Middlebrow Matters

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CHAPTER FOUR

Interwar France

The Case of the Missing Middlebrow

If the concept of the middlebrow has recently gained some critical traction, this is largely due to work on women’s writing and reading practices in interwar Britain and North America. The word ‘middlebrow’ itself dates from the 1920s, when the growing middle classes created a new type of demand for cultural products that were both entertaining and serious, accessible and imbued with cultural value. In literature, this produced a flourishing of the novel that, as Nicola Humble puts it, ‘straddles the divide between trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other’ (2001, 11). Women made up the majority of the British reading public (Bloom, 2002, 51), and women writers found a ready market for novels that mirrored and anatomised their situation through compelling stories. In France, as we have seen, similar conditions had begun to appear before the First World War, and led to a vibrant market in middlebrow women’s writing. Colette represents a bridge between the pre- and post-war feminine middlebrow, as a writer whose popularity with women readers begins at the Belle Époque and continues to address the changing configurations of social and emotional experience throughout the interwar years. Yet, beyond the case of Colette, it seems remarkably hard to find any French equivalent to the interwar women’s novel in Britain.

1 The proliferation of this type of women’s fiction in the 1920s and ’30s has been studied by, among others, Nicola Beauman (2008), Rosa Maria Bracco (1993), Faye Hammill (2007; 2010), Nicola Humble (2001) and Kate MacDonald (2011). Critical work on the interwar middlebrow has been supported and disseminated by the Middlebrow Network (http://www.middlebrow-network.com/).
In this chapter I want to address more broadly the interwar middlebrow in France, starting with a comparative perspective that will seek to understand why there appears to be no phenomenon in France akin to the remarkable proliferation of female-authored, market pleasing, durably readable fiction that occurred in Britain at this time, and which has since been recuperated for a contemporary female public by the publishing imprints Virago and Persephone. The situation of women in the neighbouring if culturally distinct nations of Britain and France was in many ways similar, as were developments in the British and French publishing industries. Yet the French interwar literary middlebrow is much harder to identify, and has certainly been far less – if at all – recognised and studied than its UK equivalent.

Women’s middlebrow in interwar Britain

In Britain, the interwar years witnessed the proliferation of a particular kind of novel that stood ‘in the vast space between lowbrow fiction, designed merely to entertain, and highbrow works, increasingly alienated from a common reference of values’ (Bracco, 1993, 12). The middlebrow novel was not an explicitly gendered phenomenon, but it certainly encompassed a considerable number of women writers, mainly middle-class women writing for an audience of their peers (Beauman, 2008, 4). The list of authors is far too long to attempt here but includes, for example, E.M. Delafield, Winifred Holtby, Molly Keane, Margaret Kennedy, Rosamond Lehmann, Rebecca West and Dorothy Whipple. Their novels dealt with the ordinary stuff of contemporary life from a largely female perspective: with growing up and finding a viable form of adult identity, with education and ambition, and with marriage and home and children and love. They were characterised by skilful plotting and characterisation, a precise sense of place and social context, and often a restrained, ironic sense of humour. A national network of lending libraries made access to fiction both easy and agreeable: libraries such as Boots (the largest, with more than 400 branches and half a million subscribers by the mid-1930s) offered reasonable subscription costs, a nicely furnished

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2 Both Virago and Persephone also publish non-British fiction, Virago (founded 1973) including on their list a wide international range of authors, and Persephone (founded 1998) publishing US, Canadian and New Zealand texts as well as a small but growing number of translations.
space in which to choose books and well-trained librarians to advise on choices. Twenty-five million volumes were exchanged at Boots in 1925, 35 million by 1939 (Beauman, 2008, 14–15). The heroines of middlebrow novels are often themselves library members: reading literary fiction was a part of middle-class feminine life, and through their choices readers also informed publishers of their tastes. In 1920s and ’30s Britain the feminine middlebrow ‘established itself as a distinctive literary form’ (Humble, 2001, 9).

The conditions that produced this flowering of middlebrow fiction were at once material (enterprising publishers, the library network) and ideological. If mainstream fiction serves in part to map, mirror and explore situations of rapid and disquieting social change, through the pleasurable form of story, then there was a particularly intense need for this kind of mediation in the years following the First World War. The war had dislocated personal, social and national identities in myriad ways, including that of gender. In the Victorian and Edwardian eras the dominant view of relations between the sexes had been one of neat complementarity, but as women moved, in the absence of so many men, into ‘masculine’ roles, and young men found themselves in situations of extreme terror, powerlessness and physical vulnerability that connoted ‘feminine’ dependence, the question of what it meant to be a man, and to be a woman, was posed with a new intensity. The figure of the damaged soldier, the puzzle of how to respond to him, figures extensively in this fiction, from Rebecca West’s explicitly titled 1918 The Return of the Soldier to Winifred Holtby’s 1927 The Land of Green Ginger in which the heroine Joanna struggles with the poverty and social isolation caused by her handsome young husband’s return from war as a bitter invalid. Teddy is still in thrall to the pre-war ideal of man as breadwinner, protector and virile lover, and cannot accept the loss of his ability to perform these roles. Joanna must save her family from homelessness and starvation, but without causing further damage to Teddy’s fragile self-esteem.

Divided notions of how to be a woman did not arise solely from the need to respond to male suffering. The war years had asked of many women that they move beyond the traditionally domestic domain of the feminine to work in the public sphere as factory hands, nurses, drivers for example, and to become heads of household. With the war’s ending and male demobilisation came a campaign, perceptible in both policy decisions and cultural discourse, to re-establish a familiar sense of sexual difference and thus recreate the lost, safe order of the past. In post-war Britain, ‘the perceived blurring of gender lines occasioned
by war’s upheaval led many [...] to see in a re-establishment of gender difference the means to recreate a semblance of order’ (Kent, 1993, 99). A ‘vicious backlash’ (Bruley, 1999, 61), supported by the 1919 Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, threw women out of the workforce, so that by 1921 fewer women were gainfully employed than had been the case in 1911. Formal marriage bars were introduced in many middle-class professions such as teaching, nursing and the civil service, and in 1927 Oxford University set limits on the numbers of students permitted to attend women’s colleges (Kent, 1993, 101). The press regularly featured articles and letters exhorting women to return to a proper practice of their feminine role.\(^3\) The sudden turn from a heroic vision of women as capable of public and private contributions to the nation’s welfare to a renewed insistence that their place was in the home produced a tension in female identity that found one form of expression in the novel.

Marriage, domesticity, the family are centre stage in the feminine middlebrow, as they were in most women’s lives. The scene of the majority of novels is the home, everyday attempts to maintain order and harmony, relations with husbands, children, neighbours, and sometimes glimpsed alternatives of wilder, less mundane alternatives that are generally (though not always) closed off by the novel’s end. The home is valued, as it no doubt was after the upheavals and grief of the war years, but there is also a pervading sense of disappointment that registers, with wry resignation rather than any more violent sense of revolt, ‘the diminished stature of the feminine subject’ and works to ‘effect her reconciliation to the culturally ascribed and sanctioned vision of her lot, which her prior hopes, ideals, and expectations had exceeded’ (Hinds, 2009, 314). Thus Laura, the 34-year-old heroine of E.M. Delafield’s *The Way Things Are* (1927), closes the novel by renouncing the brief flare of romance that has lit up her passionless, humdrum married life, because maternal duty and the need for social belonging make this the only option. Laura reconciles herself to her lot by scaling down her own sense of identity: ‘It dawned upon her dimly that only by envisaging and accepting her own limitations, could she endure the limitations of her surroundings’ (336).

\(^3\) If the woman war worker had been a heroine when her labour was needed, she was now frequently characterised as having sought employment ‘for the sake of love or flirtation and associated giddiness, which the freer and more licensed life has made it possible to indulge’ (Letter to the *Saturday Review* in 1918, quoted in Kent, 1993, 100).
Domesticity and maternity are central to these novels, but their cost, in terms of the channelling and limitation of female ambition and energy, is also a constant if discreetly voiced theme. There is a pervasive sense that whilst remaining single means, with few exceptions, low social status often accompanied by a constrained and genteel poverty, marriage means accepting dependence, containment within a wholly domestic world and an increasing sense of superfluity. This world of blocked horizons is relieved, and shaped into narrative, in various ways. A small number of characters pursue careers, against all the odds, like Sarah Burton, the courageous head teacher in Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* (1936), even if they do so at the cost of love and children. Some heroines – Delafield’s Laura, Margaret Kennedy’s Florence in her 1925 bestseller *The Constant Nymph* – encounter and are briefly heartened by passionate love, however transitory. Some, notably Holtby’s heroines, may even take a stand against compromise, like Joanna in *The Land of Green Ginger*, who closes the novel by leaving behind the site of her long domestic struggles and setting off with her children to join women friends for a new life in South Africa. Mostly, in a spirit that typified the disillusioned but resilient ‘anti-romanticism which signified Englishness between the wars’ (Light, 1993, 209), heroines just quietly accommodate ‘the way things are’ and make the best of them, this adjustment of aspiration to fit reality itself forming the narrative arc. Delafield’s Laura returns to ‘the children, her marriage vows, the house, the ordering of the meals, the servants, the making of a laundry list every Monday’ (1927, 335–36) and Kennedy’s sensible Florence, whom the novel both likes and loathes, fails in her attempt to domesticate the bohemian musician she loves, and finds herself alone in that ‘world of necessity and compromise [...] with which [everyone] would ultimately have to reckon’ (Kennedy, 1924, 280).

