Career Stories
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On April 12, 1898, Professor Gabriel Lippmann made a report to the Académie des Sciences de Paris about a discovery made by one of his former students: the radioactivity of certain minerals and two new chemical elements, which would later be called polonium and radium. He was announcing to the scientific world the initial results of Marie Curie’s doctoral thesis. Five years later, the entire world would learn of her work when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics, jointly with her husband, Pierre, and Henri Becquerel.

Marie Curie was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Physics, and her appearance at the forefront of scientific news became a cause for much interest in her unusual marriage and professional pursuits. Reporters and photographers flooded the Curie’s home and small laboratory, along with letters, poems, and invitations to speak all over the world (Curie 224–33). Even though the Curie found all the sudden notoriety a waste of time and an annoying distraction from their experiments, Madame Curie’s overbooked but balanced life as wife, mother, scientist, and teacher at the École Normale Supérieure de Sèvres provoked wild curiosity and speculation in the French press (Curie 224–25). In the same year, one of the first professionalization novels focusing on the life of a woman scientist, titled Les Cervelines, was published.

This new genre of scientific novel brought with it the appearance of a corresponding type of intelligent female character, the cerveline, based on the title of Yver’s first novel, translated into English as The Brainy Women.¹ There are three “brainy” female protagonists in that specific novel, but this character type is prevalent in several other works by Yver (Princesses de

¹ Waelti-Walters gives this translation of the title in Feminist Novelists of the Belle Époque: Love As a Lifestyle, p. 15.
science, 1907; Dames du palais, 1909), Gabrielle Reval (La Bachelière, 1910), and Marcelle Babin (Pharmacienne, 1907), among others. The hubbub that surrounded Marie Curie after she was awarded the Nobel Prize might have instigated the interest in scientific female protagonists, yet the life of the eminent scientist and the lives of these fictional women are not identical.² Similar to Marie Curie, the typical brainy protagonist is usually well educated and from a middle-class family in which the mother is a traditional housewife and the father is a successful professional. In contrast to Mme Curie, however, the brainy woman character is very often an only child and, frequently, she chooses to pursue her father’s career, thus carrying on a family tradition in a particular profession. These character traits tend to subdue the potentially rebellious or bizarre qualities of the brainy woman: rather than portraying her as a strident bluestocking or humorless bookworm, the narrator understands her as a dutiful child, absorbed by her work and by the need to perpetuate her father’s fame and fortune.

It is important to emphasize that the brainy woman character, although perhaps inspired by contemporary historical figures, is also a fictional construction based in bourgeois ideals of women and power. The novel of professional development devoted to women scientists follows the structures of the traditional bildungsroman more closely than it does the life story of Marie Curie or Doctor Blanche Edwards-Pilliet or other living women scientists from the time period.³ The historical situation surrounding the rise to popularity of these novels remains quite important, yet the fictional protagonists’ choices and the narratives’ structures that the authors employed indicate deviations from the historical woman scientist of the Belle Epoque.

Comparing the lives of the exceptional women characters who populate novels of scientific development with those of historical woman scientists will highlight some of the mainstays of the traditional bildungsroman plot in

² It should also be noted that simply because a book was published in a certain year does not necessarily mean that it was written in that year. I am not arguing that Yver wrote Les Cervelines as a direct response to Marie Curie’s fame, but that women scientists in general were of great interest to the French public and the creation of fictional women scientists around the same time period should not be a surprise.

³ Although not as well known today, Dr. Blanche Edwards-Pilliet was a pioneer during the Belle Epoque, similar to Marie Curie. She and her medical school classmate Augusta Klumpke were the first women named as internes in the Paris hospitals in the late 1880s, an important step toward advancing women’s status in the medical profession. Edwards-Pilliet became an activist for women’s rights in the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly for mothers and children’s rights. Also from the Belle Epoque period is Dr. Madeleine Pelletier, who became well known for her feminist lectures and activities in addition for her work in the medical field.
these novels, for example, the search for a positive role model or mentor, the false starts and detours the young protagonist must endure, and the eventual reintegration into familial and societal structures. In addition, it will show us one of the defining characteristics of these novels about women scientists: the complex intermingling of the quest and romance plots. Although the romance narrative hovers over some of the novels about women students and teachers discussed in Chapter 3, the two plotlines are in direct conflict with one another in this new category of novel, and the protagonists find unusual and creative ways to reconcile them. As such, these novels about women in the sciences constitute some of the most polemic texts from this time period and provide us with some of the strongest examples of a new narrative form for the Belle Epoque novel.

The notion of women participating in scientific fields was highly suspect among the conservative French bourgeoisie during the Belle Epoque, but for different reasons than those concerning women schoolteachers. The church and the bourgeoisie opposed state-educated professors because they posed a potential threat to the securely established teachers and curriculum of the Catholic Church’s convent schools. Women scientists, doctors, and researchers, however, posed new kinds of problems for the conservative bourgeois. Unlike public schoolteachers, women scientists were not replacing nuns in previously established positions for women. Rather, they were asserting themselves in all-male fields, and their appearance implied a major challenge to masculine domination. This challenge was especially devastating to male scientists, since one of the principle changes in the medical and scientific professions during the nineteenth century in France was the increase in power, prestige, and authority that scientists and doctors gained in the eyes of the French public. Men who worked in those fields thus had much more to lose when women began to enter “their” professional schools, “their” libraries, “their” laboratories and hospitals.

In two histories of the scientific and medical professions in France, both Toby Gelfand and Michel Foucault stress the tremendous increase in authority and power for doctors during the nineteenth century. Gelfand’s 1980 analysis, Professionalizing Modern Medicine, underlines the transfer of power from the patient to the doctor and thus confirms certain aspects of Michel Foucault’s 1962 work on the beginnings of the clinic in France. Gelfand and Foucault both claim that when the medical profession began to emphasize the importance of practical training for medical students and
scientific researchers, it began simultaneously to treat its clinic patients as objects of study rather than as clients and employers. The patient who was admitted to a clinic because of his or her disease became a medical example for the student interns. The patients lost their power over the doctors and researchers, who used them objectively for their experiments. This new attitude dramatically altered the relationship between patients and doctors as well as between doctors and diseases.

The historical empowerment of practitioners and administrators in the medical field during the nineteenth century is reflected fictionally in certain aspects of the women protagonists’ lives and specifically in the important shift in the relationship between patient and doctor. Descriptions in three scientific novels demonstrate patients’ respect for and dependence on the women doctors’ scientific knowledge and their ability to cure. In contrast to the patients’ respect, in two of Yver’s works, Les Cervelines (1903) and Princesses de science (1907), the women scientists treat their clinic patients as objects of study rather than as human subjects, as they seek to discover and cure diseases. Their lack of interest in the people whose bodies they are studying appears shocking to some of their colleagues, although this was common practice in the medical profession by 1900. The surprise comes from the fact that women, traditionally the object of the male gaze in bourgeois culture, were now the observers. Both male and female characters in these novels, along with the narrators’ subtle interventions, try to turn the tables on the cerveline-observers and reconfine them to the passive object of the male gaze. In Babin’s work, Pharmacienne (1907), we find an overt return to conventional roles, when the woman medical student is treated as an object of study by one of her supervising professors. The institution’s reaction to this male doctor’s “experiment” is shock and disgust, since he has broken professional codes of respect toward a future colleague as he performs his tests on his unsuspecting student. All of the scientific brainy women come into conflicts with colleagues, clients, supervisors, publishers, and professors, who still see women as confined to roles of service, care of, and dependence on others. Both in these fictional narratives and in the historical Belle Epoque, bourgeois women were generally raised to believe that they should not seek such attributes as power, domination, and authority.

4. There are several examination scenes in each of these novels in which the doctors do not mention the human being before them, only the symptoms of the disease. See, for example, Colette Yver, Les Cervelines (Paris: Juven, 1903), pp. 51–57, and Princesses de science (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1907), pp. 58–61.
Thus the new control and prestige of the medical professional over the client would necessarily rule out the legitimate possibility of women doctors or scientists.\(^5\)

A further trait that all brainy women characters specifically hold in common with historical women scientists is their obsession with their work. The protagonists are all intelligent, well-educated women. But the quality that places them in the special category of “brainy women” is their fascination with their studies. Whether in the field of scientific inquiry, legal studies, history, literature, or archeology, the women are driven by their desire to learn, discover, and create. They are overachievers who know only work. Leisure time is almost unheard of for these women, and their happiest, most peaceful, and inspired moments are spent at their desks or in their laboratories. But these brainy women deal with the distractions of love, home, and family in ways that are very different from historical women, such as Marie Curie. Their treatment of these topics moves us directly into the realm of fiction and into the opposing traditions of the romance and the quest plot.

