

COLONIAL VIRILITY AND THE *FEMME FATALE*: SCENES FROM THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES IN FRENCH INDOCHINA

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Few readers will be surprised to encounter a figure of the *femme fatale* in the turn-of-the-century French novel. Darkly menacing, with her domineering and castrating sexuality, the *femme fatale* had become a commonplace figure by the early 1900s. Frequently inspired by the Salomes and Cleopatras of the Orientalist tradition, this 'exotic' literary figure flourished during one of the great periods of French colonial expansion. And yet these two kinds of 'exoticism' — on the one hand that of the *femme fatale*, modern avatar of Cleopatra, and on the other of the colonies themselves — are rarely examined together.¹ In this article we will look at the role played by the *femme fatale* in three 'colonial' novels, or, more specifically, in three French novels where the action takes place primarily in the context of colonial Indochina. *Les Civilisés*, Claude Farrère's first novel — and, it is often said, his best — won the Prix Goncourt in 1905. Some years later appeared Henry Daguerches's *Le Kilomètre 83* (1913, Prix de l'Académie Française) and Émile Nolly's *Le Chemin de la victoire* (1913; he also won the Prix de l'Académie Française, but for an earlier novel).² While they are almost completely neglected these days, all three novels were thus highly regarded at the time of their publication.

In these novels the *femme fatale* is described according to certain clichés of dark, dangerous beauty, already familiar to contemporary readers, which

¹ There are, however, some critical analyses in which African women are likened to the figure of the *femme fatale*: see, for example, Jacques Chevrier, 'L'esprit "fin de siècle" dans quelques romans coloniaux des années 1890–1910: le cas de l'Afrique noire', in *Fins de siècle: terme-évolution-révolution?* (Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1989), pp. 495–508. For a discussion of the closely related figure of 'la Javanaise' and of the phenomenon 'Mata Hari' see Pierre Labrousse, 'Les Indes sauvages ou les chimères de la transgression amoureuse: l'Insulinde dans la fiction française (1712–1939)', in *Réver l'Asie*, ed. by D. Lombard (Paris, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1993), pp. 277–300.

² Page numbers for quotations from the novels by Farrère and Daguerches refer to the useful anthology recently published by Alain Quella-Villéger, *Indochine: un rêve d'Asie*, (Paris, Omnibus, 1995). The edition of *Le Chemin de la victoire* referred to is that of 1915 (Paris, Calmann-Lévy). The three novelists, it is interesting to note, had much in common: Farrère (in fact Charles Bargone, 1876–1957) was a naval officer who spent a lot of time in the Far East; Daguerches (in fact Charles Valat, 1876–1930?), a captain in the naval artillery, was born in Indochina and spent much of his life there; Nolly (in fact Émile Détanger) was an officer in the colonial army who served in Indochina and in Africa.

have since been analysed in the fundamental study by Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*³ and in more detail in recent works such as Mireille Dottin-Orsini's *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale*.⁴ Despite the fact that the three characters in question — Marthe Abel (Farrère), Marthe Rumillac (Nolly) and Elsa de Faulwitz (Daguerches) — are of European origin, they are described with exotic, or more specifically Oriental metaphors. Moreover, although the action of the three novels takes place in the Far East, the exoticism of these Dark Women is usually that of Egypt or of a vaguer, Romantic (Middle-Eastern) Orient.

