Career Stories
Rogers, Juliette M.

Published by Penn State University Press

Rogers, Juliette M.
Career Stories: Belle Époque Novels of Professional Development.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/293.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/293

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=305727
IN THIS BOOK I have concentrated on women writers from the first decade of the twentieth century because that is the time period when novels featuring women professionals first blossomed and enjoyed both critical and popular success. When World War I began, the tone and topic of women writers’ texts changed, often dramatically. Nancy Sloan Goldberg, in her literary history “Woman, Your Hour Is Sounding”: Continuity and Change in French Women’s Great War Fiction, 1914–1919, demonstrates that books written by some of the same women (Yver, Tinayre, Colette, for example) during the war years (1914–18) were often diametrically opposed to their Belle Époque productions. In her survey of more than forty novels, Goldberg reveals the emphasis on the Republican Mother image and on the ideal of service to others that became so prevalent in women’s wartime writings. Although many female protagonists in these fictional texts found themselves working outside the home, some for the first time in their lives, most often these were not career women but rather mothers who had transferred their nurturing and caring abilities to the role of nurse in a hospital.¹

One of the most striking changes in tone during this transition period can be found in two works by the Swiss author Noëlle Roger: the prewar novel Le Docteur Germaine (1912) about a woman doctor practicing in working-class London, and the wartime novel Carnets d’une infirmière (Notes of a Nurse, 1915) about a nurse working during World War I. In the first text, the author portrays the doctor as a hard-working and spirited professional who combats social prejudice against the poor and destitute. In the later novel, the protagonist is a devout nurse who seeks to ease the pain and suffering of wounded soldiers. Both characters are, in one sense, healers, yet their

¹. For a detailed analysis of this type of storyline, see chapter 2 (“Republican Mothers All”) in Goldberg’s text. Although most of the texts included in her study are not “career stories,” their rewriting of women’s goals and possibilities, albeit within the narrow context of a major national crisis, is remarkable. Goldberg’s explication of the innovative features of the “shero” (chapter 3) in these works is likewise fascinating.
understanding of their roles and their belief in their work contrast strongly. In the Belle Epoque novel, Germaine, the doctor, sees her role in society not only as a member of the medical institution, but as a social worker; she becomes involved in her patients’ lives and takes an interest in their general well-being as well as their physical health. As such, she does not follow the strict socialization codes of the medical profession. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the “modern” doctor treated his or her patients as nameless objects of study. Germaine’s professional status, however, is an important, even essential, part of her identity, and it causes many serious issues when she marries her childhood friend Guillaume Evoles. When Germaine explains to Guillaume’s mother why she hesitates to marry, she describes herself as “two beings pitted against each other”: the wife and the doctor (Roger 1912, 21). As in many Belle Epoque novels about women scientists and doctors, Germaine is drawn ineluctably to her career, and it is the professional doctor, rather than the devoted housewife, who prevails during most of the narrative.

In contrast, the nurse in Roger’s wartime novel believes that women’s roles in the hospital are secondary to those of both the soldiers and the male doctors. The novel opens with words that convey a feeling of service and effacement, rather than of professional goals or career. In her description of the protagonist’s goals, the author writes about her heroine as “an obscure and useful gear” (obscur rouage utile) whose “personality disappears” (la personnalité s’évanouit), and as “this anonymous person who obeys” (cette anonyme qui obéit) (Roger 1915, 13), indicating Roger’s shift away from the modern medical institution’s practice of prioritizing the professional’s control over the patient. Instead, in the context of wartime crisis, the patients, all male, have names, families, and prior histories, and they are not seen as mere objects of study for researchers. The nurses, all women, in contrast, are rather bland and anonymous figures whose names and family histories are mentioned only briefly in passing (23–28). Most wartime texts, while intriguing, are not novels of professional or educational development and thus fall outside of the general boundaries of this book, even though their transitional presence between the literary worlds of the Belle Epoque and the interwar period remains an important and, until Goldberg’s study, forgotten marker of change.