The narrative structures of these particular novels of development offer the most complex interconnections of the romance and quest plots of any of the novels considered in this study. The sizable presence of the romance plot often diverts the reader’s attention from the importance of the quest in these texts, and it can minimize the complicated nature of the narratives that weave together these two plot types. The original definitions of the novel of development focused on male protagonists because the main features of the story include the quest: a young person leaves behind family and friends in order to discover himself, experience new adventures, then return home as a more mature individual ready to reintegrate with society. Elements often found in the quest narrative include the older mentor figure who will act as a guide, the trials or tests of intelligence and strength that will be offered to the young protagonist, and, finally, the triumphant return home, with a reward of some kind, such as marriage. In contrast, the traditional romance plot usually focuses on a young woman and the various moments of doubt, suspicion, and final revelation that occur during her courtship and marriage. Studies of the romance generally claim that the heroine must go from

\(^5\) Marie Curie’s timidity and general disgust with the public’s gushing admiration of her discoveries fit well with this notion that women should not aggressively seek power and prestige. In her biography, Eve Curie explains that Pierre Curie shunned public recognition because of a principle to abhor all hierarchies, while Marie Curie fled the spotlight due to an instinctual fear of strangers’ attentions (Curie 230).
isolation, often a state as motherless orphan, to a state of connection, usually with a caring and attentive fiancé or husband.\textsuperscript{6} Within the specific context of the Belle Epoque, Diana Holmes’s definition of the romance narrative includes three parts: it must be “driven and structured by romantic love”; the style usually varies “between realism and melodrama”; and in terms of theme, it must not only include a discussion of romantic love as a woman’s “destiny,” but also provide an “arena to explore female identity and desire” (Holmes 2006, 199–200).\textsuperscript{7}

The main goal in both quest and romance narratives is the same: young men and women must mature and become adults. And the traditional conclusion is often similar: marriage. Yet the protagonist of the quest may choose a number of different paths toward becoming an adult, whereas the romance heroine has only one method of gaining maturity: find a man and marry him.

Although these novels about women scientists may include some of the basic settings or plot elements of the traditional romance narrative, the protagonists themselves are notable for their lack of almost every quality deemed “necessary” for the popular romantic heroine. The typical romance characters include a young and rather naïve woman and an older, more experienced man, who may at first appear derisive or harsh.\textsuperscript{8} The brainy women in Belle Epoque novels are young (from eighteen to thirty-five years old) and sometimes inexperienced interns or students, yet they are not confused or innocent creatures. For example, in Yver’s 1907 Princesse de science, the “doctoresse” Lancelevée states that women doctors’ knowledge of science has stripped away the mysteries and dreams that most women grow up with. They are left “dried up; we have seen everything, heard everything, known everything. We are neither nervous nor sensitive nor modest

\textsuperscript{6} Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance, although written with the 1980s American woman reader in mind, has influenced my own definitions and analysis of the romance plot in this study.

\textsuperscript{7} Jennifer Milligan offers a lucid analysis of the Romance novel in chapter 5 of The Forgotten Generation, particularly with regard to the interwar period of French women’s literature (1919–39). She also discusses the growth and development of the romance novel more generally in France, beginning with its “revival” in the 1880s (Milligan 149) and its revisions through the mid-twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{8} I have derived this simple outline of the romance heroine from Tania Modleski’s outline of Harlequin Romances in Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women. She in turn bases her definitions on the “mother” of popular romances for women, Richardson’s Pamela.
nor impressionable.”

Her description of the female doctor as heartless, senseless, and genderless (“the woman doctor is not a woman” [la femme-médecin n’est pas une femme]) indicates her attachment to male standards of professionalization in the medical field and her rejection of female standards of emotionality and vulnerability. The brainy woman could definitely not be categorized as “naïve.”

The male characters in these novels do not fit the typical romance mold either; they are never scornful or unkind and only occasionally express cynicism, usually due to a previous disappointment with another brainy woman. Rather than an older man with more experience or wealth, the male protagonists are generally the same age as the brainy woman and most often a colleague or fellow student at professional school. On the rare occasion where we do find an older, wealthier man, the results are usually catastrophic. For example, when Dr. Paul Tisserel, in Les Cervelines, tries to seduce his young intern, Jeanne Boerk, the traditional romance roles are reversed: he is confused and desperate, she is brutal and cynical. In the end, she flees the hospital and escapes from his love and attention, thus upsetting the classic “happily ever after” ending of the romance plot. One of the mainstays of the classic romance plot, the image of the obsessive male character, does resurface regularly in these texts. The conventional plot and protagonists, however, are most often distorted to fit the women scientists’ quest narrative, and it is the nontraditional characters in these texts who overturn the typical romance narrative.

The quest narrative, which includes the conventionally “masculine” elements of competition and ambition, also arises in these novels of professional development, and it is usually twisted to conform to the demands of the unusual brainy woman protagonist. Although some of the heroines deny that they harbor the typical quest plot desires for fame and success, most eventually decide to work, and they choose their particular profession based on self-interested concerns, such as personal aptitude and preference for a certain field. After becoming involved in their profession, most of the

9. “comme desséchées; et nous avons tout vu, tout entendu, tout connu. Nous ne sommes plus ni nerveuses, ni sensibles, ni pudiques, ni impressionables” (Yver 1907, 213).

10. As Tania Modleski comments, this male obsession with the female protagonist is characteristic of romance novels in general: “Here is a very potent feminine fantasy, common to most nineteenth-century novels and to their twentieth-century counterparts. The man, whether he is plotting the woman’s seduction or, as in soap operas, endlessly discussing his marital woes with his coworkers at the hospital, spends all his time thinking about the woman. Even when he appears most indifferent to her, as he frequently does in Harlequin Romances, we can be sure he will eventually tell her how much the thought of her has obsessed him” (Modleski 16).
protagonists continue to work because they are fascinated by their career and because they take pleasure in their achievements and the public acknowledgment of their efforts, thus following typical quest plot requirements.

Although most scientific women protagonists of Belle Epoque novels chose their careers because of family tradition and the power and prestige that they bring, some pursue a particular career for its humanitarian appeal, similar to teaching characters who claimed they had a mission to change society through the education of its girls. Women teachers in education novels often expressed satisfaction with their profession because of its contributions to their vision of an improved society. A few scientific protagonists, such as Babin’s pharmacist, express larger goals of improving their patients’ lives, but most brainy women protagonists are motivated to practice their skills because they enjoy the personal rewards involved, including renown in the field.

Despite this drive for knowledge, power, and success, the conventional quest is sometimes discarded entirely in these texts so that the main protagonist may resume or complete the romance narrative. If the quest plot is indeed carried through to the end of the novel, often the brainy woman must avoid many obstacles and pitfalls in order to reach her goal. These impediments include sexual harassment by peers or supervisors at school, discrimination on the job from clients or supervisors, and limited access to opportunities for advancement. Barriers such as these not only reflected attitudes about the femme nouvelle in the traditionally male liberal professions during this time period, they were also intriguing narrative devices, employed to accentuate the unusual nature of these heroines.

Within the general category of cerveline (brainy woman), there are two types. First, there are the women who are so completely wrapped up in their work that men, romance, marriage, and children are not a determinant in their lives. These brainy women dismiss conventional femininity and embrace the sanctioned masculine role entirely. They may take on masculine codes of behavior for their professional roles, but they still practice feminine virtue, that is, sexual purity. The characters are pure brain, with no corporeal lust or amorous passion to distract them. Novels containing this type of “absolute” or “pure” brainy woman also develop the strongest distortions in their romance narratives, mainly because the plotlines must be altered to conform to the brainy woman’s desire to work rather than to love, nurture, or mother.

Second, there are brainy women who, having been awakened or distracted from their intense focus on work by the introduction of a possible romance, marriage, and even family, are “seduced,” not so much by the
man, but by the idea of fulfilling traditional feminine roles at the same time as the masculine ones. These characters always fall into the difficult position of trying to maintain both roles simultaneously. In order for them to juggle intellectual, sexual, maternal, and domestic demands, they often rearrange the public and private spheres of their lives.\textsuperscript{11} In these professionalization novels, the romance plot adheres more closely to the general definition given above, even though alterations must often be made to include the work of the brainy woman. The quest plot, however, is often diverted or rewritten to make room for the brainy woman’s marriage, children, and home. In my discussion, I will focus on the distinctions between these two types of brainy women, the “pure” and the “seduced.” This division will demonstrate the ways in which the character and plot development are quite different for each type and, even within a specific type, the enormous variety of possible actions for the heroine.

The Pure Cervelines

One of the most extreme brainy women in this group of scientific protagonists comes from the first novel Yver wrote for an adult audience, \textit{Les Cervelines}.\textsuperscript{12} Her name is Jeanne Boerk, and she is the only female medical intern and student of pathology at the municipal hospital of the city of Briois. As the novel opens, Jeanne appears completely fulfilled by her profession and her ambitions for her career. An exception even to the exceptional brainy woman type, Jeanne comes from a peasant background and her reasons for pursuing medicine are not tied to bourgeois family traditions. The reader learns in passing that a village schoolteacher in

\textsuperscript{11} Biographies of Marie Curie include several pages devoted to descriptions of her arrangement of domestic space to transform it into an office. Eve Curie, for example, describes their living room–office “with its bare walls, furnished with books and a white wooden table. At one end of the table was Marie’s chair; at the other, Pierre’s. On the table were treatises on physics, a petroleum lamp, a bunch of flowers; and that was all” (Curie 150–51). The fictional women characters, in contrast, who are trying to “have it all” could be considered a turn-of-the-century prototype for the “supermom” phenomenon of the late twentieth century, when many women of the middle class tried, with varying degrees of success and failure, joy and frustration, to balance the competing demands of raising children, pursuing a career, entertaining, and keeping house.