The threatening aspect of the *femme fatale* is at times evoked, in these novels, through references to beasts of prey. She is a magnificent creature 'qui imposait l'admiration comme l'impose [...] un lévrier ramassé sur ses jarrets pour foncer sur la proie, un pur sang lancé au galop de chasse' (Nolly, p. 32). She may equally be 'une belle panthère de Java', from whose claws one must struggle to keep one's heart, or a blade, 'une arme horriblement précieuse dans sa gaine de soie veloutée et ses incrustations' (Daguerches, pp. 141, 148). Even more important than the theme of the hunting animal is the Oriental imagery which is present in both the latter references. The use of Oriental imagery to evoke the mysterious threat embodied in the *femme fatale*, although not new, came into its own in the late 1800s. The same is true of that other Oriental and dangerous beast to which the Dark Woman is compared in Farrère's novel: the sphinx. In a leitmotiv repeated obsessively in practically identical terms throughout *Les Civilisés*, Marthe Abel is compared to a 'sphinx d'albâtre' (pp. 264, 265, 290, 293, 342, 376, 380) or, the image becoming explicit to the point of tautology, she is a 'statue d'albâtre, [un] sphinx égyptien magiquement animé' (p. 375), and her beauty is capable of turning a man to stone or, to use a more modern metaphor, of electrocuting him or of blinding him like an electric lamp (pp. 266, 324). Once in love with her, her victims must affront the sphinx's cavern, in which they are torn apart (p. 377); in this particular case her prey merely leaves it staggering, to be haunted to his death. The sphinx is not only a mythological animal which evokes enigma and mystery; it is also — as Farrère specifies — Egyptian. Marthe Abel's 'alabaster' mask with its black diamond eyes in *Les Civilisés* is thus very close to the 'masque superbe et grave d'idole' of Marthe Rumillac in *Le Chemin de la victoire*. While the former is an 'Egyptian sphinx', the latter is 'impassible et muette, droite et fière comme ces divinités égyptiennes dont [le héros] avait contemplé au musée du Louvre les effigies, et dont les traits n'expriment ni tristesse ni joie, ni cruauté ni pitié' (pp. 229–30). Just as the sphinx of *Les Civilisés* haunts her would-be lover to

³ 1930, English translation by Angus Davidson (London, Oxford University Press, 1970, first edition 1933), see pp. 213–14 on the theme of Cleopatra as 'praying mantis'.

⁴ Paris, Grasset and Fasquelle, 1993.

his death, so the hero of *Le Chemin de la victoire* goes towards this woman 'comme s'il fut allé à la mort' (p. 230). In *Le Kilomètre 83* the association between death and the *femme fatale* is less explicit. Nevertheless, the hero is haunted by a growing awareness of the beautiful Elsa's role as the motivating force behind the decision which leads to the death of so many of the men working on the fatal eighty-third kilometre of the Siam-Cambodia railway. This fatal feminine influence is represented through the theme of water and of the marshes, as we shall presently see in more detail.

As is often the case in turn-of-the-century French literature, the *femme fatale* represents a mysterious, but palpable, danger for the men around her and above all for those who succumb to her attraction.⁵ But in these three novels the colonial setting makes it possible to create an opposition between the pernicious forces incarnate in the Dark Woman and other, positive, forces. Nor are these forces without a hope of victory, as is suggested by the title of *Le Chemin de la victoire*. In fact, these novels tell the story of a conflict, which is played out on a double battleground. On the one hand, the heart of the male protagonist — or of the multiple protagonists — is the terrain where points are scored for either side; on the other, the greater battlefield is 'l'Œuvre', the work of colonization itself. It may seem surprising to say that this is merely the *battlefield* and not the essence of the conflict, but these novels do not describe the struggles of conquerors and 'natives' as did those of an earlier period in colonial history. 'L'Œuvre', for these novels, is the scene of another struggle altogether: on one side the forces of malignant femininity personified by the *femme fatale*; on the other, not merely the male protagonist, but rather Virility itself. The 'chemin de la victoire' leads to a victory not over the feeble native but over the weaknesses of the hero's own heart and over the threat embodied in the *femme fatale*. What must be vanquished is the virile woman and the effeminacy that she threatens to create in her partner; here, colonial conquest is merely the means of reasserting endangered masculinity.

