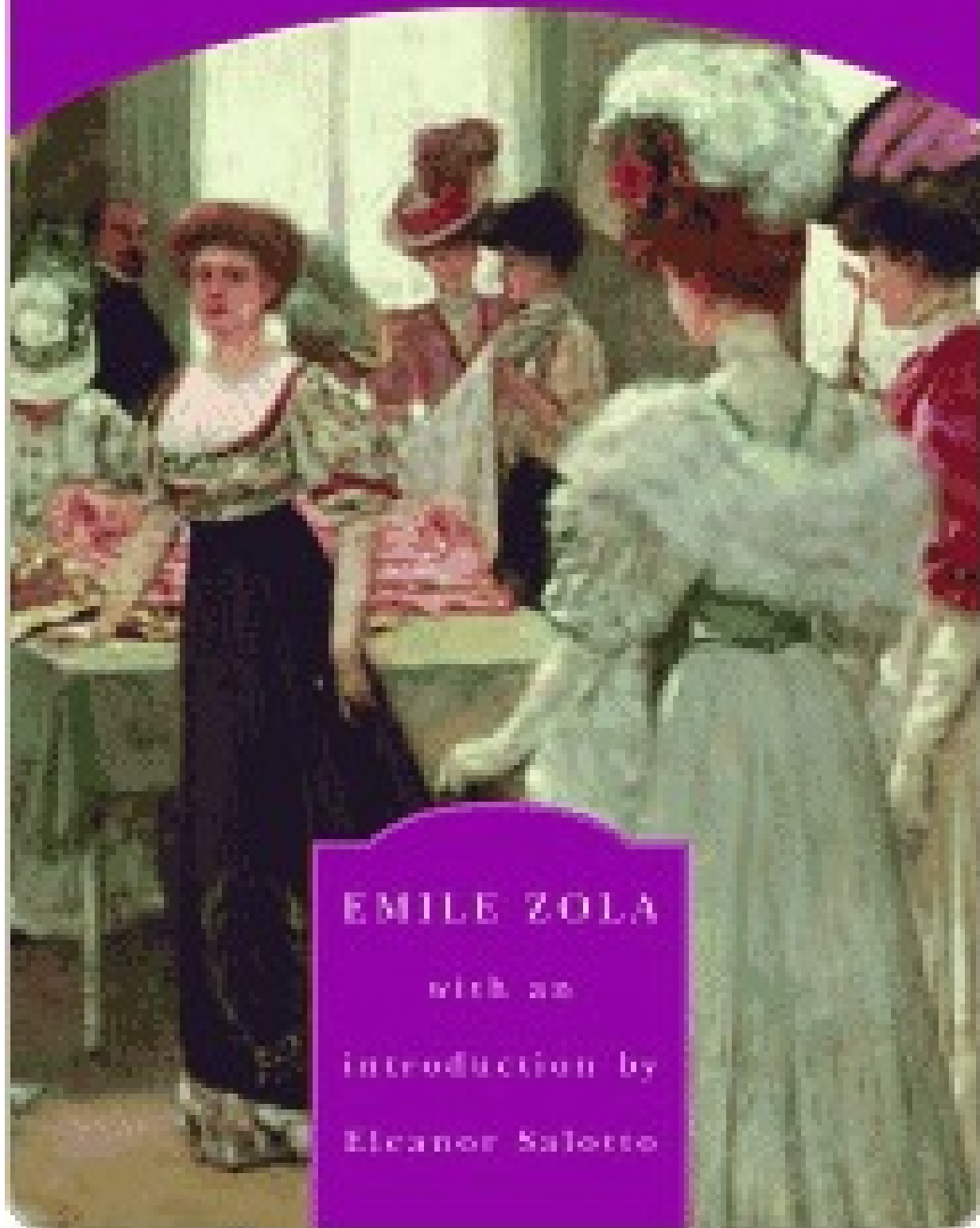


# THE LADIES' PARADISE



EMILE ZOLA

with an

introduction by

Eleanor Salette

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# The Ladies' Paradise (Les Rougon-Macquart #11)

Émile Zola

The Ladies' Paradise catapults the reader into the present-day global of customer tradition and marketing. It sort of feels as though the shop proprietors of cutting-edge Bloomingdale's, Saks 5th Avenue, and Neiman Marcus all learn "The Ladies' Paradise" and made it their bible for developing wish for purchaser goods. Emile Zola records how the 1st shops in nineteenth-century Paris made buying right into a religion, whereas he at the same time woos readers together with his gripping love tale among the enterprising shop proprietor Octave Mouret and the rags-to-riches heroine Denise Baudu.

