, wives, mothers and frequently victims, as they negotiate a difficult search for personal happiness through a world of predatory seducers, husbands legally empowered to exercise a more or less brutal authority, the shame of illegitimate pregnancy and the multiple threats to beloved children – towards (for the luckier heroines) domestic security and/or salvation in the arms of a good man. Women travel a lot in the popular feuilleton, carrying the reader to many exotic or familiar locations on the way, but their road follows a painful quest for survival or reunion with a lost child or lover, rather than a joyful quest for adventure. Nathan notes that ‘L’errance féminine est bien triste alors que l’errance masculine peut être plutôt gaie’ (1990, 127; ‘Female wandering is a sad affair whereas men’s wanderings can be quite merry’). The popular feuilleton was nonetheless characterised as a feminine genre, as the only part of the newspaper likely to appeal to the female members of the family.3 It

3 In the early 1980s, Anne-Marie Thiesse interviewed survivors of the generation who remembered, as children, the part the newspaper played in working-class culture. The low cost of dailies meant that many ouvrier families bought them regularly; interviewees remembered clearly that the paper was a ‘sexually divided space’ (Thiesse, 1984, 20): news for the father, the feuilleton (normally separated by a line across the page so that it could also be cut out and collected) for the mother.
reflected the reality of readers’ lives, in terms of power relations, fears and aspirations, but heightened and dramatised the ordinary to produce the pleasures of suspense, curiosity and cathartic resolution.

At the other end of the literary spectrum, the avant-garde was turning away from story and mimesis towards a purer focus on the aesthetic. Decadence, one major current of French artistic life at the fin-de-siècle, utterly opposed the worldview of the Third Republic with its belief in democracy and progress, and thus rejected the depiction of the social fabric as a valid aim for Art. Poetry rather than narrative enabled the invention of fantastical imaginary worlds, proudly autonomous rather than imitational. Where the Decadents did use the novel form – and apart from a desire to renew the genre, the need to survive financially in a fiction-driven market ensured that they did – their narratives favoured stasis over progression, spectacle over the drive towards closure. Huysmans’s quintessentially Decadent A Rebours (1884) has its hero withdraw from a society that bores and disgusts him into a self-created, artificial world where narrative event is reduced to a series of sensory experiments. Rachilde, the only woman among the Decadents, follows her wildly transgressive heroine Raoule de Vénérande on a lengthy search for erotic and emotional fulfilment, but Monsieur Vénus (1884) is more a succession of shocking tableaux than a suspenseful story. The Symbolists, too, overlapping in both time and theme with the Decadents, prized the creative potency of language far more than its capacity to depict the texture of a changing social world, and with few exceptions preferred the less narrative genres of poetry and theatre to the novel.4

Suspicion of plot-driven narratives and of realism was shared by critics and writers who, without being fully identified with avant-garde groups or movements, saw themselves as the defenders of authentic, high-minded and challenging literature against the creeping mercantilism of the age. The novel’s development into a form of mass entertainment was accompanied by a highly critical and very public discourse of condemnation, in which the desire to defend artistic freedom was entangled with a less disinterested desire to maintain the status of a highly educated and materially privileged élite. Typical of such discourse was an article by the author and critic Frédéric Loliée (1856–1915), published in La Revue des revues in 1899 under the title ‘Les Industriels du roman populaire’. 4

4 Georges Rodenbach’s Bruges-la-Morte is one example of a symbolist novel that achieved a wide readership. See Hibbett (2013).
Loliée roundly condemned the commercial nature of *feuilleton* fiction: paid by the line, its narrative techniques, structure and implied values were determined not by aesthetic motives but by the need to maximise length and to provide sufficient thrills to keep the readers hooked. ‘Que nous sommes loin,’ he exclaimed, ‘dans cette branche de commerce, de l’antique apostolat de lettres!’ (1899, 1261; ‘How far we are, in this branch of commerce, from the ancient apostolate of letters!’). Loliée here adopts a line of attack that had echoed through the century since Sainte-Beuve’s famous 1839 polemic against ‘la littérature industrielle’. But ‘the ancient apostolate of letters’ had depended, for writers, on freedom from the need to earn a living by the pen and, for readers, on a shared level of education and access to ‘authentic’ culture. The disassociation of legitimate from illegitimate literature was also a means, in an era of increased (if far from complete) democracy, to preserve the distinction between a cultured élite and a mass audience characterised as naively open to manipulation by profiteering publishers.

However, in between the hectic plots and shameless sentimentality of the *roman populaire* and the ornate, world-weary fantasies of the avant-garde lay a great swathe of fiction that deployed the techniques of mimetic realism, used well-crafted plots to compel the turning of the pages, took its own literary quality seriously and addressed matters that concerned an implicitly middle-class readership. Middlebrow fiction proliferated in Belle Époque France. When Lucien Mulhfeld, drama critic for the Decadent-leaning *La Revue blanche*, condemned the contemporary novel as a ‘genre fatigué, éculé par des milliers d’adultères’ (1891, quoted in Colette, 1984, xvii; ‘a tired old genre, hackneyed through its over-use of adultery’), it was to the middlebrow novel that he referred, for sexual morality and the institution of marriage were certainly among the recurring preoccupations of the ‘roman de mœurs’ or ‘roman à idées’ published by the canny new entrepreneurs of the book trade and consumed by an enthusiastic public.

**Middle-class, middlebrow**

Between the establishment of the Third Republic and the outbreak of war in 1914, French society was undergoing a process of rapid change. Like other Western European countries, notably Britain, France was moving towards the sort of mobile, urbanised, consumption-driven world that would develop fully over the course of the twentieth century.
Industrial output tripled in these years, new industries grew out of developments in technology (over thirty thousand cars were produced in France in 1903); the mass production of domestic goods and clothing expanded and enhanced the retail trade (Williams, 1982), and the tertiary sector swelled, due in part to a growing civil service and the publishing trade. With these developments came the emergence of a new social stratum of managers, engineers, mid-ranking civil servants and professional men, educated, aspirational, enjoying a reasonable amount of disposable income and leisure – for the most part in the company of wives whose domestic and maternal roles were assumed to exclude them from paid employment.⁵

France was still a predominantly rural society, with only 35 per cent of the population living in towns of more than five thousand inhabitants in 1899 (Weber, 1986, 51), but cities were growing and becoming both more reachable (trains were laid on to bring visitors from the provinces to the World Fairs held in Paris in 1878, 1889 and 1900), and more visibly the sites of an ambitiously inventive modernity, with new, faster urban transport, the electrification of lighting and radical changes to the skyline (the Eiffel Tower was built in 1889), all altering the terms on which human beings negotiate space and time. Colonial expansion brought the world beyond Europe closer, making its exotic difference more perceptible whilst revealing the relativism of cultural assumptions. In a democracy, albeit one that limited citizenship to the male half of the population, the tension between the ideals of equality and fraternity and the empirical reality of social and economic hierarchy made itself felt more acutely through political conflicts, strikes and everyday issues of class etiquette. Opposition hardened too between the secular, liberal, democratic Republicans and the Catholic, conservative upper classes with their nostalgia for monarchy or empire, erupting in the violent rhetorical wars of the Dreyfus Affair in the years surrounding the turn of the century. In the torrents of fiction that poured off the presses, and especially in those ‘novels of ideas’ that addressed this protean environment from a perspective close to their own, the new bourgeoisie of the Republic sought an illuminating reflection of their own lives as well as the pleasure of imaginary adventures.