It is revealing that, although the young hero of *Le Chemin de la victoire* later considers Marthe Rumillac the incarnation of womanliness, he is initially struck by 'le timbre un peu rauque, un peu masculin de la voix', and he takes her for a 'virago' (pp. 30–31). She herself declares her cynicism and her desire to live life 'comme un homme, brutalement' (p. 65); she even goes so far as to claim that women have the right to choose their sexual partners, as men do (p. 149). The young hero succumbs to her domineering sexuality, allowing himself to be publicly humiliated. It is only through the pursuit of

⁵ This feminine figure played an important role in the theme of declining civilization. 'Tout se passe comme si, dans ce fantasme d'agonie d'une civilisation, [...] la femme et le "féminin" devenaient le porteur de cette peur et la femme "moderne" le signe et la cause de cette décadence' (Béatrice Slama, 'Où vont les sexes? Figures romanesques et fantasmes "fin de siècle"', *Europe*, no. 751–52 (1991), 27–37, p. 27).

'l'Œuvre' that it becomes possible for him to affirm his discredited masculinity. In the end, the youth 'dont l'œuvre a fait un homme' has become both an adult and a man, and can claim his reward in the form of his blonde fiancée, as we shall see. In *Les Civilisés* the besieged state of masculinity is just as evident, the three protagonists representing as many ways of succumbing to the peril. The engineer Torral indulges in the 'vices of Saigon', the new Sodom, with native boys, whereas doctor Mévil, a degenerate womanizer, becomes practically impotent by the age of thirty; his weakness is evident right from the beginning in descriptions which underline his femininity. As for lieutenant de Fierce, he attempts to save himself definitively through his engagement to his own blonde fiancée, but it is too late and he, too, is lost. The doctor's death itself is highly symbolic: he is crushed beneath the wheels of a *victoria*, the elegant lady's carriage whose name is significantly that of a woman and of women's victory.

In *Le Kilomètre 83* the polarities of 'real' masculinity and defeated, effeminate masculinity are even more clearly defined. The dark Elsa's lover is ambiguous (p. 120), elegantly feminine (pp. 132, 145) with cat-like shoulders and girlish wrists (p. 149) — unlike the narrator himself, who is strong, tall and unambiguously masculine, and who is threatened by the female principle (Elsa) but has the good fortune to escape. His very name, Tourange, is reminiscent of the engineer's 'T' which he wields to destroy the decadent artistic creations of a dead colleague who succumbed to the malignant influences of the marsh. Tourange's escape is possible because he is upheld by his fervent belief in 'l'Œuvre'; he is a mystic who would sacrifice everything to the 'Baal des chemins de fer et des voitures à feu' (p. 115). Gazing on the glorious constructions of civilization in the midst of the colonial wastelands, he can make the proud words of another male character his own: 'Nous autres, les hommes — je dis bien, les hommes, je m'entends — nous avons fait cela tout seuls! Nous n'avons eu besoin ni des femmes, ni des aïeux, ni des dieux!' (p. 158). However, the taste of victory is not so sweet in this novel: Woman — Elsa, or simply Elle as her lover calls her — comes close to seducing even the narrator's proud heart, and there is a lingering doubt; what if the victory, ultimately, were not Ours but. . . Hers? Man labours to pay a great debt to some mysterious and unnameable Debtor; but Woman will not accept that: 'la femme veut que nous sachions que c'est elle qui détient la créance de cette dette [. . .] La voilà qui s'introduit idole centrale' (p. 196). Tourange willingly accepts the sacrifice of his friends and colleagues in the name of what we have called 'l'Œuvre' — 'une chose sans nom, sans gloire, sans profit, mais si magnifique!' — but, faced with the dangerous Elsa, even he thinks silently: 'quand je vous vois, vous si éclatante, si fascinante, si superbe, il me vient cette idée affreuse que nos morts sont morts pour que monsieur votre père puisse gagner beaucoup d'argent, et servir les quatre mille volontés de la toute petite chose que vous êtes, Elsa'

(p. 241). Whose victory is it, after all? The victory of Man's divine sense of duty and of the colonial 'Œuvre', or of petty but lethal Woman?