After World War I, the women writers considered in this book continued to publish, but many abandoned the heroines and plotlines that had been one of their central focal points, and in some cases, they made a rather dramatic switch. Colette Yver, for example, remained interested in the
dilemmas and progress of working women, publishing documentary-style
texts on the current status of feminism, Dans le jardin du féminisme (1920,
In the Garden of Feminism), and on the status of women in the professions,
Femmes d’aujourd’hui: enquête sur les nouvelles carrières féminines (1928, Women
of Today: A Study of the New Feminine Careers). In the decades following the
war and through the 1940s, however, her fictional works included many
novels devoted to the lives of saints or stories set in a variety of historical
settings, focusing only rarely on contemporary women professionals. The
antifeminism for which she is now so famous came to the fore after World
War I and continued to escalate in her writings of the interwar period.

Gabrielle Reval also wrote a series of biographical portraits of Belle
Epoque women artists and writers—La Chaîne des dames (1924, The Chain
of Women) and a memoir about early graduates from the Ecole Normale
Supérieure de Sèvres, La Grande parade des Sèvriennes (1935, The Great Parade
of Sèvres Women)—but her fictional works no longer focused on professional
women protagonists. Even Colette, who had developed the profile of a
working divorcée in her 1910 La Vagabonde, switched to a different tone in
the 1920s, with her novel Chéri (1920) and her semi-autobiographical texts
La Maison de Claudine (1922, Claudine’s House), La Naissance du jour (1928,
Break of Day) and Sido (1930) that focus on interactions between lovers and
mother–daughter relationships.\(^2\)

Such shifts in narratorial emphasis can be explained in part by historical
shifts in France’s political views of women during the immediate postwar
period. The French government made immediate efforts in 1918 to pres-
sure women into relinquishing the jobs they had taken during the war,
and they were laid off in massive numbers only three months after the war
ended.\(^3\) Along with direct government action to force women back into
the home, the Senate voted down the bill to allow women’s suffrage. New
laws were passed to reinforce women’s duty to reproduce, including strong
antiabortion and anti-birth-control legislation (Milligan 12). These heavy
strictures on women’s rights to work and live independently came as a general
backlash, after women had made important gains in freedom during the war.

\(^2\) I have argued, however, that even a text such as La Naissance du jour, which critics
have discussed for years in terms of its important mother–daughter relationship, also includes a
not-so-hidden narrative about fame and success that Colette, the established author, wishes to impose
on her readers. See Rogers, “Addressing Success: Fame and Narrative Strategies in La Naissance du
jour” (1996).

\(^3\) Jennifer Milligan in The Forgotten Generation (1996) notes that the minister for employment
began to announce these policies only two days after the peace treaties were signed (Milligan 12).
Marcel Prévost’s epistolary text, *Nouvelles lettres à Françoise ou la jeune fille d’après-guerre* (1924, *New Letters to Françoise, or the Postwar Young Girl*), mentions several times that young women of the bourgeoisie had become used to freedom of movement during the war because they were needed in the hospitals and clinics and other public places and learned to move about without chaperones. Because of their exposure to wounded soldiers in these hospitals, many young women of the middle and upper classes lost their modesty, according to Prévost. They remained pure, but they were no longer uninformed, and those who in the 1920s wanted to restrict their daughters’ knowledge of the world found either that it was impossible to do so or that ignorance was considered undesirable by many young men looking for future brides. Prévost notes that even those who were too young to be “young girls of war” (jeunes filles de guerre), that is, those born after 1905, had taken their older sisters’ habits to heart and were freer, more open individuals than their mothers could ever have been twenty years earlier.\(^4\) Prévost’s text focuses on young women, born mainly during the first decade of the twentieth century, and contrasts them with the generation of women born in the 1870s or 1880s, which includes the majority of women writers discussed in earlier chapters.

*L’Egalité en marche* (1989, *Equality on the March*), a history of feminism throughout the Third Republic, confirms Prévost’s personal interpretations of the new generation of young women. Remarkling on the changes in feminist organizations after the war, Klejman and Rochefort note that “the quest for feminine identity” (la quête d’identité féminine) is less important to the generation following World War I, and that social and political questions take precedent.\(^5\) Women were fighting for practical rights and the “means to defend themselves” rather than for a new identity, which may indicate that they already felt comfortable with their social identities. Further, the new leaders of the feminist groups in the 1920s were mainly active working women: “women lawyers, journalists, doctors or employees; well integrated

\(^4\) Simone de Beauvoir (born 1908), because of her age and social class, would have been a member of this generational grouping. Her freedom of movement, desire to pursue advanced studies and an independent career, and her parents’ realistic view that she would not be able to find a husband among the diminished number of available young men after the war, all indicate her membership in the group Prévost names “la jeune fille d’après-guerre.”

