



Decadent Love: Rachilde and the Popular Romance

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Rachilde's most prolific and famous period as a novelist coincides with the years known as the Belle Epoque (from the 1880s to the early 1900s), and thus with a period when women writers were establishing a limited, often denigrated but nonetheless real presence on the literary scene in France. The figures given for women's participation in the literary market vary but cultural historians agree that a marked increase occurred: Resa Dudovitz cites several sources to this effect (Dudovitz 1990: 77); Anne Marie Thiesse finds about 17% of her list of popular writers of the period to have been female, though women only constituted 2 to 3 % of 'serious' writers (Thiesse 1984: 183-4). It was a period when women readers were becoming the principal target audience for the popular novel (Olivier-Martin 1980: 10) and the popular novel was becoming almost synonymous with romance: 'le roman populaire deviendra roman d'amour à partir de 1880' (Olivier-Martin 1980: 16).

Since love is one of the most central themes of the whole of Western literature, if the term 'romance' is to serve any useful analytical purpose it requires definition. Romance is a genre that can be located historically: the rise of the popular romance novel during the nineteenth century in France (as in Europe generally) coincides with the domestication of women as well as with their mass emergence from illiteracy (Fowler 1991). Stories that centred around passionate love and the formation of the couple constituted a large proportion of the widely read *feuilletons* published in both popular and 'serious' newspapers throughout this period. In my definition of the genre I am drawing here mainly on what we could term the bourgeois or middlebrow romance: those best-selling, often female-authored love stories consumed — to judge from their assumption of the reader's familiarity with certain cultural reference points, and the fact that they were reviewed and publicised in the 'serious' press including *Le Mercure de France* — by a fairly wide spectrum of female readers, but mainly at the middle class end of the market. Male novelists such as Georges Ohnet (1848-1918) and Paul Bourget (1852-1935) catered for this readership; their female counterparts were writers such as Daniel Lesueur (pen-name of Jeanne Loiseau, 1860-1921) and

Marcelle Tinayre (1871-1948). Some of Colette's early novels (*Claudine à Paris*, 1901; *La Vagabonde*, 1910) also fall within this category. From 1907 on, the Delly series simplified the romance plot into a very effective and almost infinitely variable formula. Though the Delly novels were never candidates for serious critical attention, they aimed at a respectable readership that included middle class women.

The romance is a durable, adaptable form of fiction that changes with time and is still one of the most commercially successful of literary genres. It is structured around the development of a relationship between two people, normally (and certainly at the Belle Epoque) a man and a woman. It is their mutual attraction, apparent to the reader even if misrecognised or denied by the protagonists, that sets off the plot; the possibility of a union between them is the motor driving the narrative, the quest that motivates the turning of pages. What is at stake, the *enjeu*, is the possible achievement of a mutual, lasting, passionate love. The narrative is sustained by the series of obstacles that delay or (for, outside the 'formula' series such as Delly, Mills & Boon or Harlequin, not all romances end happily) finally prevent the desired outcome. Important among these obstacles are the rivals, and particularly the female rivals who act as foils to the heroine's incarnation of a positive or ideal model of femininity. The romance is always in part about how to be a woman.

Because the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of quite extreme separation of gendered identities and spheres, romantic novels tended to make the contrast between the domestic enclosure of women — their spatial and social immobility — and the mobility of men central to the narrative. The heroine waits, dreams and hopes — the hero has an active life, occupies some place in the public world, and must be drawn into the private world of feeling if her happiness is to be achieved. Popular middlebrow romance writers with feminist sympathies not only used this opposition to structure their narratives but also foregrounded the dependence of female destinies on the choice of a mate. In Tinayre's *Hellé* (1898) the orphaned, idealistic heroine seeks a suitable life partner amongst the men she meets through her uncle and his friends. Each represents, through his social activities, a different social and ethical choice which is more or less compatible with Hellé's feelings: she finally chooses the social reformer over the fashionable playwright, thus determining the ethical quality of her own adult life. In Lesueur's two-volume *Le Masque d'Amour* (1904), Micheline and Hervé are childhood sweethearts suddenly and mysteriously forbidden to marry by their parents. While Hervé departs on an adventurous quest to discover and solve the mystery, Micheline pines at home without news, until his return leads to a happy ending. Both authors also draw attention to this narrative pattern by partially reversing it in sub-plots or indeed in the main plot of certain novels: Tinayre's tellingly named *La Rebelle* (1905) is the romance of an emancipated 'New Woman', whose social and spatial mobility almost matches that of the hero, but who nonetheless closes the novel by accepting, with love, her 'natural' place as 'une petite chose [...] dans vos chères mains' (Tinayre 1905: 305). Lesueur's rebellious *Nietzschéenne*