⁵ Anglophone scholarship on the middlebrow tends to focus primarily on the inter-war period, but also acknowledges the significance of the earlier, pre-First World War decades for the development of a middlebrow reading market. See for example Hammond (2006).
Many of the writers who responded to this demand soon became bestsellers, and earned the contempt of the literary élite not only for their unadventurous narrative techniques and the perceived banality of their worldview, but also for the commercial success that made them purveyors of ‘littérature industrielle’. Some of the most successful, such as Georges Ohnet, Henry Bordeaux and Paul Bourget, managed to combine compelling narratives of modernity with moral reassurance for a middle class at once thrilled and disorientated by change. The popular _feuilleton_, with its wildly eventful plots and repeated deferral of a final resolution, spoke both to its readers’ sense of the present as confused and indeterminate, and to their desire for the world to _make sense_; the middlebrow novel used shorter, more restrained plots, but these generally concluded with an all-ends-tied dénouement that similarly suggested a teleological order beneath apparent flux. If these plots were frequently spiced up with exciting depictions of modern immorality, this was generally identified with a sophisticated Parisian milieu, often with the now-marginalised upper class of the landed aristocracy, and was ultimately shown to lead to unhappiness or ruin. What triumphed in the end were traditional values, neatly aligned with those of the Republican bourgeoisie: hard work, thrift, the patriarchal family, a hierarchical social model based now not on birth or land but on the moral authority of the new ruling class. Plot devices shared with its lowbrow cousin the _feuilleton_ ensured that the _roman de mœurs_ kept its readers captivated; the moral sobriety of an Ohnet, a Bordeaux or a Bourget reassured readers that they were part of a stable order that would survive material and social transformation.

Georges Ohnet (1848–1918) made a fortune from sales of his well-crafted novels, solidly grounded in the bourgeois virtues of industry, economy and family yet leavened by romance and melodrama, of which the most successful was _Le Maître de forges_ (1882, and endlessly republished). In this story Suzanne de Beaulieu, the spoilt and selfish daughter of a ruined aristocratic family, grows to appreciate and love the virtues of a middle-class ‘travailleur intrépide’ (32): Philippe Derblay is a handsome engineer who belongs to the new technological age, a

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6 Augustin Filon, writing in the _Revue bleue_ (7 December 1889), typified this type of critical discourse: Ohnet was criticised for his ‘phrase lourde et incolore, sa morale prud’hommesque […], sa psychologie banale jusqu’au ridicule’ (quoted in Todd, 1994, 22; ‘his heavy, colourless sentences, his pompous morality […] and absurdly trite psychology’).
veteran of the Franco-Prussian war that led to the foundation of the Republic, and the tough but fair owner-manager of the family business, revered by his workforce. Plots, duels, natural disasters and near-mortal illnesses carry the story towards a romantic conclusion that confirms the moral victory of the industrious bourgeoisie. Ohnet’s ‘noisy and persistent success’ (Todd, 1994, 22) was comprehensively despised by literary critics, so that he became what Christopher Todd describes as ‘principal whipping-boy for the intelligentsia’ (1994, 21) – a role in which he was succeeded by others, and perhaps most comparably by Henry Bordeaux (1870–1963). Bordeaux’s greatest successes came just before the First World War: his bestselling La Robe de laine (1910) contrasts the artificial values of a sophisticated Parisian milieu that cherishes fashion, celebrity and the pursuit of pleasure with the authentic values of honesty, love and fidelity, represented though the idealised heroine Raymonde Cernay. Raymonde dies ‘épuisée’ (‘worn out’) by the ‘douleur morale’ (‘moral pain’) (Bordeaux, 1910, 276–77) caused by her husband’s neglect: he is an aviator, a thoroughly modern man seduced by the worldly charm of his city friends, who comes too late to a recognition of where real happiness lies. Again there is a strong depiction of a social world in flux, and a final assertion of the validity of what purport to be timeless values, here strongly associated with a rural rather than urban setting. Like Ohnet (to whom he was frequently compared), Bordeaux pleased his readership by fusing sensitivity to topical moral debates with confirmation of the rightness of normative family structures, and judicious deployment of the strategies of melodrama and romance to procure the pleasures of a compelling read. Paul Bourget (1852–1935), who combined authorship of bestselling novels with a more ‘highbrow’ intellectual career, similarly appealed to a very wide readership through tales of love and seduction that always came down on the side of marital fidelity for women (adulterous heroines may be accorded some narrative sympathy, but they are always punished) and defence of the patriarchal family. Middlebrow authors of the Belle Époque deployed familiar realist techniques to produce stories that addressed readers’ sense of a shifting social world; their appeal often lay in their capacity to balance acknowledgement of social change with affirmation of social and moral stability.
Women and the middlebrow

The association of ‘middlebrow’ or ‘littérature moyenne’ with conservative values thus has some basis in truth: particularly in periods of intense change, mainstream audiences may be drawn to stories that contain an encounter with new ideas and experiences yet provide a comforting reaffirmation of the known and familiar. However, the broad intermediary layer of narrative fiction also encompasses novels that popularise the radical, applying the craft of enjoyable plotting and empathetic characterisation to the dissemination of contestatory ideas. In Belle Époque France, the middlebrow novel of radical ideas was particularly the province of women writers. Despite their limited numbers, for it was still difficult for a woman to make her way in any profession, female writers figured among the bestselling authors of the age – and the novel became a space in which the specific implications of modernity for women could be explored, and feminist ideas represented and tested in fictional mode.

Women were of course at a severe disadvantage in the literary world, since it was still widely assumed that they were inherently less clever or creative than men, and they were largely excluded from the networks of support and influence that could further male careers. Women were tolerated, if patronised, in the low-status sector of the popular novel,7 which in any case tended to be characterised as a feminine domain (romantic, irrational, loquacious rather than eloquent), though even here they often felt constrained to employ male pen-names, so that Georges Maldague was really Joséphine, and the prolific feuilletonnistes Paul D’Aigremont and Pierre Ninous were both in fact noms de plume of Marie-Thérèse Lapeyrère. It was still harder to be accepted as a ‘serious’ writer, even in the relatively undistinguished sector of the middlebrow. However, as with the feuilleton, women made up a substantial proportion of the readership for roman de mœurs and romans à idées, and publishers recognised the advantage of offering a female perspective by including some women writers in their ‘stable’.