\(^5\) “Utopia is no longer required. The goal now is less to open up new rapports between the sexes than to give rapidly to women the means to defend themselves and to preserve the peace.” (L’utopie n’est plus de mise. L’enjeu désormais est moins d’ébaucher de nouveaux rapports de sexe que donner rapidement aux femmes les moyens de se défendre et de préserver la paix” [Klejman and Rochefort 199]).
professionally” (Klejman and Rochefort 199). The professionalism of this new membership indicates a new generation of women with new perspectives on their roles in the public domain.

We therefore find two opposing portraits of women in the French national conscience during the period immediately following the Belle Epoque. During the war, they were considered active participants in the public domain; in hospitals, factories, and a variety of public sector jobs, their aid was indispensable to the war effort. Although many women did yield their jobs to the returning soldiers following the war’s end, they had gained a new attitude and spirit that could never completely conform to nineteenth-century expectations for the submissive housewife. In contrast, the strong effort by government officials attempted to reconfine women to the home and to the traditional duties of motherhood and domestic care. Some of these clashing images of the French woman are evident in the novels about women students and professionals after 1918. Postwar authors’ goals for their female characters also tend to fall into the same two distinct categories: those who wanted to promote the new working woman of the war days and those who wanted a return to the submissive nineteenth-century mother and housewife. Because neither protagonist type provided a literary portrait that aroused contemporary debate or curiosity, these works did not have the same critical appeal that the earlier Belle Epoque novels enjoyed.

The Second-Generation Professional Heroine

In the postwar era, we continue to find a number of novels of professional development where the brainy woman character exists, but the author’s focus is usually on the second generation of women professionals, no longer on the pioneers in their fields, and these works usually include less open hostility for their protagonists. These novels thus take on a new type of narrative form, and the endings reflect the new status of the protagonist as well as the new time period in which the novels take place.

War and Medical School: L’Interne

L’Interne (1920) by Myriam Thelen and Marthe Bertheaume covers the years 1908 to 1919 and follows the development of Jeanne from age seventeen to twenty-eight, as she pursues a career in science and medicine. Jeanne is a high-powered brainy woman in the usual sense, yet she understands
herself as belonging to a second generation of women scientists. At age seventeen, when arguing with her father for a chance to study medicine, she quotes Colette Yver’s *Princesses de Science* as an example of women scientists who are successful in their careers. This is one of the winning points in her argument, since her father must admit that he was the one who recommended the novel to her. Jeanne also engages in animated debates throughout the text with her old-fashioned sister Hélène (who is twelve years older) on women’s role in society. Hélène is obviously a prewar, even pre–Belle Epoque symbol of femininity, and she believes that Jeanne would be happiest as a doctor’s wife, rather than as a doctor herself.

Jeanne in contrast can point to a number of established women scientists who have made a life for themselves and thus set an example, and she honors these “pioneers” (Thelen et Bertheaume 1920, 24–25). When speaking of her own situation in medical school, Jeanne appears to consider the battle already won, making such statements as “everything is simplified” (tout s’est simplifié) and “we are used to the presence of women” (on s’est habitué à la présence des femmes). Her remarks confirm not only the idea that women professionals had become a stable feature in the sciences, but also that women working in the public domain in general had become much more common during the war and thus they were no longer objects of scrutiny or criticism. There are several situations in the novel, however, especially when in the company of male students, where Jeanne remarks that she has to be on her guard or they will try to take advantage of her. Thus, the prejudices of men against their future female colleagues has not vanished completely, even though she might hope it were the case.

Jeanne also reflects continually on the difficulties of juggling marriage and career, and on the growing pressures to marry that she is receiving from her sister, uncle, aunt, and an assortment of family friends. Still, she can again turn to her predecessors’ examples, including the historical figure Mme Edwards-Pilliet, who was the first woman allowed entrance into the *Internat* in French medical schools in the late 1880s, even though she was a widow with two young children at the time (Thelen et Bertheaume 1920, 83). Jeanne is pleased when her frivolous colleague Madeleine, who had quit medical school to marry and have children, tells her later that she wants to finish her studies and begin practicing medicine alongside her husband because she understands that being a doctor and raising a family are compatible activities (170).
The novel thus includes a wide cast of female characters, including a few older women “pioneers,” such as Mlle Poppée, who have been studying five to ten years longer than Jeanne and who act as rather ascetic but inspiring role models for the younger students. In Jeanne’s class of first-year students, there exist a number of differing attitudes about the medical profession, from Madeleine’s insouciance to Mlle Herpin’s practical perseverance to Phoebe’s ambitious creativity. Jeanne inserts herself in this particular niche of young women students, the second generation of future women scientists and doctors.