\textsuperscript{12} For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2. Waelti-Walters notes, “At seventeen, [Yver] published a successful book for children entitled \textit{Mlle Devoir} and several more between 1891 and 1900” (Waelti-Walters 188). \textit{Les Cervelines} appeared several years later, in 1903, when Yver was twenty-nine years old.
Landrecies had discovered Jeanne’s intelligence, and that “until the age of thirteen she had been only the daughter of farmers.”¹³ Throughout the text, the narrator repeats several times that she is a “very healthy countrywoman” (campagnarde très saine; Yver 1903, 2) and a “daughter of the people” (fille du peuple; 59). Yver describes her personality as “a mix of knowledge and rusticity; rural backwardness hovered over her intelligence.”¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Jeanne is portrayed as one of the most driven characters, and she behaves more professionally and follows masculine professional guidelines more strictly than any of her bourgeois or urbane male colleagues and supervisors. She seeks knowledge at the expense of all emotional ties and believes that duty and service to the profession come before personal desires. Jeanne Boerk is thus a clear example of the status socialization that occurred in the male professional schools of the period.¹⁵ She is also exceptional because, at age twenty-two, she diagnoses patients more rapidly and more accurately than her supervisor Dr. Paul Tisserel, as he readily admits to his colleague Jean Cécile. He explains to Jean that he had believed that she was copying her observations from a manual but then discovered that she was the manual (3). According to Tisserel, Jeanne is on the verge of surpassing LeHêtre, the general director of the entire hospital, in her powers of diagnosis. Thus her need for a mentor, usually an important part of the traditional novel of development, appears to be less important for Jeanne. Like most brainy women, she works hard and devotes every minute of her day to research, yet the narrator describes her accomplishments as the result of some inexplicable medical genius that she possesses. It is probably this characteristic that sets Jeanne Boerk apart from the other scientific women protagonists, and it provides the reader with a plausible explanation for her ascent from a simple country girl to a phenomenal pathologist.¹⁶

Her modest background and strong scientific genius also account for the reason that Jeanne, unlike most other Yver heroines, is never tempted by love or by a maternal instinct for her sick patients. Jeanne has developed

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¹³. “elle n’avait été, jusqu’à treize ans, qu’une fille de fermiers” (Yver 1903, 106).
¹⁴. “un mélange de savoir et de rusticité; la niaiserie campagnarde . . . affleurait au-dessus de l’intelligence” (Yver 1903, 55).
¹⁵. For more on status socialization, see Chapter 1 in this work.
¹⁶. In Writing Beyond the Ending, Rachel Blau Duplessis, when discussing the portrayal of the woman artist as “genius” in fiction, indicates the dual implications for women: “Making a female character be a ‘woman of genius’ sets in motion not only conventional notions of womanhood but also conventional romantic notions of the genius, the person apart, who, because unique and gifted, could be released from social ties and expectations” (Duplessis 84–85). While Yver portrays Jeanne
the same encouraging bedside manner that her more experienced male colleagues employ. And like her colleagues, nurturance is for her merely a professional duty. She explores and analyzes, focusing on the disease rather than the invalid. Her relationship with her patients corresponds directly to the modern version of power relations between doctor and patient, where the doctor retains most of the power and knowledge and the patient is no longer the employer but the object of study. Jeanne has learned this attitude from her supervisors at the hospital. The narrator indicates that Dr. Tisserel’s female patients are in awe of him and that these women have developed a loving feeling of submission to their “healer” (Yver 1903, 51).

One patient’s belief in Dr. Tisserel’s abilities to cure her is pushed to a type of cult worship: “he was for her the all-powerful healer and the all-mighty kindness.”

In contrast, the doctors generally see their patients in impersonal terms, discussing them as objects of study rather than individuals. During rounds one day, the Drs. Tisserel and Cécile, along with Jeanne Boerk, join in this type of discourse about their patients: “‘By the way,’ cried Cécile suddenly, ‘you haven’t shown me your meningitis case that I came to see.’ ‘Too late, my dear,’ said Tisserel with the gesture of a collector who is missing his most rare bibelot just when he wanted to show it; ‘she died last night.’”

The patient is referred to first as a form of disease for Dr. Cécile to look at, a “ménin-gitique,” then as a curiosity for Dr. Tisserel, his “bibelot.” But she is never named and no sorrow is indicated in either doctor’s tone of voice when it is revealed that she died during the night. Their only regret is that Dr. Cécile did not have the chance to examine her disease before her death.

Jeanne Boerk also uses impersonal discourse when discussing an examination performed by a new student. Jeanne refers to the patient as “un sujet” (a subject) and “un exemple” (an example). Her comments obviously have nothing to do with the individual’s health at all and are completely centered on the disease and its symptoms. Tisserel follows up her comments in an equally impersonal tone, as he praises her professional behavior as well

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as a genius of science rather than art, her status in the medical community will exempt her from the typical demands made of women in the bourgeoisie.

17. “Il était pour elle le tout-puissant guérisseur et la toute bonté” (Yver 1903, 51).

18. “A propos, s’écria Cécile, soudain, tu ne m’as pas montré ta méningitique que je venais voir.—Trop tard, mon cher, dit Tisserel avec le geste d’un collectionneur auquel vient à manquer son bibelot le plus rare à l’heure même qu’il voulait le montrer; elle est morte cette nuit” (Yver 1903, 57).
as her diagnostic skills: “I have rarely seen such a beautiful auscultation; I must admit that Mademoiselle Boerk is the one who revealed it to me. She diagnosed perfectly all there is there.”19 His phrase “all there is there” indicates that the only thing he sees before him is the disease, not the living human being. His praise of Jeanne’s abilities is based in part on the fact that she concentrates solely on the illness rather than the patient.

Jeanne thus excels in her profession, as she has mastered both the required skills and the required demeanor for the scientific researcher. But because Jeanne considers her power so seriously, some of her male colleagues perceive her professional attitude in a negative light. An illuminating example of their repulsion arises when she begins to boast that she never faints at the sight of blood and has a strong stomach, demonstrated by the fact that she never felt ill during the dissection of a corpse, even during the examination of a young girl’s body seven days after death. Paul Tisserel and Jean Cécile, her supervisors, are both surprised, given the fact that they had both felt faint during their first dissections. Here, Jeanne’s adherence to professional standards of impartiality goes too far. Her amorous director, Tisserel, joins in Jeanne’s boasting, however, reminding her that she “used” the little girl for twelve days, not a week. (“Twelve days, you used the little girl with the phlegmon twelve days.”)20 Tisserel’s words—“vous vous êtes servie de la fillette” (you used the little girl)—are more perverse, and perhaps more upsetting, than Jeanne’s discreet claim. But Dr. Cécile remains horrified only by Jeanne’s confession, specifically because it originates from the mouth of a beautiful twenty-two-year-old woman and serves to demonstrate her lack of traditionally feminine emotional sensitivity. According to Dr. Cécile, who is the inventor of the term cerveline, Jeanne is a perfect illustration: all brain and no heart, feminine in appearance, but inwardly inhuman.

Indeed, underlying Jeanne’s conventionally feminine exterior (blond hair, bright eyes, curvaceous body), the narrator notes, there exists an extremely inquisitive mind, whose mission is to find cures to the diseases, mainly tuberculosis and diphtheria, that kill off all of her patients one by one. She does not perceive her work in the hospital or the laboratory as a burden, but rather as an intellectual diversion, even an amusement (“Elle s’amusait à l’extrême d’être médecin”; Yver 1903, 67). The narrator’s words frequently support Jeanne’s love for science and are meant to inspire awe in

19. “J’ai rarement vu d’auscultation aussi belle; c’est mademoiselle Boerk qui me l’a découverte, je dois l’avouer. Elle a parfaitement diagnostiqué tout ce qu’il y a là” (Yver 1903, 56).
20. “Douze jours; vous vous êtes servie de la fillette au phlegmon, douze jours” (Yver 1903, 53).
the reader, as in the following passage describing her examination of Paul Tisserel’s sister Henriette: “Her force and her authority radiated now; she was no longer the country girl nor the boyish and rough student nor the uncouth girl that one loves in vain nor the exceptional woman whose eyes have seen all human misery; she was Science.”21 The narrator advocates Jeanne’s love of her work and does not reflect negatively on her quick dismissal of obstacles that lie in her way. Jeanne therefore deviates from the typical bildungsroman protagonist, who often makes mistakes and errs down misleading paths while discovering his true calling in life. Jeanne never strays from her goals and always seems to know exactly what she wants from life.

And Jeanne does confront obstacles, almost on a daily basis, at her workplace. When her classmates taunt her with practical jokes and derisive humor, she ignores them, professing to be completely unmoved by their foolish behavior. On the rare occasion when she allows her emotions to surface, it is in private, away from the jeering faces of her peers. In public, she maintains a cool and collected expression, which sometimes only incites her male peers to further insults. For such a pure brainy woman, it is important to preserve a distinct barrier between her professional activities and her private emotions, never mixing the two.

The strict divisions between her professional and personal life are obvious when she deals with her supervisor’s attempted courtship. Tisserel fails to win her heart after several desperate requests and humiliating actions in the public sphere of the hospital. Jeanne refuses his offer of love for a number of reasons. She is concerned with her reputation as an unmarried woman, which of course must remain irreproachable for her to continue her studies and establish a medical practice. She also refuses him because his position, as a simple provincial doctor and her intellectual inferior, would embarrass her. She confesses this feeling to a friend and fellow brainy woman Marceline (Yver 1903, 68). A marriage to Tisserel would also be an obstacle to her career, since she would not to be able to continue her studies in Paris under the guidance of more advanced pathologists if she settled down in Briois. Marceline agrees with Jeanne’s reasoning and understands that Jeanne is on a different mission than that of the typical bourgeois woman of the time period (175, 179).

