

The Making and Unmaking of Colette: Myth, Celebrity, Profession

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation takes the paradoxical role of Colette in the canon of French and women's writing, from her earliest works to present, as an entry into a radically new interpretation of her life and literary oeuvre. This work is distinguished from previous works on Colette both in its approach and in the scope of its research, relying on extensive archival research revealing unpublished and unstudied aspects of Colette's biography and reception, and using a variety of modes of analysis to interpret this research.

This dissertation shows, in its first two chapters, how the myth of Colette as the incarnation of a particularly French brand of femininity, a spontaneous, natural writer, in no way literarily self-conscious, neither contributing to nor influenced by literary innovations, whose writing expresses her instinctive femininity, was constituted, from the earliest reviews of Colette's first novel, *Claudine à l'école* (1900), through feminist interpretations of Colette from the 1970s to present. Because Colette was understood to be a feminine writer of women by both misogynist conservatives of 1900 and radical feminists of the 1970's, their understanding of this writer remained remarkably homogenous and durable. The third chapter relies on contemporary celebrity theory in order to investigate Colette's own agency in the creation and policing of this durable public image, tracing both ways that Colette maintained her image, and ways that she profited from it, focusing in particular on her eponymous literary collection, the Collection Colette, and her "produits de beauté" cosmetics line and a beauty salon. This understanding of Colette's agential role in her public image inspires a new reading of the

1910 novel *La Vagabonde* and the relationship Colette depicts between the protagonist, Renée Néré's stage persona and her life when she is not in front of an audience.

The next two chapters suggest new ways of approaching Colette, beyond the durable myth of the spontaneous feminine writer that she worked so hard to maintain: as a consummate professional and as a literary innovator. The fourth chapter focuses on Colette's professionalism: using a Bourdieu-inspired analysis of Colette's correspondence to uncover her role in the literary field, tracing the full extent of her social, artistic, and professional networks with other writers, journalists, and artists. This chapter then explores concrete examples of her manipulation of these networks, studying in particular her collaboration with Maurice Ravel in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and her management of the literary department at the newspaper *Le Matin*. The final chapter of this dissertation reads Colette in terms of discourses of modernism, from which she has long been excluded due to her imagined marginality to the literary field, focusing in particular on French conceptions of the harmonious reconciliation of classicism and literary innovation which reached their height in the 1920's, and which I have termed the "classique moderne." This dissertation makes a contribution to trends in French literature, literary history, the sociology of literature, women's studies, women's history, feminist literary criticism, and celebrity theory.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I want most of all to thank the members of my dissertation committee, and especially my adviser, Toril Moi. Toril's generous and insightful readings of my work as well as her encouragement and enthusiasm for my project were invaluable to me in learning to become a writer. I am deeply indebted to Helen Solterer, both for her intuitions into my writing, especially regarding performance and celebrity, and for her mentorship in coursework and teaching. David F. Bell provided valuable guidance, in particular regarding French journalism and publishing history. Anne Garréta, in her classes and as a member of my dissertation committee, has helped me to think about the role of representation in Colette's work. Patricia Tilburg's deep knowledge of Colette and her world enriched this project immeasurably. Others who have contributed significantly to this project and to my academic development as a whole are Alice Kaplan, Jean-Jacques Thomas, Robyn Wiegman, Pascale Casanova, and Marc Schachter. While in France, I was particularly aided by Foulques de Jouvenel, who both allowed me to access Colette's archives throughout France and provided me with valuable information about Colette and the archives themselves. Novelist Jennifer Weiner and her assistant Meghan Burnett generously responded to my questions about debates over chick lit. I would also like to acknowledge fellow doctoral students who contributed to my dissertation in various ways. Eric Brandom not only read drafts, but convinced me that I would be able to keep working even when I wasn't so sure myself. Nichole Gleisner and Eglantine Colon were brilliant readers and interlocutors throughout the project. My feminist lunches with Paige Welch gave me the inspiration that I needed to see the project to its

completion. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting and encouraging me in graduate school and in the writing of my dissertation.

## Introduction

“C'est bon, si elles n'aiment le classique, on leur servira du moderne à la prochaine occasion !” (*Claudine à l'école*)

In the 2004 téléfilm *Colette, Une Femme libre*, French novelist Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, played by Marie Trintignant, jauntily clad in a World War I soldier's uniform, races to the front lines to embrace her beloved second husband, Henry de Jouvenel, who is lying wounded in the trenches. Earlier in the film, we see her dressed as Claudine, appearing before an applauding Parisian audience, as she murmurs to her first husband, Willy, “je t'aime, je t'aime, et tant pis si je dois en souffrir, tant pis si je dois en mourir.” In another scene, she sits at a desk, filling pages and pages of her distinctive blue writing paper with words that flow naturally, effortlessly from her pen.<sup>1</sup> These images perfectly encapsulate the received opinion of Colette: she is a natural writer, the very embodiment of femininity, a scandalous actress in her youth, the grande dame and “sainte patronne” of French letters in her later years, patriotic, passionate, ruled by emotion and sensuality. Popular and academic audiences alike are fascinated by this Colette, by her titillating biography as much as by her enduring literary creations; she is “intime,” “amoureuse” “libre et entravée,” “pure et impure,” “gourmande.” We are intrigued by “the woman, the writer,” her “secrets of the flesh,” her “génie féminin.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The film itself was plagued by scandal and tragedy. The actress who played Colette was beaten to death by her jealous lover during the filming. Many of the scenes in the film interpret Colette's biography “loosely,” to say the least—there is no evidence that she ever dressed as a soldier and went to see her wounded husband on the front lines, and she never portrayed Claudine on stage.

<sup>2</sup> All of these citations evoke titles of works on Colette.

My dissertation undoes this remarkably homogenous and durable image of Colette through a radically new interpretation of her life and literary oeuvre. This work is distinguished from previous works on Colette both in its approach and in the scope of its research, relying on extensive archival findings revealing unstudied aspects of Colette's biography and reception, and using a variety of modes of analysis to interpret this research. Discourse analysis, reception history, and feminist criticism inform an extensive analysis of the reception of Colette's oeuvre from 1900 to present. Recent contributions to the field of celebrity theory influence a rereading of Colette's public persona. Bourdieu-inflected sociological analysis gives new insight into Colette's role in the literary field of 1900-1930. Finally, theorizations of modernism, classicism, and the political stakes of aesthetics inspire an interpretation of Colette's work and reception from the 1920's, as well as the broader literary history of this period. This dissertation contributes to current debates in French literature, literary history, the sociology of literature, women's studies, women's history, feminist literary criticism, and celebrity theory.

To make my case, I draw on unpublished letters from Colette to figures as diverse as Guillaume Apollinaire, Louise Weiss, and Henri Barbusse, as well as the publishing archives of Ferenczi et fils, Knopf, Flammarion, and Ollendorff. These little-used sources help me to uncover the extent of Colette's professional and artistic relationships, as well as her careful manipulation of her public image. Though much of Colette's correspondence has been published, correspondence related to her professional life—letters to editors, to other writers, to critics—has not attracted the attention of her

correspondence with lovers and female friends.<sup>3</sup> Extensive research into these archives provides new insights into Colette's reputation, and also turns out to be a source of significant insight into the literary history of France more broadly.

## Literary History

Though this dissertation offers a significant reinterpretation of Colette's life and work, it would be wrong to call it a recuperation or rehabilitation of Colette, who has remained a major figure for scholars in France and in the United States since the 1970's. Numerous monographs and articles are published on Colette every year (in 2009, for example, five new monographs treated her at significant length).<sup>4</sup> Colette is frequently considered in terms of her relationship to women's writing and feminism—she has been often compared to women writers including Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Marcelle Tinayre, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, Monique Wittig, and Natalie Sarraute.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Colette correspondence is generally published by recipient—letters to her mother, her daughter, and various friends are all published in separate volumes. There is only one volume devoted to her various professional and artistic acquaintances, the *Lettres à ses pairs*, which does not include the totality of this correspondence. The *Cahiers Colette* have also been working, in recent years, to publish more of Colette's correspondence. Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*, eds. Claude Pichois and Roberte Forbin (Paris: Flammarion, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Lorraine Liscio, *Paris and her Remarkable Women* (New York: The Little Bookroom, 2009), Colette Piat, *Colette et Willy, Couples mythiques* (Monaco: Alphée-Jean-Paul Bertrand, 2009), Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic : Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), Graciela Conte-Stirling, *Colette et Sido, le dialogue par l'écriture* (Paris: Harmattan, 2009), Janet L. Beizer, *Thinking through the Mothers : Reimagining Women's Biographies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> A few examples of comparative works treating Colette and women writers include: Catherine Peebles *The Psyche of Feminism: Sand, Colette, Sarraute* (2004), Bethany Ladimer *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers* (1999), Helen Southworth's *The intersecting realities and fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette* (2004), Chantal Pommier's *George Sand et Colette : concordances et destinée* (2004) Melanie Collado's *Colette, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Marcelle Tinayre : émancipation et désignation* (2003) Laurie Corbin's *The mother mirror : self-representation and the mother-daughter relation in Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, and Marguerite Duras* (2001) Julia Kristeva's 1999-2002 series *Le génie féminin : la vie, la folie, les mots : Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette Christina Angelfours's La double conscience : la prise de conscience féminine chez Colette, Simone de Beauvoir et Marie Cardinal* (1989) Victoria Best's *Critical subjectivities : identity and narrative in the work of Colette and Marguerite Duras* (2000), and Dana Handy's *As the women's world turns : innovations in the autobiographical writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Colette* (1986).

Histories and anthologies of women's writing in France always include Colette, who is seen by many as the key figure in French women's writing of the first half of this century.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, although Colette is still well-regarded in canons of women's literature, she is increasingly broadly excluded from a discussion of French literature in general. Prominent histories of French literature from recent decades have virtually forgotten Colette, reducing her to little more than a footnote. In *A New History of French Literature*, the landmark, methodologically innovative 1989 literary history of France, produced primarily by American scholars and edited by Denis Hollier, Colette's name comes up rarely, and mostly in lists. It is only in a discussion of women's writing that Colette's work is considered at any length, in Elaine Marks's essay "Odor di Femina."<sup>7</sup> The 2010 *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, which explicitly places itself in the lineage of *A New History of French Literature*, treats Colette even more briefly than its predecessor, mentioning her only once, describing the 1949 *L'Etoile vesper* as a text that exemplifies "the twentieth-century playing with gender."<sup>8</sup> Though one must recognize the impossibility of giving every author a full and fair treatment when attempting to cover in five-hundred pages the entirety of French global literary history, Colette is significantly less well-represented than some of her male contemporaries—Proust and Gide are both cited five times, and at greater length than Colette. Colette's

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<sup>6</sup> For example, chapters on Colette appear in Adele King's 1989 *French Women Novelists*, Jennifer Waelti-Walters's 1990 *Feminist Novelists of the Belle-Epoque*, Lucille Frackman Becker's 1989 *Twentieth-Century French Women Novelists*, Martha Noel Evans's *Masks of Tradition: Women and the Politics of Writing in Twentieth-Century France* (1987) and Diana Holmes's *French Women's Writing 1848-1954* (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Denis Hollier, *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman, *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). (368). I note that this passage is also cited by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième sexe. L'étoile vesper*, a very late text, is an exceedingly odd choice for a sole citation to Colette's works.

absence is not evidence of editorial misogyny either—Marguerite Duras and George Sand are each cited 11 times, and Hélène Cixous eight times.

Colette fares no better in recent literary histories written by French academics. The 2007 *La Littérature française: dynamique et histoire*, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié, demonstrates perhaps the most disturbing erasure of Colette.<sup>9</sup> The nearly three-hundred page section treating the twentieth century, written by Antoine Compagnon, mentions Colette several times in lists: authors published by the *Mercur de France* (355), authors of “littérature féminine” (568), journalists (623), writers of *récits d'enfance* (649-50). The single longest treatment of Colette, which I cite here in its entirety, deals not with her literary œuvre, but with her fame. In a discussion of the early nineteen-teens, Compagnon writes, “les nouveaux maîtres sont encore inconnus, tels Valéry, Gide, Claudel, et Proust, mais Colette, accompagnée de Willy, s’est fait un nom avec les cinq volumes des *Claudine* (1900-1907)” (608). Compagnon is dismissive, especially in his implication that Colette’s “nom” was still, in the nineteen-teens, ‘accompanied’ by the dubious reputation of her first husband, Willy.<sup>10</sup>

The general exclusion of Colette also extends to discussions of French and European modernism, especially in Anglo-American sources. Although many of Colette’s male contemporaries, especially Proust, Apollinaire, Valéry, and Gide, have been assimilated into canons of modernist literature, this is not the case for Colette, in

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Yves Tadié and Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, *La Littérature française : dynamique & histoire*, Collection Folio/essais, 2 vols. ([Paris]: Gallimard, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Compagnon observes in the 1991 “The Diminishing Canon of French Literature in the United States” that “my first years in America, when a student asked to write a paper on Duras, I accepted on the condition that she speak of another author as well: it always turned out to be Colette” (105). We note, in Compagnon’s formulation, that the myopic student writing about Duras and Colette is “she.” Throughout the article, Compagnon uses “she” whenever he is criticizing a student, frequently in conjunction with her unoriginal insistence on working on women writers. Antoine Compagnon, “The Diminishing Canon of French Literature in the United States,” *Stanford French Review* 15.1-2 (1991).



spite of formal similarities between her works and theirs (play with autobiography, stream-of-consciousness narration).<sup>11</sup> In fact, in her anti-idealist depiction of women, Colette is far more modernist than either Gide or Apollinaire.<sup>12</sup> Because of the tendency of Colette scholars to focus on her femininity, rather than her connections to her literary contemporaries, they have tended not to think about her in terms of modernism.<sup>13</sup>

Given Colette's general exclusion from narratives of modernism, one of the guiding questions for this dissertation, from its inception, was whether or not modernism was a useful paradigm for understanding Colette. The idea of a modernist Colette raised a number of critical issues: what could a narrative of modernism bring to our understanding of Colette? Why has she been excluded from narratives of modernism for so long? Is

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<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., Modernism: 1890-1930 (New York: Penguin, 1976, 1978).

Helen Southworth points out that Colette is included in MacFarlane and Bradbury's chronicle of modernism, but that the two authors misattribute *Sous le soleil de Satan* to her. Helen Southworth, The Intersecting Realities and Fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004). In a later edition of the book, this problem is rectified by the removal of Colette from the chronology of modernism altogether. Bradbury and McFarlane, eds., Modernism: 1890-1930.

Judith Ryan's *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (1991) treats French modernists including Huysmans and Proust and women writers including Stein and Woolf, but never mentions Colette, in spite of her modern treatment of the subject and the of the first person. Judith Ryan, The Vanishing Subject : Early Psychology and Literary Modernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup>One compelling theory of modernism is found in Toril Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. In this transnational and a generational approach to modernism, Moi attributes the depiction of women as either angels or whores to idealism, a way of thinking about the world that modernists explicitly undermined. Toril Moi, Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Though a book has been written about Colette and Virginia Woolf, this text does not treat Colette as modernist. Southworth, The Intersecting Realities and Fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette. Southworth analyses Colette alongside the archetypal woman modernist Virginia Woolf, though she uses modernism as a distinction, rather than a similarity, between the two women writers.

Fleiger discusses Colette's works in terms of writers and techniques (Proust and Gide, stream-of-consciousness narration and autofiction) often associated with modernism, though her reading is informed by psychoanalysis rather than attention to literary history. Jerry Aline Fleiger, Colette and the Fantom Subject of Autobiography (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

Michael Lucey's consideration of Colette alongside Proust and Gide in *Never Say I* similarly analyses Colette's *Les Vrilles de la vigne* in the context of modernist technique (the ambiguous use of the first person) without ever connecting her to a larger narrative of modernism. Michael Lucey, Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).

“modernism” even a useful concept in a French context? Are more ‘native’ formulations such as *modernité* or *les modernes* to be preferred?

Of course using the word “modernism,” or even worse, “modernisme” to describe any aspect of French literary history is a fraught endeavor. As Jacques Le Goff points out in “Antique (ancient) / moderne,” the French “modernisme” has a number of uses, none of which maps directly onto the Anglo-American concept of modernism, which is itself already, to say the least, contested.<sup>14</sup> Today, some French literary critics like Michel Collomb, in *La Littérature Art Déco*, have appropriated Anglophone usage to evoke a long international history of modernist writing, but others still resist using the term altogether.<sup>15</sup>

French has plenty of terms for describing literary and artistic innovation. A work of artistic or literary experimentation between 1870 and 1930 might be described using words including “moderne” “symboliste,” “naturaliste,” “avant-garde,” “experimental,” “artiste,” or any number of finer-grained categories.<sup>16</sup> Albert Thibaudet, in his 1938 *Histoire de la littérature française*, lists no fewer than eight different subtypes of novel for the generation of 1885, and does not manage to come up with a novelistic “type” for André Gide, simply subtitling this section, “André Gide.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, this profusion of

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “Antique (ancien) / moderne,” *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Michel Collomb, *La Littérature art déco : sur le style d'époque* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Some literary histories I have looked at include: André Billy, *L'Évolution actuelle du roman* (Paris: Eugène Rey, 1911), André Billy, *La Littérature française contemporaine* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1927), André Billy, *L'Époque 1900: 1885-1905* (Paris: Tallandier, 1951), André Billy, *L'Époque contemporain* (Paris: Tallandier, 1956), Jules. Dériat, *Histoire de la littérature française.*, 4 ed. (Paris: Belin Frères, 1918), René Lalou, *Histoire de la littérature française contemporaine: 1870 à nos jours* (Paris: Editions G. Cres, 1922), Daniel Mornet, *Histoire de la littérature et la pensée française* (Paris: Larousse, 1927).

<sup>17</sup> The eight categories of novels that Thibaudet lists are: “la tradition naturaliste, le roman bourgeois, le roman personnel, André Gide, le roman artiste, le roman de province, le roman de la société, le roman de Paris. Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature française de 1795 à nos jours* (Paris: Stock, 1936).

terms shows that categorizing the large number of literary experiments between 1870 and 1930 poses a problem for French writers and literary historians.

While researching the problem of *Colette moderne*, I discovered that, especially during the interwar period, reviewers of Colette tended to describe her works both in terms of classicism and modernity—often in the same review. I was intrigued by this surge of classicizing language to describe novels like *Chéri* (1920), which are not obviously neoclassical in their content, form, or allusions. To describe this phenomenon, I coined the term “classique moderne,” a term made especially useful by the possibility that “classique” could refer both to the classical qualities of Colette’s works, and to her own status as “un classique,” a writer of widely acknowledged excellence.

This dissertation investigates Colette’s status as a *classique moderne* in some detail, but in my view Colette is not a unique case. In the 1920’s, there existed a specific type of critical response built around a tension between the modern and the classical. The *Nouvelle Revue française*, under the direction of André Gide (himself known as “le plus classique des modernes, le plus moderne des classiques”), explicitly pursued a sort of *classique moderne* aesthetic. Writers from Gide to Paul Valéry and Jean Giraudoux played with the classical and the modern in their writing. A better understanding of the relationship between classicism and literary innovation in interwar French literature—and of this relation as a point of interest for critics of the time—would help to rewrite the narratives of nineteenth and twentieth century French literature more broadly.

## Biography

Biography has been a dominant mode of Colette criticism since the *Claudine* novels.<sup>18</sup> And the taste for Colette biography has not waned in the years following the “mort de l’auteur” heralded by Barthes and Foucault. Although biographies of male authors like Marcel Proust or André Gide have fallen somewhat out of fashion, two major biographies of Colette have appeared since 2008, Colette Piat’s 2009 *Colette et Willy*, and Madeleine Lazard’s 2008 *Colette*.<sup>19</sup> These two works appear in an already-crowded field of recent Colette biographies, one that includes Judith Thurman’s 1999 *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* and Julia Kristeva’s biographical 2002 *Colette*.<sup>20</sup> Kristeva’s book is not precisely a biography, or perhaps not solely a biography, but a large part of the book does present and interpret Colette’s life. Both Thurman’s book and Kristeva’s are exhaustive. The fact that the market could support two additional biographies is a testament to how popular narratives of Colette’s life are. That Colette still sells is evidenced by the fact that Thurman—who is a journalist, not an academic—published her lengthy biography with Knopf, a major trade press. The wide-audience appeal of this biography shows the continuing potential for books about Colette to garner popular, as well as academic, attention.