(1908) maintains her hard-won freedom, but dies as she crosses the private/public boundary by intervening in the public life of her beloved: he is an embattled factory owner, and she is shot by one of the striking workers as she tries to defend him. Colette's *La Vagabonde* (1910) explicitly reverses the roles, closing with its heroine travelling away from the man she could have loved, painfully but determinedly choosing 'vagabondage' over the 'clos ensoleillé' (Colette) of marriage. The equation public = masculine, private = female can be contested within the Belle Epoque romance, but it remains a powerful norm.

The romance thus tends to emphasize sexual difference and to make it the source of attraction. Aimed at an implied female reader, the romance's heroine is constructed as both 'like us', that is, carrying sufficient signs of the ordinary to facilitate identification, but also as wonderfully unique hence worthy of the hero's love, a combination that provides much vicarious pleasure. The hero is dramatically, fascinatingly 'other'. This play of sameness and difference is achieved in part by narrative point of view: the genre favours (though not exclusively) the use of an extra-diegetic, omniscient narrator, enabling identification by focalising much of the plot from the heroine's point of view, but also establishing her effect on the hero (and on others around her) through external focalisation, or even the adoption of the hero's own perspective. The heroine's quest is to reconcile social imperatives — for as a woman in a patriarchal society, both material well-being and standing in the community depend on alliance with a suitable man — and personal desires, for the appeal of the romance is that it also addresses the irrational, utopian desire for total erotic and emotional fulfilment, a drive which could well be characterised as anti-social.

Love in the romance is sublime and transcendent. Indeed, part of the pleasure of the romance lies in its capacity to resonate with what Dorothy Dinnerstein terms the 'massive orienting passions' (Dinnerstein, 1977: 15) of pre-verbal, pre-rational infancy. Romance imagines the reward, after the experience of separation and solitude, of a rediscovered plenitude and total connection with the m/other. It is not by chance that so many heroines of romance — including all of those mentioned above, with the exception of Micheline whose mother dies in the first volume of *Le Masque d'amour* — are motherless. At the same time, these stories of young women confronting life choices also provide the heroine and the reader with a drama of becoming, of adventure and entry into an adult world of sexuality and independence from parental ties. Love — at least in those romances that have a happy ending — resolves paradox in a utopian fashion.

Everything opposed Rachilde to the genre of romance. As a leading Decadent her aesthetics were entirely opposed to mass, popular culture, to the culture of 'la foule imbécile...qui est toujours l'ennemie parce qu'elle est le nombre contre l'unique, la société ... contre l'individu' (Rachilde 1942: 100) — and romance belonged in the realm of the popular. The Decadent ideology of gender defined the feminine as

debased and merely 'natural', subscribing to Baudelaire's famous dictum 'la femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable' (Baudelaire 1951: 1199), and romance was a quintessentially feminine form of literature. Rachilde's famous self-identification as an honorary 'homme de lettres' permitted her to dismiss all other writers of her sex as either 'bas-bleus pédants et savants' or 'frivoles qui écrivent des bouts de chronique entre deux canapés' (Rachilde 1886: xiv): she was always at pains to distance herself from the denigrated category of mere 'femmes de lettres'.² The Decadents were also reluctant to engage with a social world they considered contemptibly banal, preferring to retreat into art, so that they displayed little concern with the couple as a social unit. Rachilde's own view of love was that it was essentially a cerebral emotion, and one that did not depend on or even seek reciprocity. If romance is about uniting the sublime with the real, Rachilde is all for the sublime: 'L'Amour est. C'est même le seul dieu bien portant qui nous reste. [...] On a toujours le droit d'avoir un grand amour, à la seule condition de lui tout sacrifier' (Rachilde 1896b: 197) and she despises (in her texts if not in her life) the compromise of reconciling the two, of attempting to harmonise the (supreme) individual with society