Middle-class women – many of them now well-educated yet still excluded from civil, legal and political rights, including the right to vote, and largely destined for a lifetime of domesticity – were particularly

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7 Though even here in relatively small numbers: only 17 per cent of Anne-Marie Thiesse’s corpus of 100 popular Belle Époque novelists were women (Thiesse, 1984, 183).
attracted to stories that staged the potentially conflicted relationship between the aspiration to personal fulfilment and the social imperative of marriage and maternity. In the press, on the stage, from the end of the century sometimes too on the cinema screen, they encountered women who had jettisoned feminine submission to take on professional roles as actresses, dancers, writers, public feminists, even lawyers or doctors, yet the weight of social opinion and deeply internalised values continued to keep the majority of middle-class women firmly within the home. Divorce was re-legalised by the Loi Naquet in 1884, and the numbers of divorces pronounced rose steeply over the following decade (Adler, 1990, 198–200), yet the difficulty of living with the social opprobrium directed at divorced women remained a weighty disincentive to those tempted to flee an unhappy marriage. The topicality of the whole gender question was intensified by a ferocious male backlash against the limited gains that women had made (for example, in 1907 married women finally gained the right to dispose of their own earned income) and against the ‘New Woman’s’ perceived rejection of traditional female roles (Maugue, 2001; Rochefort, 1995). The whole question of gender roles and identities was polarised, inflammatory and no doubt for many a source of curiosity, excitement and anxiety. The novel was a genre well-suited to the modelling of alternative emotional scenarios, and to the representation of the shifting legal and social contexts that shaped relationships. It could provide a virtual forum in which to test out the solidity of old structures and the implications of the new; placing, in Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s formulation, ‘à notre disposition des schémas de situations, des scénarios d’action, des constellations émotives et éthiques’ (1999, 47; ‘at our disposition schemas of situations, scenarios of action, emotive and ethical constellations, that are susceptible to be interiorized by immersion’ [Schaeffer, 2010, 27]). Writers such as Gabrielle Reval, Camille Pert, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Colette Yver, Daniel Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre all used novels set firmly in contemporary France to address a similar set of highly topical questions: Could a woman combine professional activity with being a wife and mother? What did the legal ascription of authority to the husband in a marriage mean in terms of everyday life and intimate relationships? How do male and female desire differ, and should both sexes be subject to the same sexual morality? What is the relationship between gender and class solidarity? And, above all, how did education and social emancipation alter the

8 See for example Holmes (1996); Rogers (2007); Waelti-Walters (2000).
terms of romance? Though all long out of print, many of these novels were very widely read and remain highly readable.

Of this group of writers, the two who had the biggest impact on both market and literary scene were Daniel Lesueur (1860–1921) and Marcelle Tinayre (1872–1948). Both became minor celebrities thanks to the commercial success of their novels and media fascination with the figure of the woman author. They shared a belief in democratic republican values and a genteel yet passionate commitment to the cause of women’s equality, both writing regularly for the feminist daily *La Fronde*, both founding members of the Prix Vie heureuse (later the Prix Femina), set up in 1904 in protest against the exclusively male nature of the Prix Goncourt. Lesueur, backed by *La Fronde*, became the first woman to be elected on to the executive committee of the writers’ professional body, the Société des Gens de Lettres. Their work received some critical praise, even if this was often barbed by the implication that for a woman to write well meant to transcend her natural limitations. In 1911 Tinayre was included in the series *Les Célebrités d’Aujourd’hui*, which generally presented its ‘celebrities’ in a favourable light, but was praised above all for being less empty-headed and narcissistic than the rest of her sex:

Madame Tinayre a conquis une place tout à fait hors de pair dans la littérature contemporaine en mettant de la gravité et de la pensée là où ne se rencontre d’ordinaire que frivolité un peu vaine ou que subjectivité trop exclusive. (Martin-Mamy, 1909, 32)

(Madame Tinayre has achieved an exceptional place in contemporary literature by bringing gravity and thought to a domain where one normally finds only frivolity and excessive subjectivity)

The market appeal of their fiction, though, meant that they were courted by publishers and the press, and even recognised by the state: both were nominated for, and in Lesueur’s case actually awarded, the prestigious Légion d’Honneur. What Lesueur and Tinayre shared, and what made them significant players in a literary market heavily dominated

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9 Lesueur became an Officier de la Légion d’Honneur in 1900 – only the fifth women to have received this honour. Tinayre was due to receive the same honour in 1908, but was deemed to have shown insufficient respect for this mark of state approval in a letter to *Le Temps*, so the award was cancelled. A whole volume of the journal *Le Censeur politique et littéraire* (18 January 1908) was devoted to the affair.
by men, was a capacity to recognise and address the tension points in contemporary women’s lives, and to do so through page-turning plots that blended melodrama with serious exposition of topical issues. They have both virtually disappeared from literary history, their work almost entirely out of print and their names unknown except to a tiny number of mainly anglophone feminist critics.¹⁰ This is the first discussion of their work to situate them as important middlebrow novelists.

Daniel Lesueur (Jeanne Loiseau, 1860–1921)

Lesueur’s career situates her squarely in the middle of the literary hierarchy in the sense that she published across the spectrum from highbrow to lowbrow. Born Jeanne Loiseau, the daughter of a cultured but impoverished family, she benefited from a good education for a girl of her generation, and was able to support herself by teaching (in England as well as France) until in the 1880s she began to make a living as a writer. Her first publication, a volume of poetry in 1882, won the French Academy’s prestigious Grand Prix de Poésie, but it was the series of romans de mœurs and romans à idées begun in 1883 that made her name, albeit an assumed name since, on her editor’s advice, Loiseau now adopted the male pseudonym by which she would be known for the rest of her career.¹¹ From 1900, the ‘novels of ideas’ were interspersed with equally successful romans populaires, first published in serialised form in the big popular dailies Le Petit Parisien and Le Petit Journal. Though Lesueur was well aware of her different readerships, and versatile in narrative style, there is in fact an interesting overlap between the novels addressed to a predominantly bourgeois readership and those aimed, through the pages of the mass-market dailies, at readers she once metonymically described as hackney cab drivers and errand girls.¹²

¹⁰ Tinayre has received some critical attention in the past 20 years or so. See notably Holmes (1996; 2006); Grenaudier-Klijn (2004); Rogers (2007). To the best of my knowledge, apart from Yves-Oliver Martin (cited below) I am the only critic to have written on Lesueur, whose work has been totally out of print since not long after her death in 1921. See Holmes (2005; 2006; 2011; 2012).

¹¹ In a letter to Marguerite Durand (undated, dossier in the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand) Lesueur describes how her first publishers ‘feared for the effect that a woman’s name would have on sales’.

¹² In her response to the 1899 survey conducted by Frédéric Loliée (1279), Lesueur differed from the majority of respondents in her positive view of the
Since both types of novel were published post-serialisation by the ‘literary’ editors Alphonse Lemerre (publisher of the Parnassian poets) and Plon (who also published Paul Bourget), it also seems likely that their readerships overlapped, or at least that middle-class readers also enjoyed the more colourful page-turners once these were presented in a well-bound volume.