In tandem with these notions of a second, more modern generation of women professionals, the romance plot in this novel is based on modern ideals of equality and collegiality. Jeanne and her colleague André Pascal fall in love, becoming interns and fiancés in the same year. They decide responsibly to finish their studies before marrying, but after a year passes each one begins to wish for an earlier marriage, and they are planning for a September wedding when the war breaks out. André leaves for the front immediately, along with many of his male peers at school. Although Jeanne is worried for these men fighting in the trenches, she also comments at length on the positive effects of the “feminization” of the medical school and on the new authority and respect that her female colleagues at school now enjoy (Thelen et Bertheaume 1920, 189).

The wartime ending of this text means that the renunciation plot is no longer a valid option for the narrative. When Jeanne learns that André has died in combat, she quietly finishes her thesis and then retires to the countryside to become a humble general practitioner. Although she abandons the glories of research and an urban clientele that she and André had dreamed of earlier in their medical studies, there is no question of giving up her career as a doctor. She also adopts her friend Madeleine’s daughter, since both Madeleine and her husband died during the war, and she decides to raise the child with the help of her conservative older sister and her grandfather. The fact that she would like these family members with their traditional values to help raise her adopted daughter might indicate that Jeanne desires a return to more conservative roles in childrearing. Yet her decision to continue to work shows a distinct contrast from the final dénouement of

---

6. Jeanne is thoroughly impressed, for example, when Mlle Poppée risks her life and poisons herself with a cobra’s bite in order to see if her newly developed serum will work as an antidote. Poppée’s long hours and dedication to her theories are examples to Jeanne of the intensity with which women scientists must work to succeed (Thelen et Bertheaume 1920, 54–59).
most Belle Epoque novels about scientific heroines. In their conclusion, Thelen et Bertheaume reflect the actual situation of many French women: while government officials were extolling the importance of women as mothers, many women were left widowed or unmarried after the war and knew they would not become mothers at all. For these women, finding work outside the home was more important than raising children.

*War and the Sorbonne: La Science et l’amour*

In the humanities field, Léontine Zanta’s *La Science et l’amour* (1920) presents the diary of a young student of philosophy, Madeleine Hastier, at the Sorbonne during the war years. True to the form and structure of the Belle Epoque novel of educational development, the work includes detailed descriptions of her entrance exams, her first impressions of the halls of the Sorbonne, and her mixed reviews of her first-year courses and professors. A major difference, of course, is that Madeleine is attending the once male-dominated Sorbonne, whereas most Belle Epoque novels for future schoolteachers were set in the single-sex teacher training colleges for women. In the first few chapters of the book, Zanta introduces a wide range of characters who are defined mainly by their participation in a number of informal debates held after class or in the library on philosophical topics, often mixed with arguments over men’s and women’s future roles in society. The war has influenced their discussions of classic philosophers, and some of the fiercest debates are between the pragmatists and skeptics. The strongest positions, not surprisingly, are usually argued by those speaking up for an early form of “engagement” and theories that can be applied to their situation in the war.

Because the book is set in 1916, the tone is quite different from Belle Epoque novels, as the students also discuss the feminized Sorbonne and the “emptiness” they feel. Madeleine’s comments on the triumph of feminism in the Sorbonne reveal her beliefs that it is a phony victory (Zanta 9). Despite this negative sentiment, she and her female peers sense a new duty that they will be called upon to perform: teaching in boys’ high schools as well as in girls’ schools. Madeleine notes that some of her colleagues have already graduated and been assigned to boys schools, with initially good results. For her, this wartime “experiment” will be a major determinant for the future of feminism in her professional field: “This was an experiment that they had tried, an experiment that could be decisive for the future of feminism, good feminism as we hoped for. Would woman prove
herself capable of forming men, in the larger sense of the word?”