And yet, despite all that separates Rachilde from romance, what I mean to argue here is that certain of her texts reproduce many of its generic features, sometimes uncritically, and sometimes in a spirit of parody. Rachilde resisted the demeaning label of 'woman writer', believing that her talent transcended gender, but for all that she was inescapably *situated* as a heterosexual woman in a profoundly and overtly sexist culture, and her imagination was shaped by many of the same discourses, pressures and limitations as those of her female contemporaries. Small wonder then that, despite her protestations, there should be some common ground between their writings. Secondly, Rachilde's disassociation from popular culture was more discursive than real, for as the fiction reviewer for *Mercur de France* she read (or probably skim-read in many cases) huge numbers of novels, many of them of the popular middlebrow kind. She was familiar with romantic fiction³ just as she had a keen awareness — well founded in experience — of what a patriarchal culture meant for women. Rachilde grasps the appeal of the romance, but also recognises some of its contradictions. She is entirely capable of harnessing the reading pleasures it offers, but she also seizes on and 'outs' its concealed strategies, particularly the genre's fantasy of a possible reconciliation between female self-fulfilment and the social order.

In several Rachilde novels (not the most famous ones) the isolated heroine meets a hero whose seductive power comes from his extreme 'otherness', his masculinity signified by physical strength and beauty, and by a mobility and sense of social mastery that distinguishes him sharply from her. She glimpses total love and fulfilment in his arms — but the classic denouement of romance is always snatched away. This is the case in, for example, *L'Homme roux* of 1889, *La Princesse des ténèbres* of 1896, and *Le Grand Seigneur* of 1922. In *L'Homme roux*, the motherless heroine lives a selfless life of devotion to the needs of her unloving father and sister and

her dull if dutiful husband. Her meeting with James, her husband's foreman, is her first encounter with passion: James is handsome, vigorous and plain-speaking, willing to flout social conventions in a way that the docile Ellen has never imagined possible. His otherness is accentuated by his class difference: 'James l'ouvrier, le bâtard, le vagabond' (Rachilde 1889: 243). Divided first by Ellen's marriage, then by her sister's love for James, the couple never consummate their mutual love and desire, but it is the possibility of their union that drives the plot until at last James despairs of Ellen's moral cowardice and departs for America. In *La Princesse des Ténèbres*, the romance plot is heavily inflected by the Decadent fascination with the macabre and idolisation of the outsider hero. Again a motherless, solitary heroine trapped in a loveless family meets passion in the shape of a dramatically handsome hero, Hunter, but this time the romantic stranger is so 'other' as to have no place in the social world, appearing only at night and when Madeleine is alone. The novel is never quite explicit about Hunter's origins, but there is a strong suggestion that this mysterious figure with the livid pallor and the blood-red mouth is a *revenant*, an outsider not just in relation to society but to life. His appeal for Madeleine, the 'princess of darkness' confined within a domestic world she despises, comes precisely from his extreme otherness — though this leads not to fulfilment but to death.

In the case of *Le Grand Saigneur*, one could suspect Rachilde of a parodic intention, for if one of the pleasures of romance is the vicarious experience of being utterly, urgently wanted, here the handsome hero's passionate desire to possess the heroine becomes a literal desire to drink her blood — he is a vampire — and his virile strength goes beyond the latent violence of the usual romantic hero and tips into excess: he is a killer. Here the heroine, Marie Faneau, is a self-sufficient, capable and experienced woman artist, but living nonetheless an emotionally solitary life, her family reduced to one spoiled, dependent younger brother. Yves de Pontcroix, the devastatingly handsome war hero with whom she falls in love, has much in common with the heroes of the Dely romances, publication of which began in 1907, and which prefigure the Mills & Boon and Harlequin romances of the later 20th century. De Pontcroix is far superior to the heroine in terms of class and wealth, his arrogant and at times threatening manner conceals his involuntary and overwhelming desire for Marie, and the question posed by the narrative is whether or not her love will succeed in channelling his aggressive energy into a passionately loving relationship. As in the Dely romance, love here is natural, predestined and irresistible: 'De cet homme à elle une chaîne se formait, car, malgré leur vertu ou leurs tares, la grande nature, ignorante des usages sociaux ou des complications de guerre, les avait, depuis toujours, dédiés l'un à l'autre ...' (Rachilde 1922:101). My suspicion that Rachilde might have been intending parody, though, is unconfirmed by any textual evidence. The novel appears to take itself seriously, despite the comic possibilities opened up by the presence of a vampire in polite salon society (Yves, for example, struggles against the temptation to bite into the hands he is offered to kiss [Rachilde 1922: 167], and makes all too frequent reference to the blood-red highlights in Marie's auburn hair). Rachilde uses

