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Juliette M. Rogers, *Career Stories: Belle Epoque Novels of Professional Development* University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 2007. 260 pp. \$30 (cl). ISBN: 978-0-271-03269-6.

Review by Rachel Mesch, Yeshiva University.

Juliette Rogers' study of Belle Epoque novels of professional development is part of a growing field of scholarship addressing the role of women in the years around 1900. The Belle Epoque was a time of rapid transformation for the first generations of women to benefit from the educational reforms of the 1880s. A thriving print culture provided myriad opportunities for these cultural shifts to be imagined, discussed and debated, as women found themselves facing dazzling new ways of participating in public life, beyond their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Of course with these opportunities came the tremendous challenges of negotiating between past expectations and paths not yet undertaken. There was no single way to venture into this new public female existence, and the label of "New Woman," largely born of male anxiety about new kinds of feminine achievement and visibility, for too long masked the diversity of women's expression during this period. Mary Louise Roberts's groundbreaking study, *Disruptive Acts: New Women in Belle Epoque France*, took direct aim at this term, distinguishing between the New Woman as misogynist stereotype and the varied, colorful and real new women who actually populated the Belle Epoque.[1] Her study argued for recognizing the feminist implications of women's non-traditional challenges to fin-de-siècle gender norms--their disruptive acts--in order to reveal the hidden but crucial relationships between the Belle Epoque feminist movement and figures like Sarah Bernhardt, Séverine and Gyp. In their recent collection, *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914*, Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr bring together a series of essays that attempt to understand the significance of this period for women.[2] Posed as a question, their interdisciplinary volume showcases the diversity of female expression and the multiple images of femininity circulated in French society in the years before the First World War.

Despite this recent scholarship, literary scholars have only begun to explore the wealth of material generated by the increased number of women writers in the Belle Epoque. Mention of writers from this era can be found in Diana Holmes's *French Women's Writing* and Alison Finch's *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France*. [3] Melanie Collado's *Colette, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Marcelle Tinayre* and my own *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* focus more specifically on this period. [4] But the sheer numbers of women writing during this time has left plenty of room for more exploration. Juliette Rogers's book, *Career Stories: Belle Epoque Novels of Professional Development*, seeks to address this gap by identifying a new subgenre which she labels the female *berufsroman*, or novel of women's professional development, which provides a direct window into women's struggles in entering the Belle Epoque work force. At the outset, Rogers proposes to "expand our definitions of what 'Belle Epoque literature' means" beyond what she identifies as the "divisive schools of thought that currently exist" (p. 1). She is referring to the tendency to focus either on the fin de siècle as a period of fragmentation, or the Belle Epoque as one of "optimism." Strangely, Rogers does not collapse this binarism, as Roberts does at the outset of her study, since clearly both fragmentation and innovation are at work in the years covered by both terms. Indeed, "fin de siècle" and "Belle Epoque" do not refer to two distinct periods but rather to overlapping or even the same time periods, depending on one's dating. Yet Rogers aligns herself with Jennifer Waelti-Walters' *Feminist Novels of the Belle Epoque: Love as a*

*Lifestyle*--a thematic study of Belle Epoque women writers--and embraces the "idealistic and positive interpretation of the time period" (p. 2) that de-emphasizes "the elite echelons portrayed in works by authors of the Decadent (or fin-de-siècle) movement." [5] This rigid delineation of categories and boundaries announces one of the limitations of Rogers's work, which is sometimes unable to see beyond the lines it has drawn separating one set of texts or textual practices from another. Many Belle Epoque women writers were in fact influenced by decadence, and it seems troubling to dismiss this possibility at the outset.

For literary scholars of this period (of which I am one) one of the challenges has been to find a way to acknowledge and integrate the colorful historical and cultural threads of the Belle Epoque into analysis of the texts produced by its authors, without sacrificing an attention to traditional literary elements. Rogers is especially concerned with this challenge, and proposes her study as a "missing link" connecting "literary, social and political history for French women during the Belle Epoque" (p. 7). She explicitly defends the literariness of the texts under consideration and sees the corpus as an "innovative contribution" (p. 10) to the Belle Epoque, through its invention of new kinds of heroines. At the same time, she seeks to demonstrate "the role [these novels] played and the important place that they hold in French literary history [...] as a historical reflection of French women's culture" (p.13).

Unfortunately, Rogers's literary approach is often bogged down by an insistence on categorizing novels and characters according to pre-defined sets of characteristics and demarcations. Her book thus combines new historicism, which recognizes literary texts as transmitters of cultural history, with a formalist, typological approach, which can sometimes lead to confusion (if one forgets, for example, the difference between an *erziehungsroman* and a *berufsroman*). The first chapter, "Innovation and Education: Historical Contexts and the Belle Epoque," provides an historical introduction by sketching some of the changes in women's status at the turn of the nineteenth century, particularly with regard to their capacity as readers and writers. The educational reforms of the 1880s made secondary education for girls mandatory and led directly to increased literacy rates for French women, regardless of class. A new female readership found novels in *feuilleton* form and short stories for their consumption in a wide array of mass publications, including ones specifically for women, like *La Fronde*, *Femina* and *La Vie heureuse*. In addition, young women and school girls began to figure increasingly as literary characters, the most memorable example being Claudine of Colette's series. Most significantly for Rogers' study, the explosion of female literacy "produced new careerists" (p. 26), bringing women not only to the teaching profession, which was extremely popular, but also opening up to them--at least legally if not largely in practice yet--careers in law and medicine. Rogers devotes the latter half of this chapter to sociological and historical theories of professionalization as they relate to women of the Belle Epoque.