21. “Sa force et son autorité rayonnaient maintenant; elle n’était plus ni la campagnarde, ni l’étudiante garçonnière et fruste, ni la fille rude qu’on aime en vain, ni la femme d’exception de qui les yeux ont tout vu de la misère humaine; elle était la Science” (Yver 1903, 109).
Although Marceline Rhonans does not pursue a scientific career in *Les Cervelines*, she still may retain a place in the same category of pure brainy women. As a history professor in the prestigious girls’ high school in the city of Briois, Marceline has a career in teaching. But the school and her work there are mentioned only in passing in the novel, with references here and there to grading or class preparation. In contrast to many education novels, there are no classroom scenes and there are no encounters with her students or teaching colleagues throughout the entire text. A women’s community is not developed at the girls’ high school. Instead, Marceline is portrayed as a pioneer in her field, and she finds support and encouragement with Jeanne Boerk, a fellow pioneer. Their friendship may be “without tenderness,” as the narrator describes it, but it serves as a strong and equal association that helps them to survive difficult experiences in their work, similar to certain women’s relationships that we find in educational institutions. Instead of the educational sphere, however, the narrative focuses mainly on Marceline’s two extracurricular interests: first, the public lectures she gives every week on the history of the costume, mainly ancient Greek and Roman dress, and second, her research for her book manuscript, a monumental history of antiquity, combining archeological and historical studies. She thus has an extremely busy schedule and a varied set of occupations that fall outside of the standard teaching, grading, and lesson planning that occupy most teaching heroines. Marceline is a complex protagonist because her dreams for the future do not include marriage or even a long life of service as a schoolteacher, as she states clearly to her close friend, Jeanne. Yet she does not engage in the more power-conscious activities of the typical scientific heroine. She does not share Jeanne’s ambitious dreams of working in a prestigious Parisian institution or of advancing to the top of her field. Rather, Marceline’s aims are more closely molded to fit her particular research interests in history: “‘My dear, ten more years and I will be almost rich and at the same time armed for the definitive studies that I plan to do. Then I will resign and I will travel. It is on site, on the same ground where they passed, that I will get to know well those nations that interest me, the Phoenician nation especially.’ There was in her enthusiasm something sacred that Jeanne’s indifference profaned, and her vision ended secretly.”

22. “‘Ma chérie, encore une dizaine d’années et je serai presque riche et en même temps armée à point pour les définitives études que j’entends faire. Alors, je démissionnerai et je voyagerai. C’est sur place, sur la terre même où elles ont passé, que je connaîtrai bien ces nations qui m’intéressent, la phénicienne surtout.’ Il y avait dans son enthousiasme quelque chose de sacré que profanait l’indifférence de [Jeanne], et sa vision s’acheva secrètement” (Yver 1903, 72).
Marceline’s long-term goals include independent travel and research, not service to the community or teaching, and she already foresees her future resignation from the high school, not for marriage, but when she has earned enough money for her research trip. Her interests and efforts are focused on the distant lives of the Phoenicians, not a contemporary social problem or the young girls whom she is teaching and mentoring. Yet the narrator supports Marceline’s unusual dreams, claiming a certain “sacred” quality in her enthusiasm. Her future life of research and discovery is described as a potentially prosperous and happy one: “Her existence seemed luminous, full and rich, like a beautiful river that offered itself up to her. All she wished for was waiting for her in the future. Her current life, made of success, kindnesses, cerebral pleasures, contented her already. She was young, admired, independent; she was surrounded closely by friendships.”

In fact, Marceline appears to have achieved a perfect balance in her life at the young age of twenty-eight, filled with intellectual rewards and friendship. The problem of power relations never arises in her professional world, as it does in the medical profession, since her position as an independent researcher allows her to avoid a complicated hierarchical administration. The few colleagues with whom she has regular contact are not the bitter or juvenile medical students whom Jeanne combats, but other women teachers at school and certain scholars in her field with whom she maintains some correspondence. During her daily routine, Marceline appears to sail through her obligations without any personality conflicts or struggles for power. During her evening lectures, she takes complete control of her audience, entrancing them with her fluid lecture style and stunning examples of costumes. She happily balances domestic and teaching duties, and she manages to allot some time to work on her major research project as well. Thus she appears to be another exceptional bildungsroman protagonist with clear goals and a direct path ahead of her.

In order to explain Marceline’s success, Yver focuses on her work habits and the fact that Marceline combines her intellectual and domestic activities. In a typical rearrangement of domestic space, one of Marceline’s most important rooms in her home is her study. Its utilitarian aspects are underlined in the paragraph describing it, where Marceline is described as a sort

23. “Son existence apparaissait lumineuse, pleine et féconde, comme un beau fleuve qui devant elle se serait offert. Tout ce qu’elle souhaitait l’attendait dans le futur. Sa vie actuelle, faite de succès, de sympathies, de jouissances cérébrales, la contentait déjà. Elle était jeune, admirée, indépendante; elle était entourée de très près d’amitiés” (Yver 1903, 73–74).
of “little man” in her “cold sanctuary of science.” The narrator uses opposing adjectives to describe her bedroom, surrounded by a mystical aura of “intimacy, mystery, and femininity” (Yver 1903, 63). These separate but coexistent spheres in the home denote two distinct sides of Marceline’s personality. Brooding within her orderly, intellectual, “masculine” mind is a latent “feminine” mysticism, bordering on religious fervor, that drives her to seek comfort in the Catholic Church, in ancient religions, and, finally, in love. The reader is thus not surprised to learn that this brainy woman is seriously tempted by the idea of marriage and family later in the novel, when she falls in love with Dr. Jean Cécile. The conflict between the romance and quest plots for Marceline form the central dilemma for the text.

In contrast to her domestic sphere, which was altered to accommodate her professional interests, Marceline’s work environment is not permanently modified by romantic activities. Although Jean first meets Marceline in a public setting, at the weekly lecture series that she gives, their brief romance is fairly conventional and remains confined to traditionally private locations. They become acquainted as he walks her home from her lectures or through conversations in her salon, thus confining their private discussions to private spaces. When the expected demand is made—abandon your work for me—Marceline actually agrees that this is a reasonable request for a woman who is not a pure brainy woman. But she also realizes that she is not capable of making such a sacrifice. Instead Marceline decides to depart on a long research trip to Beirut, thus returning to her original status of pure brainy woman, in spite of the fact that she was moved temporarily by her romantic relationship with Jean.

La Bachelière (1910) by Gabrielle Reval provides an example of a third type of pure brainy woman, one who has the same drive for power and knowledge as Yver’s characters and who distorts the romance plot to fit her professional goals. Like Marceline, Gaude Malvos is tempted by marriage, but not for love or the desire for children. Rather she sees marriage as a potential source of funding for the research project that she is engaged in with her father, the famous archeologist Pierre Malvos. Gaude believes so strongly in their work that she feels no regrets about giving her body to a man in marriage in exchange for financial support for their research. Even when her father asserts that she would appear as a dead woman to him, she insists on the marriage. With this radical announcement, Gaude manipulates traditional romance plot requirements to conform to her career

24. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
goals. Unfortunately, this unusual proclamation initiates a major detour from Gaude’s professional plans, creating misunderstandings and unhappy results both in her professional quest and her personal life.

In contrast to Marceline and Jeanne, who worked independently, Gaude Malvos follows closely the teachings of a major mentor figure: her father. His statements about Gaude, however, recall advice that Marceline and Jeanne give to each other. For example, he states forcefully that it should be clear to Gaude that her sole path in life must be the intellectual one: “You are not made for a vulgar destiny. Leave to others, your inferiors, maternity and love. You will birth ideas. You know well that intelligence and energy make up individual greatness.” Pierre’s claim that Gaude will “give birth to ideas” echoes the opinions of Jeanne and Marceline that they will work for a larger social goal rather than raising their own children and taking care of a private household, and he thus establishes Gaude as a pioneer figure. In spite of Pierre’s strong show of support of his daughter’s intellect, he uses her mental abilities in a secondary way: she acts as his secretary, transcribing his notes, his dictation, and his thoughts. Confirming this idea, Gaude’s mother tells the confused and frustrated fiancé that Pierre’s anger is not so much due to Gaude’s apparent desire to be a wife and mother, but to Pierre’s own selfish fear of losing a prized secretary (Reval 1920, 43). Gaude is blind to this exploitation by her father and insists on continuing to help him at all costs, believing that his professional goals are her own.

The twisted romance plot is also misunderstood by Gaude’s fiancé, who demands that she abandon her work and devote her life to him. He thereby makes the typical male appeal in these novels: give up your life for mine. His request is stronger than most because he requires that they move to a town far away from the city of Sarlay and Gaude’s family, so that she will not be able to keep in touch with her father on a regular basis. Gaude surprisingly accepts her fiancé’s requirement because it will guarantee the financial security her father needs, even if it means he must continue their research without her aid. Her sacrifice, of course, backfires and becomes the partial cause for her father’s heart attack and death.