For Yves Olivier-Martin, one of the very few critics to have taken Lesueur’s contribution to the novel genre seriously, her achievement lay in a capacity to inject each of her favoured subgenres with the best qualities of the other, by bringing deft, lively plotting to the roman à idées, and stylistic elegance and psychological acuity to the roman populaire (Olivier-Martin, 1980, 219). Her insistence that the much-reviled roman feuilleton was a genre from which its more respectable counterparts had something to learn went radically against the tide of literary opinion: among the novelists surveyed by Frédéric Loliée in 1899 for their opinions on ‘littérature industrielle’, she was the only one to insist that writing a feuilleton required ‘genius’ (Loliée, 1899, 29); ‘un bon roman populaire réclame autant de réflexions et d’observations que deux ou trois romans psychologiques ou sociaux’ (‘a good popular novel demands as much thought and observation as two or three psychological or social novels’) she told Ernest Tissot in an interview published in 1911 (cited in Olivier-Martin, 1980, 221). Lesueur was ‘middlebrow’ both in the sense of appealing to a large middle layer of the population, and in the sense of deliberately bridging the ‘brows’. To demonstrate this, given the size of the overall corpus (she published some 25 romans de mœurs and five double-volume romans populaires), I will focus on three novels published in the first decade of the twentieth century. Le Cœur chemine (1903) is a roman de mœurs published by Lemerre; Nietzscheéenne (1907), as the title announces, is better described as a roman à idées, and was published by Plon after serialisation in the glossy, self-consciously ‘modern’ weekly L’Illustration. The third is a roman populaire, Calvaire...
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de femme (also 1907), first published in daily episodes in Le Petit Parisien before Lemerre produced it as a novel in two volumes.

The two more obviously ‘middlebrow’ novels are set among the affluent bourgeoisie of Belle Époque France, their contemporary nature underlined by plots that hinge on new technologies, industrial relations (strikes for better working conditions or higher pay were a regular occurrence throughout the early 1900s), specific events such as the Exposition universelle of 1900, and the dramatisation of topical issues and ideas, including feminism. The heroine of Le Cœur chemine, Nicole Hardibert, is married to a factory owner whose rationalism, scientific credentials (he is an engineer by training) and paternalism towards both workers and women make him a model of Third Republic masculinity. What drives the plot is the conflict between Nicole’s dutiful affection for this dry but devoted husband, and her passion for Georget, a handsome poet, but her moral and emotional drama is inseparable from its sociopolitical context: Nicole’s unhappiness in her marriage is caused not so much by personal incompatibility as by social structures that exclude her from any useful activity and legitimise her husband’s assumption of his own superiority. Nietzscheenne also places modern industry at the centre of the plot: its hero Robert Clérieux is a young, married owner of a car-manufacturing firm, struggling to impose his authority on a militant workforce and to reconcile ethical values with commercial success. His finest ally and guide in this is a woman, the Nietzscheenne of the title: Jocelyne Monestier is a single woman socially ostracised because of her rejection of conventional sexual mores, who finds fulfilment in charitable social work, notably the organisation of good social housing for workers. Jocelyne also finds moral support for her own ethic of energy, will and self-determination in the fashionable philosophy of Nietzsche. Unable as a woman to intervene directly in public life, she inspires Robert with advice and transmits to him her Nietzschean values. Thus the novel popularises a philosophy that had a profound, if often contradictory impact on contemporary French intellectual life, at the same time as it addresses

13 In Zarathustra in Paris: The Nietzsche Vogue in France 1891–1918, Christopher E. Forth recounts how, from the 1890s on, Nietzsche’s philosophy was widely reviewed and debated in France, albeit ‘reconfigured and reproduced in a range of very different and often mutually exclusive forms, appearing at once as a friend of anarchists and socialists, neoroyalists, and even feminists’ (6). Lesueur was not alone in seeing in Nietzschean thought a voluntarist doctrine that chimed with feminism: Gérard d’Houville’s L’Inconstante and Anna de Noailles’s La Nouvelle
topical social questions: What are the responsibilities of a republican employer to his workforce? What should be the ethics of entrepreneurial capitalism? What role can there be for a clever, energetic woman in a society that excludes her from political and economic life?

These are novels of ideas, but they are also very much novels, and it is their creation of an absorbing virtual world that keeps the pages turning and brings the social and philosophical debates to life. Each deploys the structure of romance, so that what is at stake in the narrative is above all the possibility of love. Both novels open with the meeting of hero and heroine, follow the development of an intense mutual passion, and close with the lovers’ separation – for like most feminist romans à idées of the period, Lesueur’s novels affirm the non-viability of happy heterosexual love in a society based on sexual inequality. The life-enhancing force of reciprocated love is vividly evoked: for Nicole, the recognition of a passionate affinity with Georget means ‘la soudaine mise en mouvement de toutes les forces endormies: force de sentir, force d’imaginer, force de se prodiguer’ (Lesueur, 1903, 134; ‘the sudden quickening of all her dormant strength: of feeling, imagination and energy’), and a renewed awareness of ‘la puissance de vivre et la saveur de la vie’ (Lesueur, 1903, 134; ‘the potency and flavour of life’); in love with each other, both Jocelyne and Robert feel themselves ‘pénétrés par une exaltation de toutes leurs facultés actives, par un héroïsme sans but’ (Lesueur, 1908, 173; ‘intensely aware of all their active faculties, and suffused with a sense of aimless heroism’). This elated energy contrasts with the mere sense of duty fulfilled that characterises conventional marriage in Lesueur’s work. In both novels, a marriage based on normative gender roles – an older, authoritative husband active in the public world and a docile, domesticated wife – acts as a negative foil to the central romantic relationship that combines intellectual affinity with intense and equal desire. Nicole is an ‘irréprochable épouse et fière de l’être’ (Lesueur, 1903, 17; ‘irreproachable wife and proud to be so’) but she feels herself patronised and belittled by her husband’s belief in the inferiority of her sex, and isolated by her confinement to the private sphere. Robert is married to a sweet but empty-headed wife, Lucie, whose ‘cervelle

Espérance (both 1903) also featured Nietzschean heroines, and contributed to the popularisation of his philosophy for a mass market that so dismayed the avant-garde. ‘That the Nietzsche vogue was being propagated by so many women writers explains the reservations of many male critics, for whom best-selling novels were the stuff of effeminate and vulgar mass culture’ (Forth, 2001, 135).
d’oiseau’ (Lesueur, 1908, 211; ‘bird-brain’) and ‘corps de poupée frêle’ (Lesueur, 1908, 211; ‘frail, doll-like body’) caricature the contemporary ideal of passive, domesticated femininity, and with whom he can share nothing of his life beyond the home and family. It is the lovers’ point of view that predominates, so that the reader’s sympathies are wholly engaged with their desire to live out a more intense, fulfilling and egalitarian form of love – even as the narrative warns of the scandal and misery that would result from such defiance of social law.

The techniques that draw the reader into the fictional world include those of popular fiction. Though ideas and values are discussed directly, through dialogue and the narrator’s commentary, they are also given more graphic form through characters and plot. In *Le Cœur chemine*, the brutal husband of Nicole’s cousin Berthe serves to underline the latent violence in Hardibert’s more restrained misogyny; the same character is also revealed to be an industrial spy, a treacherous friend and a ruthless agent provocateur, so that evil is neatly concentrated in a single protagonist. The same occurs in *Nietzscheenne*, where Sorbelin is at once Robert’s perfidious colleague, a cynical manipulator of the workforce and the blackmailer who threatens to destroy Jocelyne’s hard-won social standing for a second time. In secondary characters, psychological complexity is sacrificed to clear moral patterning and colourful, conflictual plotting. Ideas are also dramatised in action: thus the dénouement of *Nietzscheenne* has Jocelyne intercept Sorbelin’s bullet intended for Robert, so that she dies bravely for love, at once resolving the impasse of the plot and reaffirming her values of courage and self-determination.