Chapter two, "Literary Contexts: *Bildungsroman*, *Erziehungsroman*, and *Berufsroman*," lays out the major elements of the *bildungsroman*'s subgenres at the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on Maurice Barrès's *Les Déracinés* and Paul Bourget's *Le Discipline* as examples of novels of educational and professional development, and using their features to draw broad outlines of how women's novels in this genre differ. She notes the prevalence of what she terms the "renunciation plot structure," where protagonists choose to leave their profession at the end of the novel, and the gendered way in which this ending has been interpreted: "for men it is considered a heroic mark of independence, demonstrating the individual will is stronger than the suffocating demands of French bourgeois society. But when women leave behind their professional careers in these novels, it has been considered an antifeminist sign that they are capitulating to the demands of a sexist society" (p. 54).

Rogers's interesting, clearly articulated observations are too often obscured by her typological lens. The pitfalls of this formalist approach are presaged in the opening paragraphs of this second chapter, as she links Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*, Flaubert's *Education sentimentale*, and Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal* as examples of novels of professional or educational development, without arguing for what is to be gained by grouping novels in a way that also risks effacing what is most interesting about them. After all, if

one were to analyze these works by Stendhal, Flaubert and Zola *only* through the lens of their shared generic characteristics, one would be missing what is most significant about them as individual works (not to mention other kinds of relationships among them). The same is true for many of the women's novels that Rogers self-consciously resuscitates here: the emphasis on their shared characteristics, or on their "traits" as exemplary of a genre, blurs their distinctions and often masks other compelling issues at stake in the texts.

Given that so little attention has been given to these works in other contexts and that most readers will not have access to them to read on their own, this analytic bias provides a somewhat limiting perspective, and sometimes radically distorts the work at hand. Rogers reads Myriam Harry's *La Conquête de Jérusalem*, for example, as a novel of professional development, comparing it to Gide's *L'Immoraliste*, which she also puts in this category. By focusing on the professional path of Harry's protagonist, Hélié, Rogers misses the main interest of this book as an autobiographical reflection on Harry's own father and an attempt to both capture the Jerusalem of her youth and exploit French orientalist taste (an interest, admittedly, that is beyond the scope of her study). Her formalist analysis leads her to draw conclusions based on what is absent in this novel, to the exclusion of the novel's actual preoccupations. She concludes: "Although Harry and Gide make very different use of the female characters in their novels, their works are comparable because neither writer includes crimes against others," as had models of the genre in Barrès and Bourget (p. 75); thus Harry is seen to be more consistent with her fellow women writers, who had written crime out of the paradigm. Yet it is hard to see this as the kind of generic innovation meant to carve out new models of feminine achievement for a female reading public. Rather, this kind of circuitous reasoning exposes the flaws of an approach that sees novels and characters as collections of traits and patterns that a novelist chooses to either adopt or stray from.

Chapter three addresses women's education novels. Readers will likely already be familiar with Colette's *Claudine à l'école*, but it is interesting to read it alongside Gabrielle Reval's *Sévriennes* from the same year (1900), which also had a school girl for a heroine and offered a model of school as a feminocentric community. Rogers explores these writers' criticisms of educational experiences, at the same time as they recognized that education as essential to their development as adult members of French society and forged "a new model for women characters" within the literary tradition of the novel of development (p. 81). While on the one hand Rogers very carefully and helpfully lays out the historical relevance of each academic and educational reference to the French school system in the novel, she ignores the history of the authors themselves. In particular, there is no mention of the contested history of the *Claudine* series, published under Colette's husband Willy's name. This career story—of an educated young woman encouraged to write by a husband who then seemingly tried to efface her authorship—seems relevant to the full picture of female professional development in the Belle Époque, especially in a scholarly work that seeks to link the literary, historical and social. Rogers does include brief biographical summaries in an index (as well as helpful summaries of the novels). However, I found myself curious to learn more about the actual careers of the women who authored these novels and how they related to the professional struggles depicted.