These novels had such huge appeal because they explored ordinary dilemmas through the creation of compelling fictional worlds. They share the qualities of skilful characterisation and plotting, and a vivid sense of place, from Delafield’s complacently affluent rural villages to Holtby’s bleak but exhilarating Yorkshire landscapes, Whipple’s socially

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4 In other novels, such as those of Dorothy Whipple, radical rejection of ‘blocked horizons’ is depicted through secondary female characters such as Laura in *Greenbanks* (1932), who leaves her stiflingly dull husband to follow the man she loves and bear his child, while the central protagonists oppose the limitations on their lives through the more moderate strategies of humour, female friendships and the valorisation of everyday pleasures.
stratified Lancashire towns and Lehmann’s claustrophobic but elegant Oxford. They capture tellingly, in different ways, the aspirations of a female generation whose emancipation felt at once real and truncated, and their stoical desire to make the most of the reality they had. They put women’s experience at the heart of the story, and their depiction of men is searching and irreverent, from empathetic depictions of returning soldiers that implicitly critique the ideal of warrior masculinity (Holtby), to comic portrayals of middle-class husbands who consider a taciturn indifference to all matters emotional and cultural to be a mark of proper (English) masculinity (Delafield, Whipple). In Britain, these novels circulated quickly among a vast middle-class female readership and ‘threw light on the texture of women’s lives’ (Beauman, 2008, 7).

Interwar France and the middlebrow

Across the Channel in France, the factors that produced the feminine middlebrow market were remarkably similar. There, too, there was both need for a literature that could combine pleasurable reading with the exploration of new and acute social tensions, particularly in relation to gender, and a commercial infrastructure that could respond to this demand.

The war had meant the departure of large numbers of French men, of whom an even larger proportion than in Britain were killed, or came back severely damaged, and in turn this led to changes in women’s employment and position in the family. By the time the war ended, many women had lived through turbulent years of fear and anxiety, bereavement and mourning, and an accumulation of responsibilities which at best opened up new vistas of possibility and at worst wore them out as they struggled to fulfil their traditionally nurturing roles whilst taking on those hitherto defined as male. The men who had survived returned in many cases profoundly changed, anxious to recreate remembered forms of adult manhood, yet in many cases so

5 Britain and its colonies lost approximately a million men, around 2% of the population, and suffered over 2 million wounded; France lost 1,700,000 men, over 4% of the population, with more than 4 million wounded. See http://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/userfiles/files/REPERES%20%E2%80%93%20module%201-1-1%20-%20explanatory%20notes%20%E2%80%93%20World%20War%20I%20casualties%20%E2%80%93%20EN.pdf
injured and dislocated that they struggled to do so. As in Britain, the
perceived effacement of gendered difference was widely identified with a
loss of civilisation, and the reaffirmation of separate roles and identities
became ‘a privileged site for a larger ideological project: how to come
to terms with rapid social and cultural change’ (Roberts, 1994, 5). In
the desire to re-establish a social order based on traditional concepts
of gender, those women who had entered new forms of work during
the war years were rapidly despatched to make room for the returning
breadwinners. In France women war workers were, as one contem-
porary commentator put it, ‘jetées à la rue, presque immédiatement
après l’Armistice (...) les unes avec quelques jours de paye, les autres
sans rien’ (Thaon, 1919, 212; ‘thrown back onto the streets, almost
immediately after the armistice [...], some with a few days’ pay and
the rest with nothing at all’). The percentage of the female population
working outside the home was actually lower in 1926 (36.6 per cent)
than in 1906 (39 per cent) (Thibert, 1933).

Practical measures to exclude women from employment were
accompanied, as in Britain, by an ideological campaign that pervad ed
both the ‘quality’ and popular press. The esteemed and widely read
Figaro published articles such as ‘Les Conquêtes du féminisme’ (16
March 1924) that warned:

Qu’elles se méfient. La femme à barbe et la femme-canon peuvent moins
sur nous qu’une gamine de vingt ans qui sera frêle, fantasque et possédera
la merveilleuse divination que ne conférera jamais un diplôme d’avocat ou
de pharmacien.

(Women, take heed! Masculine [literally ‘bearded’], aggressive women
have far less effect on men than a slim, lovely 20-year-old whose wonderful
sense of intuition no lawyer’s or pharmacist’s diploma can ever replace)

Some of the more conservative women’s magazines joined in. On 1
January 1926, Petit Echo de la mode alerted readers to male anxieties:
‘Mais la plante fragile a voulu ou a dû devenir l’arbuste solide, elle se
suffit à elle-même, elle vit sa vie, et l’homme, au lieu d’être attendri par
sa faiblesse, craint sa concurrence’ (‘But the fragile plant has chosen
or been forced to become a solid shrub, self-sufficient, living her own
life, and man, instead of being moved by her weakness, fears her as a
competitor’). Women, advised the editorial, would be well advised to
hide their newfound self-assurance and at least pretend to need male
protection. As Irene Clephane put it in 1935, looking back: ‘From being
the savours of the nation, women in employment were degraded in the
public press to a position of ruthless self seekers depriving men and their dependents of a livelihood’ (200, quoted in Bruley 1999, 61).

The emphasis on home and family was supported materially by an increase in house building, and by a renewed emphasis on the ideology of domesticity through promotional events such as the Salon des Arts Ménagers, first held in 1923. Marriage and home-making were presented as the only proper destiny for a middle-class girl, and despite the development, at least in more progressive circles, of an ideal of companionate coupledom (Prost, 1985 [1999], 75–76), the law still allocated marital and parental authority solely to the husband. More than in Britain, maternity was promoted as an essential part of womanhood, for the low birth rate was a source of anxiety and pro-natalist propaganda was backed by the repressive 1920 laws that criminalised the dissemination of literature on birth control.

The post-war backlash was countered by certain more emancipatory factors that made female identity a site of tension and conflict. Despite the resounding emphasis on women’s duty to be wives and mothers, the fact remained that part of the war’s legacy was a sizeable population of single women, estimated variously at figures between 1.5 and 3.5 million (Roberts, 1994, 154). And however potent the force of nostalgic gender conservatism, the practical need to exploit this army of single women in a man-depleted world had its effect. There was some opening up of types of female – as well as male – employment in the interwar years, with (in both France and Britain) a shift away from privatised domestic labour into the expanding administrative, retail and leisure sectors. The reluctance of young women to enter domestic service in turn altered the lives of bourgeois women accustomed to find cheap and readily available servants and the ‘servant problem’ echoed through the interwar novel in France as well as Britain. The pull of white-collar employment also accelerated the gradual move away from the countryside to larger towns and cities. The lives of some bourgeois girls were changed, too, by the financial losses which many families suffered due to the war and, later, the Great Depression of the 1930s. Simone de Beauvoir (born 1908) and

6 Private initiatives in the early 1920s were overtaken in 1928 by a vast state-supported project (Loi Loucheur, 13 July 1928) to build some 260,000 houses and flats over five years, with a significant proportion at affordable rents (http://www.unaf.fr/spip.php?article14718). Parliamentary records show that a similar provision of housing for the growing middle classes was underway in Britain (https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/RP99-111).

7 In the UK the 1931 census registered over 1.5 million unmarried women.
her sister Hélène were representative of this phenomenon: though they were educated at first to become good Catholic, bourgeois wives, their father’s loss of his fortune obliged him to acknowledge that there were no dowries to facilitate suitable marriages, and thus to accede to their desire to pursue a university education and so achieve financial independence.

In all, then, the 1920s and ’30s were years of acute change and tension not only at the level of international politics but also in terms of roles and identities. As the middle class expanded, with the growth of the administrative and retail sectors and an increase in numbers of salaried professionals, so the reading public grew and created a high level of demand for a literature that was well-crafted, entertaining and informative. Weekly magazines, in particular Maurice Martin du Gard’s *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (founded in 1922), catered for this new mass yet educated readership with well-designed, readable and informative aids to understanding the cultural scene—‘un journal qu’on peut lire dans le métro comme n’importe quel quotidien’ (‘a journal you can read in the metro just like a daily paper’), ran the advertising. Publishers also responded: the 1920s saw the dawn of the blockbuster, as in France the average print run doubled from the pre-war 2,500 to 5,000 and bestsellers, defined by sales of over 100,000, became much more common (Brée, 1983, 43; Boschetti, 1986, 481). The publishing houses Flammarion and Grasset led the way, with Grasset in particular displaying a sharp eye for the kind of fiction that would ‘concilier la légitimité littéraire et le succès commercial’ (Boschetti, 1986, 492; ‘reconcile literary legitimacy and commercial success’). Though clearly the market included readers of both sexes, it was acknowledged in France, as in Britain, that women constituted a majority: Jules Bertaut’s study *La Littérature féminine d’aujourd’hui* (1909) was already stating this as an uncontentious fact and cultural historian Mary-Louise Roberts confirms the importance of female readers in the interwar book boom (1994, 15). Before turning to the question of which types of novel met women readers’ demands in France, I want to consider briefly those factors that differentiated the French reading context from what in most ways was a very similar situation in Britain.

8 Bertaut wrote: ‘les personnes qui, à l’heure actuelle, constituent en France le vrai public littéraire, celui qui lit la littérature d’imagination, celui qui la juge en décrétant le succès ou l’insuccès d’un livre, ce sont les femmes’ (1909, quoted in Sauvy, 1986, 243; ‘those who, in the France of today, constitute the real reading public, the public that reads works of imagination and determines a book’s success or failure, are women’).
One significant difference occurs at the level of infrastructure: France simply did not have that network of libraries, catering mainly for a middle-class female readership, that disseminated middlebrow fiction in Britain and also provided publishers with reliable evidence of female taste. Despite promising developments in provision in the later nineteenth century, for French libraries the period 1900–45 was one of ‘immobilisme, déclin et indadaptation aux besoins’ (Jolly, 1986, 543; ‘immobility, decline and failure to adapt to needs’). Budgets for French municipal libraries were only one twentieth of their British equivalents (Jolly, 1986, 547), and many cities (let alone smaller towns) had no lending library for general use: most libraries were concentrated in the capital, and were academic and research institutions rather than providing a service for non-specialist readers. Nor was there any equivalent to the private libraries such as Boots that were so successful in Britain. In Britain there seems to have been some sense of a community of female readers connected through the circulation of popular authors and novels across the library network, the trained librarians who advised and shared recommendations, the pleasant reading rooms in which women met. This in turn provided an encouraging context for women writers aiming at a readership of their peers, and gave publishers proof, through library loans, of the strength of demand for the middlebrow novel. Such a sense of a female reading community was notably absent in France.