Place too functions immersively, drawing on the reader’s existing bank of images to provide a compelling geography of the fictional world, and at the same time to intensify emotion. If the novels’ contemporary realism sets the majority of the action in Paris and its suburbs, and in the everyday settings of homes and factories, each text also has its more affectively charged or poetic spaces. Central to the emotional geography of *Le Cœur chemine* is Bruges, a totemic city for the Symbolists and Decadents made famous by Georges Rodenbach’s well-publicised 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte* (first serialised in *Le Figaro*) as a site of melancholy beauty associated with death and the denial of reality.  

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14 The Belgian Symbolist Georges Rodenbach published *Bruges-la-morte* in 1892, first in serialised form in *Le Figaro* and then in an edition illustrated by photographs with Flammarion. Its hero goes to Bruges after the death of his wife,
the novel, thanks to a fortuitous accident, Nicole and Georget come to spend a few days together in Bruges, characterised as a ‘cité nostalgique’ (Lesueur, 1903, 74) suffused with the past, and as a feminine space at the heart of which stands the Béguinage, traditionally a place of refuge for women who wished to escape the path of marriage and maternity. Here, outside the structures of both patriarchy and intensifying modernity, the two achieve mutual sincerity and a brief shared happiness. At the end of the novel, after their final separation, Nicole withdraws to Bruges as the scene of her past happiness, but now the extra-temporal dimension of the city comes to signify not a refuge, but a failure to find a place or role in modern life: ‘Et son âme se sent la sœur de cette ville, qui recèle tant de passé [...] Âme complexe et trop chargée de souvenirs séculaires, vainement elle se cherche en de subtiles brumes …’ (Lesueur, 1903, 375; ‘And she felt her soul to be the sister of this city full of the past [...] A complex soul, laden with the memory of centuries, seeking its reflection in the subtle mists …’). In Nietzschéenne, it is in the Swiss Alps that the lovers acknowledge both their love and its impossibility. The Matterhorn (in French ‘Le Cervin’), like Bruges, was a place that evoked readymade images for the reading public in the early 1900s: first climbed in 1865 at the cost of four deaths, it was frequently in the news as mountaineers attempted to conquer its different faces, and the railway link to Zermatt also made it a holiday destination popularised through press advertisements and posters. In the novel, the wild beauty of the snowy mountains corresponds to the lovers’ shared elation and sense of power; as the sun drops, the shadow of the imposing Mount Cervin blots out the light and gives sensory form to the premonition of inevitable separation: ‘L’ombre du Cervin s’étendait sur le plateau [...] devenu livide. Et elle était mortellement froide, cette ombre, projetée par le sépulcral écran de granit’ (Lesueur, 1908, 266; ‘The shadow of the mountain spread across the livid, darkening plain [...] And the shadow was deathly cold, projected by the sepulchral screen of granite’).

Lesueur’s fiction thus invites readers into a graphically imagined fictional world charged to some extent with the ‘semiological frenzy’ finding its ‘caractère mortuaire’ (‘funereal atmosphere’) suited to his mourning, and there seeks to relive his love for her through a woman he meets who closely resembles her, thus denying the reality of time and history. Both serialisation and the unusual device of the photographs made it one of the better-known Symbolist texts, and Bruges entered the collective imagination as a morbidly lovely city outside the normal course of modern life.
of the popular *feuilleton*, but also reflecting (and reflecting upon) the social tensions and ideological debates of its time. Unlike that of the equally middlebrow Bourget or Bordeaux, though, her depiction of social change celebrates the new and welcomes modernity, seeing in technological innovation and the challenge to ‘natural’ laws that this implies an emancipatory force that might translate into social freedoms. On class and labour relations, Lesueur is merely in tune with the liberal but paternalist values that dominated centre-left thinking under the Third Republic (her Nietzschean heroine seeks to mould Robert into a strong but fair capitalist employer, not to contest his right to ownership), but on the politics of gender she is quietly oppositional, and carries her readers with her. Modernity is celebrated on the premise that women must be an integral part of the emerging new social world. This in turn means a challenge to the hegemonic ideology of gender that saw masculinity and femininity as the natural expression of biological sex and as polarised, complementary opposites.

Both *Le Cœur chemine* and *Nietschéeenne* represent new technologies in terms of energy, mobility and progress. Unusually, for novels that conform to the conventions of romance, each gives industry a central place in the plot: in *Nietschéeenne* particularly, new car designs are described in appreciative detail, and the dénouement hinges on a complex financial speculation concerning the viability of manufacturing artificial rubber! Like the modernists, indeed anticipating their celebration of technology and speed (Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto was published in *Le Figaro* in 1909, Apollinaire’s *Alcools Poèmes 1898–1913* in 1913), albeit in a more prosaic key, Lesueur attributes to machines an exhilarating force and a sort of everyday poetry. In Robert’s factory, ‘L’air bourdonnait. Une vibration se propageait à travers les murs, les vitres, les planchers, tout frémissant d’une vie secrète’ (Lesueur, 1908, 27; ‘The air throbbed. The vibration of a secret life quivered through the walls, the windows, the floors’); cityscapes show a Paris lit up by electricity and by the animation of crowds – ‘la vie nocturne et printanière de Paris […] palpitait dans l’îlot d’aveuglante lumière que faisaient les globes électriques du café. Mille visages passaient, merveilleusement animés’ (Lesueur, 1908, 274; ‘the night life of Paris in the springtime […] pulsed in the island of blinding light around the electric globes of the cafe. Thousands of faces passed by, wonderfully alive’); the Exposition universelle in *Le

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15 The attribution of a thrilling energy to new technologies also recalls Zola’s hugely popular novel of the steam train, *La Bête humaine* (1890).
Cœur chemine transports Parisians through space and time, not just in imagination but by providing exotic sensory experience, ‘des lambeaux de musiques barbares’ (‘scraps of savage music’) mingle with ‘d’insolites parfums [qui] suggèrent des autrefois et des ailleurs’ (Lesueur, 1903, 211; ‘strange perfumes that evoke distant times and places’).

What is exceptional about Lesueur’s depiction of modernity, though, is that it quietly affirms, in different ways, that this exciting world must belong to women as well as men. Nicole’s story shows the negative consequences of women’s exclusion: resigned to her dominated role, she loses both husband and lover, and ends the novel in self-imposed exile in Bruges. Jocelyne exemplifies a positive view of women’s potential: her energetic grasp of economics, industrial production and management is depicted as far superior to that of the male characters, and if her death suggests that there is as yet no place for such a woman, the strong implication is that there ought to be. The characterisation of Jocelyne constitutes Lesueur’s most explicit denunciation of normative thinking on sex and gender, for what draws Robert to this woman is not so much her beauty as her ‘clarté intellectuelle’ ‘sûr jugement’ and ‘vaillance’ (1908, 313; ‘clarity of mind’, ‘sureness of judgement’, ‘courage’), all qualities strongly associated with masculinity, whereas he, the industrial leader, is ‘un peu féminin par des subtilités de sentiment, et aussi par des timidités de caractère’ (1908, 313; ‘a little feminine in his delicacy of feeling and his timid character’). Their mutual attraction, in fact, reverses the binary logic that governed hegemonic views of gender: ideal masculinity, in the deeply patriarchal culture of the Third Republic, was rational, authoritative and brave while femininity was emotional, submissive and in need of protection. Nietzscheenne suggests that the future might require a less rigid distribution of human qualities, and that romantic attraction may already tend to undermine normative gender roles.