In *Le Kilomètre 83* the opposition between the male principle and the female principle is underlined by a contrast between the theme of construction — which requires dry ground, or, failing that, tonnes of concrete — and the omnipresent swampland. Elsa demands the gift of a bracelet, 'rond, mince et noir come un petit serpent cabalistique', made of a stone which is supposed to float in water (p. 168); she herself lives on a yacht. The serpent is part of the recurrent imagery of water: each death in the marshes is announced by the cries of a frog as it is swallowed by the 'serpent d'eau'. Elsa, finally named 'l'Ennemie', reappears as the serpent itself: 'Elle est là [. . .] La jeune lumière nacre sa chevelure massive. La longue traîne blanche de sa robe serpente entre les troncs argentés, et de grandes lunes d'ombre bleuâtre choient sur le tissu pâle'. She plays with the chain around her neck which makes 'a sound of scales' and to which a golden heart is fastened (p. 239). 'Elle', Elsa, is the serpent and Eve in one. . .⁶ In all three novels the first meeting between the main protagonist and the *femme fatale* takes place on a boat, and though this metaphor of water is not as present in *Les Civilisés* one can perhaps accord a second glance to the cliché of Marthe Abel's eyes: 'ses yeux noirs profonds comme des lacs [. . .] il est très impossible [sic] de sonder ces yeux-là et de découvrir la pensée qui veille au fond de leur eau immobile' (pp. 293–94). As for *Le Chemin de la victoire*, the metaphor appears there in almost identical terms. During a fever the hero dreams that he is sinking into a swamp while Marthe, laughing on the opposite bank, waits for him to be engulfed. He is only saved by the distant vision of Work, 'l'œuvre coloniale', on the solid ground; still in his dream, he realizes that it is 'le havre vers lequel il faut se ruier' and, hearing his friend, a colonial hero, calling out 'à l'œuvre', he drags himself out of the mud. In his delirium he even calls out 'L'œuvre! l'œuvre!' (pp. 173–74).

Swamp or lake, panther or sphinx, the *femme fatale* appears in these novels as the incarnation of a threat against which man's only hope is to reaffirm his masculinity through the heroic work of combat and construction which is the colonial enterprise. She is the symbol of a threat to the social and sexual order; the 'virago' and sexually active Marthe from *Le Chemin de la victoire* is thus, oddly enough, comparable to the virginal Marthe of *Les Civilisés* who, an atheist fond of reading Schopenhauer,⁷ knows too much and has her life

⁶ She is the 'New Eve' who, taking on masculine roles (holding power, as in this case, or reading dangerous books in *Les Civilisés*, or choosing multiple lovers in Nolly's novel), is a monster who threatens the sexual equilibrium. See Annelise Manguet, 'L'Ève nouvelle et le vieil Adam: identités sexuelles en crise', in *Histoire des femmes*, iv, *Le XIX^e siècle*, ed. by Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot (Paris, Plon, 1991), pp. 527–43.

⁷ On the importance of Schopenhauer in France after 1880, and on the French vision of his atheism and pessimism, see Anne Henry, 'L'héritage français d'un vieux prophète', in *Critique*, 499 (1988), 965–81.

too well in hand. As for the Elsa of *Le Kilomètre 83*, she is the familiar figure of the latter-day Eve, all the more sinister because she is, indirectly, the cause of the deaths of so many of the other characters. Symptomatic of a decline in moral standards and a weakening of traditional sexual roles, the Dark Woman is the contemporary of the effeminate male, the slim-shouldered elegant dandy of *Le Kilomètre 83*, Doctor Mévil of *Les Civilisés* with his 'beauté sensuelle et molle jusqu'à l'indécence' (p. 251), and even the young hero of *Le Chemin de la victoire*, the weak product of his era, 'l'époque de l'humanitarisme à l'outrance', which has not understood the necessity of 'la lutte' and the survival of the fittest.