Moreover, the divide between what Bourdieu terms ‘the sub-field of restricted production’, or highbrow culture aimed at peer esteem, and the ‘sub-field of mass production’, aimed at the market, maintained a stronger hold over the national imagination in France than in Britain. And highbrow or legitimate culture was strongly gendered masculine, so that women who as writers or as readers aspired to a serious engagement with ideas and an understanding of their era knew that this meant reading male authors. Literature that focused primarily on women’s lives, from a woman’s point of view, somehow lacked the virtue of universality. A sense that writing for the market, especially the female market, is incompatible with literary value is present, too, in British middlebrow fiction: ‘highbrow’ writers often appear in its pages, the object of mingled respect and irony. But in France the conviction of a need to transcend

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9 See for example *The Constant Nymph*, in which Margaret Kennedy plays out the ambivalent admiration and exasperation that characterises the middlebrow view of highbrow culture through her solidly middle-class heroine’s love-hate relationship with the Bohemian artistic Sanger family. Delafield too has her
femaleness in the pursuit of serious culture may well have contributed to
the relative absence and low profile of women writers: among the many
authors from the interwar period who were household names in their
era and who have survived in literary history, only Colette represents
women, and her status remained uncertain for decades.

The powerful identification of ‘real’ literature with male literature
also accords with a wider cultural disparagement of the feminine in
interwar France. The post-war backlash against limited female gains
made on both sides of the Channel was arguably more ferocious and
more lasting in France: where British women gained the vote in 1918,
French women were repeatedly refused this basic citizen’s right until
after the Second World War; where contraceptive services began to be
established in interwar Britain, pro-natalist, anti-contraceptive policies
in France were implacable. Some of the period’s most admired male
novelists were viciously misogynist, Henri de Montherlant and Pierre
Drieu la Rochelle being among the most prominent. The climate was
inhospitable to a women-centred, market-pleasing literature that could
use enjoyable fictions to explore the specificity of female lives in a period
of tense and profoundly unequal gender relations.

Yet there they were, millions of more or less educated, more or less
aspirational bourgeois French women, most with enough leisure time to
read. Definitive evidence of what they chose to read is, of course, hard to
find, but given that women formed more than half of the reading public,
sales figures are one useful indicator, and we can also surmise some
correspondence between the reading tastes of British and French women,
whose situations had so much in common. It is possible to propose a
reasoned – if not a definitive – answer to the question What did women
read in interwar France?

**Female middlebrow reading between the wars**

For French publishing the 1920s ushered in an era of ‘overproduction’
(Raimond, 1966, 106) and of blockbusters (Brée, 1983, 43). More than a
thousand novels were published in France each year, and many sold in
excess of 100,000 copies: reading fiction was a mainstream leisure activity.

heroines (who write stories to make money) oscillate between self-contempt and
mockery when faced with fashionably modernist writers, who are usually male and
of independent means, and thus above domestic or financial concerns.
Among this vast output, most of it male-authored, certain categories of novel corresponded to what I have been defining as middlebrow: compellingly told narratives in a broadly realist vein that addressed serious and topical issues. Of these, some offered at least a partial correspondence to what the British novel suggests was female middlebrow taste. Women readers surely played their part in the vogue for romans-fleuve (literally ‘river-novels’), multivolume sagas that used fictional families to explore recent French history through the intersections between great public events and private family life. Roger Martin du Gard’s Les Thibault, set between 1900 and the 1914–18 war, comprised eight novels published between 1920 and 1940; the ten volumes of George Duhamel’s La Chronique des Pasquier, set between 1889 and 1931, came out from 1933 to 1945, while Jules Romains’s 27-volume Les Hommes de bonne volonté (covering 1908 to 1933) appeared steadily across the years 1932 to 1946. Romain Rolland, already the author of the pre-war novel cycle Jean Christophe, published a second seven-volume saga, L’Âme enchantée, between 1922 and 1933. All of these vast fictionalised histories were commercially successful, and though they are largely male stories in which women play secondary roles (Rolland’s L’Âme enchantée is the exception to this, though written in a discernibly masculine narrative voice), their weaving of complex stories at the boundaries between public and private worlds, and their focus on family dynamics, made for both compelling reading and a certain relevance to women’s lives.

If the romans-fleuves sold steadily, the period’s massive literary successes, in commercial terms, came from individual novels that hit a nerve in the social body and thus became succès de scandale. The two major blockbusters of the early 1920s, Victor Margueritte’s La Garçonne (1922) and Raymond Radiguet’s Le Diable au corps (1923), both deal with the impact of the war on sexual identity and relationships, playing off a generalised anxiety about the perceived upheaval in gender roles. Both benefited from deliberately provocative advertising campaigns by canny publishers, Flammarion and Grasset respectively. ‘The most scandalous novel ever written!’ shouted the posters for La Garçonne, and a curious public responded by buying 10,000 copies per week until, by the end of the decade, the novel had been read by somewhere between 12 and 25 per cent of the entire French population (Ripa, 2013, 10–12; Sohn, 1972, 8). Margueritte was an established novelist long identified with progressive causes, but this – his thirty-seventh novel – was the first to achieve such public notoriety, and sales increased still further when the government withdrew his Légion d’Honneur decoration on the grounds
that he had harmed the ‘good name and influence of France abroad’. *La Garçonne* was widely translated, and in France saturated the media with 134 articles devoted to it in the first six months after publication, across the full spectrum of the French press (Ripa, 2013, 15). There were also several stage adaptations throughout the 1920s and ’30s, a heavily censored (hence little screened) 1923 film version, and a more successful 1936 film adaptation that included Arletty and Edith Piaf in its cast. The novel’s price positioned it above Bourdieu’s fully popular ‘sub-field of mass production’, for the seven francs it cost was the equivalent of two days’ pay for a (male) Parisian worker. It seems safe to assume that the majority of readers – at least those who purchased the book – belonged somewhere in the broad spectrum of the middle class, and that women made up at least their usual high percentage of the reading public.

Flammarion’s publicity did not lie: *La Garçonne* was a shocking novel. Its heroine Monique, the *garçonne* of the title, opens the novel as the strong-minded but conventionally romantic daughter of a rich industrialist, happily engaged to Lucien, a handsome and enterprising young man of her own class. But Monique discovers both Lucien’s socially condoned infidelity and the business agreement between father and future husband that makes of her marriage a commercial transaction: outraged, she leaves behind family and what she now perceives as a hypocritical respectability, and adopts the sort of bachelor lifestyle admired in affluent young men but deemed scandalous in women. Profiting from post-war fashion by opening an interior design business, Monique selects and drops sexual partners of both sexes according to the physical pleasure they can provide – like the nude dancer, Peer Rhys, ‘une belle machine à plaisir’ (Margueritte, 1922, 169; ‘a handsome pleasure machine’). Monique deftly avoids pregnancy, which itself was provocative in a pro-natalist climate, until she opts for single motherhood and tries out a series of potential ‘reproducers’ (178) whose paternal function she intends to limit to that of insemination.

Margueritte’s narrative techniques are anything but subtle: the omniscient narrative voice is often intrusive; heavy-handed coincidence drives the plot (Monique’s beloved Aunt Lucienne, the only responsible adult in her life, is knocked over and killed by a bus at the very moment of Monique’s life-shattering discoveries); characterisation is often stereotypical. But the novel very effectively plays on the post-war hopes and fears of different audiences. For readers with feminist sympathies, Monique is the young woman emancipated by the war years, during which she has pursued her education and worked as a wartime nurse, now in revolt...
against sexual double standards and women’s social inequality, and living out her angry rebellion with vicariously satisfying absolutism. For a more conservative readership, Monique is the embodiment of a collective nightmare of sexually adventurous, assertive women who threaten society’s very foundations, and the novel’s reassuring conclusion – Monique finally opts for marriage to a progressive, pro-feminist but authoritatively virile man – allays these fears in a most pleasurable way. For both, _La Garçonne_ provided a public forum for the discussion of topical, contentious issues, not only through their dramatisation but also through lengthy sequences of dialogue in which characters debate the virtues of marriage as opposed to ‘free union’, Freudian psychoanalysis, the significance of cropped hair and jazz, the fashion for spiritism. Monique would live on in two sequel novels, but neither quite reached the exceptional articulation of collective desires and anxieties achieved by _La Garçonne_.

The second novel to reach such public prominence also appealed to tensions around gender and sex in the post-war period, and was in some senses even more daring. Set in the war years, _Le Diable au corps_ is a compelling story of illicit love between a 15-year-old schoolboy narrator and Marthe, the 19-year-old wife of a soldier fighting at the front. The potential to shock was heightened by the author’s own extreme youth, which Bernard Grasset made much of in his innovative advertising campaign. Raymond Radiguet was 20 when the novel came out, though Grasset described him in the publicity as 17, his age at the time of writing. His death from typhoid fever shortly after the novel’s appearance also contributed to its fame. _Le Diable au corps_ scandalised and fascinated readers for a number of reasons, the first of which was its

10 _Le Compagnon_ (1923) and _Le Couple_ (1924) completed the _Femme en chemin_ trilogy.