As I began working on this dissertation, I was faced with the problem of wanting to write about Colette’s life without wanting to produce another biography. I wanted to write about her life, but also about her milieu, her reception, her works. Toril Moi’s *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* provides an important

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<sup>18</sup> See my discussion of biography in the first chapter of this work.

<sup>19</sup> Madeleine Lazard, *Colette*, Folio. Biographies (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), Piat, *Colette et Willy*.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin: Tome 3: Colette* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh* (New York: Knopf, 1999). Thurman’s biography of Colette is my biography of reference.

methodological model for this type of study.<sup>21</sup> Moi's work combines interpretation of Beauvoir's life with a study of the reception of Beauvoir's works, as well as in-depth readings of Beauvoir's literary and philosophical texts. A similar combination of modes informs my own approach to Colette, which includes reception history, biographical and literary study, and a broader approach to literary history.

### **Bourdieu, the Literary Field, and Profession**

One of the extra-biographical approaches that I explore in my dissertation is an investigation into Colette's literary and artistic networks. The work of the French sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu proves essential for thinking through Colette's connections to institutions and her role in the larger literary field of 1900-1930. In *Les Règles de l'art*, Bourdieu argues that methods of reading that focus on the text alone, or see it only in relationship with other literary texts, such as close reading or formalism, as well as readings that view the texts as a simple "reflection" or a "symbolic expression" of the social (by which he means to evoke Marxist literary criticism), are ultimately reductive. He claims that literary critics should instead consider the text in the context of the social and cultural field in which it was created: "réintroduire le champ de production culturelle comme univers social autonome, c'est échapper à la *réduction* qu'ont opérée toutes les formes, plus ou moins raffinées, de la théorie du 'reflet.'"<sup>22</sup> At other places in his work, Bourdieu defines this 'field of cultural production' as the "champ littéraire":

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<sup>21</sup>Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir : The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>22</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art : genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Libre examen. Politique (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992). (334-5). Subsequent in-text citations of this work will be designated by (RA page number).

“un champ de forces agissant sur tous ceux qui y entrent, et de manière différentielle selon la position qu’ils y occupent (soit, pour prendre des points très éloignés, celle d’auteur de pièces à succès ou celle de poète d’avant-garde), en même temps qu’un champ de luttes de concurrence qui tendent à conserver ou à transformer ce champ de forces.”<sup>23</sup> In the literary field, authors, but also publishers and reviewers, interact in myriad complicated ways to establish their relative positions. According to Bourdieu, these interactions lead to a hierarchy in which actors, or “positions” struggle against one another to improve their relative positions, and to gain symbolic and economic capital (CL 5).

Bourdieu’s notion of a literary field is useful to a reading of Colette in a number of ways. First, Colette’s reception fits well with Bourdieu’s critique of the reductiveness of methods of reading that focus solely on the text. As I pointed out earlier, close readings of Colette’s texts have tended to focus on their femininity and therefore their marginality from any “consecrated” male literary forms or institutions. Bourdieu’s notion of a literary field, a network of social and artistic production, allows us to see the immense amount of power and influence wielded by Colette in the field of 1900-1930 (and beyond). Second, Bourdieu’s assertion that different authors occupy different and hierarchical positions in this field, and that various “forces” act on people in the literary field to change and determine their positions, helps us to better understand Colette’s manipulation of her networks as an accumulation, consolidation, and employment of symbolic capital.

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<sup>23</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, “Le Champ littéraire,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 89 (September 1991). (5). Subsequent in-text citations of this work will be designated by (CL page number).

Bourdieu's literary field is articulated by the concepts of autonomy and consecration, the two axes along which he visualizes his understanding of it (RA 207). Of the two axes, consecration is the more straightforward. Bourdieu describes the various modes of consecration—winning prestigious literary prizes, being elected to literary societies like the Académie Française or the Académie Goncourt, publishing with the best publishers (Gallimard), being well-regarded in the best publications, and so on. Writers, of course, can both be consecrated and work as mechanisms of consecration, for example, as editors at publishing houses, reviewers of texts, editors of journals, or members of juries for literary prizes.

Colette was highly consecrated, especially for a woman writer, both during her lifetime and beyond. Though she never won a prestigious literary prize for any of her works, her 1910 novel *La Vagabonde* made the short list for the Prix Goncourt, a major achievement for a woman writer, especially one at such an early moment in her writing career.<sup>24</sup> In 1944 she became the second woman member of the Académie Goncourt, eventually becoming its first woman president.<sup>25</sup> She was also a member of the Royal Belgian Academy (and seriously considered, though ultimately not chosen, as the first female member of the Académie Française). She became a “chevalier” of the French Légion d'Honneur in 1920, and was the second woman to ever achieve the rank of “Grand Officier,” in 1953.<sup>26</sup> On her death, she was the first woman to receive a state funeral from the French government. In 1984, her selected *Oeuvres* were published in the

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<sup>24</sup> The 1910 Prix Goncourt is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1 of this work.

<sup>25</sup> The first woman member was Judith Gautier, daughter of Théophile Gautier. I could speculate here about why Colette was nominated to the Académie Goncourt after the war (basically because the Académie was tainted by collaboration, and though Colette was not totally free of this taint, she was relatively clean).

<sup>26</sup> The first was Maréchale Lyautey.

prestigious “Pléiade” collection by Gallimard.<sup>27</sup> Her 1909 *Les Vrilles de la vigne* made *Le Monde*’s list of the top 100 books of the century in 1999. Between 1988 and 1993, Colette even served as the “sainte patronne” of a literary prize, the “Prix Colette,” though the prize itself was short-lived and plagued by scandal.<sup>28</sup>

While consecration marks the vertical axis of the literary field, along the horizontal axis, Bourdieu places autonomy—which is to say a “désintéressement” in the symbolic and economic profits of literature (CL 6). More autonomous writers, such as Flaubert, are able to produce art for the sake of art, rather than for economic profit, whereas less autonomous writers, such as journalists, must produce writing in order to support themselves economically. Colette, who throughout her life supported herself, her daughter, and often her husbands through her writing, would fall on the less autonomous side of the field.

In collaboration with Pascale Casanova, scholar of Bourdieu and author of *La République mondiale des lettres*, I produced an informal preliminary sketch of the literary field of 1913, including Colette, in which I tried to consider each writer both in terms of

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<sup>27</sup> Colette’s publication by the series happens well after the moment when the point of publishing an author with the Pléiade had become the consecration, even the sacralization, major authors. Alice Kaplan and Philippe Roussin, “A Changing Idea of Literature: The Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,” *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996).

<sup>28</sup> The prize mostly seems like an attention grab for the Geneva hotel that funded it and provided the location for deliberations—the Richemond hotel. In spite of its commercial origins, it nabbed big names for the jury: Mallet-Joris, Edmonde Charles-Roux, Jacques Chessex, Bernard Henry-Lévy, Jean d’Ormesson, Pascal Quignard, Philippe Sollers. The first few years, nothing too exciting happened—the prize was awarded to François Sureau for *La Corruption du siècle* (1989), Hervé Guibert for *A l’ami qui ne ma pas sauvé la vie* (1990), and Marc Lambron for *La nuit des masques* (1991). Some objected to the awarding of the prize to Yves Berger, for *L’Attrapeur des ombres* in 1992, suggesting that this was more a matter of loyalty to “maisons d’édition” than literary quality. Apparently, the committee enjoyed the scandal of 1992, and so in 1993, they decided to award the prize to Salman Rushdie, either for his entire oeuvre (according to some accounts) or for *The Satanic Verses* (1988). This went counter to the stated purpose of the prize, which was to reward a work written in French during the year that the prize was awarded. By some accounts, the prize-winning work was also supposed to share some stylistic similarities with Colette. The scandal intensified when the city of Geneva refused to provide adequate security for Rushdie to accept the prize in person, provoking righteous outrage, and stirring statements given to the press, on the parts of Sollers and BHL in particular. This tempest in a teapot led to the prize being renamed the Prix Libéré littéraire. *Prix Colette Dossier*. CLT 2: A15 01 04.



his or her degree of consecration and his or her symbolic and economic autonomy. A brief discussion of this sketch will help to show why Colette is problematic—and therefore interesting—for Bourdieu’s theory.

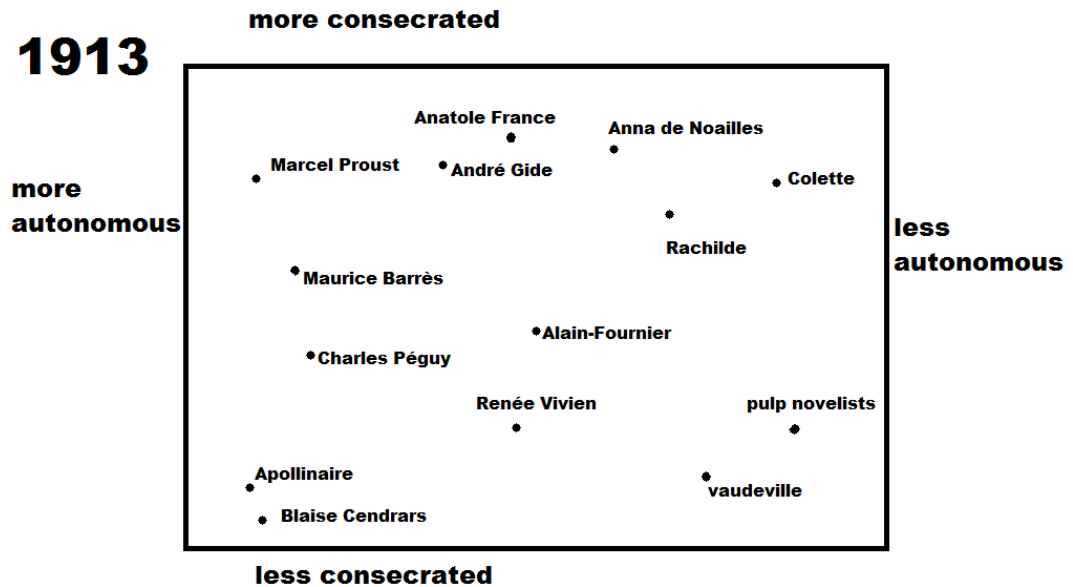


Figure 1: A sketch of the literary field of 1913

The diagram suggests that Bourdieu’s approach is limiting in three main ways. First, the notion of a map or diagram of the literary field implies that, at a single moment in time, each person occupies only a single position. However, this is not necessarily the case. For example, Rachilde’s literary works were not particularly consecrated—she won no literary prizes, and received plenty of terrible reviews. Nevertheless, as a *salonnière* and literary critic, she wielded a large amount of influence in the literary field, and was able to consecrate other writers. This disconnect applies not only to Rachilde, but to any writer who has the power of consecration in the literary field. Thus this sketch and fails to represent the complicated positions occupied by different writers and literary institutions at different points in time.

Second, Bourdieu's diagram of the literary field is even less useful for understanding the complex and shifting networks of relationships between authors, journals, newspapers, and publishing houses. We see the positions of various people, but not the relationships between them. In fact, a Bourdieusian diagram might even mislead us into believing that some writers were more similar, or otherwise more related, than they in fact were. For example, from this drawing, Colette would seem to be very close to Anna de Noailles, with whom she in fact had a distant and strained relationship, and far from Marcel Proust, who was a close friend, both personally and literarily.<sup>29</sup>

Bourdieu's notion of social capital, analysed in *La Noblesse d'état*, might ultimately be more useful than his notion of the literary field for understanding networks of writers and artists. Social capital describes the "relational power" of social relationships, which are more or less institutionalized, and the ways that an individual can accumulate, deploy and benefit from these relationships.<sup>30</sup>

The third and most basic difficulty that the case of Colette presents to Bourdieu's argument relates to the notion of autonomy. While consecration is an outside force, and a measurable one—some writers are more recognized by the literary establishment than others—autonomy is more slippery. Economic autonomy seems easy enough to sort out—did this writer have a source of income other than writing? However, as Bernard Lahire points out in "The Double Life of Writers," Bourdieu's conception of autonomy favors writers with family money, like Flaubert, *rentiers* who did not have to earn an

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<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Bourdieu tends to understand literary relationships in terms of negativity, struggle, force. He writes "les prises de position [by which he means texts] se définissent, pour une grande part, négativement" (CL 26). In the case of Colette, though at times she does evince negative, even very negative relations with another writer (see her exchange with Apollinaire in Chapter 1, or her exchange with *Femina* in chapter 3, or even her letter to Louise Weiss in Chapter 2) her "rapports" are more often positive—Colette worked to maintain good relationships with other artists, editors, and writers.

<sup>30</sup> Toril Moi describes Bourdieu's notion of social capital in Toril Moi, "Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture," *New Literary History* 22.4 (Autumn 1991).

income from literature because they had a readily accessible income.<sup>31</sup> Lahire argues that Bourdieu's notion of autonomy does not allow or account for the wide range of ways that writers without inheritances earned their livings—through journalism, working for publishers, teaching, civil service. Colette herself plaintively prefigures Lahire's objection to Bourdieu in a 1933 letter to Fernand Vandérem, complaining, “un écrivain français ne doit vivre—et à l'occasion mourir, que de sa plume.”<sup>32</sup>

Bourdieu's notion of autonomy is not only about freedom from economic concerns; it also evokes a freedom in the realm of the “symbolique” or the “esthétique.”<sup>33</sup> However, Bourdieu's notion of ‘aesthetic autonomy’ is not clearly defined, or, at least, not clearly delineated from economic autonomy.<sup>34</sup> There is slippage between the two types of autonomy; Bourdieu implies that a work that is economically autonomous is also aesthetically autonomous, and a work that is not economically autonomous is not aesthetically autonomous. This is relatively easy to understand—writers who need to earn money are more likely to produce works that they think will sell well, or, in Bourdieu's estimation, more likely to produce art that corresponds to bourgeois tastes. Economic and aesthetic concerns are therefore, for Bourdieu, inextricably linked.

In his distinction between autonomous and non-autonomous art, Bourdieu reproduces a longstanding preference for “high art” over “low art.”<sup>35</sup> “Autonomous art”

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard Lahire, “The Double Life of Writers,” *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010).

<sup>32</sup> Colette. *Letter to Fernand Vanderem*. July 1933. NAF:16870, 210. I discuss this letter at length in Chapter 3 of this work.

<sup>33</sup> (CL 6). Further, Pascale Casanova, following Bourdieu, makes the aesthetic distinction between autonomous and heteronymous art even more clear: she explains that only autonomous art responds to “critères autonomes, c'est-à-dire esthétiques.” Casanova, Pascale. *Le Meridien de Greenwich : Réflexions sur le temps de la littérature*. 2009

<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu explains that even symbolic profits are “susceptibles d'être convertis, à terme plus ou moins long, en profits économiques” (CL 6).

<sup>35</sup> In *A Singular Modernity*, Fredric Jameson writes that “the new bourgeois art—the new modernist art—is at once confronted with a public introuvable. In its crudest form, we may assert that at the very moment at

is high art, the writing of Flaubert and Baudelaire (two of Bourdieu's preferred writers). Non-autonomous art is, at best, "l'art bourgeois," and at worst "art industriel," "vaudeville, feuilleton, journalisme" (CL 11). In Bourdieu's terms, then, it seems that Colette cannot be other than a bad artist, because she writes for money. In fact, his three examples of non-autonomous art correspond perfectly to Colette's own artistic career: she was an actress in vaudeville, and wrote both feuilletons and journalistic articles. Further, one must ask whether the lingering elitism of Bourdieu's notion of autonomy also masks a structural gender bias. As Andreas Huyssen points out in *After the Great Divide*, the distinction between "high" and "low" art is gendered, with high art gendered masculine, and low art gendered feminine. Does Bourdieu's dismissal of "non-autonomous" art also imply a dismissal of women's writing as "low"?<sup>36</sup>

These questions surrounding the status of women's writing become even more complicated if we return to the problem of economic autonomy. Women writers who were supported by their husbands were presumably economically autonomous: by Bourdieu's standards, did this make their writing better? In answering this question, we can usefully bring Simone de Beauvoir's arguments about women, writing, and money in *Le Deuxième sexe* to bear on Bourdieu. In this text, Beauvoir explicitly admires Colette's professionalism, her need to make her living through writing. "Il n'est pas seulement

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which it conceives its vocation as high art, the latter finds its public confiscated by mass culture; which is not to say that the vocation is not itself inspired and thematized by the coming into being of mass culture as such, itself an inevitable result and by-product of the cultural differentiations we have in mind here. Thus, Balzac was a writer of bestsellers and Hugo very much a popular poet: something that will no longer be possible for their followers." Though Jameson does not cite *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986), his argument echoes Huyssen's. Huyssen argues that "modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, and anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (vii). Huyssen also argues that this divide has been gendered—with high culture gendered masculine and low culture gendered feminine. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002). (138) Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).

<sup>36</sup>Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*.

grâce à ses dons ou à son tempérament que Colette est devenue un grand écrivain ; sa plume a été souvent son gagne-pain [...] de *Claudine* à *La Naissance du jour*, l'amateur est devenue professionnelle.”<sup>37</sup> Here, then, Beauvoir presents a counterargument to Bourdieu. Colette’s writing is better precisely because it is less economically autonomous—her need to write, in order to earn her living, ultimately makes Colette a “grand écrivain.” Later in the same chapter, Beauvoir explains why she thinks this is so, by evoking the trap of the amateur woman writer, one who is, ostensibly, not writing for the money: “quand elle se décide à peindre ou à écrire à seule fin de remplir le vide de ses journées, tableaux et essais seront traités comme des ‘ouvrages de dames’, elle ne leur consacra ni plus de temps ni plus de soin et ils auront à peu près la même valeur” (II 628).

Beauvoir allows us to better account for Colette’s specificity as a professional woman writer than Bourdieu. For women writers, the situation seems to be the reverse of the one that Bourdieu imagines, at least according to Beauvoir. In Beauvoir’s estimation, writing professionally allows Colette to see the value of her works, something that sets her apart, in a positive way, from many other women writers. Though Bourdieu is useful for thinking about a general literary field, he fails to be sufficiently attentive to variations in the literary field that render the notion of economic and symbolic autonomy more complicated than his explanation allows for.

Of course, all this is not to say that Bourdieu is not useful for feminism, or for even for an understanding of women’s writing. For example, Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, specifically the ways that femininity can negatively affect the

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<sup>37</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, vol. 2, 1 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949, 1976). (629). I discuss Beauvoir’s treatment of Colette at more length in Chapter 2.

accumulation of symbolic capital, is certainly relevant for this study.<sup>38</sup> Bourdieu also shows sensitivity to ways that gendered publics affect the hierarchy of genres. He writes, in *Les Règles de l'art*, that the hierarchical categories which divide artistic genres (théâtre de boulevard vs. théâtre classique, for example) “correspond[ent] très directement à la hiérarchie sociale des publics touchés, et aussi, de manière assez stricte, à la hiérarchie des univers sociaux représentés et même à la hiérarchie des auteurs selon l'origine sociale et le sexe” (RA 196). Indeed, recent U.S. debates surrounding the status of women's writing have pointed out, popular fiction written for women receives far less critical attention than popular novels written for men such as detective novels or spy novels.

Colette provides an interesting test case both for questions of femininity and symbolic capital and of gendered reading publics. In the case of symbolic capital, it can be argued that Colette provides an exception to this rule—as the first chapter of this work will show, Colette's works received more praise because of the femininity of their author, rather than less. The problem of gender and reading publics is more complicated. Though during her lifetime Colette was read by both men and women, the second chapter of this work will discuss the ways that Colette's recent exclusive attachment to the genre of women's writing (and women readers) might have ultimately decreased her position in the French canon.