In contrast with Belle Epoque heroines, Madeleine’s concern is not with women’s intelligence (sometimes a point of doubt in Belle Epoque novels) nor with their morality (women are occasionally confused or seduced in many Belle Epoque novels), but with their énergie, or their ability to discipline a classroom of boys. Her friend Marie Lesage, who has been working in a boys’ school for a semester, claims that she has not had problems with her class but cannot vouch for all women teachers in France. This new view of women teachers ready to “form men” (former des hommes) is a major shift from the portraits of women professionals during the Belle Epoque, who worked mainly with a female clientele, whether in the sciences, education, or law. Madeleine’s ideal vision of women teaching both boys and girls at the high school level would not become commonplace in France for many years. But the idea that women’s moral and intellectual capacities equaled those of men was supported and promoted by another female philosophy student at the Sorbonne who attended eight years after this fictional student: Simone de Beauvoir.

In spite of her strong convictions about the future roles of women in education, Madeleine begins to slip in her own studies due to a number of distractions. She spends a long time away from school to care for her brother when he is seriously injured in the war. During his convalescence, she has heated debates with him on women’s purpose in the future. He strongly believes that women should stay at home and reproduce, and his arguments are powerful enough to make Madeleine falter in her convictions. During the same time, she falls in love with a fellow student in philosophy who cannot join the army because of health problems. Jacques is a devout atheist, and when Madeleine begins to return to the church and the teachings of her Catholic upbringing for comfort, he objects to her new love of religion, calling it dogmatic and unthinking. But Madeleine persists, and eventually she converts Jacques, too, bringing him to Mass and Communion. They continue to fight over Berkeley and Locke, skepticism versus pragmatism, and other course-related topics, but their bond grows stronger during the year until Jacques’ mother discovers their secret engagement and categorically refuses to allow her son, from a wealthy family of Parisian lawyers, to marry Madeleine, a poor student from a struggling working-class family.

7. “C’était une expérience que l’on avait tentée, une expérience qui pouvait être décisive pour l’avenir du féminisme, du bon féminisme que nous voulions. La femme se montrerait-elle capable de former des hommes, au sens large du mot?” (Zanta 81–82).
Despite this blow to her dreams, Madeleine firmly believes that love is good for women intellectuals (les intellectuelles) and that it increases women's abilities to understand and to succeed at their work. The theory of Zanta's character thus contrasts strongly with many pure brainy women protagonists from the Belle Epoque who usually decide that work and love are incompatible. Unfortunately, Madeleine's new belief is tested and fails when she flunks the exams at the end of her first year at the Sorbonne. Zanta surprises the reader with this unusual ending for a women's education novel, since we read throughout the text of advanced discussions and complex arguments in which Madeleine is a leading student and debater among her peers. The fact that she flounders at the end, while most of the others pass with honors, indicates the extent to which her thoughts and study habits have been dispersed during the last months of the school year. Her mentor, Mlle Claire, has confidence that she will pass the exams when she takes them again in October, yet the book concludes with uncertainty and defeat.

Thus the renunciation plot in Zanta's text is also modified from the typical Belle Epoque novel of educational development since Madeleine's potential career, as a philosophy professor, is not threatened by demands from a husband or children or society. Rather, she has failed the exams and limited her career potential through poor study habits and incoherent thought. Furthermore, at the conclusion of the novel, the heroine has not given up her career or her aspirations to become a teacher in order to pursue a love interest. The final lines of the text indicate that Madeleine will persevere and, it is hoped, be able to continue in her chosen field of philosophy.

War and the Country Doctor: Dr. Odile

Similar to L'Interne, Bertheaume's and Thelen's other postwar novel, the 1923 Dr. Odile, discusses the differences between women of the pre- and postwar era and the opportunities that have opened up for women during World War I. When Odile Winter returns home on vacation from her new position in the distant town of Vic, the narrator comments on the generation gap that now separates Odile from her mother and that keeps them from confiding in each other as they used to (Bertheaume et Thelen 1923, 161). Odile still appreciates her mother's care, but she is sad that they are separated by such different life experiences.

The war has drastically changed women's roles in the small town of Vic, and these changes directly affect Odile's budding career as a doctor. Because women have become an important part of the war effort, Odile's first
employer is a local factory, and her first patients are the women employed there, mainly to replace the men who have left for the war front. When the war ends, of course, the women are rapidly laid off and Odile loses her position as the company physician for women employees since there are few women left at the factory. She takes this news with a certain amount of resignation, but she is also sorry to leave her patients whose families and private lives she has begun to know well.