11 France Culture’s programme ‘Histoire de l’amour’ (12 February 2013), part of the series _La Fabrique de l’histoire_, presents a detailed account of Grasset’s campaign and of the novel’s reception. Bernard Grasset is described as the ‘inventor of modern publishing’, thanks in part to the advertising campaign that stimulated the public’s curiosity through emphasis of the author’s youth, and a cinema news clip showing Radiguet signing his contract: the author, rather than the text, was the first focus of interest. Grasset’s aims were distinctly ‘middlebrow’: he aimed to reconcile literary quality and commercial success, and for this reason came up against the hostility of those critics who defended the disinterested status of authentic literature. The programme can be listened to at: https://www.france-culture.fr/emissions/la-fabrique-de-lhistoire/histoire-de-lamour-24.
irreverent reversal of patriotic narratives of war. The two main protagonists are of a generation for whom war represents a ‘congé inattendu’ (Radiguet, 1923, 163; ‘unexpected vacation’), a suspension of normal routine and expectation that allows Marthe to see her conventional marriage to a suitable young man as not quite real, so that she marries Jacques and sets up home with him but meanwhile, in his absence, wholeheartedly explores sex and romance with her younger lover. From the young lovers’ perspective – the only one granted in the book – war is essentially something that keeps Jacques out of the way, and when the armistice bells peal out they signify not national triumph but the threat of his return (Radiguet, 1923, 162). A more normative, disapproving view of their behaviour is scarcely present, for adults on the home front are represented as timid, vacillating, even vicariously finding pleasure in the young people’s daring so that the narrator’s father has moments of pride in his son’s precocious virility, and Marthe’s mother ‘admireait Marthe de tromper son mari’ (Radiguet, 1923, 146; ‘admired Marthe for deceiving her husband’) where she herself had never dared adultery. Neighbours mutter and gossip, but also pruriently listen to the sound of the young pair’s lovemaking, Marthe’s elderly landlords even invite friends round at the time this usually occurs, in the hope of providing a spectacle.

What is also both scandalous and interesting about the novel is the characterisation of Marthe, who is another fictional avatar of the garçonne who emerged from the partial, provisional emancipation of the war years. Marthe in many ways resembles the narrator: she is artistic, adventurous, childishly egocentric, guiltlessly desiring. It is Marthe who insists on going to the modern, masculine space of the American bar, Marthe who initiates the first sexual encounter. But her options are much more limited: she has agreed to marriage to Jacques because this is the inevitable female route to adulthood, and she can see no way out of it; she finds herself pregnant (by the narrator, though Jacques assumes the child is his) and dies in premature childbirth, whereas the narrator’s life goes on, enriched rather than destroyed by their love affair: ‘je compris que l’ordre, à la longue, se met de lui-même autour des choses’ (Radiguet, 1923, 174; ‘I understood that in the long term order simply restores itself’). The novel rescripts the war as a period of freedom for the generation too young to fight, and for women, but it is the latter whose period of liberty closes as the armistice bells ring out. Like La Garçonne, Le Diable had a particular resonance for women readers.
Bernard Grasset was an astute judge of what would capture the national mood, and besides single bestsellers like *Le Diable au corps* he also built a ‘stable’ of authors whose work achieved both critical acclaim and steady sales throughout the interwar period. Jean Giraudoux, Henry de Montherlant, André Malraux, François Mauriac, André Maurois, Paul Morand all published with Grasset, and all were undoubtedly read by a middlebrow public as well as in more intellectual and avant-garde circles. Their worldviews were, unsurprisingly and no doubt unconsciously (since ‘male’ and ‘human’ were tacitly agreed to be synonymous) androcentric, but occasionally a central focus on a female protagonist resulted in a telling, empathetic narrative that captured the particular situation of women in interwar society. Such a novel was Mauriac’s *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927), set in the Landes of southwestern France, in the stiflingly oppressive world of provincial, Catholic and bourgeois conformity that came to be identified with his fiction. As the novel opens, the eponymous heroine is leaving the courtroom acquitted of the attempted murder of her husband. Narrative sympathy is immediately directed towards Thérèse, pictured between two men, her lawyer and her father, who unite to ignore and patronise her, addressing each other as though she were simply not present, ‘gênés par ce corps de femme qui les séparait, ils le poussaient du coude’ (Mauriac, 1927, 50; ‘since this woman’s body between them was in their way, they elbowed it aside’). The rest of the novel is largely an extended flashback, focalised by Thérèse, to her girlhood, her marriage to the complacent, small-minded Bernard, the birth of her child and, throughout, the intensifying desperation of an intelligent, sensitive woman condemned to the misogynistic contempt of her whole society – women, for her well-respected father, are ‘toutes des hystériques quand elles ne sont pas des idiotes’ (52; ‘all hysterical when they’re not just stupid’) – to a marriage that is in fact a business deal and legally strips her of any right to her own property (117) and, on a more intimate level, to the ‘patientes inventions de l’ombre’ (69; ‘patient inventions of the night’) of a husband who repulses her.

In what is in intention a Catholic novel, the reader is strangely drawn to share in Thérèse’s ardent desire to be rid of Bernard at any cost. Mauriac’s imagery leaves little room for alternative readings: Thérèse, for Bernard and his family, has value only as ‘le réceptacle de leur progéniture’ (Mauriac, 1927, 100; ‘the receptacle of their offspring’); deployed by them to ensnare Anne, her younger sister-in-law, away from a romantic attachment towards another materially advantageous,
loveless marriage, she is tacitly compared to the blinded doves whose cries the local hunters use to lure free birds to their deaths. Though Mauriac intermittently superimposes a more judgemental, religious discourse to define Thérèse as a ‘monster’ subject to the ‘puissance forcenée’ (‘frenzied power’) of evil (57; 119), the dominant logic of what is a compelling and moving novel is one of critique: critique of a class that dresses up the will to material gain as obedience to God’s will, critique of stultifying social conformity and, above all, critique of the cruel repression of human potential inherent in a misogynistic culture.

Women authors and middlebrow fiction

There was no absence of women writers in interwar France: in her groundbreaking study of what she terms the ‘forgotten generation’, Jennifer Milligan cites both contemporary studies such as Jean Larnac’s 1929 *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* and her own archival research to affirm the existence of ‘a very sizeable body of literature produced by professional French female writers’ (1996, 27). Milligan’s study also establishes the many obstacles to publishing and recognition that impeded women’s access to literary fame, and the effect of the gatekeepers (literary critics and historians) on retrospective views of an era’s literature. Colette is one of the very few women authors to have survived this process and entered posterity – but in terms of widely read female novelists who, we can surmise, appealed particularly to women readers, she was by no means a lone voice.

Indeed one of the major bestsellers of the early 1920s was written by a woman, though it has since virtually disappeared from literary history. Germaine Acremant’s *Les Dames aux chapeaux verts* (1921) sold in numbers comparable to *La Garçonne* and *Le Diable au corps*, went through numerous reprintings and soon reached sales of 1.5 million in France, as well as being widely translated. It was equally successful when its author adapted it for the stage, and in 1929 it also became a film. *Les Dames* was certainly not a succès de scandale: written in a milder

12 Milligan, for example, provides a neat table detailing the semi-exclusion of women writers from the major histories of French literature published between 1932 and 1982 (Milligan, 1996, 52).

13 One of the characteristics of middlebrow fiction is its suitability (strong plotlines, sense of place, empathetic characters) for adaptation into other media.
and more comic vein, it offended no one. Nonetheless it registers a strong sense of war-determined change in female identity, and in a light-hearted, romantic and optimistic mode Acremant deals with women’s life choices in post-war France.

The novel’s heroine is Arlette, a lively, ‘modern’ 18-year-old whose widowed father commits suicide when faced with the family’s financial ruin, leaving his daughter no option but to go and live with relatives. Kind-hearted and optimistic, but still daunted at the prospect, Arlette leaves Paris to take up residence with her four middle-aged cousins, unmarried sisters who live in a quiet northern town in the Pas-de-Calais. Humour is generated by the culture clash between modernity, in the form of a sporty, assertive and enterprising young woman and pre-war traditional values embodied in the four provincial old maids, who are – not without affection – shown to be prissy, blinkered and left behind by history’s progress. Their lives revolve around the Church, domestic routine and petty rivalries; the short trip to meet their niece from her train takes on the proportions of a major expedition. The presence of the more emancipated younger woman, and her cheerful attempts to expand their horizons, have some effect: Arlette discovers an anonymous diary, works out (after some comic misinterpretations) which sister was cruelly thwarted in her romantic plans by her mother’s snobbish dismissal of the suitor, and engineers the reunion of the now middle-aged lovers. Their long-delayed marriage thus doubles Arlette’s own, for her love story with the nobly born (if thoroughly democratic) Jacques de Fleurville gives the narrative shape, and concludes in a happy dénouement. Marriage is thus presented as the only non-ridiculous and truly happy female destiny; at the same time, female independence and agency are presented as positive achievements of the modern age.

One striking passage, slightly out of kilter with the overall tone, adds a note of anxiety to the general exuberance. Arlette is at a low point, having quarrelled with her oldest cousin and believing she has lost Jacques. Lying in her moonlit bedroom, feverish and despondent, she has a sort of hallucination: a ‘cortège pailleté, capricieux, ondoyant’ (‘a spangled, whimsical parade’) of female Parisian shop workers march past her, laughing, joking, revelling in their freedom and the ‘trésors de tendresse qu’elles dilapident royalement’ (‘treasures of tenderness that they freely dispersed’). ‘Pour les baisers’, reflects Arlette, ‘ne sont-elles pas toutes milliardaires? (Acremant, 1921, 262; ‘Aren’t they all millionaires where kisses are concerned?’). The young workers call out to her: ‘viens avec nous, tu riras aussi. Tout être a le droit d’être libre’ (‘come with
us, you’ll have fun too! Everyone has the right to be free’). ‘Mes sœurs!’ (263; ‘My sisters’) she cries. The vision fades and the streets of Paris shrink back to the domestic space that has predominated throughout the novel. Jacques duly returns, the wedding takes place and the lightly satirical treatment of outmoded, provincial conservatism is balanced by a fundamentally reassuring affirmation of love, romance and family. *Les Dames aux chapeaux verts* nonetheless registers a note of anxiety over what is lost, as well as gained, by transition to the status of wife.