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<sup>38</sup>As Toril Moi explains in “Appropriating Bourdieu,” “in general, the impact of femaleness as negative capital may be assumed to decline in direct proportion to the amount of other forms of symbolic capital amassed. Or to put it the other way round: although a woman rich in symbolic capital may lose some legitimacy because of her gender, she still has more than enough capital left to make her impact on the field. In the case of exceptionally high amounts of capital, femaleness may play a very small part indeed.” Moi, “Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture.” Of course, Bourdieu also wrote a book on gender inequality—*La domination masculine*—though I find this text less useful for this study because he focuses on gender relations in Kabylie rather than France. Pierre Bourdieu, *La Domination masculine*, Collection Liber (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

## Celebrity

Another issue that must be considered is Colette's agential role in the creation and maintenance of her public image. One can only imagine that Bourdieu, who prefers authors who are disinterested in the economic profits of literature, would be properly horrified by Colette's use of her image to sell makeup, for example. Celebrity theory provides one way of thinking about Colette's public image without encountering the sort of blinding value-judgement implicit in Bourdieu's work. The analysis of the star image, notably performed by Richard Dyer in *Stars* and by Edgar Morin in *Les Stars*, can be brought to bear on the iconic photographs and postcards of Colette that were so widely disseminated during her lifetime. Dyer's work on the gendered nature of celebrity—especially on Marilyn Monroe—in *Heavenly Bodies* further provides tools for thinking through the gendered nature of performance and the consumption of celebrities.<sup>39</sup> His study of Monroe as the very incarnation of female sexuality sounds not unlike Colette's role as the incarnation of femininity (18). Further, his analysis of the “woman-as-body” and the “woman as spectacle” proves useful for rethinking Colette's on-stage persona, as well as the character of Renée Néré in *La Vagabonde* (20).

Rachel Brownstein's 1993 *Tragic Muse: Rachel of the Comédie-Française* provides a model for thinking through Colette's stage career.<sup>40</sup> Though Rachel (1821-58) died more than a decade before Colette was born, there are a number of similarities between the two: both are women, in France, from modest backgrounds, who achieved

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<sup>39</sup> Edgar Morin, *Les Stars*, [3. éd. ed. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies : Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New ed. (London: BFI Pub., 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Rachel M. Brownstein, *Tragic Muse : Rachel of the Comédie-Française*, 1st ed. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993).

fame (less so on the part of Colette) on stage. Both had firmly established reputations, manipulated in various ways. As Brownstein points out, “a star is someone whose roles shape her character and get conflated with it, whose personal life appears to be spectacular as we watch it get theatrically played out” (ix). Certainly, the relationship between character (Claudine) and person (Colette) and the blurring of the personal and theatrical are at the heart of Colette’s renown. For both, the newspaper reception of their artistic productions was a crucial part of their reputation. Brownstein’s insightful study traces the ways that Rachel’s public image developed, and explicitly understands it as *created* by paying particular attention to the concrete details of how Rachel’s career was “managed.” Brownstein’s introduction evokes the fictional element of the star’s reputation: “stars are made up of fictions; we acknowledge this when we call them fabulous, legendary [...] [these fictions] suggest that personal identity is bound up in illusions, stereotypes, social and literary conventions” (ix). This careful investigation of the creation of an image, in its rich historical context, parallels my own work, especially in its attention to the ways that Rachel’s image was shaped, in its insistence that this image was constructed rather than natural.

Though I find these theories of stage and screen stardom promising in some respects for a study of Colette, a number of limitations present themselves. We must be attentive to the spatial, temporal and cultural disconnects between celebrity theory, developed to understand Hollywood movie stars in the post WWII-era, and Colette, a French celebrity, attached to literature, primarily during the pre-war period. First: Colette was not a screen star, nor was she, first and foremost, an actress. Long before Colette ever appeared on stage, she was publicly recognized, often through photographs and



caricatures, initially as the source of the Claudine character, and eventually as the author of this series. A full account of Colette's celebrity must surely consider both her writerly persona and her stage career.<sup>41</sup>

Even the terms with which to discuss Colette's wide public recognizability are not obvious. Should one use the language of the "celebrity," a word that, in French and in English, dates to the mid-nineteenth century, and to the rise of very famous stage performers? Or the "star," another mid-nineteenth century English concept that French borrowed a few decades later (1919)? Both of these words are first associated with stage or screen stardom, whereas Colette was, above all, a literary star. Does this association reduce their usefulness? "Fame," from the Latin "fama," (talk, rumor, report) is appealing because of its connotations of being much discussed, as is "reputation," also from Latin, which connotes being much considered or reflected upon.<sup>42</sup> A great deal of this dissertation, after all, is concerned with how "much discussed" Colette was and remained. I also like the French "renommée" or the English "renown" because it evokes the idea of "nom," which was so crucial to Colette.

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<sup>41</sup> A few sources for thinking about writerly celebrity do exist. *Why Jane Austen?*, also by Rachel Brownstein, treats Jane Austen's literary celebrity. Loren Glass's *Authors Inc.* treats literary celebrity in the United States. Jaffe's 2005 *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* treats British modernists. Rachel M. Brownstein, *Why Jane Austen?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Loren Daniel Glass, *Authors Inc. : Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). In "Always Lonely," Brenda R. Weber points out that literary celebrity theory has tended to focus more on male than female writers (1111-2). Of course, this is not the case for Brownstein's recent work. She also evokes an "Anglo-American Victorian bias against literary celebrity" (1112). The article goes on to treat very recent examples of celebrities and motherhood: Kate Gosselin, Oprah Winfrey. Though this work could have some relevance for a study of Colette, especially given her disavowal of motherhood (discussed in Chapter 3), Weber's argument does not seem necessarily applicable to the French context. Brenda R. Weber, "Always Lonely: Celebrity, Motherhood, and the Dilemma of Destiny," *PMLA* 126.4 (October 2011).

<sup>42</sup> The Romans personified "fama" with a woman. And, of course, "reputation" is a complicated word to use in French or English, especially related to a woman, often evoking a woman's sexual reputation.

A basic presupposition of celebrity theory has long been a sharp division between the actual person of the star and her public persona. As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond put it in the introduction to *Framing Celebrity*: “fandom, and the construction of stars and celebrities, has always involved the ‘search’ for the ‘authentic’ person that lies behind the manufactured mask of fame.”<sup>43</sup> Yet a new direction in celebrity theory, notably articulated by Sharon Marcus in her work on Sarah Bernhardt, now insists that the celebrity is not necessarily as distinct from her image as scholars might assume, and that the celebrity exercises considerable agency in the crafting of this image. Marcus writes, “where Dyer focuses on stars constrained by film studios, I focus on a stage diva known for controlling her career. Where Roach explores “It,” a transhistorical, innate quality, I focus on a specifically theatrical and deliberately crafted celebrity.”<sup>44</sup> This point is crucial for my thinking on Colette—I want to see the ways that she manipulated her own image in order to see her as agential in regards to this image, rather than a victim of it.

### **Recent Works on Colette**

In addition to these theoretical approaches, several recent works on Colette have been particularly useful for my project. Queer approaches to Colette were among the first to consider her outside of the realm of women’s literature, reading her works and life in conjunction with male contemporaries. Elizabeth Ladenson’s 1996 “Colette for Export Only” uses Proust’s depiction of lesbians in *A la recherche du temps perdu* to illuminate

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<sup>43</sup>Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, *Framing Celebrity : New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006). (4).

<sup>44</sup> Sharon Marcus, “Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity,” *PMLA* 126.4 (October 2011). (999-1000).

Colette's description of gay men in *Le Pur et l'impur*.<sup>45</sup> Michael Lucey's 2006 *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*, considers the playful and evasive use of the first person by these three authors, making many productive comparisons.<sup>46</sup> However, Lucey pays more attention to the social and literary relationship between Proust and Gide than to the relationship of either of these men to Colette, and discusses Colette's biography at more length than her literary texts.

Two recent works on Colette and professionalism also guide this study. Juliette Rogers treats Colette at some length in her 2007 *Career Stories: Belle Époque Novels of Professional Development*, focusing in particular on questions of women's education and self-sufficiency in Colette's literary oeuvre. Patricia Tilburg's 2009 *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* also discusses Colette's oeuvre in terms of education, and includes an extensive and rich discussion of Colette's use of "métier," an idea that is important for this study.<sup>47</sup>

## Chapter Overview

The first two chapters of this work examine the history of Colette's reception. The first, "The Feminine Writer: Colette's Reception 1900-1930," shows that, contrary to received scholarly wisdom, Colette's novels were far from scandalous. Critics from reactionary Catholic publications like the *Action française* to minor avant-garde publications like *Point et virgule* all praised Colette for her animal, instinctive,

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<sup>45</sup>Elizabeth Ladenson, "Colette for Export Only," *Yale French Studies* 90 (1996).

<sup>46</sup>Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*.

<sup>47</sup>Juliette M. Rogers, *Career Stories: Belle Époque Novels of Professional Development*, Romance studies (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007). Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*.

spontaneous writing style, and used Colette's natural femininity (often contrasted with the unnatural masculinity of "féministes" and male-identified novelists like Rachilde or George Sand) to defend the morality of her most scandalous-seeming novels. The second chapter, "Colette from Antifeminist to Feminist (1910-2010)" shows that, while during her lifetime Colette presented herself as an antifeminist, her works were swiftly adopted into canons of women's writing and feminist literature during the 1960's and 1970's, especially in the United States. Paradoxically, because feminist readers, just like the reviewers during Colette's lifetime, used her femininity as a major category for analysis, their view of Colette strongly resembled the one that was in vogue during her lifetime: for feminists and antifeminists alike, Colette is a feminine writer, primarily concerned with depicting women, sensuality, love, and sex, marginalized from contemporary literary institutions because of her gender.

Though it would be easy to see Colette as trapped by a public image that she wished to undermine or escape, my dissertation avoids such easy narratives of agency-less victimization. Instead I show in the third chapter, "Cultivating Claudine: Colette's Maintenance and Use of Renown," that Colette contributed to and benefitted from her image in a variety of ways, using it to sell novels and stage performances, as well as cosmetics, wine, fabric, even toothpicks. This new understanding of Colette as a self-made celebrity informs a rereading of the relationship between performance and reality in *La Vagabonde*, exploring Renée Néré's assertion that "il n'y a de réel que la danse, la lumière, la liberté, la musique." The fourth chapter, "A Professional Writer: Colette's Literary Networks," shows that Colette was a consummate professional who cultivated and pursued professional contacts, manipulating her networks for financial gain, as a

novelist, as a librettist, and as the manager of the literary department at the newspaper *Le Matin*. This understanding of Colette's professional career paves the way for a new reading of the role of money in Colette's texts, in particular *Chéri*, and the relationship between "les deux mêmes dieux—l'amour, l'argent" in the text.

The final chapter of this work, "Colette 'classique moderne': Colette and Literary History 1920-1930" reads Colette in terms of discourses of modernism, from which she has long been excluded. In it, I focus in particular on French ambitions to the harmonious reconciliation of classicism and literary innovation which reached their height in the 1920's, for which I have coined the term "classique moderne." This intervention changes our thinking about Colette's place in French literary history, and opens up new ways for thinking through the literary history of this period more broadly.

In the end, this investigation into Colette reveals that she was, in many ways, the very first modern woman writer. Her current erasure from literary history is especially tragic given the ways that Colette's reputation, her professionalism, and her self-conscious management of her image speaks to the problems faced by women writers of today.

## Chapter 1: The Feminine Writer: The Reception of Colette 1900-1928

The question of where to begin a discussion of the reception of the literary oeuvre of Colette is not easily resolved. One obvious starting place would be with the first work signed by Colette, the relatively-ignored *Dialogues des bêtes* (1904). However, before the *Dialogues des bêtes*, Colette wrote the first four novels of the Claudine series: *Claudine à l'école* (1900), *Claudine à Paris* (1901), *Claudine en ménage* (1902), and *Claudine s'en va* (1904), all of which were initially signed by her first husband—Willy. Colette was officially recognized as the author of the *Claudine* as early as 1906, when she signed the last volume of the series, *La Retraite sentimentale*, alongside Willy. That same year, Colette and Willy formally acknowledged their collaboration on the previous *Claudine* novels, and added an advertisement to all volumes published after 1906: “la collaboration Willy et Colette ayant pas fin, il devenait indispensable de remettre les choses au point, rendre à chacun le part qui lui est due et de remplacer la signature marquée de ces volumes par celle de Willy et Colette Willy.”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the fact that she did not initially sign the novels, reviews of the *Claudine* before this date, at a time when their author was taken to be Willy, should be included in an understanding of the critical reception of Colette’s work. To begin with, a connection between Colette and Claudine was made from the publication of the first

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the authorship of the *Claudine* remains somewhat contentious. Though Colette wrote the novels, Willy edited them. It is generally understood that Willy suggested plot points to Colette, in particular adding the more sexually explicit parts of the novels. However, because the original manuscripts of several of the the *Claudine* novels have been lost, the exact extent of Willy’s influence over the texts is not known. During Colette’s lifetime, she fought to be listed as the sole author of the novels, with limited success. Today, publications of the *Claudine* list both Willy and Colette as the authors, with Willy’s name appearing first.

novel: if Colette was not immediately recognized as the author of the texts, she was understood to be their source, the living, breathing, in-the-flesh Claudine.<sup>2</sup> Further, Colette's authorship of the *Claudine* was a poorly kept secret. As Lawrence Schehr points out in the introduction to his translation of Willy's *Le Troisième sexe*, Willy was well-known in the Parisian literary scene for using ghostwriters, or "nègres," as they are still termed in French, to produce his novels.<sup>3</sup> Though reviewers may not have been certain that Colette was the author of the *Claudine*, they would have known that it was unlikely that Willy wrote the books himself.<sup>4</sup> Further, many reviewers would have been aware that Colette had written the texts because Willy himself told them: he solicited reviews of the novel from his friends in the literary scene, telling them about Colette's role in the writing of the work.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I will show that the reception of the *personnage* of Claudine between 1900 and 1906 establishes a vocabulary for Colette reception that persists, in some of its forms, to the present, and that dominated Colette criticism during her lifetime. Reviewers undermined Willy's authorship of the texts by implying that the *Claudine* novels were autobiographical, written by Claudine herself. They admired Claudine's particular femininity, which was described as natural, irrational, spontaneous, and

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss Colette's reputation as the source of Claudine in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Willy and Lawrence Schehr, *The Third Sex* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Henri Fournier (pseud Alain Fournier) and Jacques Rivière, only teenagers when the novels were released, were aware that Willy had not written them. Fournier to Rivière in 1906: "Je lis en ce moment, à la bibliothèque, à mes moments perdus... *Claudine à l'école*. Jusqu'ici je trouve ça un chef-d'œuvre de "naturel" mais en collaboration avec quelle femme Willy a-t-il fait ça? Avec quelle écolière?" later, perhaps after having finished the book, Fournier figures it out: "Claudine à l'école. C'est un chef-d'œuvre, c'est indéniable. Un chef-d'œuvre de naturel. Ce n'est pas pervers. Il y a au centre, une bordée d'injures et à la fin une fessée qui sont très morales et détendent les nerfs. C'est long. Colette Willy a du génie." Rivière responds: "J'ai parcouru 'Claudine en ménage.' C'est d'une perversion... j'allais mettre des épithètes trop flatteuses, mais vraiment presque d'un bout à l'autre cela m'a paru enfantin, pervers et charmant. Maintenant est-ce de lui ou de Colette?" Alain Rivière and Pierre de Gaulmyn, eds., *Correspondance: Jacques Rivière--Alain-Fournier (1904-1919)*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1991). It is fascinating that they see the "natural" so easily.

<sup>5</sup> Willy, *Indiscrétions et commentaires sur les Claudine* (Pro Amicis, 1962).

instinctive. In spite of the scandalous content of the novels, the novels received consistent critical praise, often for Claudine's morality. Finally, the style of the novels was described in terms of nature and sensuality. In the second part of the chapter, I will show that the particular critical vocabulary that emerged to praise Claudine's femininity, natural immorality, and sensual style before 1906 continued to dominate Colette criticism for decades. At the end of the chapter, I will touch on some outliers, some areas of resistance to the dominant mode of reading Colette, placing particular emphasis on Apollinaire's "well-meaning nastinesses" in a 1909 review of *Les Vrilles de la vigne*.

I also suggest that there is a specific historical reason for the critical enthusiasm attached to Claudine's natural femininity: the reaction against women's suffrage movements and the "New Woman" in France. As Mary Louise Roberts points out in *Disruptive Acts*, French society was scandalized at the turn of the century by the emergence of the "New Woman," uninterested in the traditional roles of wife and mother, who dressed and acted like a man, smoked cigarettes, and worked outside of the home, experiencing both financial and sexual freedom.<sup>6</sup> "La femme nouvelle," and even more so the suffragists who demanded voting and other rights for women (and Roberts points out that these two groups, though distinct, were frequently confused in the French press), were portrayed as unnatural and masculinized. In reactions against this New Woman, Roberts explains, "'nature' played a key essentializing role" (23). The critical fervor for Claudine/Colette, specifically using the language of nature and femininity, and not infrequently evoking a return to an older model of femininity, must be understood in the context of a reaction against the New Woman. Of course, though Colette/Claudine might

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). (21, 24)



have been the very figurehead of the anti-new-woman movement, Colette herself was in many ways a new woman. She had short hair, worked outside the home, and certainly benefitted from the sexual freedoms of the New Woman. This makes her adoption of the very embodiment of natural femininity even more deserving of critical attention.

### **Claudine's Autobiography**

Many of the reviewers of the *Claudine*, in particular *Claudine à l'école*, imply in various ways that it is an autobiographical work, written by Claudine, who is a real person. This insistence has a number of implications. First, it undermines the belief in Willy's authorship of the novels. Second, it cuts Colette out of the equation—if the novels are not written by Willy, they are also not written by a third party (Colette). Colette, in the extent to which she exists in these reviews, exists only as the real, living Claudine. Finally, in removing Colette from the discussion of authorship, any potential control over the writing process is denied—the novel becomes a natural extension of its main character rather than a product of conscious writerly decisions.

Reviewers acknowledged, more or less openly, their suspicions that Willy was not the true author of *Claudine à l'école*. Rachilde, prominent for both her scandalous life and scandalous literary oeuvre, provides, in her May 1900 review of *Claudine à l'école*, perhaps the most blatant example of resistance to Willy's claim of authorship of the texts.<sup>7</sup> Rachilde, whose ecstatic praise for the novel is at times quasi-religious in nature (she claims to be “saved” by *Claudine à l'école*) concludes that, “de Willy, le livre est un chef-d'œuvre. De Claudine, le même livre est l'œuvre la plus extraordinaire qui puisse

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<sup>7</sup>It seems likely that Rachilde was one of the reviewers from whom Willy solicited a review (he and Colette attended her *salon*), though he does not mention Rachilde's review in the *Indiscrétions et commentaires*. Rachilde, *Mercure de France* (May 1900).

éclore sous la plume d'une débutante ” (475). Rachilde suggests that *Claudine à l'école* might not have been solely authored by Willy, but might have instead have come “de Claudine.” However, though Rachilde was well aware of Colette’s role in the writing of the text, she does not evoke a third person who might have contributed it.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the author of *Claudine* is Claudine.

Rachilde peppers her review with further references to the autobiographical nature of *Claudine à l'école*. She writes, “que par un tour de force de son seul esprit (il en a beaucoup) Willy le boulevardier, le potinier, le brillant auteur et le plus délicat des virtuoses ait crée ce personnage de Claudine, ou qu’il ait réellement *cueilli* ces pages de main aimées d’une femme, comme on prendrait des fleurs pour les disposer avec art dans un vase précieux, je m’en moque” (474 italics original). Rachilde again obliquely references the fact that Willy was not the sole author of the text—explaining that she ‘s’en moque’ as to whether Willy or “une femme” wrote the text. However, although Rachilde hints at the possibility of a female author of the text, she views this author’s creative process differently than that of a male writer. Rachilde uses the active verb “créer” to discuss Willy’s potential authorship of the text, but a passive formulation for an imagined woman author. The pages of the novel, plucked by Willy, become natural extensions of Claudine’s body rather than creations of her imagination.