Reval develops in her fictional character Gaude the consummate brainy woman: she is serious, hard-working, obsessed by her research, and she will not let any sentimental notions, whether men’s or women’s, distract

her from her pursuit of knowledge. Her family situation also conforms to
the typical brainy woman mold: her mother, Rachel, is a quiet, patient,
and obedient woman. Her father, Pierre Malvos, has raised his daughter
to follow in his footsteps, pushing her to pass the baccalaureat exam at
age sixteen and to accompany him in his classroom and on archeological
digs. Unlike many other scientific heroines, Gaude does not encounter raw
prejudice from her male classmates, all of whom respect her and her father’s
wisdom. Her one goal in life is to help her father finish his research on
“la cité Gallo-Romaine.”

After her father’s sudden death, Gaude moves to Paris with the hope of
continuing her quest. This move from provinces to Paris, so typical of the male
bildungsroman, remains an exception in female novels of development from
the Belle Epoque. But Gaude follows the outlines of the traditional male model
in a number of ways. In order to finish her father’s incomplete manuscript, for
example, Gaude must take several major detours and overcome a number of
important obstacles, seeking a strong mentor figure along the way.

At first, she lives with her Polish cousin Thaïda, a possible female role
model for Gaude in the all-male world of Parisian research circles.26 This
new mentor figure teaches Gaude some important lessons about the real
world, and teases her young cousin that she has been living “on a moun-
tain” for too long (Reval 1910, 92). Trained as a doctor, Thaïda has instead
become a modern “scientific” beautician. Her medical examination room
has been transformed into a modern “beautification” laboratory with elec-
tric baths and other unusual equipment. Similar to other brainy women,
Thaïda has transformed part of her home into a laboratory in order to be
able to continue her career. She diverges from the pure brainy woman
model, however, since her mixing of spheres comes with an interesting
variation: Thaïda has given up “formal” or professionally approved research,
and she openly acknowledges the charlatan aspects of her new career:
“I abandoned medicine and embarked on an old boat which still works.
They call it Illusion. I, who had respected truth, a passion for research, diag-
nosis, analysis, I threw those bothersome companions overboard and I chose

26. The reference here to a Polish woman in the sciences is most probably a nod to Marie
Curie, who had moved to Paris from Poland in her twenties and who made her major discover-
ies while living in France. The reference also draws the reader to conclude, however, that foreign
women may have been allowed more freedom to work outside the traditional expectations for
middle-class Frenchwomen; Mary Louise Roberts notes that we find both English and Russian “new
women” in a variety of Belle Epoque texts, including Yver’s Princesses de science, Tinayre’s La Rebelle,
and both volumes of Marcel Prévost’s Vierges fortes (Roberts 2002, 259).
for assistants: trickery, bluffing, play-acting.”27 In her statement, Thaïda still refers to institutional standards of professional scientific research (truth, analysis, and diagnostic research), even though she realizes that she cannot continue to uphold them and still earn enough to make a living. Her new career, although a scientific compromise, has been a great financial success, and during the eight years she has been working in this new field, her reputation has spread all over Paris.28 While relinquishing certain rights to “pure” scientific research, Thaïda is able to live independently and to donate funds to the school for orphans, which she has had constructed in Poland with her earnings. Gaude, who remains a purist about science, is shocked by Thaïda’s confessions.

Reval has structured the quest plot of this particular professionalization novel in a traditional series of progressive steps away from Gaude’s protected family life in provincial France. Her first job in Paris, as a private research assistant for Gilbert Luceram, is arranged through her cousin Thaïda. Gaude’s second job, as a teacher in the elite private boarding school Le Chrest, is completely removed from family and friends. She obtains that position through a job placement agency that she picked at random.

As her quest takes her further from home and family, Gaude finds it easier to separate public and private spaces and becomes better prepared to finish her father’s great historical work. In the first section of the novel, she acts merely as her father’s secretary in their home, taking notes that he dictates and working out problems together with him at the dinner table or in the living room. When she moves to Paris, she at first encounters open sexism when she tries to find an editor to help her to complete her father’s book. Her father’s editor dismisses her request and explains condescendingly that her “woman’s brain” (cerveau de femme) does not have the capacity to do this work, no matter how intelligent she might be (Reval 1910, 114).

Although she has moved away from home, she is still relying on her father’s circle of colleagues and therefore is held back by their prejudices. After this discouraging encounter, Gaude decides to work on her own in the public libraries, thus beginning her new path of independence. After Gaude has separated her work and her home, she begins to make great strides


28. See Magali Larson’s Rise of Professionalism (1977) on the importance for a new group of professionals to corner a market for their skills.
in her research. In the main reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris she feels more at ease with the material but still has difficulty writing. She expresses her doubts about her own abilities—not to do research, but to gain sufficient general knowledge of her subject. In the third section of the book, when she is at Le Chrest boarding school and completely isolated from all family and Parisian acquaintances for nine months, her writing explodes. She writes to her cousin, “I’m making progress Thaïda, I’m making progress! I have the immense joy, the unsuspected joy to find, almost word-by-word, the thoughts of my father.”  

In typical brainy woman fashion, the pioneer must be completely isolated from familial or sentimental influences to become most productive and creative.

The progress in Gaude’s maturity as a scholar and writer corresponds to a paradoxical movement in Reval’s novel, from an entirely male environment where she was surrounded by her father, his male colleagues, and his male students; to a mixed male-female environment when she spent all her mornings with her employers, Odette and Gilbert Luceram; to a completely female environment at the girls’ boarding school. Although Gaude complains about the atmosphere of immorality and the lack of discipline among her female students, she herself blossoms as a scholar when she no longer has male colleagues with whom to discuss her work. Her community of women is not comparable to the women’s environments that we find in other education novels (by Reval, Compain, or Colette, for example). In fact, there is no “community” at all at the Le Chrest School, only competition and alienation. Yet Gaude’s abilities do not come to the fore until she is separated from men in her field.

This need for separation is due in part to the fact that, whether her father, her fiancé, or her employer, the men whom Gaude deals with are all irrationally and irresponsibly fixated on her. Following classic romance plot requirements, these men are obsessed with the object of their affection and cannot bear to live without her, even if it means that they must stamp out those qualities that they find most attractive in their brainy woman: her engaging intellect, her passion about her work, and her independent thought. As La Bachelière concludes, Reval’s protagonist, one of the purest brainy women created during the Belle Epoque, leaves for Poland on her own in order to continue her pursuit of knowledge unrestricted.

29. “J’avance, Thaïda, j’avance! J’ai la joie immense, la joie insoupçonnée de retrouver presque mot par mot la pensée de mon père” (Reval 1910, 259).
These examples of pure brainy women are isolated loners, pioneers in male-dominated fields. In most women’s professionalization novels from the Belle Epoque, there is at least one older woman who provides counsel and emotional support to the younger women embarking on a difficult career. At the least, there are other female colleagues who are struggling in the same field. Yet in *Les Cervelines* and *La Bachelière*, these pure brainy women are isolated from other women in their field, if they exist at all. Marceline and Jeanne, in *Les Cervelines*, rely on each other and spend their brief moments of leisure in Marceline’s salon, smoking cigarettes and discussing their work and their goals. But they are not working in the same discipline and could never become collaborators at work. In Reval’s *La Bachelière*, the pure brainy woman is also perceived as isolated from other women researchers, for the simple reason that they do not exist. As an archeologist at the Sarlay dig and a researcher at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Gaude is the only woman present amidst large groups of male scholars. Her one brief exposure to other women schoolteachers, while waiting for an interview at the placement agency, reveals a wide gulf between herself and other women educators. Even at the girls’ boarding school, she has nothing in common with the two other teachers or the director and remains apart from them, never seeking advice or consolation.

These brainy women protagonists are also exceptional because they choose work and career before love and marriage, an unusual decision in the genre of Belle Epoque women’s professionalization novels. Perhaps because Yver herself remained unmarried while writing *Les Cervelines*, it was the only novel that she wrote in which neither female protagonist opted for love and marriage, and where there remained a clear division between professional and domestic spheres for the heroines. In her later novel, *Princesses de science*, the pure brainy woman Dr. Lancelevée is no longer a central character to the narrative, but rather acts as a negative role model for the married doctor Thérèse Guéméné. Lancelevée is aloof and distant from the other women doctors whom Thérèse knows.

These are the dilemmas of the pure brainy woman: she feels obligated to follow the male standards of professional behavior strictly, even though she is not always respected or regarded as a peer by the men in her field. And although she might be tempted by love, as in the case of Marceline

30. *Les Cervelines* was successful when it first appeared, and as Waelti-Walters notes, Yver’s future husband, the editor Auguste Huzard, claimed that it was after reading this novel that he fell in love and decided to marry Yver (Waelti-Walters 188).
Rhonans, she renounces the romance plot in order to continue her quest for knowledge, success, or fame. These fictional dilemmas were not always present in the lives of “real” brainy women during the Belle Epoque. To return to the example of Marie Curie, she was well respected by her male colleagues and received two Nobel prizes, but she did not find it necessary to give up love, marriage, or family in order to pursue her career. Even though she could combine the private and the professional aspects of her life, her work habits and her passion for knowledge definitely place her in the category of “cerveline” or brainy woman. Readers must ask themselves why women writers during this time period felt the need to create these fictional cervelines who refused marriage and children in order to devote themselves to science. Before we can find an answer to such a question, we must explore the alternative: the fictional brainy women who followed their temptations, trying to adjust their quest, that is, their intellectual and professional lives, to admit love, marriage, and children into their private lives.