Acremant (who only died in 1986) went on to be widely read and to write other novels in a similarly comic yet tellingly topical vein: *Gai ! Marions nous* for example in 1927, and *A l’Ombre des célibataires* in 1932. Among the other women novelists whose target readership was certainly both middlebrow and female was Marcelle Tinayre, now in her fifties (born 1870) and like Colette continuing a career begun in a pre-war period more favourable to the ‘women’s novel’. Tinayre remained a well-known name, regularly published and regularly featured in the press. Her interwar fiction differs markedly, however, from the optimistic ‘new woman’ novels of the Belle Époque. The fiction of the 1920s and ’30s features no brave heroines intent on, and succeeding in, the reconciliation of love and freedom, romance and emancipation. If her later work continues to pose the same question of how to be a woman in a rapidly changing world, the answers it proposes are decidedly less sanguine.

Tinayre’s interwar novels show some resemblance to the body of work produced by her British counterparts, of which she was almost certainly aware. They make ‘the woman […] hero of the ordinary’ (Clark, 1991, 185), illuminating ‘the texture of women’s lives’ (Beauman, 2008, 7), which are largely hidden and unremarkable, and registering a sense of stifled aspirations; dreams of love and self-fulfilment are in constant tension with that ‘world of necessity and compromise’ (Kennedy, 1924, 280) so present in British women’s middlebrow. Tinayre’s stories, though, are bleaker, their resignation more desolate and more likely to end in despair or death. Whereas her Belle Époque novels were largely set in a Paris vibrant with hopeful modernity, the later work belongs in the provinces, in small towns and villages left behind by that febrile

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14 Tinayre was translated and known in British literary circles, touring England (as well as the USA) in 1937, and delivering talks in, among other cities, Leeds and Oxford. The preface to one edition of *L’Ombre de l’Amour* (by Marie-France Houdart) notes that she lunched with Rebecca West in London in 1934.
passion for novelty and change that has come to be associated with the 1920s. The split between the major cities, and particularly Paris, and the more quiescent, traditionalist culture of rural France is as evident in Tinayre as in Mauriac’s interwar fiction. Villefarge, the main setting of L’Ennemie intime (1931), typifies this world, with its shuttered bourgeois houses filled with heavily ornate furniture, its dark arcades of shops dominated by a square-towered church and hideous war memorial (8), its exercise of social surveillance through gossip, and sparse bus service that limits intercourse with the world beyond. Signs of social change appear in the form of American films at the cinema, the café changing its name to adopt the more exotic sounding English term ‘tea rooms’, the shortage of domestic help as young women discover better options in the towns: ‘il y avait pénurie de domestiques, comme il y avait pénurie de logements, et pénurie de jeunes hommes mariables’ (25; ‘there was a servant shortage, just as there was a housing shortage and a shortage of marriageable young men’). One affluent member of the local bourgeoisie holds a regular salon in an effort to keep Villefarge up to date with literary and artistic fashion – but gossip remains the chief form of local entertainment, and social attitudes show little change. The local doctor is writing a book on the ‘depopulation of the provinces’, and the gradual exodus towards urban centres is graphically dramatised as the novel returns repeatedly to Saint-Mars-de-la-Lande, a dying village now inhabited only by the very old, the casualties of progress symbolised by the filthy, ragged madwoman who haunts its streets (84). Old electoral posters promising ‘Laïcité … Démocratie … Réformes sociales … le pays confiant dans ses destinées’ (83; ‘Secularism … Democracy … Social reform … a country confident of its future’) peel off the walls of semi-derelict buildings.

Provincial France is represented as a place of stasis and decay, and Tinayre’s heroines are the frustrated products of this society. They are what one of her books defines as ‘lampes voilées’, veiled lamps whose potential to radiate light has been dampened and obscured by a repressive education and the narrow constriction of their life choices. Laurence, heroine of one of the two stories published under the title Les Lampes voilées (1921), is a single, celibate woman in her thirties, devoted to the care of her cantankerous old mother and to charitable work in the local children’s hospital. Her past contains one tentative, failed romance: the plot is shaped by the return of the man she almost loved, and the brief glimmer of a possible rekindling of their relationship. The dénouement sees his departure, and Laurence’s return to a state of atony: ‘résignation
sans douceur, détachement sans amertume, passions tombées comme le vent tombe; aucun élan vers la vie et pas même vers la mort’ (35; ‘resignation with no sense of relief, detachment with no bitterness, passions that fall as the wind falls; no zest for life or even for death’). Geneviève in *L’Ennemie intime* is also a daughter raised to a life of feminine decorum and submission to her tyrannical parent, in this case a blustering, egotistical old patriarch. Geneviève has partially escaped this life by marriage to a Parisian architect, an elegantly sceptical libertine for whose lifestyle and milieu she is singularly ill-suited, and with whom she manages to cohabit only by becoming an automaton version of the sophisticated wife. The novel sees Geneviève move between Villefarge, where she struggles to fulfil her sense of filial duty to a brutally ungrateful father, Paris and her joyless marriage, and La Sarrasine, the isolated home of her war veteran lover, Bertrand. In Bertrand’s house is the ‘chambre rouge’, a bedroom magnificently furnished in deep-red silk, the antithesis both of the genteel stuffiness of Villefarge and the cold elegance of Paris. Here, in a room ‘où les voix du dehors ne pénétraient pas’ (Tinayre, 1931, 102; ‘into which no voice from the outer world could penetrate’), Geneviève has discovered sexual passion and real if fleeting happiness. As with British middlebrow, the novels’ immersive power and their thematic resonance owe much to the eloquent depiction of place. Plots are driven by the tension between desire and force of circumstance, and carry a strong sense of fatalism as the latter inexorably wins.\(^\text{15}\) *L’Ennemie intime* sees each of Geneviève’s slender sources of identity destroyed: her filial role is gradually usurped by the woman she employs to look after her invalid father; her marriage offers neither motherhood nor companionship; Bertrand accepts a marriage of convenience to a competent, wealthy woman neighbour, ending Geneviève’s experience of love. A sense that the post-war period has ushered in alternative modes of female identity is certainly present, but Tinayre’s heroines are blocked from these by a learned docility and emotional diffidence. The repressed Laurence observes with passing envy the girls in the local seaside tavern, excited by the arrival of young sailors after a shipwreck, but sexuality is associated for her with social shame and a terrifying risk to the integrity of the self: ‘Tantôt sa fierté se rebellait, tantôt, dans une honte brûlante, elle appelait, en dépit de tout, la tendresse et les caresses jadis méprisées’

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\(^\text{15}\) In its haunting settings and strong sense of fatalism, Tinayre’s fiction of the 1930s can be compared to the Poetic Realism strand in French cinema of the same period.
At times her pride rebelled, at others, with burning shame, she longed for the tenderness and the embraces that she had once despised’. The central conflict that drives *L’Ennemie intime* is between Geneviève and the ruthless (and meaningfully named) Renaude Vipreux – ‘le renard et la vipère en une seule vieille fille’ (207; ‘the fox and the viper in a single old maid’) – the middle-aged woman taken on to look after the ailing patriarch, who gradually, ruthlessly turns him against his daughter and manipulates him into leaving his entire legacy to herself. Renaude deals with the social humiliation of the unmarried woman with uncompromising aggression, carving out a place for herself in the world by utter indifference to the well-being of others. The reader’s sympathies are with Geneviève, embodiment of the ‘feminine’ qualities of empathy, concern for others, self-sacrifice, but the novel shows the impotence of such goodness in a more competitive, harsher world that is also deeply misogynist. The woman for whom Bertrand leaves Geneviève is also better adapted to modernity: she is a young widow who ‘aime sa liberté et n’est pas sentimentale’ (Tinayre, 1931, 93; ‘likes her freedom and is not sentimental’), a ‘garçon manqué’ (‘tomboy’) who herself proposes the marriage on a business-like basis, with a confident, ‘Avec moi, que ne feriez-vous pas?’ (178; ‘With me, you could achieve anything’). In Tinayre’s pre-war fiction, conventionally feminine virtues could ally in new ways with strength and self-affirmation. Not so here: her sensitive, dutiful heroines are crushed by a society that offers no way of being other than utter submission, or imitation of a ‘masculine’ stance of ‘unsentimental’ egoism.

Though pessimistic, the interwar fiction remains compelling particularly in its figurative representation of the heroines’ quandaries, through images of stasis and sterile circularity. Narrative trajectories stall or replace progression with spiralling repetition. In both of the novels foregrounded here, heroines set out on journeys but fail to reach their destination. Laurence sets off early in *Les Lampes voilées* to make her way home from the children’s hospital where she does charitable work, but gets lost in the fading twilight and wanders, cold and helpless, till chance provides an exit. This journey is replicated in more dramatic form at the story’s end, when she decides at last to make her way to Dominique, the only chance of a relationship she has known, but is blocked by snow and the resulting cancellation of all modes of transport. Laurence sets off on foot through the blizzard, in a belated, reckless gesture of hope and self-determination, but she fails and is rescued half-frozen to suffer a long illness and recover to find her
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...dreary life unchanged. Dominique leaves France: the next news she has is that of his death. Geneviève (*L'Ennemie intime*) also makes a belated gesture of self-affirmation that ends in disaster. Defeated by the ruthless Renaude and abandoned by Bertrand, Geneviève takes her husband’s sleek, state-of-the-art car, symbol of both modernity and virile power – ‘C’était une automobile de tourisme, grise comme un torpilleur, très basse, longue de capot, avec des roues pareilles à des boucliers et des nickels étincelants’ (Tinayre, 1931, 227; ‘It was a touring car, torpedo grey, low to the ground with a long bonnet and wheel hubs like shiny metal shields’) – and drives away from Villefarge into the night. At first the sensation is one of extreme exhilaration: ‘Chaque rotation des roues, quadrigée d’astres métalliques, accrochant des reflets errants, délivrait la fugitive, l’allégeait, la soulevait’ (228; ‘Each rotation of the wheels of this metal chariot glinted with the reflection of passing lights, freeing the runaway, lightening her load, raising her up’). But the roads are steep and potholed, the night dark and wet, and gradually Geneviève realises that she is driving in circles, returning repeatedly, as in a nightmare, to the ghost village of Saint-Mars-de-la-Lande. She crashes the car, and dies.