Rachilde takes this imagery even further elsewhere in the review by implying that, rather than having written the text, Claudine *is* the text. The book is “ni un roman, ni une thèse, ni un journal, ni un manuscrit [...] mais une personne vivante de debout, *terrible*” (474 italics original). Rachilde describes her experience of reading the novel in

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<sup>8</sup>Letters between Colette and Rachilde dating to 1901 reveal that Rachilde was aware of Colette’s authorship of the novels. The relationship between Colette and Rachilde is discussed in more detail in the Chapter 4.

arresting terms: “la projection lumineuse d’un être m’a enveloppée” (474). Her description is not only important because of its implications for autobiography—it is also important because of the relationship that it enacts between the body of a woman and the text. In Rachilde’s figuration, the text becomes a female body. The language of the text is an extension of, even a secretion of, a woman’s body.

Other writers also hint at the potentially autobiographical nature of *Claudine à l’école*, though they lack Rachilde’s verve. Charles Arnaud, for *Polybiblion*, insists that Willy is “déguisé en pensionnaire.”<sup>9</sup> Gaston Deschamps, in his short review of the novel for the newspaper *Le Temps*, also suggests that Willy found or discovered the text, rather than writing it himself, referring to the novel as a “trouvaille de [...] fantaisie.”<sup>10</sup> Charles Maurras, for the *Revue Encyclopédique*, refers to *Claudine* as a “personne” rather than a “personnage.”<sup>11</sup> Colette never escapes this refusal of a gap between the nominal female author and the text itself.

Certainly Willy’s own preface to the first edition of the novel (suppressed in later editions) added to the fiction that the text was autobiographical, as well as establishing some of the terms in which the text would be discussed. Willy begins asserting that the text is a manuscript that he has received from a young woman, “je ne recois jamais un manuscrit sans quelque terreur [...] c’était la prose de femme, bien mieux (bien mieux?) un journal de la jeune fille !.”<sup>12</sup> He evokes *Claudine*’s unconscious animality: “sauvageonne, elle a la spontanéité inconsciente d’un jeune animal souple qui mordille sans méchanceté et câline sans penser à mal [...] qui est presque l’enfant de la Nature,”

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Arnaud, *Polybiblion* (1900). (14-15).

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Deschamps, *Le Temps* (1 April 1900).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Maurras, *Revue Encyclopédique* (5 May 1900).

<sup>12</sup> Colette, *Oevres*, ed. Claude Pichois, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). (4).

explaining that she is ““a-morale”” rather than immoral (5, 6). The extent to which this preface sets the tones for later reviews of Colette’s novels cannot be ignored. Further, Willy’s use of the text to set its own critical vocabulary fits well into an understanding of the skillful management of Colette’s persona.

### **Claudine and Femininity**

Willy’s description of Claudine’s natural, savage femininity was echoed by critics of the novels. For these critics, Claudine was not just a particularly well-written woman character, but was in fact an exemplar of a new (or perhaps very old) type of woman, the incarnation of an essence of femininity.

The most interesting treatment of Claudine’s femininity appears in a comparative essay: Charles-Henry Hirsch’s 1902 “De Mademoiselle de Maupin à Claudine.”<sup>13</sup> In this article Hirsch criticizes the commonplace novelistic depiction of the young woman as “la fleur insipide et pâle” and laments the fact that even Georges Sand’s virility could not budge this stale image. He summarily treats a large number of novels in this article, according each one little more than a paragraph—Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Daudet’s *Le Nabab*, Zola, Maupassant, Paul Adam, Balzac. After dismissing all of these depictions of women, Hirsch concludes that the fundamental truth, that “tota femina in utero,” has been ignored by all of these authors, and has been understood only by the author of the *Claudine*.

Though no other author receives more than a paragraph or two of treatment, Hirsch’s discussion of the *Claudine* lasts for six pages. Also, though Hirsch usually refers

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<sup>13</sup> Charles-Henry Hirsch, "De Mademoiselle de Maupin à Claudine," Mercure de France (6 June 1902).

primarily to the author of the work he is discussing, to such an extent that at times he omits the title of the work, in the case of the *Claudine*, Willy's name does not come up until the last sentence of the article. For Hirsch, as for other reviewers, it is Claudine, rather than her author, who is of primary importance. Claudine is the only woman character of whom Hirsch is not critical—she is the best example of a woman character that he can think of, his singular exemplary woman.

Hirsch's insistence on the principle "tota femina in utero" is important, not only because it focuses on the bodily, natural nature of femininity (located in the uterus) but also because of the "tota"—not only is Claudine's femininity located in the uterus—the whole woman is there, which is to say, she is *only* body, only natural. Hirsch continues to insist on the uterus throughout his discussion: Claudine, who is "à peine instruite" employs a logic of love, of a natural tendency toward men and sex. He makes these notions explicit in his descriptions of "la jeune femelle [qui] s'offre au male," or "la plante [qui] se dirige vers la lumière" (583, 587). The fact that these sentences reveal a gross misreading of the novels themselves shows how badly Hirsch wanted to believe in the irrational, uterine Claudine, even when this is not textually indicated. Far from "à peine instruite," the Claudine of *Claudine à l'école* receives the "brevet supérieur," a teaching certificate, one of the higher levels of education available to lower- and middle-class women at the time.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, her natural tendency toward sex with men is certainly undermined by her lesbian adventures in all three novels.

Claudine's pure femininity requires irrationality. Rachilde describes Claudine as a "vraie femme" (like Hirsch, distinguishing her from other women) and describes the book as "la femme hurlant, en pleine puberté, ses instincts, ses désirs, ses volontés, et ses

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<sup>14</sup> Tilburg, Colette's Republic : Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914.

... *crimes* !”<sup>15</sup> Rachilde is not the only one to use the word “instinct” to describe Claudine. Hirsch writes, “un instinct puissant la guide vers les sensations que tout son effort mental tend à prolonger” (583). Charles Maurras describes the portrait of Claudine in terms of nature: “peinte après la pure nature.” She is without the capability for logical discernment: “Claudine ne soupçonne pas l’importance relative des sensations qui successivement sollicitent son âme non formée [...] elle pose tout sur le même plan.” She is “inconsciente” and “a-morale,” even “sauvage.”<sup>16</sup> Georges Castella, who reviewed all three *Claudine* in the *Revue dorée* after the publication of *Claudine en ménage*, describes Claudine as “vivante à la façon des bêtes” and as obeying “tous ses instincts.”<sup>17</sup> Castella’s Claudine is also capricious, a sign of her irrational spontaneity. “Elle se retrouve la même devant l’amour ou devant la colère, parce qu’elle n’est capable, au fond, que de sentiments tumultueux. [...] ses moindres volontés sont satisfaites.” With startling consistency, reviewers of the *Claudine* praise this character for a pure femininity that can only be animal, instinctive, irrational, spontaneous.

The reactionary nature of Claudine’s natural femininity becomes most clear in Rachilde’s review of *Claudine en ménage*. Rachilde’s Claudine is the most irrational Claudine of all. She describes the character of Claudine as emerging from “des fôrets antiques où la jeune druidesse vierge s’offrait sauvagement.”<sup>18</sup> This evocation of the “antique” evokes an earlier period of “true femininity” before the infection of the New Woman. Rachilde explains that during times of “sécheresse cérébrale, de casuistique religieuses, de sophismes, d’intolérances, d’hypocrisies légales” this woman will emerge

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<sup>15</sup> Rachilde. (473 italics original).

<sup>16</sup> Maurras.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Castella, *Revue dorée*.33 (Nov 1902).

<sup>18</sup> Rachilde, *Mercure de France* (June 1902).

as “la grande ennemie, l’éternelle ennemie du cerveau de l’homme. Elle est la logique des seuls instincts.” Here, Rachilde almost sounds like Hélène Cixous in her assertion of *écriture féminine*: Claudine is, after all, an “enemy” to masculine logic and reason. However, Rachilde also sounds like the reactionary Maurice Barrès, complaining about the “sércheresses cerebrales” and ‘hypocrisies’ légales of French intellectuals after the Dreyfuss affair.

### **Praise for Claudine**

In the scholarship on Colette, there is an underlying assumption that the *Claudine* novels were scandalous and were met with moral denunciation and rage from cultural conservatives.<sup>19</sup> Of course, Willy did everything in his power to draw attention to the novels, including cultivating scandal, but in fact, in mainstream Parisian publications, *Claudine à l’école*, and the other *Claudine* novels, were praised, even by conservative critics. For example, Charles Maurras, chief editor and ideologue for the *Action française*, a right-wing Catholic periodical, praised *Claudine à l’école* in his review of the novel for the *Revue Encyclopédique*. Maurras writes, “*Claudine à l’école* est bien amusante. Mais on l’outragerait si l’on rangeait ce livre dans le rayon des auteurs gais. Il

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<sup>19</sup>I discuss several examples of this in Chapter 2—critics like Elaine Marks insist on the dangerous nature of Colette’s works, which put her at odds with the misogynist male literary establishment. On the *Claudine* novels specifically, Diana Holmes describes them as “radical” and reads them as a challenge to the “male monopoly of power” (28). Diana Holmes, *Colette, Women Writers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991). Even in the marketing of the *Claudine* novels, we see the insistence on scandal—in her introduction to a new edition of the novels, Judith Thurman describes *Claudine en ménage* as a “scandalous *roman à clef* about adultery, homosexuality, and betrayal” and *Claudine and Annie (La Retraite sentimentale)* as “only somewhat less seamy” (xviii). Colette and Antonia White, *The Complete Claudine*, 2nd Farrar, Straus and Giroux pbk. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

n’y a rien de plus sérieux que la personne de Claudine.”<sup>20</sup> Though Maurras notes the “scabrous” nature of some of the scenes, he is untroubled by this, concluding that “Sergent [Mademoiselle Sergent, one of the characters in the novel] font des chapitres d’une fantaisie un peu vive, mais assez retenue pour ne jamais déplaire, bien qu’assez variée pour ne donner aucune minute d’ennui.” Though Maurras delicately calls attention to the novel’s more scandalous moments—the “chapitres d’une fantaisie un peu vive”—this is far from a rejection of the text overall, since he concludes that the fantasy is “assez retenue pour ne jamais déplaire.” Similarly, Charles Arnaud, for *Polybiblion*, acknowledges the naughty nature of the book without rejecting it: “Je n’ose pas dire à quel point j’ai goûté *Claudine à l’école*, cette ‘perverse innocente’ [...] je ne l’ose pas—bien que le livre ne soit pas précisément ‘pornographique.’”<sup>21</sup>

*Claudine en ménage*, which features Claudine’s love for and sexual relationship with another woman, provoked the most outrage among conservative literary critics, though even this outrage never reaches the level I had expected. At least one denunciatory review did appear: Willy, in *Indiscrétions et commentaires sur les Claudine*, mentions an extremely critical review in *La Croix Rouge de Reims* because his response to the review was published on the front page of the newspaper some time later.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted, however, that this lone negative review of *Claudine en ménage* appeared in a minor, small-run, provincial, Catholic publication. Still, some members of the French public were scandalized by Claudine: Simone de Beauvoir writes about her

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<sup>20</sup> Maurras.

<sup>21</sup> Arnaud. Marcel Deschamps concludes that the work is an “amusante parodie” worth reading for its description of the education of women. Deschamps. In the case of *Claudine à Paris*, B.H. Gausseron, in the *Revue Universelle*, praises “la prestesse, [...] l’esprit, [...] la drôlerie piquante du récit où Willy a prodigué son étincelante verve.” B.H. Gausseron, *Revue Universelle* (1901).

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the copies of this newspaper at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France were too deteriorated to be consulted, so the exact content of the review and Willy’s response remain unclear.



father's objections to the novels in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, and a French senator, René Berenger ("le père de la pudeur," known for his anti-pornography campaigns), was apparently worried enough about the immoral nature of the books that he brought up the issue before that honored assembly: according to Jean de la Hire's account, he "s'indigna devant le sénat."<sup>23</sup>

In mainstream Parisian newspapers, there were also a few negative reviews, though they did not denounce the text with much force. The most negative review appears in *L'Opinion*, under the title "Moeurs renouvelées des grecs."<sup>24</sup> In the article, Paul Bernard announces: "et j'avoue, à ma honte, ou à ma louange (le public en jugera) que je n'ai pu avaler cette pilule de poison littéraire subtil, encore qu'elle fut enveloppé de la couche dorée d'un talent d'écrivain vraiment prestigieux." This is certainly a negative review, but even here, Bernard insists on the literary talent of the writer: "ce talent réel fait de simplicité à la fois fin et perverse." Bernard concludes by evoking the "magie du style" of the text, and suggesting that, in the future, its author turn his attention to more worthy subjects. Similarly, Marcel Boulenger compares the novel to an excess of "sucreries"—enjoyable, but perhaps also a bit sickening, "mi-pénible, mi-délicieux."<sup>25</sup> Though Boulenger is certainly critical of the dilettantism of the novel, he still recognizes it as "plein de talent" as well as "charmant[]" and "joli" (255). A. Gilbert de Voisins, in a review for *L'Art moderne* recognizes the beauty in certain parts of the book, while suggesting that some of the more lascivious moments are not worth reading:

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<sup>23</sup> Jean de la Hire, *Ménages d'artistes: Willy et Colette* (Paris: Adolphe d'Espie, 1905). Judith Surkis mentions Berenger's morality campaigns in Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Bernard, "Moeurs renouvelées des grecs, Claudine en ménage," *L'Opinion (Saigon)* (13 September 1902).

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Boulenger, *Renaissance latine* (12 June 1902).

Il y a dans ce livre deux parts à faire : l'une est composée des pages où l'auteur nous dit son amour pour la campagne, les occupations légères qui sont la menue monnaie de la vie, la tristesse et les sourdes angoisses de l'amour ; cette part-là est tout à fait exquise et parfois même belle ; mais il y en a une autre où nous sont décrites des caresses trop prolongées, de mauvaises mœurs et des derrières de petites filles malpropres. Eh bien, je pense vraiment que cette part-là ne vaut rien.<sup>26</sup>

Other reviews of this, Colette's most apparently scandalous novel, were even more positive. Henri Albert acknowledges the generally positive nature of reviews, writing "ces qualités de l'œuvre d'art, toute la critique fût unanime à les reconnaître et à les louer. Elles sont suffisantes pour garantir à Claudine une longue existence dans la mémoire charme de ceux qui la connaîtront."<sup>27</sup> In an article titled 'Doit-on le lire ?' Jean Lorrain acknowledges the scandalous nature of the text, staging a conversation between members of the reading public: "Vous avez lu ? Je n'ai pas pu continuer ; c'est scandaleux ! Je ne suis pas prude, mais, enfin..."<sup>28</sup> Lorrain, who described himself as 'stunned' to discover that he was not scandalized by the text, concludes that, yes, one must read it. Lorrain concludes, like many others, that the text is in fact quite moral: "le mari de Willy lui, fait de ses propres mains le ménage de *Claudine en ménage* ; mais la surprise de ce livre est que, jusqu'ici libertin, il devient tout à coup moral."

### **Claudine's Morality**

Indeed, one of the important justifications for the praise heaped on the *Claudine* was the moral content of the novels. Gaston Deschamps, writing for *Le Temps*, defends *Claudine à l'école* against any "censeurs grincheux" who might object to the titillating

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<sup>26</sup> A. Gilbert de Voisins, "Impulsion galante," *L'Art moderne* 22 (22 June 1902).

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Hire, *Ménages d'artistes: Willy et Colette*.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Lorrain, "Doit-on le lire?," *Le Journal* (29 Mai 1902).

depiction of women's education by pointing out that this fitting subject for literature has been treated by authors since the thirteenth century, and that the "plus turbulents écolières" of the novel are "modèles de sagesse" when compared to their thirteenth-century predecessors.<sup>29</sup> For Rachilde, it is because Claudine is not rational, not "civilized," that she is not responsible for the apparent "vice" of the novel: "du vice ? Non ! Le vice est une invention des civilisés. En principe, une violente et une amoureuse d'amour n'est pas une vicieuse."<sup>30</sup> Rachilde's claims that Claudine cannot be held responsible for her actions because she is an irrational woman. Similarly, Camille Pert characterizes Claudine's amorality as "l'amoralité joyeuse et mélancolique."<sup>31</sup> Pert adds that Claudine's morality is "ni de la perversion, ni du libertinage, mais de l'élan fou, indomptable du gracieux et intelligent animal qu'elle est."

Even reviews of *Claudine en ménage*, perhaps the most scandalous of the *Claudine*, given its relatively explicit depictions of lesbian sex, elicited defense and praise from critics. Georges Castella writes off attacks on *Claudine en ménage* as "l'incompréhension ou la mauvaise foi des critiques."<sup>32</sup> For Castella, Claudine's virtue is made clear in her distinction from Rachilde's character Raoule in the novel *Monsieur Vénus*. Raoule is a highly masculine character, who works to feminize her male lover, eventually devising a complicated machine that enables her to penetrate him sexually. The particular comparison between Claudine and Raoule is certainly meant to emphasize Claudine's natural femininity, as opposed to Raoule's unnatural masculinity. Castella writes that Claudine "eut servi à faire ressortir plus violemment l'antithèse qui existe

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<sup>29</sup> Deschamps.

<sup>30</sup> Rachilde, "Revue du mois," *Mercure de France* (May 1900). (474 italics original).

<sup>31</sup> Pert cited in Hire, *Ménages d'artistes: Willy et Colette*.

<sup>32</sup> Castella.

entre la vertueuse Claudine et les femmes perverses auxquelles on l'accuse de ressembler." Claudine's natural femininity allows her to remain virtuous in spite of her actions. Gaston Derys, for *Gil Blas*, also discusses the novel's morality, explaining that, though the book is obviously not "un livre pour les petites pensionnaires," it has a conclusion that would "ravira les gens vertueux" because Claudine returns to her husband, upon whom she depends.<sup>33</sup>

Though all of these reviewers defend Claudine's morality, the terms in which they defend her are remarkably different—a natural lack of morality (Rachilde), a feminine, and therefore not perverse, lesbianism (Castella), a heterosexual dependence on one's husband (Derys). However, all of these moralities, in one way or another, link back to Claudine's femininity. Further, the fact that reviewers desire a moral ending from these novels, even if they cannot agree on how to interpret the novels as moral, is a theme of Colette criticism that will not go away.

### **Claudine's Style**

The *Claudine* were often praised for the style of their writing. The terms of this praise are remarkably consistent, from the *Claudine* to other books signed by Colette. Even reviewers who did not know that Colette was the author of the work note that the style is unusual for Willy.

Derys describes the style of *Claudine en ménage*:

Il vous donne constamment le petit frisson, et sa phrase alerte, preste, musquée, où l'afféterie la plus délicate se mêle, par plaisants contrastes, aux touches un peu brutales d'un réalisme minutieux, sa phrase se faufile, insinuante, onduleuse et pailletée, comme un ruisselet qui sautèle de roc en roc, de mousse en mousse,

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<sup>33</sup> Gaston Derys, "Claudine en ménage," *Gil Blas* (24 May 1902). Derys also describes the conclusion of the novel as "antifeminist," a term that I will explore at more length in the next chapter of this work.

raillant les obstacles là, et qu'il effleure, mystérieux ici, ensoleillé là, et qui recèle dans ses glouglous une musique d'incantation, une musique aussi douce, aussi gaie, qu'une voix d'amoureuse qu'on écoute sans jamais se lasser, et qu'on écoute encore lorsqu'elle se tue.<sup>34</sup>

This sentence uses a significant amount of bodily, sensory imagery to describe the style of the novel: words like “frisson” (touch) “musquée” (scent) and “glouglous” (sound). Derys further compares the style to a lover—“la voix d'amoureuse.” There is also an insistence on natural imagery—“un ruisseau,” “ensoleillé” “de roc en roc.” This emphasis on the natural, bodily, sensual, even sexual nature of writing style will become a hallmark of discussions of Colette's style.