Seduced Cervelines

Yver’s *Princesses de science* (1907, *The Doctor Wife or Princesses of Science*),31 published four years after *Les Cervelines*, won the Prix Femina, thus establishing Yver as a well-known writer of the Belle Epoque. The main protagonist, Thérèse Herlinge, belongs to a bourgeois and fairly traditional nuclear family; her mother works at home and her father is a doctor. Thérèse’s childhood training, although mentioned only briefly in flashbacks, was classical and elite, especially for girls of this era. Since the baccalaureat was not officially offered in girls’ high schools during this time, the fact that she had received the prestigious diploma implies that she must have taken a special course of study or even had private tutoring to pass the exams. Further, Thérèse is an only child. Because she has no brothers or sisters with whom to compete for family affection or support, her parents allow her to pursue a professional career. She is a motivated and intelligent woman, but the unspoken comment remains that if she had had brothers who were expected and encouraged to become professionals, Thérèse may not have been able to entertain such daring notions. She also comes from a family of doctors, so in some ways she is merely maintaining a Herlinge family tradition. Thérèse soon demonstrates a certain amount of promise and ability in her young

31. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
career, earning the admiration of her family after she has proven herself capable of succeeding. These factors (doctor’s daughter, only child, superior education), given by the author, explain why she has chosen to pursue a medical career when financial concerns did not require her to work. When they are combined with her abilities in science and her diligent studies, it is easy to understand why she is able to surpass most of her classmates and contemporaries in medicine.

Although Yver patterns her main character, Thérèse, according to the “brainy woman” mold of her earlier novel, the plot and main characters of *Princesses de science* confront unexpected detours that lead to a more melodramatic tone and more tragic events than in *Les Cervelines*. The professional development of Thérèse is interrupted numerous times by elements from the romance plot involving her fiancé/husband Fernand. In order to accommodate these intrusions, there are many more rearrangements of the domestic sphere in this novel, to allow for a woman’s office, lab, or examining room in the home. And there are many more private conversations held in public spaces, either in the hospital or clinic. The characters transgress the normal boundaries between public and private spheres frequently, and the results point to a new type of heroine: the seduced brainy woman.

The opening chapter of the novel contains the first example of public and private boundaries crossed, in this case by Fernand Guéméné, a fellow student who interned with Thérèse but who has now graduated and begun a general medical practice in Paris. Thérèse has just received a love letter from Fernand, asking her permission to meet her at the hospital. Fernand’s marriage proposal, in Thérèse’s laboratory, is framed by the narrator’s references to the harsh scientific surroundings: amid cadaver parts, boiling beakers, and rats in cages, “Thérèse was awakening to love” (la vie sentimentale s’éveillait chez Thérèse) (Yver 1907, 8). This peculiar juxtaposition of profession and romance is a shock to the brainy woman at first, and she tells Fernand bluntly that she is not interested in marriage and does not love him (9).

Despite her initial refusal, she is tempted and eventually accepts his proposal, until he reveals his wish that she halt her medical studies and career when they marry. His conservative bourgeois upbringing dictates both the type of marriage that he desires and the service-oriented career goals that he embraces. Fernand dreams of building a solid general practice based on the ideals of caring and healing, and he wants a loving wife and children, devoted to him alone. Thérèse, in contrast, reflects the more modern professional of the late nineteenth century, one who pursues technical knowledge and competence and who embraces the exploratory fields of the medical
career stories

profession. When trying to explain to Fernand Guéméné why she could never abandon her medical studies to marry him, she reveals her fascination, at times lugubrious, with science. Embedded in her description is the modern scientific focus on the disease, rather than the patient, and a nascent passion for power and authority: “Oh Guéméné, Guéméné, do you not know the intoxicating trance of diagnosis, and the delight of auscultation and the triumph of predictions confirmed? . . . And what power we hold! . . . And autopsy! What a marvel, with its revelations that sanction the entire scaffolding of hypotheses produced on a mysterious case.”

Thérèse’s enthusiastic and unselfconscious description of her passion for auscultation and autopsy indicates the typical modern scientist’s desire for knowledge: her curiosity about disease overshadows any impulse to heal or care for the sick. In fact, she never even mentions her patients, except when they disappointingly recover and takes their body away with them, leaving her deprived of her autopsy, unfulfilled because she is unable to discover the illness lurking within. She finishes her macabre praise of autopsy with the phrase, “Ah! There have been some wonderful times in my life, Guéméné!”

This image of the driven scientist is not exactly the one that Fernand had created in his mind for Thérèse. He would have preferred a woman doctor devoted to medicine for the benefits of nurturing and healing, perhaps those qualities found in the traditional definition of the nurse, but he finds in Thérèse the opposite. Nevertheless, he persists in proposing marriage, although the offer changes each time.

Following the typical path of the obsessed male romance character, Fernand’s passion for Thérèse and his desire to possess such an intelligent creature overcome his disgust with her confession. Soon after, he offers a second proposal, in which he negotiates with Thérèse, agreeing to let her do laboratory work in their home, thus allowing her to continue her research but assuring him that she will never leave the house. This “compromise” allows for certain boundary crossings in one direction: the professional sphere of scientific research may enter the private domain of

32. “Oh! Guéméné, Guéméné, vous ne les connaissez donc pas, vous, les transes grisantes du diagnostic, et la volupté de l’auscultation et le triomphe des prévisions confirmées? . . . Et quelle puissance nous détenons! . . . Et l’autopsie! quelle merveille, avec ses révélations qui viennent sanctionner tout l’échafaudage des hypothèses émises sur un cas mystérieux! Souvent voyez-vous, j’ai frémi, pendant des auscultations difficiles, en présence de secrets que le corps vivant ne voulait pas lâcher alors que je songeais à l’autopsie qui mettrait à nu les viscères, illuminerait nos obscuretés, nos incertitudes; oui, l’autopsie je l’ai quelquefois désirée fiévreusement . . . je l’ai désirée avec révolte, avec curiosité” (Yver 1907, 24–25).

33. “Ah! il y a eu de belles heures dans ma vie, Guéméné!” (Yver 1907, 25).
the home. Thérèse’s activities as a modern scientist would be contained behind the closed doors of their apartment, and the general public, clients, and colleagues would not see Thérèse in the public sphere. Therefore Fernand’s image of her as his own private possession would not be jeopardized. Thérèse again refuses his offer.

Tortured by the fact that Thérèse has refused him and convinced that his life will be a solitary and miserable existence without her, Fernand desperately proposes that Thérèse continue all of her work—her laboratory research, her clinical work at the hospital, and her doctoral thesis—but that she do so as his wife. Thérèse happily accepts this third proposal of marriage, even as it crushes Fernand to make it: “He offered his arms. A sadness overwhelmed him, cast a gloom over his engagement. Mademoiselle Herlinge was triumphant. It was her complete dream come true: tender tears sprung to her eyes.”34 This quotation reveals that at first the marriage was a victory for one (“she was triumphant” [elle triomphait]), defeat for the other (“a sadness overwhelmed him” [une tristesse l’accablait]), but the battle has only begun. One of the most important power relationships throughout the novel for Thérèse is the one that she maintains with her husband. Professionally, she does not appear to have any difficulties with regard to patients, about whom we read very little, or hospital administrators, since her father and his close friends are among the highest ranking officials in the hospital where she works. Even public scrutiny of her position as doctor and researcher appears to remain minimal. But her negotiations and struggle for respect within her marriage are constant and often bitter. It is in her public-private transgressions that these battles are fought.

As soon as she has finished her medical studies, Thérèse and Fernand both receive patients daily, and she begins a playful competition with her husband for clientele. On the surface, traditional public and private spheres appear to mix easily for Thérèse. Even Fernand, when speaking in public, appears to accept the “new woman” whom he has married and vigorously defends the wife’s right to work outside the home when discussing the subject with his conservative uncle or his colleague Dr. Pautel. When Pautel reveals his expectation that his fiancée, Dina, a medical intern and friend of Thérèse, will renounce her studies when she marries him, Fernand gives an impassioned speech on the rights of women to pursue their career goals,

even when married. He explains to Pautel that they desire companions, not slaves, for wives, and that it would be odious to suffocate their wives’ intellectual lives (Yver 1907, 127–28). Thus Fernand seems to have been converted to Thérèse’s philosophy on the modern couple, but at home with Thérèse, the battle continues.

It becomes apparent that Yver’s male characters allow public-private boundary transgressions in *Princesses de science* only at the initial stages of their relationships. The reader understands quickly that Fernand made his marriage proposal in Thérèse’s laboratory only because he could not find a way to do so in a more traditional, private setting. As soon as they are wed, he begins to pressure her to give up these public-private transgressions and become a traditional wife and mother according to the strict private codes of the bourgeoisie. In a scene depicted during their second week of marriage, Fernand asks Thérèse at their intimate dinner for two if she is seriously planning on continuing her medical studies. She replies that she has already told him “twenty times” that she is, of course, going to finish her degree. The number that she gives in her statement implies that he has been hounding her with the same question ever since their wedding day (Yver 1907, 94).