With its malevolent villain, fast cars and sense of fatality, *L’Ennemie intime* draws on the thriller genre as well as that of the (failed) romance. The thriller element is strengthened in a final plot twist, when revenge for Geneviève’s suffering is exacted, not by herself, but by the brother whom she has missed and sought throughout the novel. Raymond left the hated paternal home as a very young man, fought in the war and is now a militant communist. All the revolt and agency of which Geneviève’s ‘feminine’ conditioning have rendered her incapable are fully present in her brother who now, after her death, travels to Villefarge to confront and kill his sister’s tormentor, Renaude Vipérin. Tinayre’s sad, likeable heroines are unable to overcome their learned docility and decorum, yet are aware that these qualities have little currency in post-war society. In Tinayre’s interwar fiction, the tension between female desire and ‘the way things are’ leads not just to wry resignation, but to utter desolation or to death.

Other women writers of the Belle Époque generation also continued to publish novels in the interwar period, though their appeal to a middlebrow market is less certain than that of Tinayre. Lucie Delarue-Mardrus (born 1874), friend of Colette and member of Natalie Clifford Barney’s Sapphic set, wrote on into the 1920s and ’30s, but her ‘virilized heroines and emasculated heroes’ (Milligan, 1996, 186), and her emphasis
on lesbian love, may well have been too radical for a mainstream audience. Rachilde (born 1860) also published novels more or less annually throughout the interwar years, but her sulphurous reputation and the eroticism and violence of her texts made her anything but middlebrow. Of a younger generation, Marguerite Yourcenar (born 1903) published her first novel *Alexis ou le traité de vain combat* in 1929, having begun her literary career as a poet, and published steadily throughout the 1930s. But Yourcenar’s dense, erudite historical fiction is aimed at a ‘highbrow’ readership, as are the formally experimental fictions of Louise de Vilmorin (born 1902), of which *Saint Une-fois* (1934) is the most famous. Jeanne Galzy (born 1883), winner of the Prix Femina in 1923 for *Les Allongés*, attracted a fairly wide readership, though one that was possibly restricted by the lesbian nature of her love stories. Of the generation born around 1900, the female novelist who belongs most clearly to the category of ‘feminine middlebrow’ has recently returned to public prominence for quite different reasons, but her fiction appealed to a wide mainstream readership – and arguably a predominantly female one – from the end of the 1920s till her death, aged only 39, in 1942. She is Irène Némirovsky.

**Némirovsky and the feminine middlebrow**

Irène Némirovsky reappeared on the national and international literary scene in 2004, when the manuscript of her last novel – or to be more precise, two novellas – *Suite française* was discovered, published and posthumously awarded the Prix Renaudot. Némirovsky died in Auschwitz, classified as a Jew under the racist laws of Vichy France and hence transported by the Nazis. *Suite française* became an international bestseller, and its out-of-print and largely forgotten author a household name, at least in France. However Némirovsky had in fact already been a well-known and successful novelist throughout the 1930s. On the interwar literary scene Némirovsky had situated herself as a serious but accessible mainstream writer, a type of authorship that was entirely consonant with her twin goals of assimilation into her adopted culture of France (her family emigrated from Russia in 1917) and secure commercial success. Angela Kershaw has shown how the mediation of Némirovsky’s work through particular reviews (*Les Nouvelles Littéraires, Gringoire*) and the strategies of her publishers (especially Grasset) invited the attention of a middlebrow readership, and to this
readership she appealed with narratives that explicitly addressed the moods, styles and tensions of the contemporary age, in a form and style that were neither jarringly modernist nor tediously traditional, but quietly skilful within a broadly realist frame of reference. Kershaw summarises this as ‘clear composition, a strong narrative thread and convincing characterisation’ (2010, 38). Settings, characters and themes are strongly of their era: as Kershaw puts it, Némirovsky ‘writes into her readers’ situation’ (167).

Her fictional world foregrounds the restless spirit of what came to be known as ‘the roaring twenties’, and the fragility of the affluence (both inherited and earned) that for some social groups characterised those years. Drawing on her own background in a relatively wealthy Russian-Jewish immigrant family, she portrayed the cosmopolitanism of the times, and also the impact of the war on a young French generation: the men wounded, more psychologically than physically, by the experience of the trenches, the young women at once elated and destabilised by new social freedoms that were in part illusory. It is a world of music halls and jazz, fast cars and telephones, a yawning gap between generations separated by the cataclysm of war, a *mal-du-siècle* as manifest in the frenzied pursuit of pleasure as in the strained silences and mutual incomprehension of domestic relationships.

There is no evidence that Némirovsky’s imagined reader was any more a woman than a man, and certainly (as we have seen) the desire to succeed in both critical and market terms would militate against any self-presentation as a ‘woman’s writer’. Her novels are concerned with male as well as female subjectivity: *David Golder*, her breakthrough novel in 1929, focalises the majority of the action from the point of view of its eponymous hero, an ageing Ukrainian-Jewish merchant leading a wealthy but deeply unhappy life in his adopted France; *La Proie* (1938) is the story of the young Jean-Luc Daguerne as he struggles to find a place, both material and emotional, in a France knocked off its axis by the Depression. And yet it is the female life course that takes centre stage in Némirovsky’s fiction, and the themes she addresses – as well as her self-presentation as an ordinary wife and mother and the types of magazine in which she published – all suggest the probability of a large female readership. In interviews undertaken as part of the publicity campaign for her books, Némirovsky emphasised the conventional gender roles she shared with most of her contemporaries, playing down her exceptional status as a well-known writer – ‘Mon mari rentre. J’arrête mon travail, à partir de ce moment je suis l’épouse tout court’
('My husband comes home. I stop working, and from that moment I am simply a wife') (d’Assac, undated) – and allowing photos of herself with her small daughters to feature in press articles. She published from the start in magazines such as Les Œuvres Libres, which specialised in ‘popular, accessible literature’ in reasonably priced volumes and ‘paid its authors well’ (Kershaw, 2010, 12), or Gringoire, later associated with anti-Semitism and far-right politics, but in the early 1930s at least a more eclectic publication and the best-selling literary and political weekly in France. Némirovsky was also (like Colette) a favourite of the eminently middlebrow Les Nouvelles Littéraires. It is interesting, too, that Persephone, the London publishing house devoted to the revival of a lost feminine middlebrow, should have chosen to re-edit Némirovsky’s stories in translation, their first volume to have been translated from the French (Dimanche and Other Stories, 2010).

Némirovsky’s young women, some of them in their teens as the war ends (the author herself was born in 1903), some a decade younger, most of them from families whose degree of wealth absolves its female members from any imperative to work for a living, enjoy a degree of social freedom that would have been unthinkable before the war. They are in that sense the garçones of the 1920s: they drive cars, stay out till the early hours in the company of young men, actively seek sexual pleasure – and the rarity of pregnancy suggests that they know about contraception. Némirovsky attributes to very young women an exuberant sense of potentiality, of not yet being ‘un être achevé’ (Deux, 1939, 32; ‘a completed person’), and an intense sensuality shared with their male counterparts: Joyce and Alec in David Golder are described ‘mêlant leurs lèvres mouillées, poivrées, mais si jeunes que rien n’altérerait leur tendre goût de fruit’ (1929, 163; ‘kissing each other’s mouths, damp and peppery from their food but so young that nothing could change their tender taste of fruit’). As this last quote suggests, the narrative voice is generally older, suggesting and sharing a nostalgia for freedom and

16 In Deux, Marianne reflects that “Autrefois, quand on prenait une jeune fille pour maîtresse, du moins la crainte de lui avoir fait un enfant empêchait d’être trop muflle. Maintenant, il n’y a même plus cela.” Elle se rappela le sourire d’Antoine: “Vous savez trop de choses”’ (1939, 53; “In the past, when you took a [virgin] girl for your mistress at least the fear of getting her pregnant stopped you being too much of a cad. Now there isn’t even that”. She recalled Antoine’s smile, “You know too much”). Though another young female protagonist does get pregnant, the acknowledgement of a generalised practice of contraception is explicit, despite the pro-natalist, anti-birth control laws in force since 1920.
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the fierce elation of a life still unshaped by time. For these are butterfly moments: adult life in Némirovsky’s world brings with it a closing down of possibilities, for both sexes, but for her women the choices are particularly stark.

The future of these free, mobile girls with their wild avidity for pleasure is figured through two main models of adult femininity. On the one hand, there is the dull, self-effacing matron immured within domestic walls, accepting the infidelities of a husband like Guillaume in the story ‘Dimanche’, ‘gras, bien portant et heureux’ (2000, 14; ‘plump, in good health and contented’) as he escapes the family home to meet his mistress, or Henri in La Comédie bourgeoise, pictured asleep and snoring on his wedding night (1934a, 174) and repeatedly engaged in the seduction of his female workers. To Guillaume, his wife appears ‘casanière, éteinte’ (2000, 17; ‘homely, faded’), like Madeleine in La Comédie bourgeoise, already at twenty-five showing ‘un visage lassé […] qui commence à se faner’ (1934a, 179; ‘a tired face that was beginning to fade’). This category of women, fully absorbed into their role as wife and mother, are characterised by verbs that suggest wilting, fading, a light extinguished.