Other writers also praised the *Claudine*'s style. Maurice Maeterlinck, at the time a very well-respected symbolist writer, praised the author of the *Claudine* as a “délieux poète aigu.” André Beaunier, who attributes the style of the *Claudine* to Claudine herself, rather than to Willy, writes, “comme elle écrit, cette Claudine ! avec quelle habileté, quel esprit, quelle délicatesse ! comme elle sait dire les choses les plus difficiles avec un art subtil—subtil et simple, presque classique.”<sup>35</sup> Marcel Boulanger, like Gaston Derys, notes the sensual aspects of the style, calling it “savoureux” and remarking upon its “volupté.”<sup>36</sup>

## Rachilde

Rachilde took a very strong interest in Colette from the beginning of her career; reviewing, between 1900 and 1918, every text that Colette wrote. Rachilde's reviews are

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<sup>34</sup> Derys, “Claudine en ménage.”

<sup>35</sup> Maeterlinck and Baunier cited in Hire, *Ménages d'artistes: Willy et Colette*. I will return to the question of the “classique” in Colette's work in Chapter 5.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Boulanger, *Renaissance latine* 1 (12 June 1902).

typical of Colette criticism in general in that, as we have seen, Rachilde focuses on Claudine's irrational, natural femininity. However, there is something particular about Rachilde's critical relationship to Colette that deserves a moment of attention before passing to a discussion of Colette criticism in general. Unlike other critics, Rachilde uses her reviews to instruct Colette, to discipline the boundaries of a proper Colette text. Though she reviews every text that Colette writes, she does not have the same enthusiasm for every work: for example, though she ecstatically praises *Claudine à l'école*, her review of *Claudine à Paris*, though never overtly critical, is lukewarm. The highest praise she offers of the book is for the "histoires de chats exquises."<sup>37</sup> Colette is aware of Rachilde's preference for *Claudine à l'école* in a letter, writing, "vous préférez *Claudine à l'école* et vous me faites l'honneur de me le dire."<sup>38</sup>

The criteria by which Rachilde gives or withholds praise are linked to Colette's femininity, to nature, irrationality, animals. Rachilde's review of *La Retraite sentimentale* is ecstatic. She adores the Claudine of this novel, a "bête" "cruellement sauvage[]" who dances in mysterious, ancient, forest rituals. She has an understanding of the "ivresses mystérieuses de la Nature [...] dont quelques-unes sont ignorés par les hommes."<sup>39</sup> Rachilde also explains in this review "pourquoi la femme, la vraie, devait rester une créature en marge des civilisations; c'est qu'elle est toujours plus dangereuse sous le masque des convenances sociales que tout nue" (113). Rachilde's meaning in this sentence is ambiguous: is Colette a 'real woman' "en marges des civilisations," or is she

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<sup>37</sup> Rachilde, *Mercure de France* 188-89 (April 1901).

<sup>38</sup> Claude Dauphiné, *Rachilde* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1991). (170).

<sup>39</sup> Rachilde, *Mercure de France* (April 1904). In her review of *L'Entrave*, Rachilde returns to this language, announcing that "Mme Colette est un demi-dieu" (588). Rachilde further describes Colette's demi-god status when she likens Colette to "les individus qui sont entre le divin et l'humain [qui] n'ont pas besoin de Dieu ou du diable" (588). Rachilde, *Mercure de France* (16 May 1913).

an even more dangerous woman, “sous le masque des convenances sociales”? Femininity and irrationality are also used by Rachilde to criticize Colette. In her review of *Dialogues des bêtes*, the first work signed by Colette, Rachilde writes that “Mme Colette Willy nous dévoile du même coup une âme naïve et une complexité cérébrale, bien curieuse. Elle est femme de lettres par le choix du détail, littéraire par la nouveauté, un brin précieuse, de la métaphore, et simplement femme tout court dans son admiration de ses bêtes.”<sup>40</sup>

Though these sentences might sound like praise, Rachilde implicitly critiques this “femme de lettres” with her “complexité cérébrale” later in the review. She reproaches “le secret réservoir de science de ces cervelles rudimentaires; le chat, surtout, est un personnage qui a des idées sur ce qu’il pouvait déjà perpétrer [...] Kiki-la-Doucette parle un peu trop comme un homme qui pâlerait sur les livres aux clartés du gaz [...] Je préfère la naïve jobardise de Toby-Chien. Il est plus nature, moins humain.” Rachilde makes her expectations of Colette’s writing clear: she prefers animal over human, nature over intellect, female over male. The cat, “un peu trop comme un homme” demonstrating an excess of “science,” could easily be Colette (in other reviews, Rachilde describes both Claudine and Colette as cats, in fact). Though other critics do not even consider Colette in terms of reason, of intellect, Rachilde does find rationality in some of Colette’s works, and rejects it.<sup>41</sup>

Rachilde’s last review, of the collection *Les Heures longues*, which reads like a letter to Colette, concludes: “vous serez demain le plus grand des journalistes qui savent écrire. Vous n’aurez pas de peine à démontrer des vérités quotidiennes et à allumer la

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<sup>40</sup> Rachilde.

<sup>41</sup> Dauphiné, *Rachilde*. (170). In an undated letter, Rachilde chides Colette: ‘Tachez, Colette, je vous en prie, de vous souvenir que vous portez une chose précieuse en votre cerveau de chatte folle et bondissante par-dessus les gouttières des préjugés sociaux et que l’on peut rompre le bel équilibre de cette chose précieuse en marchant sur les mains, par exemple !’

torche qui fait propager l'incendie purificateur. Faites-le."<sup>42</sup> Here, Rachilde makes her imagined control over Colette's writing career explicit—ordering her to use her femininity to “light a purifying fire,” whatever that might mean. Again, though this might sound like the kind of purifying feminine violence that would appeal to Hélène Cixous, it should instead be read as a reactionary call to purify the masculine logic of women, even more so than men.<sup>43</sup>

### **After Claudine: Colette's Autobiography**

The transition between reviews of the *Claudine* and reviews of later novels signed by Colette is seamless. The language used by reviewers becomes increasingly ossified throughout the 1910's and 1920's, until Colette's “naturel” develops into a cliché. I will use the categories from the first part of the chapter—autobiography, femininity, praise, morality, and style—to trace the remarkable stability in the reception of Colette after the *Claudine*. One reason for the similarity between reviews of the *Claudine* and reviews of Colette's later works is that reviewers believed that Colette was Claudine—any characteristic that they attributed to Claudine could just as easily be attributed to Colette. This point of view is best summed up by Louise Martial, in her review of *La Naissance du jour* for the avant-gardist review *Point et virgule*: “Colette, est, malgré *Chéri*, l'écrivain d'un seul livre, celui de sa vie. Si son œuvre constitue un phénomène, ce n'est

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<sup>42</sup>Rachilde, *Mercure de France* (16 February 1918).

<sup>43</sup>For example, Cixous, who also opposes *écriture féminine* with masculine logic and theory, writes that the appearance of the woman-poet will be “une révolution—car le bastion était immuable—du moins de déchirantes explosions. Parfois c'est d'ailleurs dans la cassure que cause un tremblement de terre, à l'occasion de cette mutation radicale des choses par un bouleversement matériel quand toutes les structures sont un moment désorientées, et qu'une éphémère sauvagerie balaie l'ordre” (42). Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la méduse,” *L'Arc* 45.2 (1975).



point par une extériorisation intelligente du moi féminin, mais pour une forme essentiellement nouvelle de l'autobiographie."<sup>44</sup> Martial's complete denial both of the intelligence of Colette's writing and of the exteriority of Colette's writing is crucial. For Martial, the "essentially new" form of autobiography produced by Colette is an irrational, automatic writing and rewriting of the self—from the *Claudine* novels forward, Colette only produces a single text.

Because Colette only writes autobiography, her name and the names of her characters are interchangeable. Emmanuel Glaser refers to Colette as, "pour lui emprunter un de ses titres—une 'ingénue libertine.'"<sup>45</sup> Fernand Anque admits that "la discrimination entre la vraie Colette et Claudine est donc difficile."<sup>46</sup> Just as Colette and her fictional characters are interchangeable, different characters from different texts merely become different variations on the same, essential person: Renée Néré, protagonist of *La Vagabonde* (1910), is "une Claudine toute usée et meurtrie."<sup>47</sup>

The one time that some debate over autobiography appeared in reviews of Colette's novels was with *La Vagabonde*. Jean Schlumberger expresses a certain amount of discomfort with the extent to which the novel mimics Colette's own life—he calls it

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<sup>44</sup> Louise. Martial, *Point et virgule* (June 1928).

<sup>45</sup> Glaser, "Novembre--Les Romans," *Le Mouvement littéraire* (1910).

<sup>46</sup> Fernand Anque, "La Jeunesse de Colette," *Nouvelles littéraires* (4 July 1925).

<sup>47</sup> Z, *L'Opinion* (10 December 1910).

Three more examples: *Revue Mondiale* review of *Le Blé en herbe*: "Elle qui a su jadis nous raconter d'une façon si drue, si frappante, si attachante, l'éveil dans la nature de Claudine, ses premiers émois, était bien indiquée pour écrire cette idylle rustique." Nicholas Ségur, *Revue mondiale* (15 August 1923).

In a review of the 1929 *Voyage egoïste*: "Sa sensibilité n'est point locale. Elle ne s'attache ni à un seul sens, ni à une seule contrée. Elle embrasse tout entier, l'être et le monde. Les odeurs, les saveurs des Claudines vivent en tous ceux qui ont lu ces livres et l'atmosphère artificielle des music-halls, et Paris, et la campagne, exaltés sous le soleil, ou lumineuses par la neige qui étouffait les pas d'Annie." Jean Larnac, "La Critique des livres: Essais," *Nouvelles littéraires* (13 April 1929).

"Vous pensez bien que notre femme naturelle, si évoluée soit-elle, ne s'élève pas jusqu'à une notion métaphysique de la vie. [...] Laissez faire la vie, vous verrez que Claudine, devenue la vagabonde, trouvera un jour que la maternité est la fin dernière de cette attente si longue et si inquiète." Jean de Pierrefeu, "Le Livre de la semaine," *L'Opinion* (8 November 1913).

”une autobiographie à peine voilée” and delicately suggests that the reasons readers might enjoy this story of a young dancer “n’ont que peu de chose à voir avec la littérature.”<sup>48</sup> Though Schlumberger reads the novel as autobiographical, it is this autobiographical element that he thinks is the least believable part of the book. He asks, “elle a *véritablement* éprouvé ceci ? pensé cela? Est-ce bien là l’existence à laquelle l’ont condamnée son humeur indépendante et les durs préjugés du monde ?” (469 italics original). Henri Martineau, in stark contrast, finds the book lacking in autobiography. He writes that “ce roman... nous déçoit tout de même, par son manque d’unité, par les défauts de sa composition, et par ce qu’il y a d’un peu artificiel dans l’analyse et dans l’évolution d’un sentiment plus imaginé que vécu. C’est précisément cet amalgame de vérité criante et de fiction qui ne donne pas le fondu, l’achevé, le parfait que nous étions en droit d’attendre.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly, there is no critical consensus over the autobiographical nature of *La Vagabonde*—for some, it is too autobiographical, for others, not enough.

This posing of autobiography as a problem marks a new phenomenon in Colette criticism—critics celebrated the autobiography of the *Claudine* novels rather than worrying over it. Interestingly, though some critics dismissed *La Vagabonde* as too autobiographical, it is also possible that critics were less fond of the novel *Chéri* (1920) because it was more difficult to connect this work to Colette’s autobiography than previous works, given that the protagonist is a man. In fact, some critics made clear their preference for *La Maison de Claudine*, a series of explicitly autobiographical short stories published in 1922. In the review of *La Fin de Chéri* for the *Revue Universelle*, readers are assured “il est permis de préférer les sortilèges de la *Maison de Claudine*, cette

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Schlumberger, *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 27 (1911).

<sup>49</sup> Henri Martineau, *Le Divan* 17 (1911).

psychologie sous les voiles a pourtant bien des attraits.”<sup>50</sup> In the *Nouvelles littéraires* review of the two works, Mireille Havet explains: “*La Maison de Claudine* est bien différente. *Chéri* est un livre bas, la *Maison de Claudine* est au contraire très pure, mais nous y retrouvons la même mélancolie.”<sup>51</sup>

## Colette’s Femininity

Discussions of Colette’s natural, instinctive, spontaneous femininity are too numerous to discuss each one in detail. For example, some form of the word “instinct” appears in more than a third of the reviews that I found between 1906 and 1930. “Nature,” “natural,” and “spontaneous” are nearly as common. A few carefully selected examples of this notion of natural femininity will ably demonstrate not only its popularity but how seductive this view of Colette became for critics.

J. Ernest-Charles, reviewing *La Vagabonde*, thanks God for Colette’s “vraiment féminine” personality, and describes her as “une femme spontanée, instinctive, en même temps affectée et précieuse, brutalement réaliste et délicieusement poète.”<sup>52</sup> He also mentions her closeness to animals—“elle flatte les bêtes” —and her communication with nature – “elle crie à la nature.”<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Ségur, in his review of *La Femme cachée*,

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Kemp, *La Revue Universelle* XXV.2 (15 August 1926).

<sup>51</sup> Mireille Havet, “Nos Médaillons,” *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques, et scientifiques* (21 Octobre 1922). And another one: in a 1929 review of *Bella Vista*: “de là vient sans doute que les livres de souvenirs purs, tels *Sido* ou la *Maison de Claudine* surpassent pour nous ceux où elle doit se plier à une fiction. Jean Vaudal, *Nouvelle Revue Française* 50 (February 1938). The *Nouvelles littéraires* is a wide-audience publication focused on “un reflet vivant de l’actualité culturelle, ni trop académique, ni trop engagée dans l’avant-garde.” Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral and Fernand Terrou, eds., *Histoire générale de la presse française*, vol. III: De 1971 à 1940, 3 vols. (Paris: PUF, 1972).(595).

<sup>52</sup> J Ernest-Charles, *L’Excelsior* (December 19, 1910).

<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Eduard Dolléans’s review of *L’Envers du Music-Hall* for the *NRF*: “Ses deux plus récents livres mettent en relief les trois qualités que l’intimité de son œuvre nous révèle, la fraîcheur et la richesse des sensations qu’éveille en elle le sentiment de la nature ; la pittoresque intelligence qu’elle a de l’âme des bêtes, l’intuition aiguë qu’elle possède des êtres frêles et effacés, de ces humbles vies qui se cachent aux

manages to squeeze nearly every cliché of femininity into a single paragraph: “jusque dans ses moindres récits, Madame Colette sait laisser paraître son talent naturel et sa parfaite connaissance de nos racines instinctives. Quelques fois même dans ces contes de quatre ou cinq pages éclate mieux sa spontanéité, sa sincérité et l’aise de son style non soigné, mais naturellement agréable et coulant.”<sup>54</sup> Ségur, reviewing *Le Blé en herbe* for the *Revue mondiale*, also evokes autobiography in works by Colette, connecting it back to instinct and spontaneity: “ce ne pouvait pas être là une œuvre aussi fouillée, aussi personnelle, que *l’Entrave* ou que *la Vagabonde*. Mais c’est un roman, où ce qu’il y a de spontané, d’instinctif dans le talent de Mme Colette apparaît encore assez distinctement.”<sup>55</sup>

Reviews also evoke the connection between the female body and Colette’s writing. Henri Pourrat evokes the nudity of Colette’s female characters in his review of *Le Blé en herbe*: “ses personnages, les personnages féminins surtout, tiennent toujours par mille fils de soie au grand milieu originel. Demi -nus et dorés naturels, quasiment instinctifs, qui réinventent l’amour parmi les tourments du corps et de l’âme.”<sup>56</sup> Jean Erhard, in the 1932 *Le Roman français depuis Marcel Proust*, also evokes the bodily nature of Colette’s writing: “jamais une sensation n’est réduite à sa forme intellectuelle ; Colette écrit pour la peau. Elle chérit la vie instinctive, celle des animaux... et à faire

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yeux de la plupart et dont elle sait d’une main si délicate découvrir le mystère avec quelle ingéniosité dans l’expression elle sait décrire les figures...” Eduard Dolléons, *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1 July 1913). Another similar example appears in the *Nouvelles littéraires* review of *Le blé en herbe* : “La vie universelle atteint peut-être chez elle à un état de tension qu’elle n’a pas ailleurs... Mi- fée, mi-animale, elle est plus proche de la matière animée : moins isolée des éléments, des choses, des êtres primitifs.” Benjamin Crémieux, “Les Lettres françaises,” *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques, et scientifiques* 2 (25 August 1923).

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas Ségur, *Revue mondiale* 158 (15 April 1924).

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Ségur, “La Vie littéraire,” *La Revue Mondiale* 154 (15 August 1923).

<sup>56</sup> Henri Pourrat, “Notes,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 21 (1 September 1923).

crédit à un écrivain qui a introduit dans notre littérature la prose féminine qui lui manquait.”<sup>57</sup>

Colette’s femininity is often linked to her genius. I dwell for an additional moment on the connection between Colette and genius in part because of Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion, in *Le Deuxième sexe*, that “il y a des femmes qui sont folles et il y a des femmes de talent : aucune n’a cette folie dans le talent qu’on appelle le génie” (II 633). My purpose is not to disprove Beauvoir’s assertion by insisting that Colette was in fact a “génie.”<sup>58</sup> Instead, I want to show the ways that, though Colette might have been referred to using the language of “génie,” this genius was always gendered, always feminine. Colette was certainly not considered a genius in the same way that male writers were taken to be geniuses. Beauvoir is correct in saying that that a truly universal notion of genius was not available to women, in spite of reviews that use this language in connection to Colette.

Colette was first referred to as a “génie” in 1913, in two separate reviews. The first, by Rachilde, takes Colette’s “génie,” as a given, and asks why a writer of such “génie” would also work in music-halls.<sup>59</sup> The other reviewer to use the word “génie” to refer to Colette was also a woman: Héra Mirtel, in a review of *L’Entrave* for *Renaissance contemporaine* entitled “Colette!”<sup>60</sup> Mirtel writes :

Le Verbe agile et magique de cette “fée de l’encrier” qui affronte l’infrontable, dompte l’indomptable dans le mystère de la pensée, comme dans celui du style. Bravo Colette ! Chacun de nos essors vers l’isolement nécessaire à l’œuvre s’est

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<sup>57</sup> Jean Édouard Ehrhard, *Le Roman français depuis Marcel Proust* (Paris: La Nouvelle revue critique, 1932).

<sup>58</sup> Here, Beauvoir is presumably evoking the Romantic notion of the individual artistic genius, driven mad by divine creative forces beyond his control, like Baudelaire, for example.

<sup>59</sup> Rachilde.

<sup>60</sup> Héra Mirtel, *Renaissance contemporaine* 7 (10 November 1913). Mirtel is a rare woman reviewer of Colette, and a literary figure in her own right. Héra Mirtel was the pseudonym of Marie-Louise Jacques, notorious for her passionate and scandalous writing about love.

accru de votre contagieuse conquête ! Au sommet où nous rassure votre génie, où il semble nous dire : “Tenez pour certain, désormais, qu’on y arrive à cette apothéose de créatrice exempte du protecteur, de l’initiateur jusqu’ici nécessaire à nos timidités” nous allons partager votre définitive et éblouissante royauté de femme couronnée de son seul nom, vêtue de la seule pourpre de sa féminine puissance.

