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The Zola Mystique: The Titles of the Rougon-Macquart Novels  
in English Translation

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Who are the naughtiest, raciest writers? The French. Who was the most sensational and most extreme of them during the last third of the nineteenth century? Emile Zola, who was noted in his home country for writing "putrid literature." Stereotypes? Yes. The grain of truth? A few French authors occasionally have dared to say in public what everyone was saying in private anyhow. Emile Zola (1840-1902) was one of these, and polemic than most; he dared to write frankly about all phases of life, including the seamy side, of all levels of society. He wanted "truth" in literature and art. Was he above seeking sensation? Perhaps not, for he knew that an author needed publicity. Was he a partisan of depravity? Decidedly not.

Although Zola may be known in the United States for his part in the Dreyfus Affair, which colored his last years, the one permanent monument he wanted was a series of 20 novels about life under the Second Empire in France from 1852 to 1870. At least one character in each of the novels

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belongs to Rougon-Macquart family. The series bears the subtitle:  
The Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire.

The novels in this series (with their dates of publication) are:  
La Fortune des Rougon (1871), La Curée (1872), Le Ventre de Paris  
 (1873), La Conquête de Plassans (1874), La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret (1875)  
Son Excellence Eugène Rougon (1876), L'Assommoir (1877), Une Page  
d'Amour (1878), Nana(1880), Pot-Souille (1882), Au Bonheur des Dames  
 (1883), La Joie de Vivre (1884), Germinal (1885), L'OEuvre (1886), La  
Terre (1887), La Reve (1888), La Bete Humaine (1890), L'Argent (1891),  
La Débâcle (1892), Le Docteur Pascal (1893).

The British and American traditions of these cannot be kept apart, for the translations crossed back and forth over the water. Often a title chosen by one translator, in either country, would become the standard one for the work, and later translators would continue to use it. (Interestingly, 14 of the 20 appeared in English translation in the United States before they were translated in England, 5 more appeared on both sides of the Atlantic in the same year, and only one appeared first in England.)

I find that there are five types of titles used for the translations, two of which may be associated with the Zola Mystique, that is his reputation for writing about sensation and sex. The five types are: (1) the French title retained, (2) literal or straightforward translations, (3) sensational titles, (4) titles with sexual overtones, and (5) original titles with no overtones. Types 1 and 2 may have overtones of 3 and 4.

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The French title has been used exclusively for only Nana, but it was known from the start that Nana personified sex (actually her life was one of more tragedy than pleasure).

The French titles have been retained for at least one translation each of La Curee, L'Assommoir (actually for most of the translations of this novel—the notoriety of the work was associated with the French title from the start), Une Page d'Amour (actually Helene, Une Page d'Amour—Helene was the heroine), Pot-Bouille (which is essentially untranslatable), Germinal (actually used for all but one translation, another untranslatable title), La Terre, Le Rêve, and La Bête Humaine. Pot-Bouille is now-outdated slang for "ordinaire du menage," "the everyday life in a family." Germinal was the name of the month of the germination of seeds in the Republican calendar (mid-March to mid-April); the book is about miners who work underground, and there must be overtones of the seeds of life of man also.

Literally translated titles used exclusively are: for L'Argent, Money (which is sensational in itself); for La Debacle, The Debacle and The Downfall (it refers to the collapse of the French army in the war against Prussia); for Le Docteur Pascal, Doctor Pascal (he is the last member of the family to figure in the series).

Other literally translated titles are: for La Fortune des Rougon, The Fortune of the Rougons; for La Conquete de Plassans, The Conquest of

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Plassans; for La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret, Abbe Mouret's Transgression, The Sin of the Abbe Mouret, The Abbe Mouret's Sin, and The Sin of Father Mouret (but a faute is only a "mistake" or "error," and for Zola the abbe's mistake may not have been that he had an idyllic love affair when amnesiac and recovering from illness, but that he allowed himself to be shocked back to reality and to return to his priesthood--all of these are sensational, though); for Son Excellence Eugene Rougon, His Excellency Eugene Rougon, and His Excellency; for L'Assommoir (slang for a bar that will eventually kill you with its absinthe), The Dram-Shop (which is too mild) and The Gin Palace (which is too cheerful); for Une Page d'Amour, A Page of Love (used only once!) for La Joie de Vivre, The Joy of Life; for L'Oeuvre, The Masterpiece (only since 1950); for La Terre, The Soil and Earth; for Le Reve, The Dream; for La Bete Humaine, The Beast in Man (which is what the French is really saying) and The Human Beast (which the French only seems to be saying, but really is not--both of these titles are sensational without even trying).

Straightforward, but not literally translated titles are: La Fortune des Rougon, The Rougon Macquart Family; for La Curee (which essentially means "booty" or "spoils"--it is a term of the hunt), The Rush for the Spoils; for Le Ventre de Paris (about the old market, ~~Les Halles~~), The Markets of Paris; for Une Page d'Amour, Helene--A Love Episode; for Au Bonheur des Dames (the name of a department store, like Au Bon Marche and Au Printemps, which are still going strong),

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The Ladies' Paradise and Ladies' Delight (both of which suggest 'sex the suggestible, perhaps); for La Joie de Vivre, Zest for Life (1955-- not as racy as Lust for Life; but intriguing nonetheless) and How Jolly Life Is! (ill-chosen by E. A. Vizetelly, usually the first to translate Zola in England); for L' OEuvre, His Masterpiece? ... or Claude Lantier's Struggle for Fame (another Vizetelly title--Claude Lantier was an artist overly wrapped up in his work) and His Masterpiece (a standard title even in 1946);

Will these titles sell books by themselves? Some certainly will.