These comments on the changing roles of women in French society notwithstanding, Odile is a classic Belle Epoque brainy woman. She has a strong interest in women’s health and women’s rights, and she believes firmly that women doctors are better able to communicate with women patients. As such, she conforms to the theories espoused by many Belle Epoque authors that women professionals could best serve women clients, whether in legal matters, medical treatments, or educating girls. Odile is also a reminder of the pure brainy woman from the Belle Epoque because she believes that her duty to the medical profession comes before her own personal happiness. She decides that women like herself who were too busy during school to think about romance are often tempted by the idea of being in love when they first begin their careers, even though they are usually not in love at all. The advances of a married man tempt Odile, but eventually she smothers those desires and tells him to do the same. Her attitudes about love are thus strictly objective and commonsensical. She does admit that she might some day fall in love with a true passion, but that she is too young and inexperienced at the moment to do so. She is thus quite different from other postwar women characters who believe either that love and career are compatible or that love is more important than career.

From this brief survey of postwar novels about women students and professionals, a pattern surfaces, one that would explain the lessened popularity of this particular subgenre of the bildungsroman after the war. One of the reasons that these novels may not have enjoyed the same enthusiastic reception as the earlier Belle Epoque texts was the fact that women professionals were no longer considered such unique characters. The women characters themselves constantly remind the reader that they are part of a second generation, not pioneers in their field, and that the challenges and hurdles that existed only ten to twenty years earlier have been cleared for them. The confrontational choice between career, on one hand, and marriage or family, on the other, is also eliminated in two of these novels, either because the fiancé dies on the battlefield or because there are no available men
to distract the heroine from her career. These protagonists and their women's communities may have appealed to a specific audience of postwar readers (women who were members of that generation), but they did not pique the general public's curiosity as the earlier portraits of pioneer Belle Epoque heroines and women's communities had. Since the difficulties of the preceding generation had apparently been eliminated, the storylines that these later characters would follow did not contain the same dramatic elements or surprising plot twists found in the prewar novels. None of these later novels won literary prizes, nor did they generate as many reviews and letters in women's magazines.

After the war, there was also a strong antifeminist current in literary circles. A comparison of the misogynist portrayals in Henry Fèvre's *L'Intellectuelle mariée* (*The Intellectual Wife*) to the depictions of women professionals in Yver's *Princesses de science* or *Dames du Palais*, for example, reveals the vast gulf that separates these two views of women. While Yver presented intelligent and productive women who were dragged down by prejudice and chauvinism, Fèvre's text offers us portraits of women who liked to pose as intellectuals but who were actually flighty, acquiescent, or even incompetent professionals. Although these negative portraits might be due in part to the fact that they were written by a man, the fact remains that Fèvre's women intellectuals are ultimately shown to be immature or fraudulent, incapable of sustained intellectual activity. It is for acerbic portraits such as these that I prefer to retain the title “antifeminist,” in contrast to the majority of literary critics who feel the need to condemn such writers as Yver or Tinayre or Reval because they included female characters who abandoned their careers for their husbands and children.

Simone de Beauvoir rather infamously dismissed several of these Belle Epoque women writers in her *Mémoires d’une jeune fille range* (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*). Of Colette Yver, she writes: “My father was no feminist; he admired the wisdom of the novels of Colette Yver in which the woman lawyer or the woman doctor in the end sacrifice their careers in order to provide their children and husband with a happy home. But after all, necessity knows no law: ‘You girls will never marry,’ he often declared,