In fact, Lesueur’s novels consistently question contemporary ideals of masculinity. Her plots stage successful patriarchs, but then expose not only their moral limitations but also their lack of sexual appeal for her heroines. Where the conjugal attentions of her handsome, forceful husband produce in Nicole only a mixture of revulsion and embarrassment – sex is ‘un devoir, en attendant que ce soit la corvée’ (Lesueur, 1903, 54; ‘a duty, that would soon become a mere chore’) – the younger, softer Georget (even his name is a diminutive) provokes the most intense desire. It is not Nanders, the mature, virile captain of industry with his leonine charm – ‘sa nuque, mouvante comme sous
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l’arrogance d’une crinière, ignorait le poids des années’ (Lesueur, 1908, 68; ‘his neck moved as though beneath a lion’s mane, and seemed to defy the weight of years’) – who attracts Jocelyne – indeed, she recoils from his embrace with a ‘sursaut farouche’ (67; ‘wild start’) – but rather Robert, the tentative, self-doubting young man whose social place is not yet assured, and with whom a relationship of equality thus remains possible.

As Olivier-Martin puts it, ‘le féminisme irrigue de son flot sûr et vénémente les intrigues de Lesueur’ (1980, 26; ‘the forceful current of feminism nourishes Lesueur’s plots’) – and does so, he adds, in both of her ‘manières’ or types of novel. The more straightforwardly ‘popular’ novels share the values and to some extent the narrative techniques of the romans à idées, though the dosage of melodrama in proportion to realism is increased, and the feuilletons carry the reader further from the grind of the everyday to exotic places and a thrilling density of action.

The plot of *Calvaire* is more diffuse, heterogeneous and eventful than that of *Le Cœur chemine* or *Nietzschéenne*, its central thread not romance but, following what had become a familiar feuilleton trope, the search for a lost child. Solange de Herquancy is the wife of an eminent diplomat, the domineering and unfaithful Maxime; she has a daughter by him, but also a secret love child born of her relationship with the sculptor Pierre Bernal. The story’s powerful opening has Solange alighting from a train at a deserted suburban station and walking alone through the twilight towards a rendezvous with her lover, tailed by three masked figures in a car who then set upon Bernal and knife him so that he dies before Solange’s eyes. The novel then follows her quest both for vengeance and to find the little son, Etienne (known as Tiennot), confided by Pierre to the safekeeping of unknown friends. By the end of the novel, mother and son are reunited and justice has been done, but the journey to this ending has involved the following of mysterious clues, several more violent deaths, narrative shifts to the parallel adventures of Tiennot and the woman who is caring for him, a lengthy sojourn in Rome, and subplots both comic and tragic, all woven together with what Olivier-Martin calls Lesueur’s ‘habilité dans l’art de nouer une intrigue et de provoquer l’intérêt’ (1980, 224; ‘skill in the art of constructing a plot and keeping the reader absorbed’).

A realist concern with modern technologies is less evident in *Calvaire*, but the setting is unmistakably contemporary and aspects of modernity play a vital role. Solange, reluctantly exiled to Rome when her husband becomes the French ambassador to Italy, appreciates the city’s classical
beauty but is more at ease in the urban bustle of Paris, preferring ‘l’aspect des rues, le son des voix, le parfum de l’air parisien’ (‘the look of the streets, the sound of the voices, the smell of Parisian air’) to the ‘torpeur’ (1907, I, 172; ‘torpor’) of Rome. The speed and mobility of modern transport has crucial narrative functions: the car plays a more sinister role than in Nietzsche’s, being the instrument of two murders, but fast trains enable Solange to travel to rendezvous with her lover, as well as to criss-cross the country in the quest to find her son. Like Jocelyne, Solange is well adapted to a modern urban world, and though she is in some senses a more conventional heroine (as a wife and devoted mother), she also shares Jocelyne’s ‘New Woman’ qualities: both are intrepid, emotionally controlled and courageous. Both also suffer severely for their failure to abide by the normative codes of sexual behaviour. The single Jocelyne is socially ostracised because she is known to have willingly lost her virginity to a fiancé who subsequently cancelled the marriage; Solange’s adulterous affair and illegitimate maternity are idealised in Calvaire as the expressions of authentic love, but they render her legally helpless before a husband whose brutality and ruthlessness are empowered by the law. As Solange reflects, ‘Ne suis-je pas sa proie, sa chose? Il a la loi pour lui. Seul au monde, il avait le droit monstrueux de frapper Pierre’ (Lesueur, 1907, 20; ‘Am I not his prey, his thing? He has the law on his side. He alone had the monstrous right to strike Pierre down’). Through sympathetic characterisation, and by making transgressive heroines the principal focalisers of the action, both novels situate their readers on the side of feminist claims for equality in law, in access to public roles and in sexual morality.

As in the romans à idées, but more blatantly, secondary characters and subplots are deployed strategically to reinforce meanings. Solange’s plight finds an echo in that of the servant Adeline who, as Tiennot’s wet nurse, quite literally becomes her maternal double. Adeline has struggled to survive with her illegitimate daughter and has also been the victim of male violence: despite the difference in social class, the two women experience ‘une sourde sympathie’ (Lesueur, 1907, I, 127; ‘a strong, unspoken sympathy’) and form a staunch alliance. The friend to whom Pierre entrusted Tiennot before his death, and who cares for him throughout Solange’s lengthy search, is Fanny Cornet, a single woman in her late seventies. Fanny forms an interesting contrast to the often caricatural figure of the prim ageing spinster: she is a clever, courageous, kind woman, academically brilliant – ‘bachelière et licenciée ès sciences, la première de toutes les Françaises’ (Lesueur, 1907, I, 214; ‘the first
Frenchwoman to have gained a degree in science) – but like Jocelyne in *Nietzscheenne* she is excluded from those positions for which her abilities fit her (‘les ronds-de-cuir du Ministère la réélégèrent pour toujours à la salle d’attente’ [I, 214; ‘the pen-pushers at the Education Ministry consigned her forever to the waiting room’]) and reduced to giving ill-paid private lessons to support herself, her sister and Tiennot. Fanny is generous, spirited and certainly not militant, but when she discovers that her sex renders her ineligible to adopt the child for whom she is already in practice the sole carer, even she is incredulous and indignant: ‘Alors moi qui ai nourri cet enfant pendant cinq ans, moi qui l’ai élevé, qui l’ai instruit, moi qui lui ai servi de mère […] je ne puis pas être sa tutrice?’ (Lesueur, 1907, II, 133; ‘So even though I have fed this child for five years, brought him up and taught him, acted as his mother […] I can’t be his guardian?’).