In this citation, Colette’s genius is tied to her femininity through her “féminine puissance,” her status as a “femme couronnée de son seul nom,” and her magical writing style.<sup>61</sup>

Thanks to all of these qualities, Colette is also held up as a model for other women writers to follow. Pawlowski, reviewing *L’Entrave* for *Comoedia*, writes: “Colette [...] a ceci de très particulier, qu’elle représente à notre époque à elle seule la littérature féminine digne de ce nom [...] son texte] ne révèle aucun plan d’ensemble, aucune préméditation littéraire. C’est purement d’instinct que Colette nous décrit au contraire.”<sup>62</sup> In his review of *Chéri* for the *Nouvelle Revue française*, Benjamin Crémieux adds, “ce n’est que dans un siècle ou deux qu’on pourra doser avec quelque chance de précision l’apport de Colette dans la littérature française. Aucune des femmes-prosateurs qui l’ont précédée, de Marguerite de Navarre à Mme de Staël et à George Sand, n’ont écrit autrement que des hommes. La véritable créatrice de la prose féminine française, c’est Colette.”<sup>63</sup> It is not just that Colette is a woman writer—she is *the* woman writer.

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<sup>61</sup> Other reviewers also link Colette’s “génie” to her femininity, like Mireille Havet: “La plume de Colette mieux que celle de l’oiseau nocturne qui se promenait, dit-elle, dans le grenier lunaire avec ‘une majesté d’enchanteur’ est un anneau qui nous révèle le monde. Dès qu’elle touche l’encrier où elle pêche le génie, nous sommes pris et par le cœur et par nos souvenirs qui ressemblent aux siens et par son enfance, la notre.” Havet, “Nos Médailles.”

<sup>62</sup>G. de Pawlowski, “La Semaine littéraire,” *Comoedia* (9 November 1913). Similarly, Jean de Pierrefeu refers to Colette as “le modèle de la littérature féminine.” Pierrefeu, “Le Livre de la semaine.”

<sup>63</sup>Benjamin Crémieux, “Chéri,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (December 1920). Very similar: for the *Nouvelles littéraires*, Benjamin Crémieux compares Colette to other women writers: “La mode chez les dames de plus est présentement au style masculin ; une Henriette Charasson, une Renée Dunan écrivent comme des hommes. Si cette tendance s’accroissait, ce serait un retour à la tradition, que notre époque n’aurait fait qu’interrompre un instant Mme de Staël, George Sand, Louise Ackermann, écrivaient masculinement tout comme Marguerite de Valois ou Louise Labbé. Il n’y a dans leur style rien de

According to most of these reviewers, Colette's writing is unique in its irrational, instinctive femininity. This is absolutely not a characteristic that they ascribe to all women's writing. Indeed, for these reviewers, most women writers are criticized for not being feminine enough.

### **Praise for Colette**

As we have seen, reviews of novels written by Colette after 1906 were, like the reviews of the *Claudine*, overwhelmingly positive. Most reviews contain only very minor criticisms of the novels in question, or none at all. When reviewers do criticize a novel, the criticism inevitably takes the same form: the reviewer praises Colette's indisputable "talent" or even "génie," while confessing that the particular work under review is simply not Colette's best work. *La Vagabonde* and the pair of novels *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri* provide excellent case studies for understanding the praise of Colette's novels.

The closest Colette ever came to winning a major literary prize was in 1910, when *La Vagabonde* made the short list for the Prix Goncourt. In the first round of voting, Colette's novel received two votes, Apollinaire's *L'Hérésiarque et Cie* three votes, and Louis Pergaud's collection of poetry *De Goupil à Margot*, the eventual winner of the prize, only one vote. However, in the second round of voting, Pergaud's collection received five votes, as did a book that had received no votes in the first round—Gaston Roupnel's novel *Nono*. In the final round of voting, Pergaud's text beat Roupnel's by a single vote.<sup>64</sup> René Benjamin, in a 1910 article for *Gil Blas*, asked some of the members

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spécifiquement féminin. [...] La véritable créatrice de la prose féminine française, c'est Colette." Crémieux, "Les Lettres françaises."

<sup>64</sup> Eugène Montfort, Vingt-cinq ans de la littérature française: Tableau de la vie littéraire de 1895 à 1920 (Paris: Librairie de France, 1925).

of the Academy why the voting had happened this way, and why Colette's novel, which did so well in the first round, was not even considered in the second.<sup>65</sup> Lucien Descaves responded that "à tous les Dix, on n'envoie pas tous les livres et si Mme Willy n'a obtenu que deux voix, c'est que tous les Dix n'avaient pas lu son roman. A partir du second tour, on ne s'est battu que sur des œuvres connues de tous." However, his fellow member Élémir Bourges explained Colette's loss somewhat differently: "mais, mon cher, c'est toujours ainsi... Nous votons délibérément au premier tour, pour ceux qui ont le moins de chances. Alors, nous leur faisons une petite réclame. C'est une compensation." Whatever the reason, Colette did not become the first woman to win the Prix Goncourt, an honor that eventually went to Elsa Triolet in 1944, the same year that Colette became a member of the academy.<sup>66</sup>

As is fitting for a nominee for the Prix Goncourt, *La Vagabonde* enjoyed considerable critical praise. Even critics who were a little skeptical of the novel, like Henri Martineau, for *Le Divan*, described the novel as "un beau livre" that is "passionant" and whose writer is a "très grand écrivain."<sup>67</sup> Martineau also places Colette's works "au premier rang de nos lettres contemporains" (21). Jean Schlumberger the *Nouvelle Revue française*, though his praise for the book is less enthusiastic, nonetheless categorizes this book as "bien au-dessus de nombreux ouvrages plus conscients" and believes that the book has "merit."<sup>68</sup> Schlumberger's reference to "ouvrages plus conscients" should be understood in terms of other praise of Colette's irrational writing style.

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<sup>65</sup> René Benjamin, *Gil Blas* 10 december 1910.

<sup>66</sup> It has been suggested that both Colette's election to the Académie and the awarding of the prize to Triolet, who was Jewish, were ways for the Académie to distance itself from the taint of the collaboration.

<sup>67</sup> Martineau.

<sup>68</sup> Schlumberger.



Other reviewers were less restrained in their praise of the novel. Emmanuel Glaser, for *Le Mouvement littéraire*, writes that *La Vagabonde* is Colette's best novel to date: "le roman le plus direct, le plus personnel qu'elle nous ait encore donné."<sup>69</sup> Gaston Deschamps, for *Le Temps*, applauds the novel, and even goes so far as to compare Colette to Balzac.<sup>70</sup> An anonymous reviewer for *L'Opinion*, writes that the novel is a "beau livre sans reproches."<sup>71</sup> J. Ernest-Charles, in a review for the *Excelsior*, writes that "le talent de Mme. Willy est, en effet, indiscutable."<sup>72</sup>

There were some criticisms of the novel. Henri Martineau, for *Le Divan*, writes that, although the novel is a "beau livre," "il n'est point encore l'œuvre parfaite que nous avons le droit d'attendre de Mme Colette Willy" (21). According to Martineau, Colette's books, up to and including this one, have been "piquant" and filled with "sentiment exquis" but "trop rapides : à peine nous avons mordu à la pulpe fondante du fruit que la collation est déjà terminée" (21). Martineau's dissatisfaction with the rapidity, and the sense of dissipation after finishing the novel is put in explicitly sensual, perhaps even sexual terms—the novel is an exquisite physical experience that ends too quickly. The terms are also natural—comparing the novel to a piece of fruit. This dissatisfaction is echoed by Jean Schlumberger, who writes that "ces passages [descriptions of music-halls] ne suffirait pas à faire de ce roman un livre égal et plein, ni à proprement parler une

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<sup>69</sup> Glaser, "Novembre--Les Romans."

<sup>70</sup> Gaston Deschamps, *Le Temps* (January 15, 1911).

<sup>71</sup> Z.

<sup>72</sup> Ernest-Charles. It is interesting to note that Ernest-Charles was not always such an enthusiastic fan of Colette. He described *Les Dialogues des bêtes* as "d'une insupportable prétention et extrêmement factices." cited in Jean Larnac, *Colette, sa vie, son oeuvre* (Paris: Simon Kra, 1927). (94) Unexpectedly, Ernest-Charles also characterizes *La Vagabonde* as: "son dernier roman, le plus logique, le mieux ordonné de ses livres, *La Vagabonde* !" (2). It is fascinating that Ernest-Charles praises *La Vagabonde* for its "logique" and its organization. These are not normally terms that we associate with Colette critics from this period, who prefer to think of Colette, as we saw earlier, as a less-than-conscious writer. In fact, Ernest-Charles is himself one of these critics, praising Colette's style elsewhere in the review for its "instinct." It is hard to reconcile this praise for Colette's logic with an insistence on her work as instinctive.

œuvre d'art achevée."<sup>73</sup> In both of these cases, the authors of the review acknowledge Colette's "indisputable" talent, which is considered, on some level, to be immaterial to the quality of the particular book that they are reviewing. This particular critique, of dissatisfaction, does not come up in any other reviews of Colette's novels. It seems likely that, because the novel was nominated for the Prix Goncourt, it was held to a different standard, that of an "oeuvre d'art achevée," to which her other novels were not.<sup>74</sup>

At other moments, critics praised Colette's talent in general, while expressing some skepticism about the work itself. This mode is especially evident in reviews of *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri*, perhaps because these works differed drastically from the kinds of books that Colette had written before them. J. Joseph Renaud, in his review of *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri* for *L'Œuvre*, writes: "et je crois même que, sans le génie de Colette, *Chéri* serait d'une stupidité à peine supportable. [...]. Second postulat, plus hardi encore que le premier et que peu d'hommes accordèrent à Colette, sous réserve de droits exceptionnels qu'on ne peut contester à un si beau talent : Chéri inguérissable de l'amour de l'antique Léa, inguérissable au point d'en mourir."<sup>75</sup> Though the novel might not be Colette's best, her "génie" is able to prevent it from being unbearably stupid. Similarly, Pierre Lassere for the *Revue Universelle*, express reservations about this particular text. Though Lassere ultimately praises the novel, he introduces his review by writing that he would have preferred to read *Les Dialogues des bêtes*: "c'est dans ces genres familiers et dont la matière d'observation est toute proche que Mme Colette trouve le meilleur emploi

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<sup>73</sup>Schlumberger. (470).

<sup>74</sup>Though none mention the Goncourt nomination, many of the reviews were published after the novel was nominated for the prize, which is usually announced in early November.

<sup>75</sup>J. Joseph Renaud, *L'Œuvre* (23 March 1926).

de son talent.”<sup>76</sup> Both of these reviews are critical, but this criticism is couched through a general insistence on Colette’s “talent,” even her “génie.” *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri* are not very good novels, according to these reviewers, but Colette is nonetheless a great writer. Of course, it could be that Laserre and Renaud did not truly believe that Colette was a great writer, and merely pay lip service to her “génie” here. Either way, it is clear that by 1920, Colette’s greatness has become essentially unassailable.

Other writers defend *Chéri* and offer insights into reasons that the work made some reviewers uncomfortable. Benjamin Crémieux, for the *Nouvelle Revue française*, explains that “*Chéri* a déconcerté quelques admirateurs de Madame Colette, parce qu’ils y ont cherché en vain la chaleur lyrique des *Vrilles de la vigne* et de *l’Entrave*.”<sup>77</sup> Though it is not entirely clear what Crémieux might have meant by “la chaleur lyrique,” it is true that *Chéri* was Colette’s first text written in the third person, and her first text with a male protagonist. Could it be that this difference made it seem colder, more distant, than her previous works? Crémieux, like Renaud, makes reference both to Colette’s “talent” and to her “génie” in the review that follows.

It is impossible to ignore, in these citations, the frequency of the use of the word “talent”—obviously, Colette’s talent becomes one of the commonplaces of discussions of her works.<sup>78</sup> Maurice Lena, discussing *La Fin de Chéri* for *L’Excelsior*, similarly evokes talent: “le talent de Mme Colette, par l’aisance et la souplesse, par le constant bonheur du mot direct et de l’image neuve, donne l’impression d’être tellement sur qu’il en devient

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<sup>76</sup> Pierre Laserre, *Revue Universelle* (1 October 1920).

<sup>77</sup> Crémieux, “Chéri.”

<sup>78</sup> André Thérive, reviewing *La Fin de Chéri* for *L’Opinion*, returns to the controversy over *Chéri*, pointing out the fact that even detractors of the book admired it, and again evoking Colette’s talent: “*Chéri* était un livre incomparable, un des plus beaux peut-être qu’on ait écrits en langue française, à l’avis même de ses détracteurs dont nous allons reparler. [...] C’est à la réflexion que l’on conçoit ces difficultés vaincues ; et l’on admire davantage le talent le génie de Colette, qui n’a pas même dû s’y dissimuler.” André Thérive, *Opinion* (17 April 1926).

comme infaillible.”<sup>79</sup> Lena’s assessment sums things up nicely—Colette’s talent, not only in her works, but in critical discourses as well, has become certain, infallible, even when critics did not like a specific work.<sup>80</sup>

Though Colette herself was consecrated by the French literary establishment—she was made a member of the Royal Belgian Academy in 1935, a member of the Académie Goncourt in 1944 and its president in 1949, a grand officier du Légion d’Honneur in 1953, and was the first woman ever to receive a state funeral from the French government—none of her novels ever won a prestigious literary prize. This kind of consecration—honoring the woman rather than her works—dovetails with the image of Colette described thus far. It is Colette herself, rather than her individual works, who is the focus of much of the praise of her novels.

### **Colette’s Morality**

Interpretations of the conclusion of *La Vagabonde* provide a useful example for understanding later interpretations of the moral content of Colette’s literary oeuvre. Like reviewers of the *Claudine*, all of the reviewers of the novel insist on the morality of the ending, though they explain this morality in very different ways. The plot of the novel is simple: Renée Néré, a divorcée who is employed as an actress, falls in love with a

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<sup>79</sup> Maurice Lena, "Les Livres," *Excelsior* (9 May 1926).

<sup>80</sup>See also *Nouvelles littéraires* review of *Le Blé en herbe* : “Ce n’est pas le meilleur livre de Colette—encore qu’il soit remarquable et contienne sur la mer des pages d’anthologie,—mais c’est peut-être celui où sa ‘philosophie de la vie’ des rapports entre hommes et femmes, s’exprime avec le plus de force de la clarté.”Crémieux, "Les Lettres françaises." Also, “Mais le fait d’un talent reconnu par le consensus universel doit-il porter les délicats à supporter que cette renommée a quelque chose de tant soit peu surfait ?” Marcel Berger, "Le Style au microscope: Colette," *Revue mondiale* 30 (15 August 1929).

wealthy man, Max. Max wants to marry her, but she chooses to continue her career, going on tour with her theater troupe to South America, rather than marry him.

J. Ernest-Charles summarizes the conclusion of *La Vagabonde* thus: “elle [Renée] renonce à la lutte pour le bonheur possible... Elle sera sans fin la Vagabonde et la Solitaire ... Elle pleurera sans témoins.”<sup>81</sup> He adds that in this “cruelle résolution,” Renée is unhappy because “il lui manque la vie normale près d’un mari, crée de toute éternité pour être son compagnon modeste et gentil. Et elle crie sa détresse.” For Ernest-Charles, the novel reveals to young women the inherent unhappiness of vagabondage, of liberty, of life without a husband. Ernest-Charles understands this to be a profoundly moral ending—Colette is teaching young readers about the tragedy of the unmarried lives of women who choose work over family.

Emmanuel Glaser also reads the ending as somewhat tragic, though, for him, the story is Max’s tragedy, rather than Renée’s. “Je plains de tout mon cœur le pauvre Max, l’homme simple et amoureux que son méchant destin a mis sur le chemin de cette petite femme séduisante et cruelle qui se croit un instant amoureuse, mais qui au fond—je le lui dis tout bas, puisqu’elle n’a pas su découvrir cela dans son analyse, pourtant si pénétrante et si loyale—n’aime vraiment qu’une personne au monde : elle-même.”<sup>82</sup> Though both Glaser and Ernest-Charles feel saddened by the ending of the work, neither implies that the text is immoral; instead, it is a moral description of a tragic situation.

For Gaston Deschamps and Henri Martineau, however, the ending of the novel is triumphant, rather than tragic. Deschamps praises Renée’s rejection of “Don Juan.” “Ayant manqué sa vie au foyer où elle aurait pu trouver le bonheur, elle ne veut point des

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<sup>81</sup> Ernest-Charles.

<sup>82</sup> Glaser, “Novembre--Les Romans.”

compensations faciles que lui offre la vie de bohème. Elle a horreur de Don Juan, de ses bouquets, de sa ‘garçonnière,’ de ses autos...”<sup>83</sup> For Deschamps, then, because the narrator did not find happiness in her first marriage, she is right to reject a second marriage with a questionably “fast” suitor. He reads her flight to South America as a flight from sin: “elle fuit jusqu’en Amérique, pour échapper à la tentation du pécher.”<sup>84</sup> Martineau also praises Renée’s rejection of Max—though she initially accepts his caresses (outside the confines of marriage), she eventually takes hold of herself and spurns his inappropriate advances: “ayant eu le temps de se ressaisir, elle lui fermera sa porte.”<sup>85</sup> These reviewers also find a moral lesson in the end of the book, but in the mode of triumph, rather than tragedy.

The diversity of explanations of the end of the novel show the extent to which Colette’s reviewers were committed to reading her works as moral: even when the morality is so vague that readers find it in different places, they all agree that it must be in there, somewhere. Though the positive responses to *La Vagabonde* indicate that the novel was less outwardly subversive than later critics might suggest, this confusion over the end of the novel does provide some basis for a feminist reading. Though misogynist readers desperately want the novel to fit into the antifeminist, patriarchal paradigms, their inconsistency in explaining away Renée Néré’s rejection of marriage at the end of the novel shows that this conclusion must have been troubling to them on some level. Or, this shows the literary openness and ambiguity of the text, often a sign of literary quality, at least for modernists.

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<sup>83</sup> Deschamps.

<sup>84</sup> Is it significant that Deschamps draws no distinction between l’Amérique and l’Amérique du sud, which is where Renée is actually going?

<sup>85</sup> Martineau.

Discussions of morality become less frequent in later reviews of Colette novels. There are a number of likely reasons for this: first, concern for morality in literature in general waned. Second, as Colette became more and more established and consecrated as a writer, less and less defense of her morality was necessary. Third, though the works from the interwar period treat morally difficult themes, such as suicide, they are less sexually explicit than the *Claudine*, and feature less ambiguous endings than *La Vagabonde*.

However, morality is not totally absent from interwar reviews. André Thérive, in a very laudatory review of *Chéri*, discusses the morality of the work at some length.<sup>86</sup> Thérive compares Colette's work to classical elegy and tragedy, suggesting, like Glaser and Ernest-Charles did in the case of *La Vagabonde*, that the tragic nature of the love described in the text prevents it from falling into amoral territory. Though there is no direct moral teaching, "*Chéri* est donc, comme tout chef-d'œuvre, une œuvre conforme à cette éthique modeste dont on peut exiger sans ridicule de voir les droits respectés."<sup>87</sup> Thérive further concludes that there is a "valeur éducative" in Colette's works because of their lessons "qui dureront encore, en honneur au siècle vingtième, alors que Madame Sand ne sera plus depuis longtemps ni lisible ni lue ?"<sup>88</sup> Thérive is not the first to negatively compare Georges Sand to Colette—we can assume that, as in so many other

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<sup>86</sup> Because much of Thérive's review concentrates on the classicism of Colette's morality, a longer discussion of this review can be found in Chapter 5. Here, it is sufficient to note that Thérive finds a moral quality in Colette's work.

<sup>87</sup> Thérive. Or, Georges Bergner: "Colette perverse ? Non. Une pudeur naturelle la retient de trop livrer le meilleur d'elle-même : elle ne s'occupe pas de détruire la légende, jette comme un filet autour de sa personne. Plutôt que de s'attacher à en ronger les mailles, elle préfère conter pour la joie de ce temps et peut-être aussi pour celle de l'avenir." Georges Bergner, "Le Billet de la semaine: Colette," *Alsace Française* 5.108 (20 January 1923).