---

8. Henry Fèvre was a noted naturalist/anarchist writer in the 1890s and early 1900s, with a number of hit plays in Parisian theaters during the fin-de-siècle period, such as *L’Homme*, which he also published in novel form (1891). His later work about women, *L’Intellectuelle mariée* (1925), is disappointingly conservative and decidedly antifeminist.
'you have no dowries; you’ll have to work for a living’” (de Beauvoir, Kirkup trans. 104). She explains her disappointment as well with Marcelle Tinayre’s heroine Hellé: “I had felt some affinity for Hellé, Marcelle Tinayre’s heroine. ‘Girls like you, Hellé,’ her father had told her, ‘are fit to be the companions of heroes.’ This prophecy had aroused my interest; but I found the bearded, ginger-haired missionary she finally married rather revolting” (Kirkup trans. 144). One might conclude from these statements that Simone de Beauvoir criticized these particular women writers because she felt they were antifeminists. But her attitude about them extends to the entire generation of novelists, both male and female, that had “enchanted my father’s youth” (enchanté la jeunesse de papa) (de Beauvoir, Kirkup trans. 109; de Beauvoir 152). When speaking of these writers (Maupassant, Bourget, Daudet, the Goncourt brothers, and others), she claims that they all seemed irrelevant to her own life. Except for the heroines in Colette’s Claudine and Mademoiselle Dax by Claude Farrère, the society described in these writers’ works seemed out-of-date and the heroines “inane” or “frivolous” (de Beauvoir 152). After our close analysis of the pioneering professionals and hard-working students of these Belle Epoque works, Simone de Beauvoir’s dismissal of them as “inane” or “frivolous” seems incomprehensible. Yet it is apparent that de Beauvoir was in fact part of the second generation of women professionals in France. In contrast to the fictional characters in the postwar novels, who respect and give thanks to their pioneering elders, de Beauvoir felt the need to distance herself from those who came before by critiquing them. Not only did she feel that these writers appealed to more conservative readers of an earlier generation, she also dismissed them because she felt that she had moved beyond their writing practices and into the newer realms of surrealist and existentialist fiction. She finds much more in common with her “contemporaries”: Barrès, Gide, Valéry, Claudel, for examples (de Beauvoir 269). France, in general, followed de Beauvoir’s lead: it dismissed, forgot, or ignored. As is evident now, those dismissals were rash. The movement for women’s equality in the workplace and at home is obviously  


10. “Je m’étais sentie assez proche d’Hellé, l’héroïne de Marcelle Tinayre. ‘Les filles comme toi, Hellé, sont faites pour être les compagnes des héros,’ lui disait son père. Cette prophétie m’avait frappée; mais je trouvai plutôt rebutant l’apôtre roux et barbu qu’Hellé finissait par épouser” (de Beauvoir 1958, 201).
not over, even today; in literature of the early twenty-first century, we 
find many women protagonists who are still struggling to find their place 
in corporate and professional culture, and who continue to juggle many 
tasks in the public and private domains, just as their ancestors did one 
hundred years ago. Although the discussion of women and work may 
have waned temporarily during the interwar period, a number of works 
written after World War II bring up education and profession develop-
ment for women.

Melanie Hawthorne, in a collection of essays on the politics of literary 
history in France, makes an important statement about recovering and 
revising women’s history and literature: she claims that it is not only “how previously obscured objects may suddenly come into view, but it is also about how one reading may obscure another, and the need for vigilance in not assuming that the first thing that hoves into view is the only thing” (Hawthorne 92). I believe that her statement is especially important when considering these long-forgotten Belle Epoque novels of professional development: while their recent “rediscovery” was a major step in rewriting French literary history, we must be careful in the ways that we re-read and remember them, avoiding the stereotyp-
ing and generalizations that caused them to disappear in the first place. If we make a careful analysis of the variations that flourished in the Belle Epoque berufsroman, our new views both of the Belle Epoque and of the generations that dismissed them may not vanish as quickly as did the original works.

Thus, these Belle Epoque novels of professional development remain important texts—and not only because they helped to reshape and redefine the modern heroine at the beginning of the twentieth century. They also introduced a new form of bildungsroman with innovative narrative twists that combined both romance and quest to offer new paths

11. I am thinking, for example, of recent novels by Amélie Nothomb, Marie Redonnet, Malika Mokkedem, Claire Martin, Monique Proulx, Nadine Bismuth, and others from Quebec and France whose protagonists are doctors, librarians, computer programmers, writers, translators, hotel managers, among other professions.

12. Simone de Beauvoir herself wrote novels in which the female protagonist’s private life is structured by her career in the public sphere. See her L’Invitée (1943) for images of women working in the theater and Les Belles images (1966) for a discussion of women who design advertising campaigns for domestic products (wood paneling, canned tomatoes, etc.). In the domain of working class women we find Claire Etcherelli’s 1967 novel Elise ou la vraie vie about a factory worker in Paris during the Algerian War.
for female protagonists in French literature. Although the great dividing line of World War I would temporarily put aside the narratives that these women writers had created, their works act as a crucial link in the development of the French novel in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and they enable us to understand the situations of twenty-first century working heroines in a long-term historical perspective.