The other model of female adulthood is not dull but monstrous: Némirovsky’s fiction features the recurring figure of the ageing women who in her desperate attempts to deny advancing age turns herself into an abject masquerade of femininity. From Gloria in David Golder with her ‘vieille figure fardée, émaillée comme une assiette peinte’ (1929, 66; ‘old face beneath the mask of make-up, enamelled like a painted plate’), to Bella in the semi-autobiographical Le Vin de solitude, her face ‘peint, empâté, fardé, englué de poudre et de crème, mais il semblait que la chair cédât intérieurement et que la surface lisse, blanche et rose s’affaissât lentement’ (1935, 269; ‘painted, puffy, made-up, thick with powder and cream, but beneath this the flesh was sagging and the smooth pink and white surface was slowly giving way’), Némirovsky’s age-denying older women are vivid embodiments of Beauvoir’s later analysis of female ageing in a patriarchal culture. With the menopause, Beauvoir writes in Le Deuxième Sexe, a woman:

perd l’attrait érotique et la fécondité d’où elle tirait, aux yeux de la société et à ses propres yeux, la justification de son existence et ses chances de bonheur […] elle assiste impuissante à la dégradation de cet objet de chair avec lequel elle se confond; elle lutte; mais la teinture, peeling, opérations esthétiques ne feront jamais que prolonger sa jeunesse agonisante. (II, 456–57)
(loses the sexual appeal and the capacity to give birth which form, in society’s eyes as well as her own, the justification of her existence and her sole chance of happiness [...] she watches helplessly as that flesh with which she has identified her very self starts to decay; she fights against it, but all that the hair dyes, the facelifts, the beauty treatments can do is to prolong the death throes of youth)

In Némirovsky’s most extreme portrayal of this dilemma, Jézabel (1936), the identification of youthful beauty with identity itself leads Gladys not just to devote her life to concealing her real age, but actually to commit murder when she is threatened with its revelation. Seen from the perspective of their daughters, these women are physically repulsive and bitterly resented for their lack of maternal warmth: Hélène (Le Vin de Solitude) ‘nourrissait dans son cœur envers sa mère une haine étrange qui semblait grandir avec elle’ (1935, 58; ‘felt in her heart a strange hatred for her mother that seemed to grow as she did’). But seen – as they also are, albeit briefly in some novels – from their own point of view, they invite empathy rather than horror: Gloria (David Golder) recognises her own role in her husband’s life, not as object of love but as the public sign of his wealth: ‘Il ne l’avait jamais aimée. S’il la couvrait de bijoux, c’était comme une enseigne vivante, un étalage’ (1929, 96; ‘He had never loved her. If he covered her with jewels, this was only so that she could be a living display cabinet for his riches’); Antoinette in Le Bal has moments of reluctant sympathy for her mother despite the latter’s malice:

Et quand elle disait le mot ‘attendre’, il passait sur ses traits durs, tendus, maussades, une certaine expression pathétique, profonde, qui remuait Antoinette malgré elle et la faisait souvent, allonger, d’instinct, ses lèvres vers le visage maternel. (1930, 13)

(And when she said ‘wait’, her strained, hard, sullen features took on a deeper, sad expression that moved Antoinette despite herself and made her move instinctively to kiss her mother’s face)

And through discreet but effective images Némirovsky makes clear that part of the daughters’ horror comes from the fear of an underlying resemblance, fear that this may be the fate that awaits them too, which sets the monstrous mothers in a more forgiving light as victims of a constricted female destiny. In Le Bal, mother and daughter are connected by mirroring gestures:

Elle serrait violemment les mains en parlant, d’un geste tellement
identique à celle d’Antoinette que la petite [...] tressaillit brusquement comme quand on se trouve, à l’improviste, devant un miroir. (1930, 55)

(She clasped her hands violently as she spoke, in a gesture so exactly like Antoinette’s own that the girl [...] shivered suddenly, as if she caught an unexpected glimpse of her own reflection in a mirror)

Gladys in Jézabel becomes that ‘vieille poupée fardée’ (1936, 53; ‘painted old doll’) she remembers with such horror as her mother.

Marriage, in the class in which these novels are set, is the only viable future for young women, and on the whole it is not presented as an institution that offers happiness to either partner. Though very young women enjoy new freedoms to explore, with their male peers, both sexual and romantic desires, marriage reimposes a strict division of roles that is fulfilling for neither. The men must find the means to support the family, a responsibility that is presented as desperately hard especially in the Depression years of the 1930s, but also provides a sense of agency and of being part of the public world. The women become, like the once-wild Madeleine of Deux, ‘la parfaite épouse’ (1939, 194; ‘the perfect wife’) and are consigned to the private, domestic sphere of motherhood. Without maternity, life is even more desolate: Solange, victim of a botched pre-marriage abortion in Deux, and left unable to bear children, becomes ‘triste, aigrie, vieille avant l’âge’ (193; ‘sad, embittered, old before her time’). But becoming a wife and mother means a closing in of horizons, and a sense of gradual effacement as the next generation reduces the female parent to the status of insignificant shadow: in the eyes of Christiane, her daughter, Mme Boehmer in ‘Les Rivages heureux’ in Dimanche ‘n’était qu’une ombre insubstantielle et calme, entourée d’autres ombres’ (2000, 38; ‘was no more than a calm, insubstantial shadow, surrounded by other shadows’).

Though Némirovsky certainly flags up no feminist agenda – any more than most English middlebrow – her fiction displays a world in which women’s options are rigidly limited. An acceptable adult social identity, for her women, demands marriage, and marriage means either resignation to a quietly subordinate, marginalised place, or a desperate and undignified struggle to cling on to youth and the sense of identity conferred by male desire. Yet celibacy is no less desolate, given the low status of unmarried women. Vieilles filles in Némirovsky’s fiction are insubstantial figures, ‘pale, fragile, transparent’ like the Illmanen sisters in the story Les Fumées du vin (1934b), or like Mlle Isabelle in Le Bal, envious and mean-spirited, eking out an impoverished life by
teaching piano in an apartment that her pupils see as ‘laid, misérable et sinistre’ (1930, 45; ‘ugly, miserable and sinister’). Unmarried women are ‘solitaires, vieillies avant l’âge […] Tisanes, cataplasmes, potions, leur vie s’écoule ainsi’ (‘Aïno’ in Dimanche, 2000, 113; ‘lonely, old before their time […] Weak tea, cataplasms, medicines, thus go their lives’).

The imperative to marry is a powerful one, and a clear if unspoken taboo prevents women from taking the initiative in proposing marriage. So they wait, even in the hedonistic period of early youth: the activity most recurrently associated with women in Némirovsky is waiting, attendre. Young women wait long hours for lovers to come, in cafés like Christiane in ‘Les Rivages heureux’ or Nadine in ‘Dimanche’, wondering ‘Combien de femmes avaient attendu, comme elle, ravalé leurs larmes, comme elle’ (28; ‘How many women had waited, like her, and choked back their tears, like her’) on this same café bench, as the clock relentlessly chimes out one quarter hour after another; or they wait in parks like Marianne in Deux, walking round and round the snowy lawns as Antoine fails to arrive for their rendezvous: ‘Il ne venait pas. Elle tournait sans cesse autour de la pelouse, le front baissé, les dents serrées. Attendre encore … Attendre … Espérer …’ (1939, 69; ‘And still he didn’t come. She walked round and round the lawn, head down, teeth clenched. Just wait a bit longer … Wait … And hope …’). In each of the cases cited an older woman from a lower social class addresses the waiting girl with a word or look of sympathy that generalises their plight across the social hierarchy, and across generations. In Deux:

Une femme s’assit à côté d’elle, une petite bourgeoise, vêtue d’un manteau noir, avec un col de fourrure râpée, qui la regarda avec pitié, comme si elle songeait: Encore une …’ (1939, 70)

(A woman sat down next to her, lower middle class, black coat with a threadbare fur collar. She looked at her pityingly as if she were thinking, ‘Here’s another one …’)

The ardour and appetite for life of Némirovsky’s young girls is soon shadowed by recognition of the real limits on their futures, and the aura of resigned disappointment is one of the elements that connects her to her British contemporaries.