the romance plot in a characteristically excessive and melodramatic way, but it nonetheless structures and drives the novel, concluding (in true Delyly style) with the marriage of the lovers. The Rachildean twist of the bridegroom's post-wedding suicide does not alter the fact that love triumphs, for Marie is left heir to the Pontcroix fortune and (we assume) faithful to the memory of her one true love.

The romance then seems at least to be a very relevant intertext for Rachilde's fiction. I want now to focus my argument on a single novel, *Le Dessous*, published in 1904. My argument is this: that *Le Dessous* both deploys, skilfully and effectively, and parodies the romance form, acknowledging (far more than Rachilde would have allowed at a theoretical level) the desires, frustrations, and aspirations that drive the romance narrative and determine its popularity, and the seductive force of masculine otherness in a deeply gendered culture, whilst parodically exaggerating or reversing certain conventions of the genre.

LE DESSOUS: THE DEPLOYMENT OF THE ROMANCE FORM

The narrative structure of *Le Dessous* reproduces — or possibly mimics — that of the romance. We begin by being introduced to the heroine and to her ordered, calm and fixed life — a representative life in its quotidian material detail: Marguerite has a fragrant blue and white bedroom, she has domestic responsibilities, her leisure activities are crocheting and reading romantic novels. Into this calm erupts the seductive hero, Fulbert, a rootless, irreverent *hors-la-loi*, highly articulate, opposing the black of mystery and passion to her pure white and evoking at once the appeal and the danger of sexual passion: 'Alors, il lui jeta un regard noir, un long regard très sombre et très chaud qui tomba sur elle, l'enveloppa tout entière, comme un manteau de velours' (Rachilde 1904: 49). As in the romance, the hero is hard to read and ambivalent in his behaviour towards the heroine. Fulbert alternately treats Marguerite with derision and displays signs of attraction, and Marguerite struggles to reconcile desire for so socially unsuitable an object with a very pragmatic concern for her own material and social well being. The obstacles to a happy outcome are several: the class and financial gap between them; his refusal to compromise with a society he despises; the arrival of Flora, the rival, Fulbert's mistress whom he believed he had stabbed to death but who has survived. At the end Flora leaves, confiding her lover to Marguerite's care, and the way seems clear for a union of hero and heroine — a classically romantic denouement that Rachilde proceeds to snatch away.

Marguerite Davenel is — as her unremarkable name implies - an 'ordinary' heroine typical of her class and period. She is the only daughter of the manager of a fruit and flower farm set up by the state down-river from Paris, where the land can absorb the city's effluent and transform it into malodorous but fertile soil. Marguerite's function is domestic: since she is motherless, like all Rachilde's heroines, she manages her father's household, performs 'feminine' works of charity, and acts as hostess on

social occasions. Her destiny is fixed and non-negotiable: either she will marry or she will remain her father's housekeeper and hostess. Intelligent, restless and torn between performing her role as *jeune fille* to perfection and rebelling against its limits, Marguerite invites a degree of sympathy and identification, facilitated by the narrative voice which (as in most romances) is extra-diegetic throughout, but shifts focalisation between the omniscient, external narrator and the heroine, with occasional forays into the consciousness of the hero.