The author Yver dissolves the tenuous happiness established in the first descriptions of married life by a rapid succession of events: first, Fernand’s illness, which forces Thérèse to abandon her thesis experiments to take care of him, and second, her discovery that she is pregnant. Both she and Fernand agree that she must refrain from laboratory work during her pregnancy, which means that she must jettison her plans for an innovative thesis altogether. The pregnancy is viewed as a triumph for Fernand but an unfortunate accident for Thérèse. When the baby is born, Thérèse wins a small victory in the ongoing battle by hiring a wet nurse for their new son, so that she may begin her medical practice and return to the hospital clinics. Fernand understands Thérèse’s refusal to breastfeed as a confirming sign that her family is less important to her than her career, something that he had always feared. When the baby dies a few months later from a disease that the nursemahid gave him through her milk, Fernand’s anger and resentment turn into bitterness and sorrow. Thérèse is also devastated by the loss of her son but immerses herself in her work for comfort. Even though both Fernand and Thérèse had theoretically envisioned a way to combine professional and domestic responsibilities, neither is capable of living that dream and their battles become nightmares.

Where was the Belle Epoque reader supposed to lay his or her sympathies throughout these battles? In the case of the Guéméné marriage, the answer is clear: despite both characters’ failures, Thérèse is portrayed sympathetically,
while Fernand is generally portrayed as embittered, possessive, and narrow-minded. In an age when the scientific method and the cult of discovery were beginning to take on the enormous prestige that they have continued to hold throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Thérèse, even though she was a woman, is perceived as the more positive figure. She is intelligent and thoughtful, constantly wishes to learn more about her field, and aspires to new experiments and discoveries. Fernand, in contrast, is characterized as an old-fashioned and often negative figure for the medical profession. His attempts to discover a cure for cancer are pitiful and fail; the experimental immunizations that he gives to his patient, Monsieur Jourdeaux, eventually kill him.

Furthermore, Fernand is depicted as an obsessive neurotic who childishly complains that Thérèse is not paying enough attention to him. Whether at home, on vacation, in her laboratory, or on a quiet street, Fernand never misses an occasion when they are alone to remind her that he is suffering, constantly intensifying his whining and disagreeable character. Thérèse, in contrast, always responds with patience and understanding, claiming that she does not want him to suffer, but that her passion for medicine is too great for her to stop practicing. These scenes resurface until a startling moment of revelation when they are on vacation in Switzerland. Thérèse’s venomous reply shocks both the reader and the pouting Fernand, as she firmly announces that he is not the only one who has been suffering or who has had to make sacrifices in their marriage:

I sacrificed, for a maternity that you desired, a thesis that would have classified me in the ranks of Madame Lancelevée. I renounced, to be at home more often, Boussard’s clinics and Artout’s operations. I would have liked to study alienist medicine in Janicot’s clinic: I didn’t even mention it to you because Passy was too far away and you would have blamed me. . . . If I have remained a modest and ignored doctor, reduced to contenting myself with clients, that was the ransom of my love for you, because alone, without my house to take care of, without the worries of your well-being, without that pregnancy, without your exigencies, I would count for something today in the medical world.35

35. “J’ai sacrifié, pour une maternité que tu désirais, une thèse qui m’eût classée au même rang que Madame Lancelevée. J’ai renoncé, pour être plus souvent chez nous, à suivre les cliniques de Boussard, les opérations d’Artout. J’aurais désiré faire de la médecine aliéniste dans l’établissement de Janicot: je ne t’en ai pas même parlé, car Passy, c’était trop loin et tu m’aurais blâmée. . . . Si je suis demeurée une doctoresse modeste et ignorée, réduite à me contenter de la clientèle,
This fiery accusation and her long list of privations since her marriage began are blows from which Fernand never recovers and that awaken the reader to Thérèse’s sacrifices.

As Thérèse appears to win the battle, both spouses flee the private sphere of the home and find comfort in their work, spending their days and evenings occupied in doctor’s visits, lab work, or clinical observations. During these self-absorbed months, the quest plot dominates for Thérèse. She builds a clientele that outnumbers Fernand’s, and she makes important discoveries, one of which she publishes in a medical journal. As she amasses this type of institutional recognition from colleagues and superiors in the profession, she also begins to gain power and prestige, in spite of her status as a woman in a predominantly male field. Fernand meanwhile keeps his work to himself, sharing his discoveries only with the widow Jourdeaux, a simple and attentive young woman who places her faith in the hands of the doctor. His research never enjoys the public discussion among doctors and scientists that Thérèse’s work receives.

Thérèse’s phenomenal success is due in part to the fact that she is completely tuned in to recent progress in medical research and to the achievements of her colleagues (Artout, Boussard, Janicot). The passage cited above indicates that she compares her own work to that of other colleagues, and in particular to another woman doctor, Madame Lancelevée, who may be perceived as a role model for her. But Dr. Lancelevée is too distant and unconventional to appeal to Thérèse. A second possible role model, Dr. Jeanne Adeline, offers an example of a seduced brainy woman, but with financial problems, too many children, and an unhappy marriage, she offers a negative example of someone whose life has fallen apart. Thérèse’s classmate and friend Dina, who gives up her medical studies when she marries Pautel, disgusts Thérèse. She says to herself after a visit with Dina, that her friend has committed an intellectual suicide and has lost all dignity by presenting herself as a contented housewife (Yver 1907, 274). Throughout the book, Thérèse does seek a positive example, but she cannot find one.

Given the negative role models offered, the reader might have a difficult time guessing what Thérèse’s final decision would be, especially because Yver’s sequence of events regarding Thérèse does not follow typical romance conventions. In the end, Thérèse was not forced to renounce her career due

cette rançon de mon amour pour toi, car seule, sans ma maison à tenir, sans le souci de ton bien-être, sans cette grossesse, sans tes exigences enfin, je compterais un peu aujourd’hui dans le monde médical” (Yver 1907, 295).
to her husband’s demands, as her friend Dina did. In fact, Thérèse succeeded in resisting Fernand’s repeated pleas to give up her career throughout the entire narrative, for about three years total. Nor did she appear overwhelmed by her work or drained by the pace of her professional activities and family responsibilities, as was her colleague Jeanne Adeline, who for financial reasons was required to continue her medical practice against her will. Thérèse’s decision to become a full-time housewife is instead directly related to two surprising emotions that are never mentioned with regard to Thérèse until the very last chapter of the novel: jealousy (of Fernand’s friend Madame Jourdeaux) and fear (of losing Fernand). These new emotions alter the course of her career considerably, and she abruptly decides to notify all her clients that she will no longer be practicing medicine.

Her sudden decision may appear to be a transformation into the conventional romance plot, one where love and marriage triumph over career and adventure. Yet Yver’s unusual narrative does not end on a happy note. Fernand does not appreciate Thérèse’s sacrifice; in fact, it might be too late for him to appreciate it: in the final scene, he is sobbing with his head in his hands because Madame Jourdeaux has written to say she is leaving him. Thérèse finds no comfort or skill in domestic activities, although she admits that she might eventually adapt and become used to them. The renunciation of her promising career in science does not bring with it the blissful family life that she had anticipated. Yver’s startling conclusion thus leaves the reader of Princesses de science with a sense of confusion: on one hand, one might interpret the narrator’s conclusions as a form of acceptance that Thérèse developed during the last part of the text, mainly through the examples she encountered in Dina and Jeanne Adeline, both of whom told her that married life and science were incompatible. On the other hand, the reader can just as easily understand the ending as a negative statement about the enforced retirement of married women from the professions due to societal pressures that ignored or denied women’s interests and abilities in the medical and scientific fields.

Marcelle Babin’s novel Pharmacienne (1907, The Woman Pharmacist) depicts the life of a very different seduced brainy woman, Danielle Dormeuil, who does not undergo the constant badgering, or difficult demands from family and career to which Yver’s characters are subjected. More similar to Reval’s novel about Gaude Malvos, Pharmacienne reveals

36. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
a strong bildungsroman pattern, although the romance narrative does intrude to cause the heroine to take certain detours from her chosen career goals.\textsuperscript{37}

Babin’s personal experiences in medical and pharmacy school allowed her to create a brainy heroine who was not exaggeratedly exceptional. For example, after completing her coursework, the protagonist Danielle passes the Concours de l’Internat and finishes thirty-fourth: a good test result, but unlike the brainy women in other novels about women scientists, she does not score at the top of her class. In the surgical department where she interns as a pharmacist, there is not much for her to do, but instead of beginning new investigations or research, she enjoys wasting time in the hospital’s \textit{salle de garde}, playing the piano and joining in pranks with friends from pharmacy school (Babin 60). The reader thus witnesses a more “human” brainy woman in action in this novel. Danielle’s attitude in school and later at work is one of acceptance, tolerance, and service to her peers and clients, similar to many schoolteachers’ ethics, yet the community of women, one of the major structures in the women’s novel of educational development, is entirely absent from \textit{Pharmacienne}. Although there are a few women students in the medical school, Danielle does not develop friendships with any of them, and there are no female mentors.