Némirovsky’s world is far from simply bleak, however. British middlebrow heroines on the whole get on with life, finding joys and pleasures (and humour) here and there in the lives they have, occasionally (as in the dénouement of Holtby’s The Land of Green
transcending all constraints to affirm the survival of their youthful sense of entitlement to happiness. This beleaguered optimism is also present in Némirovsky. Hélène, the most autobiographical of her heroines, concludes *Le Vin de Solitude* with a sense of deliverance from her unhappy girlhood, a rejection of marriage and an assertion of hope in her independent future as a writer: ‘je suis libre. Je travaillerai [...] Je n’ai pas peur de la vie, songea-t-elle. [...] je suis seule, mais ma solitude est âpre et enivrante’ (1935, 309–11; ‘I am free. I shall work [...] “I’m not scared of life”, she thought, “I’m alone, but my solitude is bitter and intoxicating”). The final image of the book employs familiar and effective imagery to endorse Hélène’s optimism: ‘Elle se leva, et, à ce moment, les nuages s’écartèrent; entre les piliers de l’Arc de Triomphe le ciel bleu parut et éclara son chemin’ (1935, 311; ‘She got up and at that moment the clouds parted; between the pillars of the Arc de Triomphe the blue sky appeared and lit up the road ahead’). And if Hélène’s independence and ambition are exceptional in Némirovsky’s world, those heroines who find themselves tied to a more conventional destiny may also affirm the survival of some core of selfhood. The later fiction in particular proposes a more nuanced and positive view of marriage. In *Deux* (1939), for example, Marianne finds in her marriage to Antoine not the passionate desire and fascination that first drew them together, but a sort of shared peace and mutual support grounded in ‘les précieuses banalités de chaque jour’ (140; ‘the precious banality of the everyday’). Without loving Antoine in the full romantic sense of the word, she identifies herself as ‘solidaire de sa joie et de sa souffrance’ (‘standing alongside him in both his joys and his suffering’) and puts this sense of solidarity into practice in their daily lives. Here too, the novel ends on a positive image of the couple, ‘leurs bras enlacés, leurs corps pressés l’un contre l’autre. Ils ne ressentaient pas le désir; ils étaient calmes, un peu ironiques et sans joie, mais, au bout d’un instant, il leur sembla que leur fatigue les quittait’ (261; ‘arm in arm, their bodies pressed close together. They felt no desire, they were calm, a little ironic and joyless, but after a moment they felt that their weariness had left them’). For her readers, Némirovsky maps the social and emotional landscape of a conflicted period, with the emphasis on a female life course, and a bleakness about women’s life chances that is offset by her vivid rendering of youth’s vitality and sense of open horizons, and of an attenuated, pragmatic and even serene acceptance of the realities of female adulthood.
Némirovsky’s fiction was positioned as middlebrow by her own needs as an author, by the mediation of publishers and press, and by the fact of her femaleness in a very male culture. But the textual qualities of her work were also central to her appeal to a mainstream, middle-class readership, and connect her to the other authors defined here as middlebrow. These are not fully popular novels as were, for example, those in the thriving romance series of the 1920s and ’30s, forerunners of the Harlequin Press, or their crime or adventure equivalents. Nor are they formally demanding and self-reflexive in the manner of Proust, Gide and the Surrealists, or using the novel form to articulate a strongly ideological vision like, for example, Montherlant or the communist novelist Paul Nizan. They situate personal stories in a social context, and their narrative techniques are well-established and familiar since the late nineteenth-century heyday of the realist novel: through empathetic characterisation, a mixture of external and internal focalisation, coherent plotting with elements of suspense and themes relevant to their readers, they invite suspension of disbelief and that pleasurable state of ‘narrative hypnosis’ (Radway, 1997) that reading fiction can deliver. Némirovsky exemplifies in particular two characteristics of the middlebrow aesthetic: the signifying power of place and the use of a body of imagery that is familiar to the point of transparency, because integrated into the language and perceptual processes of the everyday.

First, the sense of place. Némirovsky often uses vividly evoked settings to give sensory reality to characters’ mental or emotional landscapes. There are places that materialise utter desolation, such as the empty apartment to which David Golder returns after losing his fortune and his family, and which his wife has stripped of all their accumulated comforts: sounds echo through the vast deserted rooms, harsh external light and cold draughts enter freely through the ‘vastes fenêtres nues’ (1929, 168; ‘vast, bare windows’). In *La Comédie bourgeoise* the narrator returns insistently to the long flat road, ‘une route de France’, that runs through the village where Madeleine, the heroine, lives out the dully conventional stages of her life:

De nouveau, la longue route plate qui semble s’allonger interminablement. Madeleine marche avec les enfants. […] Ils s’éloignent. la route, luisante de pluie, semble monter vers le ciel bas et s’enfoncer dans l’horizon. (1934a, 193–94)
(And again the long flat road seems to stretch endlessly ahead. Madeleine walks along it with the children [...] receding into the distance. The road, shiny with rain, seems to rise towards the low sky and vanish into the horizon)

In *La Proie* it is the Daguerne family’s house in the Paris suburbs that materialises, throughout much of the novel, the pinched misery of respectable poverty: ‘ce pavillon de briques jaunes à l’aspect maussade, solide, laide, avare’ (1938, 10; ‘that yellow brick bungalow with its sullen, solid, ugly, miserly air’) with its ‘parcimonieuse lumière’ indoors (10; ‘sparse indoor light’) and garden ‘sans fleurs, sans grâce’ (10; ‘graceless and flowerless’). These spaces contrast with the cold but elegant white and abundance of light that characterise affluence, from Golder’s villa on the Côte d’Azur to Jean-Luc Daguerne’s *nouveau riche* apartment on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne, on the top floor of ‘un immeuble neuf, blanc’ (147; ‘a brand new, white apartment block’) and internally decorated entirely in white. The spaces of desolation also contrast dramatically with those of happiness and sensuality, which are usually temporary and provisional, as opposed to permanent and solidly predictable. Thus Jean-Luc Daguerne knows rare moments of peace and fulfilment with Édith, before their disastrous marriage, in a rented ‘chambre chaude et sombre’ (16; ‘warm, dark bedroom’) immured against the cold, dark city night, and later in a village café in which he and his second love, Marie Dourdan, take refuge from the rain, where a cat sleeps on a chair before the fire and ‘cet aspect familial, doux s’alliait étrangement au décor du bar, et à l’odeur de vieux et excellents alcools qui imprégnait les murs’ (154; ‘its homely, cosy look formed a strange contrast to the décor of a bar, and the smell of fine old alcohol that emanated from the walls’). *Deux* opens at dawn in a country hotel room, a fire warming the five young people gathered there while outside a dank white fog presses against the windows. The 1914–18 war has just ended; the five – two girls and three young men – have escaped family to celebrate Easter with a whole night together, ‘un caprice, une escapade folle’ (1939, 10; ‘a whim, a mad escapade’) in this ordinary room touched with magic in the firelight: ‘la chambre, le vieux lit sombre, la courte-pointe à fleurs, froissée, jetée à terre, le petit canapé rose’ (13; ‘the room with its old dark wood bed, its flowered quilt crumpled on the floor and the small pink sofa’). The imagery of happiness – warmth that protects from a cold external world, firelight, the sensuality of colours (the pink of the furniture, the reflection of the flames in an amber necklace) – is
commonplace and transparent, as is that of cold, dark, flat uniformity that evokes misery.

The use of place to figure mood, and the specific images used (the long, flat road, the empty house, white as a signifier of cold beauty) are quietly effective precisely because they activate familiar associations, commonly used types of metaphor, analogies that pervade everyday modes of perception and narration as well as literary ones. They are relatively transparent images that serve the fictional illusion rather than drawing attention to the text itself. Place is just one example of this stylistic trait: an unostentatious poetry of the everyday runs through Némirovsky’s narratives, part of her characteristically middlebrow discretion of style and tone, which Angela Kershaw sums up as ‘formally accessible, contemporary in theme, and yet reassuringly familiar’ (2010, 28). The opening sequence of Deux ends with a typically discreet yet telling image of this kind. Marianne, 20 years old, has spent the night as described above with her four friends who include Antoine, whom she finds intensely seductive and who will soon become her lover. As they leave the hotel room at dawn, she turns to take one last look at what will become the emblematic scene of their youthful freedom and sense of potential: ‘Du grand feu qu’ils avaient allumé avec tant de joie, depuis longtemps il ne restait qu’une cendre ardente’ (13; ‘Of the great fire they had lit so joyfully, there remained only one cinder, live and burning’). The condensed image of transient yet consuming passion, of happiness that is at once fleeting and formative, scarcely needs interpretation. It simply contributes to the reader’s imaginative immersion in a fictional world that is simultaneously sensory and charged with meaning, and thus to the everyday pleasure of reading.

Conclusion

The high era of middlebrow, indeed the moment of the term’s coinage, is the period between the two world wars, at least in Britain. Demand came from the growth of an aspirational middle-class public; in literature, this demand was met by entrepreneurial publishers, by new forms of marketing and dissemination through libraries. Post-war tensions around gender identity, and the fact that middle-class women were on the whole both educated and moderately leisured, created demand for a specifically women-oriented type of fiction that could reflect and reflect on female experience, and a cohort of talented women novelists
responded to this demand with a new kind of relevant, page-turning, often wise and witty fiction. In France the conditions for the production of a feminine middlebrow appear to have been equally present, yet no such phenomenon is visible in literary history, nor has a lost generation of interwar female novelists been identified and recuperated for contemporary readers as it has across the Channel.

I have suggested certain factors that help to explain this, from the absence of any equivalent of the large, popular network of libraries that flourished in Britain to the more extreme misogyny of the post-war backlash against women’s limited gains in France and the more radical division between ‘high’ culture – esteemed, masculine and dismissive of the ‘easy’ pleasures of immersive fiction – and ‘low’ culture, a category into which tended to fall women’s fiction, particularly if concerned with relationships, home or family. But there is no reason to suppose that French women lacked the desire to read compelling stories that mapped, dramatised and explored their own situation – indeed, the existence of a vibrant feminine middlebrow in the years preceding the First World War would suggest precisely the opposite. I have speculated on the types of male-authored fiction that partly filled this need, but also pointed to a number of women writers of what Jennifer Milligan has termed the ‘forgotten generation’ whose work certainly answered demand for a French middlebrow. Some, in particular Colette and Marcelle Tinayre, pursued literary careers begun in the more auspicious years (for women writers) of the Belle Époque. Some were themselves young women in the interwar period, and of these Irène Némirovsky comes closest to a French equivalent to the British middlebrow phenomenon, in the sense that her work too crafts compelling stories out of the tensions between women’s dreams of self-fulfilment and new horizons, and the cramped reality of what Hilary Hinds sums up as their ‘culturally ascribed and sanctioned lot’ (2009, 314). Némirovsky, like her English counterparts, refuses simply to echo the deprecation of the ‘feminine’ sphere of home, family, personal emotions that is implicit in a ‘virile’ definition of literary authenticity, seeking too to acknowledge and valorise the undramatic joys of what she names, in Deux, ‘les précieuses banalités de chaque jour’ (1939, 140). Her writing style too bears comparison with the British middlebrow’s unemphatic deployment of familiar imagery in the service of fictional illusion. Rediscovered and republished thanks to the dramatic rediscovery of her wartime writing, Némirovsky remains, with Colette, the chief survivor of France’s smaller but nonetheless real interwar feminine middlebrow.