Fulbert has the powerful otherness and the sexual allure of the romantic hero. He first appears as a thief, a rebel, dark and hence contrasted to the bright, light, purposeful productivity of the farm: 'Il était grand, très maigre, de teint bistré et d'allures violentes tout à fait étrangères au pays. Loup sortant du bois. Ses prunelles, bleues à force d'être noires, jetaient du phosphore' (63). An anarchist, they decide, reassured to have a label for him and slightly thrilled to have the currently à la mode outsider in the house.⁴ His attraction is immediately sexual and very like that of the romantic hero. In fact he is a classic hero of romance — wounded, alienated, made aggressive by excessively strong emotions: 'Il n'était pas de chez eux et ne leur servirait à rien, car il n'aimait ni la terre, ni les humains, encore moins le monde, la société... Il n'aimait rien pour avoir trop aimé, mal aimé' (73-4). In a more conventional romance the work of the text would be to heal him, to transform him for the heroine into a partner who can provide both the intensity of the sublime and the loving support she craves, and this is indeed Marguerite's aim. As in the romance, love — at once erotic and affective — is here granted transcendent status. It is an irresistible emotion, irrational, violent and mysterious. Fulbert has loved Flora ('N'était-elle pas à la fois ma mère et mon amante?' [166]) so desperately that he can scarcely recover from her loss; she in turn finally sacrifices her life to smooth the way for what she believes will be his marriage to Marguerite. Through Fulbert, Marguerite glimpses what authentic love might be like: 'Marguerite venait de voir passer au loin le vagabond *amour*, le seul qu'on n'épouse pas, mais le seul qu'on désire' (140),⁵ and briefly experiences the anti-social force of passion: 'Ah! Fuir, se sauver, sa robe de vierge sur la tête, rejoindre les loups, serait-on poursuivi par tous les chiens de garde, rejoindre les loups, mordue, couverte de plaies, pour hurler enfin avec eux, les punir ou en être définitivement dévorée' (236). There is no irony in Rachilde's treatment of love — where she departs from the romance, and indeed treats the genre parodically, is in the handling of the reconciliation of this transcendent emotion with the social and the limitations of the real.

LE DESSOUS AS PARODIC TEXT

So far I have argued that Rachilde comes closer to that archetypally feminine genre, the romance, than she would consciously have wanted to acknowledge. Parody, however, or the critically ironic reproduction of textual or generic codes, was a mode

of writing that the irreverent werewolf (as she liked to style herself) could embrace. *Le Dessous* can be read in part as the story of a young woman's entry into adulthood through her encounter with passionate love, but it also exaggerates and mocks certain conventions of the romance, displaying and refusing the genre's tendency to naturalise the social process whereby desire is domesticated and made productive.

The heroine of the romance offers scope for reader identification because she displays some signs of the ordinary: less than perfect beauty, a recognisable lifestyle, a set of values that correspond to the norms or aspirations of contemporary readers. As we have seen, Marguerite — pretty, intelligent, limited in her options — largely matches this description, but the Rachildean narrator makes her heroine's conformity to the norms of the age not an innocent acceptance of social realities, but rather a strategic performance of the role most likely to win social rewards. Everything about Marguerite (at least until she meets Fulbert) is constructed to produce the right effect, from her pale skin ('Elle restait un peu pâle, quoique d'apparence assez robuste, parce que les jeunes filles qui attendent un mari pâlissent toujours en attendant' [11]), to her genteel and passionless religion ('elle croyait modérément en Dieu' [13]) and charitable endeavours (she is 'correctement bonne, justement généreuse' [25]). At a period when the secular Republic was firmly established but religion continued to be considered a guarantor of female virtue and decorum, Marguerite 's'étudiait, selon les nouvelles formules, à devenir une jeune fille rangée, une variété juste milieu, mi partie rose mi partie chou, rien du lycée, mais rien du couvent, joignant l'utile à l'agréable' (13-4). By rendering explicit the conventions of bourgeois girlhood, and their function in attracting a mate, Rachilde gives an ironic twist to the first stage in the romance narrative where normally the heroine lives out her prelude to love innocently and unselfconsciously, with only the reader aware that something romantic is about to happen.

Nor does the romance heroine normally herself read romances, but Marguerite does, indulging in passionate fantasies before putting these tidily aside to return to the real business of playing the dutiful daughter and seeking a suitable husband.