In opposition to the figures of weakened masculinity and of the dominating Dark Woman⁸ stands that of the truly virile colonial hero. Situated between the poles of the adventurer and the administrator, he appears in these three novels as an engineer or a soldier.⁹ Significantly for our argument here, he has an ally. Indeed, the *femme fatale* is not the only European female figure in these colonial novels: she is set off against another figure whom we will call the Blonde and who represents quite a different future, far from the cavern into which the *femme fatale* lures her victims or the dark lakes of her eyes. While the Dark Woman is contaminated by the exotic to the point where she becomes the main figure of the 'Other' in these colonial novels, her Blonde counterpart remains apart. She represents, instead, the values of Family, Home or France itself. In *Les Civilisés* the France of the *ancien régime* is reflected, perhaps ironically, in the beauty of a young bourgeoisie, 'une beauté de marquise adorablement blonde et pensive' in her boudoir Louis XV (p. 254), a 'marquise blonde' who looks like a living Watteau (pp. 333, 334), described above all as 'blonde [. . .] rose et mince' (p. 263). Nor is the blonde marquise the only incarnation of 'la francité': Mlle Sylva, the daughter of a colonial military hero slain at El-Arar, is also 'toute rose et blonde' (pp. 290, 295). She is above all associated with the men of another generation — her father's — the heroic generation of those who died in the service of French colonialism. She is often described as direct, honest and loyal, and above all she is 'franche'; she gives her hand frankly (p. 336), her hand itself is frank (p. 300) and the label is not coincidental: she is nothing less than the descendant of the heroic Franks themselves, as well as the daughter — more directly — of Imperial France.¹⁰

⁸ The figures of the decadent male and of the New Woman appeared to pose a common threat to society: 'they jeopardized the very survival of the race' through their ambiguous sexuality, as Linda Dowling points out in 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33, no. 4 (1979), 434–53, p. 444.

⁹ For a discussion of these two figures of authority in Imperialist Exoticist texts see Jean-Marc Moura, *La Littérature des lointains: histoire de l'exotisme européen au XX^e siècle* (Paris, Champion, 1998), pp. 304–12.

¹⁰ On the significance of the term 'Franc' in the construction of French identity, see Léon Poliakov, *Le Mythe aryan* (Brussels, Éditions Complexe, 1987, first edition 1971), p. 29.

Similar figures are present in the other novels. In Daguerches's novel three blonde and blue-eyed women accompany the men struggling with the construction of the fatal railway line. First of all the melancholy 'Fagui' (Françoise-Marguerite), tender and faithful, whose 'visage aux traits brisés a, pour authentifier sa noblesse originelle, deux sceaux intacts: les yeux bleus qui toujours sourient. Prunelles d'azur et chevelure blonde, pauvres bijoux des visages blancs, qui reprennent ici, au voisinage de tous ces galets noirs, roulés dans des peaux limoneuses, leur taux primordial, imprescriptible' (p. 110). Then the young blonde bride, Mme Lanier, whose fragile face and large clear eyes mark her out for the protection of the 'heavyweight' Englishwoman. This latter, the mistress of the chief engineer, is beautiful, blonde, 'fraîche comme un baby [sic] et loyale et forte comme un homme' (p. 133). The admiration expressed for this 'Anglo-Saxonne', as she is constantly called, is symptomatic; it is 1913, and the enemy is no longer English but, rather, German. And while the three blondes are either unambiguously French or English, the dark woman, Elsa de Faulwitz, is the daughter of a mixed-blood entrepreneur with an Italian-sounding name (Vanelli) but who may well be Jewish or indeed anything at all, and she is married to a German who passes himself off as Austrian and whom the engineers call 'The Enemy'.