The fourth chapter considers novels about female scientists. Rogers begins with a biographical sketch of Marie Curie, whom she uses as a reference point for measuring the realism of characters imagined by the authors Colette Yver, Gabrielle Reval and Marcelle Babin. For example, noting that Curie had a successful career and family, she asks "why women writers during this time period felt the need to create these fictional cervelines [brainy women] who refused marriage and children in order to devote themselves to science" (p. 134). The novels here begin to move away from the traditional narrative patterns Rogers has identified, and their departures, through "the complex intermingling of the quest and romance plots," are precisely what make them interesting (p. 115). Rogers distinguishes between two kinds of scientific heroines, what she terms the "pure," who forsake marriage and romance in order to devote themselves to their careers, and the "seduced," who succumb to love and must negotiate the

professional conflicts marriage and maternity inevitably pose. Colette Yver figured both kinds of heroines in her novels: in *Les Cervelines*, Jeanne is a fiercely intelligent pathologist who refuses to be seduced by her director. However, it was her 1907 *Princesses de sciences* that garnered the most critical acclaim, winning her the Prix Vie Heureuse (now the Prix Femina). In it, the physician Thérèse marries Fernand and reluctantly becomes a mother, which she later resents. Yet once she becomes jealous of a female colleague, she leaves her medical practice for a life of domesticity. Rogers rightly discourages an overly conservative reading of this ending, noting the complexity of Thérèse's emotions throughout the novel. That the same author imagined two such different versions of the challenges of female scientists suggests the ambivalence surrounding these new choices for Belle Epoque women.

Rogers is most successfully able to break out of the constraints of formalist, typological criticism in chapter five, "Indépendantes: Professional Women Writers," when the subjects at hand are writers themselves who refuse to conform to pre-existing categories of how protagonists should behave. Reading Colette's autobiographical *La Vagabonde* alongside Marcelle Tinayre's *La Rebelle* and Yver's *Cervelines*, Rogers concludes that the decisions of Colette's and Yver's heroines to resist marriage are linked to their positions as "producers of culture as well as consumers of culture" (p. 173). Their public affirmation enables them to forsake private life.

Chapter six addresses novels about women lawyers. Finding no label adequate to categorize these works, Rogers terms them "composites." It was still quite rare to find a woman lawyer during the Belle Epoque, but some of the novels Rogers presents starkly anticipate modern struggles, offering courtroom dramas staged by working mothers. In one remarkable scene from Colette Yver's *Les Dames du Palais*, "the father tenderly kisses the mother on the forehead and babbles to the baby as she nurses from her mother's breast, while the mother heatedly debates a convoluted point of inheritance law with her secretary" (p. 191). The same character, Henriette, later interrupts a trial because of her fatigue, which she casually reveals is due to a new pregnancy. And yet, at the end of the novel, Henriette gives up her career in order to tend to her family. Rogers concludes that Yver's unexpected dénouement "implies a marker or boundary for Belle Epoque literary history: while fictional characters could act in manners similar to their real-life counterparts [...] those characters that did not have actual historical equals seemed doomed to a conservative ending" (p. 200).

Given Rogers's interest in narrative structures as a means of grouping related novels, it is somewhat surprising that she does not turn to feminist narratology in order to consider departures from conventional narratives. In particular, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's notion of "writing beyond the ending" as a way of expressing "critical dissent from dominant narrative" might have provided a fruitful tool for analyzing the repeated disjunction between a novel's seeming path and its ultimate conclusion.[6] For a work that is so clearly concerned with feminist issues, very little time is spent relating these novels to other expressions of Belle Epoque feminism, in its multiple forms. Rogers is reluctant to label Yver "antifeminist," reserving the label for "several French authors who wrote about female professionals in an aggressively misogynist manner" (p. 201). This statement left me curious about who those authors were and how they imagined female professionals, but also wishing for a more careful attentiveness to the particular valences of the terms feminist and antifeminist in Belle Epoque France.[7]

All told, Rogers's study does the important work of bringing out a thought-provoking corpus of underexplored novels and demonstrating their significance to a fascinating moment of transformation in women's history. Although at the outset she declares her intent to underline the literariness of these texts, she does little to situate the novels in literary history by relating them to other Belle Epoque literary movements or to previous generations of women's writings. Her book is thus likely to be of greater interest to cultural and social historians, for whom it offers a fictionalized view of the personal conflicts and struggles faced by the first generations of educated French women as they entered the workforce.

## NOTES

[1] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts. The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[2] Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, eds., *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* (New York: Berghan Books, 2006).

[3] Diana Holmes, *French Women's Writing, 1848-1994* (London: Athlone Press, 1996); Alison Finch, *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[4] Melanie Collado, *Colette, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Marcelle Tinayre* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2003) ; Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

[5] Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). I am also troubled by the equation of "fin-de-siècle" with "decadent," especially in a work of literary scholarship. Rogers does not mention other coincident fin-de-siècle literary movements like naturalism, which had a great deal of influence on Belle Epoque women writers. For more on naturalism's influence on women, see *The Hysteric's Revenge*, pp. 81-118.

[6] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), p. 5. See also Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[7] In fact, Rogers devotes an article to the presence of feminist discourse in novels of professional development in Holmes and Tarr's collection ("Feminist Discourse in Women's Novels of Professional Development"). It is unfortunate that she did not integrate this analysis into her book.

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