Will the following original titles sell? For La Curée, In the Whirlpool; for Le Ventre de Paris, The Fat and the Thin (still another Vizetelly title--the Bourgeois merchants in Les Halles got fat, the Republicans thin); for La Conquete de Plassans, A Priest in the House (itself a spinoff from Vizetelly's subtitle to The Conquest of Plassans); for Son Excellence Eugene Rougon, Clorinda, or The Rise and Fall of His Excellency Eugene Rougon. The Man of Progress, Three Times Minister shades of "Turn again Whittington, thrice Lord-Mayor of London"); for L'Assommoir, Gervaise (after the well-known heroine) and Drunkard; for Une Page d'Amour, A Woman's Heart, or A Stray Leaf from the Book of Love (not bad, Zola meant the book to be heavily sentimental and appealing to women); for Pot-Bouille, Restless House (descriptive of the story); Germinal, or Master and Man (Vizetelly again--it's miners vs. bosses); The Monomaniac: La Bete Humaine (Vizetelly). Yes, some of these will sell.

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The sensational and sexy titles come mainly in two periods, the 1870's, 80's, and 90's in the United States, and, since the 1950's, chiefly in England. In the 1950's the impulse is to push paperbacks with attention-getting titles and covers, although hard-bound editions exist, too. In the earlier period, the impulse was really the same, to sell through sensational, racy titles, even if they obscured literary merit. And so the titles reinforced the existing French mystique and gave Zola an aura of wickedness almost from the entry of his translated works into the United States.

The pioneer publisher of Zola in translation in the United States was T. B. Peterson & Bros. of Philadelphia. Their first effort was Helene, A Love Episode, in 1878 (Une Page d'Amour), Translation after Translation, reprint, after reprint, followed from them until about 1890, when other publishers had appeared on the scene. Most of the Peterson translations (14) were by Mrs. Mary (Neal) Sherwood, under the pseudonym of John Stirling; the remaining three were by George Cox. The Stirling-Cox-Peterson combination also published English translations of four of Zola's five "early novels" (La Confession de Claude, Les Mysteres de Marseille, Therese Raquin, Madeline Ferat). The Peterson reprints had stronger titles than their originals. Thus, in 1882 they published Helene, A Tale of Love and Passion (it was really a gentle tale). Their Ladies' Paradise, or The Bonheur des Dames of 1883 became The Bonheur des Dames, or The Shop Girls of Paris, with Their Life and Experiences

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in a Dry Goods Store. How Peterson loved to sell with girls in the title! The Markets of Paris of 1879 became La Belle Lisa, or the Paris Market Girls in 1882 and The Flower and Market Girls of Paris in 1888. Likewise what Peterson had called The Mysteries of Marseille in 1882 and 1885 became The Flower Girls of Marseille in 1888 (a poor choice, since the novel is a fictionalized account of some real crimes that had occurred in Marseille and deserved a sensational, not a suggestive title).

What are the sensational titles? La Fortune des Rougon became Wedded in Death (1884-- the young hero and heroine were so united, but the title trivializes the story). La Curee became Renee, or The Crime of the Family (1887; Renee has an incestuous relationship with her grown stepson--another candidate for a sexy title) and The Kill (1954; falsely suggesting a detective or crime novel). Le Ventre de Paris became Savage Paris (1955). La Conquete de Plassans became A Fatal Conquest, or Buried in the Ashes of a Ruined House (1888). La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret became The Abbe's Temptation (1879) and The Sinful Priest (1960). Son Excellence Eugene Rougon became The Mysteries of the Court of Louis Napoleon (1882) and The Mysteries of Louis Napoleon's Court (1884)--all the Mysteries titles, even Zola's Mysteres de Marseille, go back to Eugene Sue's Les Mysteres de Paris.

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And finally the titles that suggest sex--those not mentioned a moment ago. La Fortune des Rougon became The Girl in Scarlet, or The Loves of Silvere and Miette (1882; honi soit qui mal y pense, the scarlet was the color of the republicans at the time of the coup d'etat that set up the Second Empire, and poor Miette led a column of marchers wearing her red-lined cape inside out). La Curee became Venus of the Counting House (1950; but Renee was really a "new Phaedra," as Zola often called her). La Conquete de Plassans became A Mad Love, or The Abbe and His Court (1882). La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret, which was The Abbe's Temptation in 1879, was reprinted in 1880 and 1882 as Albine, or The Abbe's Temptation, so all would know the exact nature of his temptation. After Nana became known as sex embodied, L'Assommoir could become Nana's Mother (1882) and get the subtitle A Prelude to "Nana" (1884); likewise Germinal could become Nana's Brother, Son of Gervaise and Lantier of L'Assommoir (1885). Une Page d'Amour became A Love Affair (1957). Pot-Bouille became Piping Hot for Fizetelly in 1885--another poorly chosen title of his, for he never meant it to be suggestive of anything hotter than a pot of soup; it became A Lesson in Love in 1953. L'Oeuvre became Christine the Model, or Studies of Love (1886; but the book is about the artist who cared more about his work than

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about her). Le Reve became A Dream of Love (1890; only part of the dream--the heroine was a religious mystic).

What does all this prove? That commerce and art have an uneasy marriage. That you can't judge a book by the title on its cover. And, as Zola said over and over, you can't judge Emile Zola by his popular and infamous reputation, but rather you must read his works and then judge for yourself.