Strongly drawn secondary characters are equally important in the novel’s critique of patriarchal masculinity. Solange’s aristocratic husband Maxime has a more proletarian double: his loyal servant and accomplice, Gervais, is a rapist, wife-beater and murderer who acts out in more graphic form the latent violence of Maxime’s marital power. Gervais’s evil deeds eventually drive him mad with guilt and he dies dramatically, flinging himself from a high cliff, thus foreshadowing Maxime’s own remorseful death by duel at the story’s end. But the wider palette of the popular novel encompasses comedy, and *Calvaire de femme* also employs humorous caricature in its depiction of masculine authority. Otto Perkowicz is a lion tamer, a hyper-virile figure whose strength, courage and charisma leave the women in his audience weak with desire. Even his female lions are subdued by his powers of seduction, and the novel’s *femme fatale*, the proud and ruthless Principesa di Trani, takes him for her lover. The novel’s narrator, however, lays a trail of clues to suggest that Otto is a charlatan whose heroic masculinity is more performed than real, using bathos for example to describe his dressing room ‘qui sentait le fauve, le chypre et l’odeur chaude des fers à friser’ (Lesueur, 1907, II, 49; ‘which smelt of wild animals, sandalwood and the warm odour of curling tongs’). In the end Otto the Polish aristocrat turns out, in a neat drawing together of diverse threads of plot, to be in fact Victor Grouille, the long-lost son of the kind if crusty concierge of the house where Fanny Cornet lodges: his entire persona was a performance. The broad-brush conventions of the *feuilleton* allow Lesueur to parody the virile hero, and thus to combine entertainment with mild but telling social critique.
Like her novels of manners, Lesueur’s popular fictions are highly effective examples of the subgenre to which they primarily belong. Her two modes of writing share many themes, narrative devices and qualities, and enunciate in different but overlapping ways the same Lesueurian view of the world: open to modernity, feminist in her acute awareness of the damaging effects of sexual inequality, life-affirming in the energy and verve of her plots, and the space she offers for the reader’s ‘imaginative transportation’ (Ryan, 2001, 133) to a fictional world. Brave and independent heroines act as avatars for the female reader’s imaginary journeys through a varied geographic and social landscape and a diverse set of emotions, from passionate love to anger and resentment at their own subordinate status, to resignation, or an obstinate yet pragmatic determination to make the best of their situation. These are not radical novels, formally or politically, but their overall effect for readers surely mixed pleasure with what Schaeffer calls the ‘modelling’, through immersion, of a critical, engaged sense of their own agency as women in an age of developing modernity. Lesueur’s own refusal to acknowledge any qualitative distinction between middlebrow and popular fiction was probably echoed in her middle-class readers’ public consumption of the one, and more surreptitious devouring of the other.

Marcelle Tinayre (1871–1948)

Like Lesueur, Marcelle Tinayre’s career as a writer was motivated by an inextricable mix of literary aspiration and financial need. The daughter of a female primary school teacher, she too benefited from an unusually good education for a girl of her times, passing the baccalaureate in 1888 when this remained a rare feat for women. The same year, aged 17, she married the engraver Julien Tinayre and gave birth to four children over the following decade. Engraving was a profession increasingly threatened by photography, and the family’s finances were fragile. Tinayre began to earn money by writing articles, reviews and stories for the press, achieving her breakthrough success in 1897 when her novel *Avant l’amour*, published by the Mercure de France, achieved high sales and some critical acclaim. She went on to publish 22 books, mostly novels but also including essays and travel writing, whilst continuing her work as a journalist and columnist.

As an author, Tinayre can be compared to Lesueur in several ways. She too occupied the upper ranks of that army of writers who fed the public’s
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appetite for fiction in the Belle Époque: many of her books achieved bestseller status, and she was also reviewed and reported with some respect as a serious middlebrow writer. She shared Lesueur’s moderate republican feminism, writing for the feminist daily *La Fronde* from its inception in 1897 and sitting on the all-women jury of the Femina book prize. Her fiction appealed to the same mainly female – and probably mainly middle-class \(^{16}\) – readership, depicting the contemporary age from a female perspective, keeping the pages turning through the narrative tension of the love story, pursuing what Jennifer Waelti-Walters calls a ‘systematic study of the psychology of love’ (1994, 68). Her stories work mimetically and immersively: everyday life in Belle Époque France is the context; plots are patterned to alternate tension and release; though these are ‘novels of ideas’ in which characters verbalise and debate the issues at stake, they also dramatise their themes through event and colourful characterisation, with secondary characters more explicitly functional than the more nuanced principals (in *La Rebelle*, for example, the devout aunt is named Mlle Miracle, whilst the supportive older feminist is Mlle Bon).

The conflict at the heart of most Tinayre narratives is that between the heroine’s desire for self-realisation through professional or creative achievement, and her desire for love. In several Tinayre novels, an honourable if unconventional young woman struggles to reconcile a sense of personal integrity with an intense romantic relationship with a man. The search for a suitable hero who can accommodate a woman’s freedom combines with the question, How should a modern woman live? Thus Hélène, eponymous heroine of an 1898 novel, is brought up by an unconventional guardian to consider herself the intellectual equal of her male peers, and must then negotiate her (in the novel’s terms) authentic values against the glittering pleasures of fashionable Parisian society, and confront the prevailing belief that cleverness in a women is sexually and romantically unappealing. Hélène’s dilemma is resolved in the arms of a strong, enlightened socialist man with whom she can combine egalitarian comradeship and conventional romance: in Tinayre’s case, feminist romances do sometimes end happily.

The novel for which Tinayre is best known, and which probably had most impact at the time of its publication, is the 1905 *La Rebelle*.\(^ {17}\) Here

\(^{16}\) Though see note 17.

\(^{17}\) *La Maison du péché* (1902) is also often cited as Tinayre’s *chef-d’œuvre*. In this novel a young hero brought up in the austere Jansenist current of Catholicism
Tinayre amplified the plot of *Hellé* with an older, more experienced and radical heroine and a broader social panorama. Josanne is unhappily married as the story begins to a sickly, irascible husband whom she treats with devoted care, but she has also taken refuge from this unsatisfying relationship in a romantic affair with Maurice who, unbeknownst to anyone but the couple, is actually the father of her son. However, Maurice, despite his charm, is a selfish young man whose concern for his own future takes precedence over commitment to his lover. As the novel opens, Josanne is waiting in the rain for his delayed arrival at their rendezvous, tired after a long day at the women’s magazine where she works as general factotum. As she waits outside a bookshop, she idly leafs through a book entitled *La Travailleuse*, an essay on women and work by one Noël Delysle, and finds that it articulates the dilemma of her own life with surprising eloquence. She soon writes to the author to express her appreciation, correspondence ensues then later, after her husband’s death and the end of the affair with Maurice, a meeting: this is the beginning of the romance that will drive the plot. The couple must negotiate a difficult path through Noël’s jealousy of Josanne’s past and the complexities of reconciling freedom, motherhood and love, but they end the novel in each other’s arms.