<sup>88</sup> Thérive is not the only one to find a classical quality in Colette's morality: Eugène Marsan, in a review of *La Naissance du jour*, compares Colette classical moralists: "elle travaille avec le calme audacieux de nos moralistes classiques." Eugène Marsan, "Du Sentiment à la personne," *Comoedia* (3 April 1928).

cases, Colette's femininity, as opposed to Sand's masculinity, is part of what will permit her works to "dureront encore."

## Colette's Style

Colette's writing is highly praised for its style. For most reviewers, this style remains linked to Colette's femininity: her writing style is natural, feminine, animal, instinctive, spontaneous.

Jean de Pierrefeu describes Colette's style in his review of *L'Entrave* (1913):

Colette écrit souvent comme on fume, pour le plaisir de dessiner des arabesques veloutées ; elle note ses songeries avec une précision qui décèle des goûts de maniaque ou des habitudes d'insomnie. Cette minutie de la description est d'ailleurs bien féminine ; elle n'oublie rien, elle saisit des traits avec le coup d'œil d'une femme qui déshabille instantanément sa rivale. De toutes ces phrases denses, souples et pleines au toucher, où abondent les mots concrets, s'exhale un charme à la fois doux et aigu, un parfum bien personnel, le parfum capiteux de 'son mélange.'<sup>89</sup>

This description boils down to a reading of Colette's style as feminine—she writes this way because she is a woman. The description is tactile—the sentences are “souples” and “pleines au toucher.” Colette's writing is intimately connected to her female body, to her feminine sensibility, and a feminine sensitivity toward other women's bodies, in the comparison to the woman looking at her rival.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, in a review of *Mitsou*,

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<sup>89</sup> Pierrefeu, "Le Livre de la semaine."

<sup>90</sup> For other references that praise Colette's style :

“C'était, au lendemain de la guerre, comme un lieu commun de déclarer que Colette écrivait le plus beau style—ou, de moins, le plus beau 'style moderne'—que connussent nos lettres. Faisons-nous erreur ? Il semblerait que, depuis quelques saisons, les 'jeunes' jurent un peu moins par elle. De ses livres sont là, sur notre table, que nous avons pris l'habitude de considérer comme des chefs-d'œuvre. Ouvrons-en un, le premier venu, *Chéri*. Prenons le début, comme d'habitude. Lisons... aussi impartialement que si jamais le nom de Colette n'était venu jusqu'à nous.” Berger, "Le Style au microscope: Colette."

And: "On a tout dit sur le style unique de Colette : on a vanté sa clarté, célébré son originalité, analysé ses finesses, disséqué ses subtilités." Louis-Jean Finot, *Revue mondiale* 170 (15 April 1926).



Maurice Le Blond describes Colette's style: "de l'auteur, on aime à retrouver cette phrase chatoyante et nue, et qui vit comme de la peau ou comme de l'onde, ce récit leste et spontané, hardi jusque dans ses réticences. Mitsou ne désenchantera pas les admirateurs de Mme Colette."<sup>91</sup> Le Blond, like other critics, focuses on the presence of the body in the text, the physicality, the femininity, as well as references to commonplaces of Colette understanding, especially spontaneity.

Reviewers often mention a mysterious, fugitive nature in Colette's style—the "reticence" of Le Blond, or, Pierre Hamp "le style, c'est une cadence heureuse, un mouvement perpétué traduisant des forces éparses et fugitives. A ce style, le meilleur, l'art de Colette atteint toujours."<sup>92</sup> This shyness, this fugitive nature, can be connected to animality (shy like a cat) as well as to femininity, as shyness associated with women. There is certainly something sexual in this reticence, this mysterious resistance. This mysteriousness also echoes back to Rachilde's first review of *Claudine en ménage* "le mystère de la vraie femme." Emmanuel Glaser, however, is troubled by Colette's reticences. He writes that "elle cultive en même temps le réalisme le plus cru et je ne sais quel idéalisme éthéré, elle est émue et ironique, tendre et cruelle, brutale et pudique, et ses pudeurs sont plus gênantes souvent que ses brutalités" and concludes that her work is "troublant."<sup>93</sup> The same quality that for Rachilde and Le Blond is so intriguing—Colette's reticence, is, in the form of "pudeur" deeply troubling for Glaser. Could it be that because this "pudeur" is not attached to femininity, to the body (unlike, perhaps "brutalités") that Glaser finds it so unbearable?

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<sup>91</sup> Maurice Le Blond, *Marges* 16 (15 June 1919). Maurice Le Blond is otherwise notable for his racism.

<sup>92</sup> Pierre Hamp, "L'Art et les hommes," *Les cahiers d'aujourd'hui* 4 (4 April 1913).

<sup>93</sup> Glaser, "Novembre--Les Romans."

Paul Reboux's *Colette ou le génie du style*, the first monograph written on Colette in 1925, is an excellent place to conclude the study of commonplaces in Colette criticism, exactly because this book contains examples of every commonplace.<sup>94</sup> Even in the title, Colette's style is linked to her "génie," and it is clear that, for Reboux, Colette's "génie" is feminine. Though Reboux rarely uses words like "femme" or "féminin" to refer to Colette, he does conclude that she is a "déesse" rather than a "femme de lettres"—underlining both her femininity and her irrationality (60). He focuses on objects associated with femininity: he analyses her descriptions of plants, animals, sentiments and passion. He uses adjectives like "naturelle" and "voluptueuse" and compares Colette's style to "un animal jeune et plein de force" (20, 39, 9). Instinct comes up as well: "les couleurs, les sons, les éléments concrets de la nature, elle en ressent les moindres effluves avec cet instinct" (37). Reboux also defends Colette's "vertu," using the example of Minne, the heroine of *L'Ingénue libertine*, to show that, although the book contains a depiction of sex, it is in "le lit conjugal [...] en pleine légalité" (51-2). Reboux concludes, Colette "écrit comme elle sent [...] et son style a cette sorte de sûreté qui est le propre de l'instinct" (60).<sup>95</sup>

### **Critical Outliers: Apollinaire and Others**

Despite the largely hegemonic nature of Colette criticism, there were outliers, critics whose reviews deviated sharply from the normal mode of reading Colette. These

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Reboux, *Colette, ou le génie du style* (Paris: V. Rasmussen, 1925).

<sup>95</sup> Simone de Beauvoir specifically disapproves of the ending of *L'Ingénue Libertine* in *The Second Sex*.

outliers were, in various ways, unconvinced by Colette's natural, feminine, spontaneous persona.

The most prominent of these outliers is Guillaume Apollinaire, who, in October 1909, using the female pseudonym Louise Lalanne, reviewed Colette's *Les Vrilles de la vigne* for Eugène Montfort's "gazette littéraire," *Les Marges*. The article was one of a series on "La littérature féminine": in it Apollinaire also reviewed works by Anna de Noailles, Gérard d'Houville, and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, among others. According to Montfort, the personage of Louise Lalanne was invented by Apollinaire expressly for the purpose of producing this chronicle of women's literature, a task Apollinaire agreed to undertake only after Colette, Noailles, and Houville had all turned it down.<sup>96</sup>

In the January 1909 issue, Apollinaire introduced the series, explaining that it would offer him the opportunity to "leur [women writers] dire tout le bien et tout le plaisir qu'elles m'avaient faits."<sup>97</sup> He also described the women writers he would cover in future columns. On the subject of Colette, he wrote, "je me dis qu'elle doit être charmante, mais trop indépendante. Il est probable, d'ailleurs, que je me trompe et si ces lignes lui tombent jamais sous les yeux, je la prie de me pardonner" (921). This sentence prepares the ground for Apollinaire's review of *Les Vrilles de la Vigne*, where he similarly mixes praise with light insults. He also proves to be remarkably prescient since the review did indeed fall under Colette's eyes, and she was indeed insulted by "ces lignes."

Colette scholars have almost uniformly read Apollinaire's review as a positive one. For example, Claude Pichois and Alain Brunet write that he "y va de son éloge [*Les*

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<sup>96</sup> Eugène Montfort, *Apollinaire travesti* (Paris: P. Seghers, 1948).

<sup>97</sup> Cited in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).. All subsequent in-text citations refer to this edition.

*Vrilles de la vigne*].”<sup>98</sup> Donna M. Norrel also approves of the article, noting that “it is to the credit of Apollinaire, who was to become one of the great lights of French poetry, that he had so many good things to say about Colette at this early stage of her career.”<sup>99</sup>

Although Julia Kristeva suspects Apollinaire of “misogynie,” she too describes the text as an “éloge” that is “perspicace.”<sup>100</sup>

A letter from Colette to Apollinaire however indicates that she understood the review to be less positive than her critics have asserted. Only a fragment of this letter appears in the notes of Apollinaire’s *Œuvres complètes en prose*: “j’en ai goûté l’esprit, la bienveillante rosserie [...] et je vous remercie sans pudibonderie, mais sans cynisme, c’est une des formes de la candeur souvent et j’ai passé l’âge, hélas, d’être candide” (1671). My transcription of the punctuation varies lightly from that of the Pléiade edition—Colette’s handwriting is particularly difficult to decipher in this letter. Because the missing and intriguing portions relate to the review, the letter is worth noting in its entirety.

Monsieur, le courrier de la Presse m’envoie votre article mais la communication s’arrête à Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, et la signature manque. Mais je veux que vous sachiez que j’ai lu les deux pages qui me commentent et que j’en ai goûté l’esprit, la bienveillante rosserie, et que je vous en remercie sans pudibonderie, mais sans cynisme. Le cynisme c’est une des formes de la candeur souvent, et j’ai passé l’âge, hélas, d’être candide. J’essaierais [sic] hier de vous démontrer que ce que vous nommez mon talent de littérateur, c’est seulement de l’activité physique... mais mon papier à lettres est petit et je ne vous connais pas assez.<sup>101</sup>

Clearly, Colette sees the review more negatively. Her lightly mocking response is well-suited to Apollinaire’s tone in the review. Her oxymoronic, “bienveillante rosserie,” fits

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<sup>98</sup> Claude Pichois and Alain Brunet, *Colette* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1999).

<sup>99</sup> Donna M. Norrell, *Colette : An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography*, Garland reference library of the humanities vol. 805 (New York ; London: Garland Pub., 1993).(419)

<sup>100</sup> Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin: Tome 3: Colette*.(57).

<sup>101</sup> Colette. *Letter to Guillaume Apollinaire*. 7 April 1909. NAF:27149, 14-16.

the self-contradictory nature of Apollinaire's remarks. In a similar fashion, Colette's assertion that she has passed the age of being candid negates her 'thanks' and her praise of the review's "esprit" in the previous sentence. The final sentence of the letter comes off as a veiled threat, albeit a playful one. Her use of the phrase "activité physique" could indeed be a direct reference to the review itself, in which Apollinaire writes "quelle activité! Quelle ambition!" (923).

With Colette's response in mind, we can now better interpret the tone of the review. It is not surprising that scholars have focused on the parts in which Apollinaire praises Colette, because the vocabulary of this praise contains many commonplaces of Colette's reception. His admiration for the "langage naturel" of the "petites bêtes qu'elle fait parler," or his praise for Colette's 'talent' and assertion that "ce livre charmant aura une fortune singulière" could easily have been written about any number of her works, by any number of reviewers (923). Similarly Apollinaire's observation that "on y trouve des beautés de premier ordre qui ne sont rien autre que d'émouvants frissons de la chair" (923) offers an attractive formulation of the common cliché of fleshy, bodily nature of Colette's writing.

Yet his compliments are at times backhanded. For example he admires the "charm" of the work that "à l'exclusion des livres masculins, embellit certains ouvrages féminins trop rares pour l'honneur de la littérature où l'on n'a pas rencontré assez souvent de femme ayant su conserver sa gentillesse après avoir acquis des prétentions" (923). Although the beginning of the sentence appears to be positive—the work is rare among works written by women—the end of the sentence reveals Apollinaire's point, that Colette has "acquis des prétentions." It is also difficult to see an

*éloge* in the condescending exclamation that follows the above quotation “comme elle respecte la grammaire!” (923).

Indeed the concluding sentences of the review epitomize Apollinaire’s doubled-voiced approach: “elle ne distingue pas entre le bien et le mal et se préoccupe peu de l’édification de son prochain. La colombe lâche aussi sa crotte sur le passant et c’est blanc avec un peu de noir-vert comme une page imprimée...” (924). That Colette “ne distingue pas entre le bien et le mal” could be read as a positive or, at the least, neutral remark given Colette’s reputation for amorality. However, the image of Colette as a dove dropping the “crotte” of her texts, described in remarkably specific color, on readers who are nothing more than unsuspecting passersby, is deliciously cruel. The end of the sentence, “comme une page imprimée,” makes the force of Apollinaire’s insult extremely clear: Colette’s writing is bird excrement.

However, Apollinaire’s review is at its most insulting, and perhaps most perceptive, in its evaluation of Colette’s persona, rather than her text. This discussion is clearly important to Apollinaire -- nearly half of the short text is given over to it. The review opens and closes with references to Colette’s reputation: “nulle femme de lettres n’a intrigué, ravi, et scandalisé ses contemporains autant que Colette Willy [...] Voilà une femme de lettres comblée d’éloges !” (922, 924).

Apollinaire acknowledges the work that goes in to maintaining such a reputation when he writes: “après avoir tenu le monde au courant de ce qui se passait dans son ménage, elle a voulu montrer publiquement comment elle s’en passait [...] Colette Willy a pensé qu’elle devait aussi donner son corps en spectacle” (922-3). Use of “a pensé,” “a voulu montrer” shows acknowledgement of Colette’s active role in creating her

intriguing, delightful, scandalous image. The tone is also mocking: “avoir tenu le monde au courant” implies that Colette’s works are little more than gossip.

Elsewhere in the review Apollinaire evinces his distaste for Colette’s dancing, twice evoking her “ambition” and asserting that “cette jeune femme ne veut pas se contenter de la renommée d’une Sévigné, il lui faut la vogue d’une Camargo” (923). He paints her trying to surpass the more modest fame of Madame de Sévigné (a classic example of a *femme de lettres*), by attaining the allure of the eighteenth-century *danseuse* and social climber and opportunist, Marie Camargo. To this is added: “cependant, ne s’accorde-t-on pas avec la pensée même de notre ambitieuse si l’on avance que c’est en écrivant qu’elle a laissé apparaître le plus de talent ?” (923). Certainly, here, Apollinaire acknowledges Colette’s “talent,” but only in the context of her ambition, and with the veiled suggestion that her extra-literary endeavors demonstrate less talent than her written works.

Apollinaire’s acknowledgement of the importance of Colette’s persona to her literary success, and his emphasis on the work required to create and maintain that persona, is unusually insightful. If Colette was generally known for her *naturel*—a certain spontaneous, instinctive literary talent—Apollinaire suggests that this reputation is carefully constructed rather than innate. In so doing his views go against the grain of Colette criticism.

Apollinaire acknowledged Colette’s chastising letter publicly, adding as a postscript to his October 1909 article on “La littérature féminine:” “Colette Willy m’a écrit pour me dire qu’elle me trouvait rosse” (933). Although their correspondence ended

here, a letter from Apollinaire to his fiancée Madeline Pagès, dating from 1915, offers his ultimate, and private, assessment of Colette as a person and a writer:

En général on s'extasie sur le naturel de Colette en ses écrits. J'y vois beaucoup d'affectation, peu de naturel et un simple talent de pensionnaire, une sensibilité de surface. C'est tout et peu intéressant à mon gré. Elle a en outre un terrible accent berrichon qui me déplaît extrêmement.<sup>102</sup>

Apollinaire's review is nasty, and his letter even nastier, but there is some interest in his approach to Colette. He correctly diagnoses Colette's reception: her contemporaries did indeed go into ecstasies over her natural writing, which they linked to her femininity, a connection that continues to be made even today. By suggesting in his letter that this "naturel" is an affectation, a crafted persona, his review appears even more insightful. Colette's public image, maintained in part through her career as a dancer and mime, contributed to her success as a writer. Apollinaire refused to accept as natural Colette's image as a spontaneous feminine writer, and instead understood that she worked to create this reputation.

Other writers also saw through Colette's "naturel." Both Hariette Charasson and Benjamin Crémieux focus, in interwar reviews, on the artificial nature of Colette's apparent spontaneous nature, though Crémieux is much more appreciative of Colette overall. Crémieux writes:

Colette a pris pleine conscience de son art spontané, et domine ses dons au lieu de s'abandonner. Elle travaille au subconscient, et n'écrit plus un mot qu'elle ne l'ait prémédité. Ce n'est plus une matière en fusion, mais durcie, polie, qu'elle offre à son lecteur. [...] Colette a créé un style où s'équilibrent la mesure et la spontanéité, où l'adjectif a retrouvé toute sa valeur d'épithète, les alliances de mots une nouveauté musicale ou suggestive sans afféterie, ni cubisme, style aussi propre à la description qu'à l'analyse, bref sans sécheresse, charnu sans redondance.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire and Laurence Campa, Lettres à Madeleine : tendre comme le souvenir, Ed. rev. et augm. / ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). (276).

<sup>103</sup> Crémieux, "Chéri."



Though some commonplaces of Colette criticism appear in this description of her style (music, spontaneity), Crémieux sees these qualities as part of a thoughtful, conscious literary project—he describes Colette as having “pris pleine conscience” and as being able to “dominate” her “dons,” as “premediating” her writing. In addition to according Colette rational control over her “dons,” Crémieux also implies an evolution in her style—*Chéri* is not *Claudine*, Colette, like any male writer, is capable of advancement, of evolution, of change, rather than being an irrational woman writer who can only write herself over and over.<sup>104</sup>

Unlike Apollinaire, Charasson criticizes Colette directly, writing that she does not share the opinion of “tous nos contemporains,” and ultimately denying that Colette is a “grand romancier.”<sup>105</sup> Charasson recognizes many of the commonplaces of Colette criticism, noting, for example, Colette’s autobiographical style, but concluding that this is a negative quality of her work: “Mme Colette n’a jamais su nous parler que d’elle-même.” She also seems, on some level, annoyed by Colette’s femininity, accusing her of flirting with her readers: “elle a souvent gâté ses lucides dons d’analyste en écrivant pour plaire, en pipant ses souvenirs, en *flirtant* avec son lecteur.” Finally, she sees through Colette’s spontaneity: “nullement spontanée, quoi qu’on croie, ni dans son admirable style travaillé, ni dans ses analyses personnelles, Mme Colette a réussi à faire passer pour ‘instinctive’. ‘Instinctive’ ‘soumise à l’instinct’ telle fut, durant les quelques quinze

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<sup>104</sup> This sounds a lot like Simone de Beauvoir’s “spontanéité réfléchie” a quality that she attributes to Colette’s writing in *Le Deuxième sexe*. I will discuss Beauvoir’s treatment of Colette at length in Chapter 2.

<sup>105</sup> Charasson’s article on “La littérature féminine” is a contribution to Eugène Montfort’s: Montfort, *Vingt-cinq ans de la littérature française: Tableau de la vie littéraire de 1895 à 1920*. (74-6). “Certes, si l’agrément de la langue, la science du rythme et des consonances, un sens merveilleux du monde visible et une adresse aiguë à rendre en toutes leurs nuances, et dans des paroles veloutées, ses plus âpres et ses plus pittoresques sensations, suffisaient, joints à un esprit facile et gouailleur, à faire un grand romancier, Mme Colette serait un grand romancier. Mais, jusqu’ici, il lui manquait le don de s’extérioriser et de composer.”

premières années du siècle, la plus grande louange que les critiques semblaient pouvoir décerner à une autresse. ” Here, Charasson seems to be saying what Apollinaire wishes he could say—that critics adore Colette’s “naturel” and her “instinct” but that these categories are myths of her work, rather than inherent features of it. Further, in evoking “les critiques,” Charasson recognizes that the critical praise of Colette is tied up in the personal biases of these critics, in their desire to read femininity and women writers in a certain way.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps because Charasson sees past Colette’s “natural femininity,” she is also able to deny the desire to read Colette’s works as moral. Responding to claims that Colette’s works are naturally moral, she writes, “ni Molière, ni Laclos, ni Lesage, ni Balzac n’ont voulu peindre des enfants de cœur ; mais dans leurs plus inquiétantes compositions, je ne sais quelle nuance, quelle démarche trahissait le moraliste et mettait en garde le lecteur. La sympathie égayée de Mme Colette est infiniment dangereuse et l’on ne peut regarder comme un chef-d’œuvre un livre où tout ce qui fait la seule valeur de l’homme est paisiblement bafoué.” Even negative reviews of Colette’s works never described them as “infiniment dangereuse.” Charasson sees that, without a firm belief in Colette’s natural femininity, the subjects of her works are not as morally palatable as critics have made them out to be.