Elle abandonnait tous les jours quelques heures aux désordres de son imagination pour, le reste du temps, épousseter avec soin la poussière soulevée par le rapide passage du grand amoureux ou du séducteur fieffé, lequel passait orageusement soit à cheval, soit à bicyclette. (6)

Thus Rachilde comments on the integration of stories of passionate and anarchic love into the disciplined leisure habits of the age. There is also a *mise en abyme* at work here, for Marguerite will experience the disorder provoked by the passage of the 'grand amoureux' only in order to brush herself down, expel him from her life, and return to the proper role of a *jeune fille*. Though Marguerite is fundamentally a

pragmatist who never loses sight of her own material and social interests, her imagination is also shaped by her reading, so that at times she longs for the role of romantic heroine and fantasises real-life situations that would match her favourite fictions. 'A cause de ses habitudes de lectures romanesques, Mlle Davenel s'inventait facilement des situations amoureuses qu'elle tressait avec quelques brins de réalisme et plusieurs ficelles de son imagination' (105). Indeed her relationship with Fulbert is a mixture of spontaneous passion, that threatens her normally robust common sense, and romance-fuelled fantasy in which he represents 'l'occasion de se créer l'héroïne d'une prochaine aventure d'amour qu'elle pouvait comparer aux plus extraordinaires des romans modernes' (251). Romance reading encourages Marguerite in her hope that intense love and desire can be reconciled with social respectability and productivity, that the 'vagabond amour' can be tamed, that absolute desire and marriage as institution are compatible. Rachilde's novel, true to the genre of romance, poses the question of their compatibility — but answers firmly in the negative.

Fulbert's resistance to the safe assimilation of his passions is absolute. The attitude of managers and workers on the farm to this handsome 'anarchist' is one of complacent and repressive tolerance: they provide him with food, a bed, work if he wants it, and assume that he will thus learn the error of his ways and become a good citizen. The narrator endorses her hero's resistance: 'Il n'était pas de chez eux et ne leur servirait à rien' (73). If the central male protagonist possesses the mystery, glamour and intensity of desire that define the romantic hero, he refuses to comply with the domestication of these qualities that could bring about a satisfactory romantic resolution. Fulbert mimics the process whereby the hero enters and accepts the heroine's world, taking a clerical job in Marguerite's father's business, performing a courtship composed of long conversations, walks and sexual advances. But he remains resistant: the attachment to Flora, the total disdain for social conformity, the refusal to equate desire with love make his integration into Marguerite's future impossible. So in a denouement that has a distinctly comic tone — the final chapter is ironically entitled 'L'Honneur de Marguerite' — Marguerite realizes that the only other option is to expel him from the plot, which she does by inviting him to a secret rendez-vous in her bedroom, then alerting her father who assumes that he has broken in to rape his daughter and shoots the intruder dead. Marguerite plays the terrified virgin before her father, as she will before a wider audience. Briefly alone with the dying Fulbert, she gloats at the success of her plan, before resuming a prostrate pose more consonant with her public role: 'Et elle se recoucha pour s'évanouir plus commodément devant de nouveaux témoins'(278).

At the heart of *Le Dessous* is a brutal symbolism. The farm's productivity depends on sewerage: the waste products of city life are transported down river to feed the crops, a process that pollutes the river, makes the surrounding villages uninhabitable and kills off the local wildlife, but makes a large profit for the State and for Davenel, the manager: 'Un pays tout entier, merveilleux, était soumis à la plus

effroyable des profanations: se transmuier de marais en cloaque et de fumier en or!' (85). This fact, together with the revealing smell that underlies and sometimes overcomes the fragrance of the flowers, is studiously ignored and denied by all those who profit from the business. Abundance, order and fertility conceal a dependence on the basest, most destructive side-products of modernity and city-living. This dramatic image emerges, at one level, from Rachilde's reactionary politics: from her perspective, the modern republican State promotes the technology that supports a mass urban society, thus engineering the triumph of materialism over aestheticism, yet disguises this with a rhetoric of order, progress and beauty.