In Farrère's novel the blonde is represented by Fierce's fiancée, Mlle Sylva. She is an innocent *jeune fille* of the old school, recalling a more traditional era, whereas the Dark Woman represents a peculiarly modern threat. As her own mother declares: 'Ma fille n'est pas une fille d'aujourd'hui. Je l'ai faite pareille à moi, pareille à ce que fut ma mère. Je ne trouve pas que l'éducation des femmes soit en progrès. On dénigre les petites oies blanches de jadis; mais j'ai vu la génération nouvelle: c'est moins blanc et c'est plus oie' (p. 344). Mlle Sylva is a good Catholic; she has only read what *maman* allowed her to read and doesn't want to unpin the forbidden pages until she is married (p. 294). Her innocent candour represents a hope of redemption for the 'Civilisé', Fierce.

Sélysette Sylva is in many ways comparable to Alice, the blonde fiancée of *Le Chemin de la victoire*, who is always described as a child or 'à peine adolescente', 'rose' with the permanent blush of innocence. She is an 'orpheline blonde aux larges yeux de pervenche', the protagonist's childhood friend, raised in his own family (pp. 3 and 17–18). Intimately identified with the hero's family, Alice thus represents the values of the hearth and the promise of continuity and belonging. The victory with which the novel concludes is summed up by the smile which, after having become a man and a hero in the colonial struggle, Pierre gives 'à l'enfant blonde et rose qui sera sa femme' (p. 357). In this novel it is clear that the blonde fiancée is the symbol of Belonging, not only to France, but also to Home and Family: the key to the continuity of the Hearth, she is the reward for victory and the

symbol of the accession to manhood.¹¹ Nolly's novel, ending in this accession to manhood, is thus the story of the path to victory, just as Farrère's is the story of a defeat and Daguerches's that of a bittersweet stalemate. These themes associated with 'blondness' bring us to a highly significant aspect of the battle of the sexes in these novels: its racial imagery.

While the Dark Woman is a threat to the social and sexual order, the Blonde incarnates, as we have seen, French or even familial identity. She is a faithful wife or mistress, or an innocent fiancée. While it may seem more than a little surprising (especially to an English reader) that French identity should be embodied in the figure of the Blonde, this is by no means an unusual phenomenon in French literature of this period. Two decades after the French defeat at the hands of the Prussians, blondness had come to be associated less with Romantic dreaminess and sentiment than with the values of discipline and virility.¹² In the French colonial novel the hero is more often than not blond and blue-eyed. If the same is true of the fiancée he leaves behind in France (or of the female French characters in the colonies, as in two of the novels in question), it is because the blondness of these women evokes the same world of order and traditional values. The symbolic value of blondness is, of course, all the more important in the context of French colonial expansion. The dark-haired *femme fatale*, firmly anchored in the Orientalist literary and iconographic tradition, acts as a focus for the ambient exoticism. In these particular novels she, far more than the minor 'native' characters, embodies the glamour and the horror of Otherness. And although she is never likened to the 'native' women, the *femme fatale* is often of doubtful origin or of mixed race. The same is true of her partner, the effeminate male of whom we have already spoken. Thus, in *Le Kilomètre 83*, the ambiguous Henry Vigel has 'une figure voluptueuse et ambiguë d'Eurasien, quand on le regarde de face, mais qui révèle, en profil, des courbures ovines et des méplats rocheux de boxeur israélite' (p. 122), while Elsa's father, Mureiro Vanelli has 'le nez levantin, les yeux mongols, le sourire italien et la mâchoire anglo-saxonne' (p. 117). They are of the same race, 'c'est-à-dire d'aucune race' (p. 120). The bastard products of mixed European and Semitic races, further corrupted by the influence of the Far East, they represent, in this novel, a certain loss of identity and an encroaching entropy

¹¹ In an extraordinary proportion of French colonial novels of this period the hero leaves behind in his home village a fiancée who has certain very specific characteristics: she is generally blonde and blue-eyed, and she is very closely linked to the hero's family, often being a cousin, an orphan adopted by his family, or having even been raised as his sister. Confronted with the threat of otherness, the hero seems to take refuge in a reaffirmation of identity which goes as far as symbolic incest. Of the three novels examined here, only Nolly's is directly concerned with this observation, which I mean to develop by looking at a wider range of novels in a separate article.