Danielle could therefore be compared to Thérèse Guéméré and other scientific brainy women because she is a pioneer in her studies rather than a member of a women’s community. Like them, she remains a diligent student throughout, devoting all her waking hours to the school. But she is neither a brilliant student nor an innovative researcher, and her goals are not to make groundbreaking discoveries or to develop a prestigious clientele. Danielle wishes simply to be able to support her younger brother and to earn a good living. Her reasons for pursuing a career are linked to the fact

\textsuperscript{37.} \textit{Pharmacienne} could in some respects belong to the genre of education novels because of the detailed enumeration of school events, including rites of passage, professors’ lectures, and student pranks. During her fourth year, for example, Danielle remarks in a letter to her brother that she knows that she has become an \textit{ancienne} [senior] in the school because the male students no longer emit catcalls and other obscene noises when she enters the amphitheaters. The description of daily harassment is supported by footnotes, almost as though Babin were attempting to inform (or warn) her female readers of the practices, songs, and jargon of medical students. Babin was herself a pharmacist, went through the same professional schools as her protagonist Danielle, and had an insiders’ view of life for women in professional schools (Babin 3). These experiences contributed to the detail in her account of the difficult lives of the pioneer women who decided to attend medical school during the Belle Epoque.
that her father was and her guardians still are involved in medicine and the sciences, however her motivation is based on financial necessity rather than on personal aptitude.\(^{38}\)

The first and major “detour” in Danielle’s medical career comes not from a marriage proposal or financial concerns, but from a psychological experiment for which she was the unknowing subject. Danielle develops an unarticulated love interest in her professor, Dr. Clavelan, but during his “research,” the reader is aware that this is not a two-sided romance and that Clavelan is merely manipulating Danielle’s emotions to test his hypothesis about the relation between emotional and physical healing. Interestingly, however, the typical figures of the romance narrative are still present: the young, confused woman and the older, cynical, and brutal man. Clavelan’s obsession with Danielle may also appear to fit the characteristics of a man involved in a romance plot, but the narrator explains that his fixation with her is merely part of his scientific investigation. Thus Babin makes use of some of the major elements of the romance genre in this novel, but she demonstrates how they can be employed to manipulate and hurt young women.

When Dr. Clavelan concludes his “experiment” with Danielle, she is left wounded on two levels. Professionally, her choice has been taken away from her: although she had been studying both medicine and pharmacy, she is forced to continue with pharmacy only. Emotionally, her undefined (yet growing) feelings of affection for Dr. Clavelan suddenly appear inappropriate and foolish. Here the author exposes the negative results of a doctor whose obsession with his power over both diseases and patients leads to a damaging relationship with the patient. The uneven power relations are perhaps more evident in this case because Danielle is not a nameless patient on a clinic bed but a future colleague and member of the medical profession, and therefore she should have been viewed as an active rather than passive member of the medical community and of the doctor–patient relationship. Danielle’s quest plot is thus led astray by the phony romance that Clavelan created between them.

This early experience forms Danielle and her expectations for her professional career. Her initial reaction is to hide the hurt and continue her pharmaceutical studies with fervor. The narrator comments: “She felt completely different from that day on, and she felt the need to hide from

\(^{38}\) As discussed in Chapter 1, service to the community or the crown was the traditional and altruistic reason claimed for pursuing a profession. With the growth of industrial and technical professionals during the nineteenth century, however, more individuals acknowledged that financial and personal incentives motivate the choice of a particular career path.
everyone this surprise in love that had victimized her. She did not want others to bruise her soul; she became more silent than before. She concentrated on herself. She would have been ashamed to show her disappointment, the sadness of her soul. She remained inaccessible.”

The detailed description that Babin gives of her heroine’s emotional state after this romantic deception is narrated in terse, simple sentences. On a parallel, the new personality that evolves is also one that is detached, less effusive, and less enthusiastic about the profession and her schoolwork (Babin 29).

The bottom line is that Clavelan’s experiment has numbed Danielle, permanently changing her interactions with her colleagues. Her withdrawal from the world after this surprise denotes some of the archetypal responses of a victim of harassment or assault.

Danielle’s reactions mark a distinctly different response from those of a pure brainy woman, for example, Jeanne Boerk in Les Cervelines, even though both characters experience male harassment. After Paul Tisserel’s intrusive interruption in her dorm room, Jeanne decides that she must move to a different hospital to complete her internship, and she does show some temporary shock when Tisserel’s tone turns hateful and menacing (Yver 1903, 206). But after this brush with a potentially murderous intruder, Jeanne easily reassumes her rational calm. Five minutes later, she is in control again, telling Marceline that she will never submit to Tisserel’s demands and announcing to Tisserel that she is leaving the Hôtel-Dieu for another hospital. The narrator notes that Jeanne’s tone is “grand calme”, but it does not leave her silenced and helpless. Danielle Dormeuil suffers for a much longer period of time and blames herself as much as she blames Clavelan, never completely recovering from his experiment. Rather than simply changing hospitals to avoid further conflict with Clavelan, she changes her entire career path, from medicine to pharmacy.

As a pharmacist in the provinces, Danielle’s daily occupations are rather independent and thus rarely include the power relations of the pure brainy woman in science, found in clinics, doctor’s offices, or hospitals. She does not need the political or social clout that Thérèse Herlinge or Jeanne Boerk requires to continue with her career. The long power struggle that develops in the second part of the novel plays itself out between Danielle and the
conservative bourgeois residents of Domfront, and it is similar to some of the contests new schoolteachers undergo in their new communities with the mayor, priest, and other conservative town members. Finally, thanks to the good will of one of the younger members of the local Fleurigny family, Danielle is able to establish confidence in these difficult customers and her business improves.

Her attempts to combine public and private activities do not meet with overwhelming chaos or failure either, mainly because Danielle does not have a husband, children, or competing demands from different public offices. She lives and works in the same building, and her life is fairly simple and regulated, similar to Marceline Rhonan’s description of her life of independent research in *Les Cervelines*. Yet she is quite different from a pure brainy woman like Marceline. One of the major questions for Yver’s character was whether to marry or to remain single, but that is never a choice for Danielle. Rather, her main question is, “Whom shall I marry?” After several missteps, she decides to marry the local artist Edouard Fleurigny, but as she is accepting his proposal, she asks the all-important question: “You will permit me to continue with science? And to come to the pharmacy from time to time to help my brother?”

Edouard, whose general philosophy is cited as the epigraph on the title page (“Reality is never anything but the inequality of the dream born from the imagination.”), states that since she would never think of asking him to give up his career, he would never ask her to do such a thing.

Similar to some of Yver’s brainy women, Babin’s married protagonist builds a laboratory attached to Edouard’s studio, so that the married couple may work side by side. But in contrast to Yver’s Guéméné couple, Babin’s Danielle and Edouard do not have children, at least not during the first years of their marriage. Therefore, Danielle is never seriously concerned with the conflicts that Yver’s heroine had to manage. Danielle can work on all sorts of experiments and occasionally help her brother behind the counters of the Twentieth-Century Pharmacy (Babin 198). For the Belle Epoque, this dénouement could be considered a satisfying compromise: the romance plot and the quest plot are intertwined, and the heroine is able to negotiate both. Danielle’s careful choice of a husband who would support both her career and herself appears to be the key to a successful brainy woman seduction.

40. “Vous me permettrez de continuer toujours à m’occuper des sciences? Puis de venir parfois à la pharmacie seconder mon frère?” (Babin 192).
41. “La réalité n’est jamais que l’inégalité du rêve enfanté par l’imagination” (Babin 1).
Given the relative newness of fictional career women who might also be wives and mothers and the skepticism they generated among the bourgeoisie, most women’s professionalization novels from the Belle Epoque evolve around the choice: either career or marriage. A look at the reception of these four novels provides us with important proof that the choices and career reversals made by some of the married female protagonists did indeed contribute to their status as polemical, highly discussed texts during the Belle Epoque. The most popular of the four novels discussed here, and the winner of the Prix Femina in 1907, *Princesses de science* could appeal to both conservative and liberal feminist readers. Thérèse’s decision to give up her practice could be applauded by conservative readers of the bourgeoisie as a return to traditional mores. Yet the novel ends ambiguously, since Thérèse’s sacrifice does not immediately improve her marriage nor does it bring back Fernand’s love to her. Feminist readers could thus interpret the novel as an indictment of bourgeois codes that required women’s retirement from work upon marriage. The fussy dependent male character Fernand, cast generally in a negative light throughout the novel, is further proof that women are sacrificing too much when they opt for marriage. The unsettled ending of *Princesses de science* allowed for a variety of interpretations of the protagonist’s final actions.

Indeed, a broad spectrum of Belle Epoque readers appreciated this more contentious ending. One of Yver’s contemporaries, the conservative writer and journalist Gyp, wrote in a letter to her colleague Maurice Barrès that she found *Princesses de science* “very very good” and “complex.” Moreover, Yver “follows the evolution of women and she approves of it without approving it” (quoted in Silverman 198 and 282). Gyp, of course, is well known for her polemical anti-Semitic and antifeminist statements, and it may well be that her endorsement of Yver’s novel has contributed in some way to the long-term view that Yver was an antifeminist and conservative writer. But this novel did not receive praise solely from conservative sources like Gyp: Yver’s novel had enough support from women on the Vie Heureuse Prize jury to be awarded the prestigious literary prize that year. Many of the women on the jury were active feminists during the Belle Epoque, and their support of this text indicates that feminists could approve of the intellectual and independent nature of the main character Thérèse and of the critique of society implied by the conclusion. Thus, even though the final decisions in all these novels indicate that a choice might have to be made—the public sphere or the private—the more dramatic conclusion was obviously one where the female lead had to make the wrenching decision to give
up her favorite pastime, her promising career, and her public recognition. The brainy woman whose final decision was the most ambiguous turned out to be the more critically acclaimed for the turbulent Belle Époque era. When we compare Yver’s “complex” conclusion to the “happy” ending of *Pharmacienne* or the “to be continued” endings of *La Bachelière* and *Les Cervelines*, it is clear that the latter conclusions do not have the same “punch” as *Princesses de science*, even for readers of the early twenty-first century.