However, in terms of gender, the image functions rather differently. Marguerite is repeatedly likened to the cultivated flowers: she is (and this is the narrator's voice, not Fulbert's) the 'fine fleur de la bourgeoisie culture intensive' (92). Like the perfect blooms mass-produced on the farm, Marguerite is the product of a corrupt, destructive society but she also forms the pretty, fragrant surface that serves to disguise it. Her hypocrisy, her alienation from her own desires, her willingness to use sex as a bargaining counter in the pursuit of her security and happiness, all result from Marguerite's intelligent if cynical recognition of the reality of her situation: within the existing social structures, she can only function as an object of exchange, and her best chance of exercising agency is to perform this function knowingly. Fulbert compares the respectable 'jeune fille' unfavourably to Flora, the prostitute who sells her body openly and gives herself for love: 'Une putain, c'est celle qui se refuse pour le calcul honteux de se réserver à son mari futur' (203). Rachilde's implication is that modernity's patriarchal market economy pollutes the world and corrupts human relations, but that it does so cleverly, fabricating products that not only make profit but also work to conceal its destructive power. Just as the pretty, fragrant flowers disguise the smell of effluent, so Marguerite's white dresses, accomplishments, charity work, and leisured reading of romantic novels serve to camouflage the crude origins of her father's wealth. The role of the feminine here is to adorn and disguise a basely materialist society, to represent as romance what is really a ruthless economy in which nature is destroyed in the name of profit, and women function as objects of exchange.

Marguerite's total complicity in her own fate expresses Rachilde's lack of faith in her own sex, but since Marguerite is both the reader and the would-be heroine of romance, it may also be read as further commentary on the complicity of the genre in reconciling women to their limited destinies. Rachilde does not contest the ultimate values of romance, for Marguerite — and through her, the reader — experiences briefly, but authentically, the disruptive and ecstatic force of passionate love. But whereas the romance genre treats seriously the possibility of reconciling passionate romantic love with social integration, of finding both total self-fulfilment and a viable place within the community, Rachilde's novel makes passion and female respectability entirely incompatible. Marguerite's attempts at such a reconciliation are encouraged by her reading of romances, but in fact they produce only the death of the hero, and her

own alienation from her desires as well as from all narrative and readerly sympathy.

CONCLUSION

Although Rachilde was often at pains to distance herself from her female contemporaries, both as writers and as readers, her novels benefit from being read not just within the context of (mostly male-authored) Decadent literature, but also within that of contemporary 'women's novels'. Her favourable commentaries on the work of Colette and, for example, Marcelle Tinayre suggest that she was aware of the ubiquity of romance plots in fin-de-siècle women's writing, and well able to understand their appeal, and her own fiction confirms this. Several of her novels — and with particular clarity, *Le Dessous* — reproduce the plot structures, narrative techniques and thematic emphasis on the transcendent power of love that characterise the romance genre. *Le Dessous* also demonstrates Rachilde's canny recognition that romance fiction could help to keep its readers docile, providing an imaginary escape valve for pent-up desires, and persuading women (against all that Rachilde herself believed) that erotic love could be happily domesticated and channeled into marriage and motherhood. *Le Dessous* performs the feat of providing simultaneously the pleasures of romance and a derisive critique of the genre.

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¹ Delly was the pen-name of a sister and brother writing team: Marie (1875-1947) and Frédéric (1876-1949) Petitjean de la Rosière published their first romance in 1907 and went on to write around a hundred romantic novels. Delly romances were hugely popular in France for most of the twentieth century, and were still selling over a million copies per year half a century after the authors' deaths (Paizis 1998).

² See Holmes 2001: pp. 34 and 69-87.

³ For example, Rachilde wrote a positive review of Tinayre's *Avant l'amour* in *Mercure de France*, December 1897, and consistently praised Colette's writing including *La Vagabonde* (*Mercure de France*, December 1910).

⁴ In the early 1890s a series of anarchist attacks on institutions and symbols of authority (the French parliament, the homes of judges, famous Parisian cafés etc) killed ten people and led to the trials of several anarchists, who both horrified and fascinated the public. 'Anarchism not only connoted rebellion and bravado, but also stood for originality and individuality, qualities much admired by snobs' (Sonn 1989: 55).

⁵ In one of her last poems, Rachilde represents herself as the solitary 'vagabond', wandering through life accompanied only by an equally wild and wilful dog, who is Love. '*J'ai marché sans remords, n'ayant commis qu'un crime/Rester indépendant en dehors de leurs lois*' (Rachilde 1945).