Lorsqu'on prend en considération les séries des Rougon-Macquart, on réalise que la popularité de certains des vingt romans évolue à travers le temps. Il y a de ces classiques dont le succès instantané demeure stable. C'est le cas de *Germinal*, chef-d'œuvre de Zola, qui restera sans doute toujours le plus lu, mais aussi de *L'Assommoir* et de *Nana* qui ont toujours été très populaires. D'autres bouquins semblent plutôt faits pour leur époque, en dehors d'elle, comme des poissons hors de l'eau, ils ne respirent plus. Les séries *Débâcle* et *Une web page d'amour*, d'abord parmi les plus vendus sont ainsi parmi ceux dont on entend le moins parler actuellement. Je n'évoquerai pas les ouvrages qui n'ont jamais obtenu le succès pour passer immédiatement à ceux qui semblent ne pas avoir été faits pour le goût du jour, mais qui, comme de grands crus, ont eu besoin qu'on leur laisse bien mûrir pour qu'ils puissent développer toutes les richesses de leurs saveurs, c'est le cas, par-dessus tous, de *Au Bonheur des Dames*. L'impact révolutionnaire sur le trade et la société en général que représente l'arrivée des magasins à grandes surfaces ne s'imposait pas alors avec autant de strength qu'aujourd'hui, alors qu'on y trouve en germe toutes les grandes lignes de notre société actuelle de surconsommation et d'objectivation de l'humain, mais aussi d'émancipation féminine et de démocratie sociale. Alors qu'on a parfois critiqué facilement les orgies de gaspillages et la dissolution des barèmes normatifs d'autrefois, un regard lucide sur les misères que cachaient les grandeurs d'autrefois ramène l'équilibre du regard et permet d'ouvrir l'avenir avec plus de réalisme. Zola, en maître du réalisme littéraire qu'il est, a voulu que ses personnages existent à la manière dont le surgissement encore tout récent des sciences humaines promettait de le saisir de manière imminente. Comme il le dira lui-même : « Notre héros, n'est plus le pur esprit, l'homme abstrait du XVIIIe siècle. Il est le sujet physiologique de notre technological know-how actuelle, un être qui est composé d'organes et qui trempe dans un milieu dont il est pénétré à chaque heure. » Son entreprise des Rougon-Macquart constitue ainsi le véritable contre-pied de la Comédie humaine de Balzac. Et de cela aussi, il était parfaitement conscient : « Je ne veux pas comme Balzac avoir une décision sur les affaires des hommes, être politique, philosophe, moraliste. Je me contenterai d'être savant, de dire ce qui est en cherchant les raisons intimes. » Et encore : « Balzac dit qu'il veut peindre les hommes, les femmes et les choses. Moi, des hommes et des femmes, je ne fais qu'un, en admettant cependant les différences de nature et je soumetts les hommes et les femmes aux choses. » (Zola, 1869) Et c'est ainsi que les séducteurs s'imposent aux femmes et que les femmes s'imposent à leur tour aux hommes honnêtes, qui ont bons

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cœurs et qui veulent que leurs femmes soient libres. Ces derniers sont vraiment les grands perdants dans cette histoire. Le fait que l'émancipation des femmes est la situation nécessaire à la société de surconsommation actuelle est aussi montré de manière très nette, sans sombrer dans la caricature. Au final, le grand séducteur qui tient toutes les femmes à sa merci, n'a été rendu atteignable que par la mort de sa première femme et n'aura jamais amassé toute sa fortune que pour jeter *The Ladies' Paradise* (Les Rougon-Macquart #11) au pied d'une petite vendeuse honnête *The Ladies' Paradise* (Les Rougon-Macquart #11) et pure. Le seul reproche que j'ai à faire à Zola, c'est que l'exception lui échappe, du moins en ce qui concerne *Au Bonheur des Dames*. En effet, Denise Baudu, véritable héroïne de ce roman est une exception et elle n'est pas acceptée par Zola telle qu'elle devrait l'être à mon avis. Tous les personnages qui l'entourent sont des caricatures de kinds sociaux, répondant sans résistances aux plus bas instincts de préservations et des critères normatifs ambiants et cela rehausse d'autant plus l'évidence du caractère exceptionnel de Denise. Elle est exception automobile elle échappe à tout conditionnement extérieur. Elle plaît et déplaît en fonction de cette caractéristique essentielle de son être. C'est parce qu'elle existe par-delà tout conditionnement qu'elle est toujours able de voir les événements les plus touchants et qui font les plus souffrir avec une objectivité complète. C'est aussi pour cela qu'elle est toujours prête à se sacrifier elle-même pour le bonheur de tous, y compris de ceux qui l'ont fait souffrir et qui font souffrir les gens *The Ladies' Paradise* (Les Rougon-Macquart #11) qui lui sont les plus proches. Zola ne peut donc pas écrire à propos de cette Denise que « C'était par une intuition du bonheur qu'elle s'entêtait, pour satisfaire son besoin d'une vie tranquille, et non pour obéir à l'idée de vertu. » (365) Cette intuition de bonheur et le besoin d'une vie tranquille contredisent directement tout ce qu'il lui fait accomplir dans le roman et montre bien l'incapacité qu'a Zola d'accepter l'exception. Il est bien arrivé à en présenter une *The Ladies' Paradise* (Les Rougon-Macquart #11) et à rendre crédible d'une manière sublime, mais il ne peut dire qu'il en ait jamais accepté aucune, du moins, dans *Au Bonheur des Dames*, et c'est bien dommage à mon avis. Du reste, hormis ce détail, très vital pour moi, mais qui demeure tout de même un détail, le roman fonctionne à merveille. J'ai particulièrement apprécié le passage, au chapitre XII, où Mouret fait une tournée dans son substantial magasin, observant, un peu rêveur, toutes les merveilles de puissances commerciales qui lui appartiennent, pour revenir toujours au keepsake obsédant de cette petite vendeuse qui lui échappe irréductiblement. C'est une véritable litanie qui tient sur plusieurs pages, jusqu'à atteindre le paroxysme de la mélancolie dans le passage suivant : « Il revenait à la caisse centrale, s'irritait à la vue des coffres-forts, marchait au milieu de ses millions, dont l'inutilité le rendait fou. Elle disait non, toujours non. Non toujours, dans tous les comptoirs, dans les galeries de vente, dans les salles, dans les magasins entiers! » (350) Je ne bouderais donc pas mon bonheur d'homme que j'ai eu aussi très grand à lire ce livre formidable, auquel j'accorderai, en toute justice, la pleine et entière reconnaissance qu'il mérite amplement.

## **The Ladies Paradise Les Rougon Macquart 11**

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