Like Lesueur’s heroines, Josanne is characterised as a woman of her age whose situation in many ways typifies that of her readers. Josanne’s ordinariness is emphasised: she is dark, slim and pretty, but pretty in an unexceptional way that makes her a woman of her times, with a ‘visage de moderne Parisienne’ (Tinayre, 1905, 39; ‘the face of a modern Parisienne’) and a talent for dressing stylishly on a very low budget; she is a good housewife who takes pleasure in her own domestic skills and enjoys the sociability of shopping at the market; she is a devoted mother. The marked normality of Tinayre’s heroine positions the reader with her as she combines these conventional feminine virtues with more transgressive forms of behaviour. Josanne is the family breadwinner, still a relatively rare situation in the middle classes, and her work means that she travels independently around the city and meets a wide variety of interesting people.

is torn between loyalty to his religion and love for an emancipated young artist: the struggle kills him. The wide currency of *La Rebelle* is confirmed by one of Anne-Marie Thiesse’s interviewees, born in 1899, who recalled reading this ‘scandalous’ novel as a teenage factory worker: ‘Ce roman parlait de l’émancipation de la femme, et il m’avait beaucoup plu’ (Thiesse, 1984, 66; ‘It was about women’s emancipation, and I loved it!’).
of people in her own right rather than as a wife or mother. Moreover, as the novel soon reveals, she has a lover and a child conceived outside marriage, and the central plotline will see the development of a second extra-marital love affair. ‘Rebellious’ behaviour is normalised: readers would need no prior subscription to feminist values to sympathise with Josanne’s search for love, security for her child and the satisfaction of engagement with the wider society.

For as in Lesueur’s fiction, the France portrayed in La Rebelle is the secular, urbanising, proudly modern France of the Belle Époque Republic. Whereas male middlebrow writing tended to identify women with rural settings, to which male characters might retreat from the more frenetic life of the city (as in Ohnet’s Le Maître de Forges or Henry Bordeaux’s La Robe de laine), Tinayre’s heroine belongs in the bustle of Paris. Josanne’s stay in the quiet provincial town of Chartres, after her husband’s death, soon provokes restlessness and the clear recognition that she prefers ‘la lutte, les risques, les fièvres de Paris au doux enlisement provincial’ (Tinayre, 1905, 67; ‘the struggle, the risks, the fever of Paris to the gentle stagnation of the provinces’). When, in Chartres, she accompanies her elderly aunt to church, Josanne’s secular republican values recoil from the sermon’s message of guilt and submission, particularly for her own sex. ‘Dès l’enfance’, she reflects,

l’Église avait enseigné à ces femmes qu’elles devaient porter, plus que l’homme, le poids de la réprobation première et du péché originel. Elles étaient les résignées, les servantes, les sujettes, subordonnées au père et à l’époux, nées pour prier, souffrir et servir … (Tinayre, 1905, 213)

(From childhood on, the Church had taught women that they, more than men, must bear the weight of original sin and the first shame. They were to be the resigned servants, subject to the authority of father and husband, born to pray, suffer and serve …)

These thoughts lead her on, however, to the recognition of how little ideologies of gender have in fact changed in the new secular age: the ‘morality of reason’ of the Republic, Josanne (and thus the novel) comments, ‘reproduisait exactement la morale religieuse, et, pour la femme en particulier, le code des droits et des devoirs demeurait le même’ (Tinayre, 1905, 213; ‘reproduced exactly the morality of religion, and for women in particular the code of rights and duties remained identical’) – without even the ultimate reward of eternal salvation. In Noël, the prototype of liberal, progressive, republican man, she will encounter the extreme difficulty of eradicating deeply rooted beliefs about men’s rights
over women. Tinayre’s middlebrow fiction situates women as agents of and participants in modernity, but also underlines the extent to which the new era maintains the patriarchal values of the old. *La Rebelle* foreshadows another widely read novel centred on a heroine’s conflicting desires for love, with its tenacious implications of female submission, and freedom: Colette’s 1910 *La Vagabonde*, first published in serial form in the fashionable weekly *La Vie parisienne*. Colette’s heroine finally opts not for the stability of marriage but for solitary *vagabondage* – not without regret, but with a passionate conviction of the incompatibility between romantic love and female integrity:

Tu es bon, et tu prétendais, de la meilleure foi du monde, m’apporter le bonheur, car tu m’as vue dénueée et solitaire. Mais tu avais compté sans mon orgueil de pauvresse: les plus beaux pays de la terre, je refuse de les contempler, tout petits, au miroir amoureux de ton regard [...] Vagabonde, et libre, je souhaiterai parfois l’ombre de tes murs [...] Ah! tu seras longtemps un des soifs de ma route. (I, 1231–32)

(You are good and, with the best faith in the world, you meant to bring me happiness, since you saw me deprived and solitary. But you counted without my beggar-woman’s pride: I refuse to see the most beautiful countries of the world microscopically reflected in the amorous mirror of your eyes [Colette, 1960, 191])

Tinayre’s dénouement is in every sense more cautious and conventional. Love conquers all: ‘La victoire restait à l’amour qui n’avait pas faibli, qui n’avait pas désespéré, – à l’amour fort comme la vie’ (1905, 372; ‘Victory remained with a love that had never faltered, never despair – a love as strong as life itself’), and where Colette’s heroine refuses the intermediary of a male gaze between herself and the world, Tinayre offers a more reassuring assertion that romance can resolve the tensions of sexual inequality. Focalised from Noël’s point of view, the closing passage nonetheless implies – perhaps inadvertently – that same primacy of the male perspective from which Colette’s vagabond heroine flees: ‘Il s’enivra de baiser le beau front intelligent où la pensée se formait, pareille à sa pensée; les yeux fidèles qui reflétaient ses yeux dans leurs miroirs sombres’ (371; ‘He passionately kissed the intelligent, lovely forehead where her thoughts took form, so like his thoughts; the faithful eyes that reflected his eyes in their dark mirrors’). Tinayre’s novel articulates the dilemma of the ‘new’ woman, caught between liberty and love, equality and emotional fulfilment, and does so through a fictional heroine whose
mix of conventionality and rebellion made her an effective avatar for many middlebrow readers.

**Conclusion**

If the middlebrow novel is ‘one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other’ (Humble, 2001, 11–12), then the Belle Époque was the founding age of the middlebrow. The close association of middlebrow – or the mildly despised ‘ordinary’ novel – with women\(^\text{18}\) also seems to begin in France at this period. The new climate of semi-universal literacy, mass commercial publishing and a changing social panorama created a middle-class demand for an explanatory, interpretative, mimetic literature of the age that could also furnish the pleasures of suspense, immersion in a fictional world, the geographic and emotional diversification of experience. Women made up a substantial proportion of the reading market, and because women in France of the Third Republic found themselves solicited both to conform to traditionally domestic and maternal roles, and to believe in values of liberty and equality that in theory applied to both sexes, they sought maps to negotiate the modern world and define their role within it. The middlebrow novel supplied page-turning romances that were also – far more than their male equivalents – quietly subversive, and invited reflection on the gender politics of the age and the place of women within modernity. Both Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre provided their readers with avatar heroines whose quests to reconcile love, truth and their own sense of personal integrity drove the narratives, and carried the readers on virtual journeys through contemporary land- and cityscapes, and through moral terrain that was at once familiar and heightened into greater intensity and coherence.

\(^{18}\) Or what George Orwell termed in an English context the ‘average novel – the ordinary, good-bad, Galsworthy-and-water stuff which is the norm of the English novel’ – which, he went on, ‘seems to exist only for women’ (1969 [1936], 244).