¹² See the article by Erich Bierhahn, 'Blondheit und Blondheitskult in der deutschen Literatur', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 46 (1964), 309–33, pp. 320–22, on the symbolic value of blondness in French literature after 1870.

which threatens to abolish all frontiers. At once racial and sexual, this is also the underlying threat represented by the decadent lifestyle of the three protagonists of *Les Civilisés*. Mévil, for example, 'se vantait d'être suffisamment civilisé pour que tous les sangs de toutes les origines se fussent mélangés dans ses artères également' (p. 251). The three men drink their favourite cocktail, called a 'Rainbow' (in English, the natural language of universal bastardization), which is comprised of layers of diversely coloured liquors: The cocktail is, of course, a metaphor for Saigon itself, the capital of 'les Civilisés', where no moral code has survived the mixture of all races and religions (pp. 261–62).

As for the 'natives' themselves, they play an infinitely less important role. In Daguerches's novel, and to a lesser degree in Farrère's, they seem so inferior as to be almost invisible. In *Le Chemin de la victoire*, on the other hand, two local women take part in the process which makes the immature hero into a man. These figures are not without interest but they remain secondary in comparison with the two female figures we have discussed at length, who could be called, schematically, 'la Brune' and 'la Blonde'. For the conflict in these novels is not between the 'native' and the colonizer, nor even between different colonial powers: the colonies serve merely as a terrain for the battle of the sexes.

These three novels thus present a dramatic microcosm of a major conflict: between a virile, energetic force and the decadence which threatens to sap it. The latter is incarnate in the figure of Woman, but not of any or all women. The *femme fatale*, as she appears here, is evoked by predominantly — even obsessively — exotic metaphors. The very darkness of the *femme fatale* makes her identity ambiguous whereas, in this new literary and political context, blondness has come to signify an unambiguous 'belonging'. The *femme fatale*, dark-haired and exotic, is therefore contrasted with another woman who is as fair as the former is dark in every sense of the word. Knowledge on the one hand and innocence on the other; manipulation contrasted with naïveté; cynicism opposed to faith. Domineering or contemptuous, the *femme fatale* is at once the touchstone and the symptom of a failure of virility. Although she is beautiful, her femininity is somehow doubtful: Woman incarnate, she is no longer womanly, and in her presence men are no longer truly Men. Real virility requires the other form of femininity, the traditional and sacred innocence of the blonde Fiancée, who is at once an auxiliary of Male power, the prize attributed to the conqueror, and the symbol of belonging (belonging in both senses: the Fiancée is a *possession*, the prize won by the colonial hero; and she represents *appartenance*, the identity of the hero within his family, his nation and his race). At once unambiguously 'feminine' — innocent, virginal, submissive — and of unmarred racial purity, the blonde Fiancée stands for all that must be fought for in this turn-of-the-century battle: order; tradition; clear sexual and racial boundaries.

The colonial subject, almost absent from these novels, is present mainly as the pretext for a reaffirmation of virility made necessary by the disturbance in sexual roles as symbolized by the figure of the *femme fatale*. The colonial Other is thus effectively reduced to the role of prop in the more abstract colonial backdrop, which provides the terrain for the reconstruction of the heroic individual thanks to its demand for action: bridges must be built, marshes filled in with concrete, natives administered.¹³ According to the terms of this Imperialist Exoticism, the successful protagonist should emerge sufficiently cleansed and strengthened from his encounter with the devalored colonial subject to be able to assert his own status as hero faced with the more pernicious exoticism of the *femme fatale*.

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¹³ This affirmation of the possibility of the heroic depends, significantly, on the exotic context. Confronted with the 'atrophy of experience' of the Western liberal State — which is of course intimately linked to the turn-of-the-century crisis of sexual identity — these novels strive to revalidate the threatened individual through what Chris Bongie has called 'Imperialist Exoticism' (*Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford University Press, 1991)).