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<sup>106</sup>Charasson’s reading of Colette’s style does not diverge too much from the mainstream, though she laments Colette’s choice of subject matter. “Colette a de l’esprit—mais cet esprit boulevardier dont les racines ne sont pas profondes et qui risque de rendre exaspérantes dans l’avenir des pages qui relèvent pourtant des beautés de style supérieures[...] Nul, en effet, ne saurait songer à nier son merveilleux métier ni surtout cette prose rythmée, souple, charnelle, d’une câline et subtile sensualité qui, ajoutant à sa pittoresque mémoire, fait d’elle un rare et troublant styliste. Mais quel malheur qu’elle n’emploie point son instrument à nous jouer d’autre musique ! Comment ne pas déplorer sa complaisance envers la turpitude, la bassesse, la méchanceté,—trop significative dans *Chéri*, son premier roman composé ? ... ”

## Conclusions

This chapter has presented remarkable continuities and cohesion in the reception of Colette's novels by critics during her own lifetime, tracing, in particular, ways that the reception of the *Claudine* novels, before Colette was even acknowledged as their author, shaped readings of Colette's femininity and feminine writing style throughout her career. Contrary to the received critical opinion of the last three decades, Colette's works were not shocking or outrageous, and were instead praised by critics for their morality. How did recent scholars come to have such an inaccurate view of Colette's reception? What are the critical stakes of and motivations for painting Colette as a scandalous writer, rejected by the male-dominated literary establishment? The next chapter seeks to answer these questions, investigating the process of Colette's recuperation by feminist literary scholarship.

The durability of Colette reception poses an historical, interpretive problem as well as a critical problem: where did this continuity come from? And then, how can we read past it? The outliers discussed at the end of this chapter hint at new ways for reading Colette. Apollinaire saw through the mask of the feminine, natural Colette to the professional, the self-made celebrity beneath. Charasson saw the ways that Colette's works, so palatable to misogynist critics, could in fact be dangerous challenges to the patriarchal order, prefiguring feminist celebrations of Colette from H el ene Cixous's in *Le Rire de la m eduse* to those of Anglo-American feminists in *Colette, the Woman, the Writer*. Finally, Cr emieux, in recognizing the hard work, the polishing, that went into Colette's writing, saw that she was not merely a natural writer, but a professional one,

who honed her craft with great energy and skill. These new ways of reading Colette will be discussed at length in the third and fourth chapters of this work.

## Chapter 2: Colette from Antifeminist to Feminist (1910-2010)

The biographical fact of the matter is clear—Colette did not participate in feminist political activity during her lifetime.<sup>1</sup> In fact, she was avowedly anti-feminist: in a 1910 interview, when asked whether she was a feminist “au point de vue...social, naturellement” she responded “non! Les suffragettes me dégoûtent. Et si quelques femmes en France s’avisent les imiter, j’espère qu’on leur fera comprendre que ces mœurs-là ne sont pas cours en France. Savez-vous ce qu’elles méritent les suffragettes? Le fouet et le harem...”<sup>2</sup> Certainly, it is not necessary to read this interview as an expression of deep political conviction: Colette could have had many motivations for positioning herself as antifeminist that had little or nothing to do with politics.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I will trace the various ways that Colette presented herself as antifeminist in interviews and letters, focusing on the rare moments when she explicitly addressed questions of politics and women’s suffrage, rather than seeking a hidden or subconscious feminist message in her oeuvre. First I discuss Colette’s most explicit denunciation of feminism in an interview with Walter Benjamin, I then turn to a brief discussion of French antifeminist praise of Colette. A letter to feminist activist Louise Weiss reveals

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<sup>1</sup> It was possible to be a feminist writer during Colette’s lifetime—both in literature and journalism, writers such as Marguerite Durand eventually identified with feminist political movements during the time period in which Colette was writing.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Dekobra, “Chez Madame Colette Willy,” *Paris-Théâtre* 22 January 1910. This sentence is often cited by scholars of Colette, including Claude Pichois, Julia Kristeva, Patricia Tilburg and Judith Thurman. Kristeva has a lengthy discussion of the possibilities of the political in Colette’s work in her book *Le génie féminin*, Colette, in the chapter, “Un peu de politique quand même.” The section subtitled “Une antiféministe” is of particular interest. Colette and Claude Pichois, *Œuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 314, 327, 381, 481, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin: Tome 3: Colette*, Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*, Tilburg, *Colette's Republic : Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*.

<sup>3</sup> In the third chapter of this work, I explore at more length Colette’s possible motivations for adopting these stances.

that, in private, Colette was capable of more nuanced positions, or at least of more polite refusals. The second half of the chapter examines in more detail Colette's eventual adoption into canons of feminist literature—beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, continuing in the United States, especially through *Ms. Magazine* and Erica Jong, and ending with her treatment by academics.

It is undoubtedly problematic to employ the term “feminist” to encompass viewpoints and political positions spanning two continents and more than a century in time. The feminism of European political activist Louise Weiss looked remarkably different from that of novelist and sexual provocateur Erica Jong, for example. And *Le Deuxième sexe*, a landmark text of feminist enlightenment, did not use the term at all. Simone de Beauvoir did not identify herself or her work as feminist until later in her life (1972). The case of Colette is of particular interest to all of these discourses of feminism because she was adopted by all of them. From French antifeminists opposing women's suffrage, to 1970s feminists seeking sexual liberation, from academic feminists seeking a canon of women's writing to those writing about queer theory—it seems that every discourse involving women or sexuality can find a way to use Colette, often to diametrically opposed aims. One of the purposes of this chapter, and of the dissertation as a whole, is to find out why Colette was able to mean so many different things to so many different people.

## The Antifeminist

As Julia Kristeva points out in *Le Génie féminin*, Colette generally avoided the subject of politics in interviews.<sup>4</sup> If her offhand remark about “les suffragettes” is frequently cited, this is probably because it is one of the few moments when Colette explicitly addresses the question of feminism at all. However, Colette does discuss the issue at some length in an untranslated interview with Walter Benjamin, which he, or his editors, titled with the question “Should women participate in political life?: One woman author, Colette, answers ‘no’”<sup>5</sup> The interview was first published on November 11, 1927, in a series for *Die Literarische Welt*, entitled “The Great Debates of Our Time.”<sup>6</sup> The series presented two opposite views on a controversial topic—in this particular issue, interviews with Colette and Katharina von Oheimb-Kardorff, a German politician and feminist, presented differing views on whether women should participate in politics. The circumstances surrounding this interview remain somewhat murky, though it seems likely

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<sup>4</sup>Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin: Tome 3: Colette*. (431-454). The insistence that Colette would never consciously adopt a political stance became very strong late in her life, perhaps due to certain questionable interactions with the Vichy government (notably Colette’s publications for the collaborationist magazine *Gringoire* and her writing the national *dictée* for the Vichy government, containing the Vichy catchword “patrie”). In 1947, for example, Jean-Paul Lafargue describes Colette’s “ignorance de l’engagement” in “Colette et la sensibilité féminine française.”

<sup>5</sup>Walter Benjamin, “Solt die frau am politischen leben teilnehmen? Dagegen: Die Dichterin Colette,” *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Herausgegeben Tillman Rexroth, vol. IV.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972). (492-495). The four-page interview appears in Benjamin’s completed works in German, but it is not in the French or English translations of his works. Nor is it in the *Ecrits français*. For now, I’m using an unpublished English translation of the German, because I don’t read German. Since the translation is unofficial, I provide the German original in the footnotes. The German text gives no details about the circumstances of the interview—the year in which it took place, who arranged it. Benjamin was in Paris interviewing writers in 1926, and the interview was published in German in 1927, and so 1926 seems to be a logical time for the interview to have taken place, so for now I’ll tentatively date the interview to this year. However, I have not found a Benjamin biography that mentions Colette. One might even suggest that the interview is simply made up by Benjamin, which is certainly possible. However, Julia Kristeva, whose book on Colette is impeccably researched, seems to believe that the interview is real. Though she does not discuss it in detail, she does mention it, and, in the 2000 *Le génie féminin, Colette*, describes Colette’s response to Benjamin’s question as “nuanced.” (83).

<sup>6</sup>“Die Grossen Gegensätze Unserer Zeit: Eine Reiche Und Interviews in Antitethetischer Anordnung.”

that it took place in 1926. During this year, Benjamin went to Paris in order to meet and interview a number of prominent French writers.

In many ways, Benjamin follows the standard script for Colette interviews: he begins with a description of the setting, not neglecting to mention Colette's pets, eventually sitting down "in the neighborhood of her little dog." He concludes the interview the same way, evoking "the many finished animal and human-creatures that Colette so fully and so bitterly knew how to describe."<sup>7</sup> This Colette is instantly recognizable, with her sympathy for animals and her deep, and at times tragic, understanding of human emotion.

However, once we move beyond these initial clichés, Benjamin's interview does depart from the typical Colette interview, especially in Colette's apparent willingness to discuss politics. Though Colette is initially reluctant to speak about women and politics—"at first Colette has only a surprised moment for my inquiries. Expressing her opinions about 'woman' does not seem to be very much to her liking,"—Benjamin is able to overcome her resistance. He explains: "but I specify. I assure her of my respect and sympathy for the struggle around lost positions she wages against the power and the public, official role of women in the life of modern society."<sup>8</sup> After Benjamin has explained himself, Colette goes on to discuss the issue of women and political life at some length.

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<sup>7</sup> "In Nachbarschaft ihres Hündchens Platz [...] ähnlich den vielen ausgedienten Tier- und Menschenkreaturen, die Colette so wahr und so bitter zu schildern gewußt hat" (492, 495).

<sup>8</sup> "Für mein Anliegen hat Frau Colette zunächst nur einen erstaunten Blick. Über 'die Frau' sich zu äußern – das scheint ihr nicht besonders am Herzen zu liegen. Aber ich präzisiere. Ich versichere sie meines Respekts und meiner Sympathie für jenen Kampf auf velorenem Posten, den sie gegen die Herrschaft die öffentliche, offizielle Rolle der Frau im Leben der modernen Gesellschaft führt" (492).



This readiness to discuss feminism is fishy. As the third chapter of this work makes clear, Colette was very able, in interviews, to avoid answering questions on any variety of issues, such as discussions of “literature,” for example. Radio interviews from later in her life show that she is happy to cut off an interviewer mid-sentence, preventing him from even asking a question about a topic she does not want to discuss.<sup>9</sup> Why would Benjamin’s assurances be enough to convince the notoriously tight-lipped Colette to open up on the subject of politics?<sup>10</sup> Further, Benjamin’s identification of Colette with a “struggle” seems out of place—though she might have happily allowed herself to be adopted by discourses of antifeminism, there is no evidence that Colette ever participated in any kind of political struggle.

The interview contains other atypical moments as well. At the end of the first paragraph, Benjamin narrates, “here Colette broke off, in order to fix me with a difficult-to-define look in her eyes; she waited, as if she wanted to give me a short while to change the dynamic, and stopped, discouraged by my silence: ‘What do you think. I don’t know. Should one go on...?’ she looked at me, I had no intention of approving such a motion.”<sup>11</sup> It is very surprising that Colette, a self-assured and successful woman, would defer to a much younger (in 1926, Colette was 52, Benjamin 34), unknown German journalist in this way. In 1926, Colette was extremely prominent—perhaps the best-known and most-admired woman writer in France. She had been seriously considered only a few years earlier for admission as the first woman member of the Académie Française—why would

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<sup>9</sup> Chantal Thomas, 12 October 2011.

<sup>10</sup> It could be that Colette was more willing to open up to Benjamin because the interview would be published only in German.

<sup>11</sup> “Hier unterbricht sich Frau Colette, um mit einem schwer definierbaren Ausdruck mich ins Auge zu fassen; wartet, also wolle sie mir eine kleine Frist zur Änderung dieser Verhältnisse geben und schließt, entmutigt durch mein Schweigen: “Was meinen Sie. Ich weiß nicht. Sollte man solange...?” Sie sieht mir an, ich habe nicht die Absicht, eine solche Geschäftsordnung zu befürworten” (493).

she look to Benjamin for “approval,” or be “discouraged” by his silence? Could her “difficult-to-define” look be flirtatious, rather than deferential?

Given the oddness of Colette’s tone here and the incongruity of her acquiescence to Benjamin, one might well wonder if the interview was completely invented by Benjamin. However, because of the historical circumstances of Benjamin’s trip to Paris to interview writers, as well as certain moments in the interview that sound like Colette, it is likely that some version of this interview did take place. Nonetheless, moments like this one, in which Colette defers to Benjamin, might well be authorial embellishments in order to make clear the roles of the interviewer and interviewee. Benjamin establishes a power dynamic in these sentences, in which he, the man, is clearly in control, and in which Colette defers to him and looks to him for guidance. This exchange sets the tone for the interview, in which Colette will insist on women’s natural differences from men.

For instance, Colette claims that these natural differences should prevent women from entering into politics. She “says drastically,” “I myself know plenty of harmonious, healthy, highly cultured, intelligent women, who are entirely as capable as men are of sitting on a commission or a jury. It is only that each one – and I assure you: normal women of the best dispositions—has two or three days in a month when they are over-taxed, out of control, unpredictable. Official business keeps going on these days, doesn’t it? A vote will be taking place, or a decision will have to be reached.”<sup>12</sup> Here, women’s bodies, femininity, make them irrational, undependable, and disqualify them from politics.

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<sup>12</sup> “Sie sagt sehr drastisch: ‘Ich selber habe in meiner Bekanntschaft genug harmonische, gesunde, hochgebildete, kluge Frauen, die ganz genau so gut imstande wären wie ein Mann, in einer Kommission oder Jury zu sitzen. Nur haben sie, eine jede – und ich versichere Sie: normale Frauen von der besten Veranlagung – im Monat zwei, drei Tage, an denen sie überreizt, unbeherrscht, unberechenbar sind. Die öffentlichen Angelegenheiten gehen aber an diesen Tagen weiter ihren Gang, nicht wahr?’ (492-93).

Women's natural brutality also makes them ill-suited to political life, according to Colette. "However, the violence of every sort of stupefying taste has been inflicted on them, and above all to the willpower. All that will push to extremes their natural brutality. If her passion is once awoken, then woman is known no longer as a wife or a mother, but rather also as a plotter and conspirator without limits. That is her main thing. With this, however, society makes for itself an instrument of destruction."<sup>13</sup> The "natural brutality" of women plays a strong role in Colette's oeuvre, from the *Claudine* novels (Claudine and her friends are always spanking one another) to *L'Entrave* (in which May takes pleasure in being beaten by Jean, her boyfriend). Even Colette's 1910 denouncing of the suffragettes, claiming that they need the whip and the harem, suggests brutality. This insistence sounds like Colette, rather than a simple parroting of antifeminist views—I have not found any other antifeminist discourses that argue that women are violent and brutal.

Though Colette uses women's natural femininity to disqualify them from politics, she also complains that French women are not feminine enough. Colette laments the behavior and appearance of women who "claim no rights for themselves and insist only on the same law for everyone," a clear reference to feminists. According to Colette, their bodies are not feminine enough: "if things go on with dieting and gymnastics, in twenty years women will have become as flat as boards." Nor are their haircuts: "when she has her hair cut, she wears it as short as you have yours." According to Colette, feminists draw attention to their own masculinity: "why does it always cause such an excitement

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<sup>13</sup> "Aber man hat ihnen mit Gewalt an jeder Art von Mannstum Geschmack beigebracht, und am meisten am Machtwillen. Man wird mit alledem das Brutale in ihrer Natur bis zum äußersten treiben. Wenn ihre Passionen einmal geweckt sind, so kennt die Frau nicht nur als Gattin und Mutter, sondern auch als Verschwörerin und Intrigantin keine Gransen mehr. Das ist ihre Größe. Aus dieser Größe aber macht sich die Gesellschaft ein Instrument der Vernichtung" (493-494).

when women smoke in public? Because it is simply always conspicuously done; and because when a man smokes a long cigarette, she takes one out that is twice as long. When she crosses her legs, she won't do it the way you do (I no longer have time to improve my posture), but rather she makes an art of it." These woman are criticized both for their appropriation of masculine (maybe even phallic) gestures like smoking, and for the conspicuousness of this appropriation.<sup>14</sup>

The complaints seem paradoxical—women are too feminine to be in politics, but at the same time not feminine enough. However, this incongruity is a hallmark of debates surrounding the “New Woman” in France—in fact, by the 1920's short hair and smoking were two of the hallmarks of the “New Woman.” As Mary Louise Roberts points out in *Disruptive Acts*, being a “New Woman”—“challeng[ing] the regulatory norms by living unconventional lives and by doing work outside the home”—did not necessarily coincide with feminist political goals. Plenty of French New Women found feminism “too narrowly focused on legal, political, and social reform.”<sup>15</sup> In this interview, Colette conflates the two, and rejects both.

As Benjamin parenthetically points out, though Colette might reject the New Woman, she is not so different from a New Woman herself. He observes, after Colette comments on the short hairstyles of New Women that “(No one, however, would want to

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<sup>14</sup> “Die Frauen erklären, sie täten nur und sie wollten nur tun, was die Männer machen. Sie beanspruchten kein Vorrecht für sich und sie beständen nur auf gleichem Recht für alle. Aber sehen Sie doch näher zu. Warum erregt es immer noch ein gewisses Aufsehen, wenn die Frau in der Öffentlichkeit raucht? Weil sie es eben auffallend tut; und weil sie, wenn der Mann an seiner langen Spitze raucht, ein doppelt so lange hervorholt. Wenn sie die Beine übereinanderschlägt, so wird sie es nicht tun wie Sie eben (ich habe keine Zeit mehr, meine Haltung zu verbessern), sondern sie macht es auf diese Art (und hier schlägt Frau Colette mit derart resolute Schwung die Knie übereinander, daß der Rock nicht viel mehr zu sagen hat). Wenn sie sich ihre Haare schneiden lassen, so tragen sie sie kürzer als Sie das Ihre. (Es wird aus diesen Worten aber niemand schließen wollen, daß nicht auch die Sprechende selbst einen Bubikopf trägt. Man kann sich ihr kluges, scharfgeprägtes Gesicht schwer unter einem Haarknoten denken.) Und nun nehmen Sie dazu die Parole von heute. Wenn es mit Fasten und Gymnastik so weiter geht, so sind die Frauen in zwanzig Jahren flach wie die Bretter geworden” (493).

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in fin-de-siècle France*. (3, 9).

conclude from this that the speaker herself does not also sport a bob-cut. One might think her witty, mint-fresh face heavy under a hair-knot.)” Her haircut is not the only thing that makes her similar to a New Woman. Colette also worked for a living, and reveled in the sexual freedoms obtained by New Women. Indeed, Colette’s earlier insistence on women’s natural role as wife and mother is incongruous, given that she herself, at this moment, was not a wife (having divorced her previous husband after her affair with his son) and not particularly committed to her identity as a mother.

Colette believes that women should intervene in politics using their sexuality:

Women are – thank god – an explosive anarchistic power the opposite of all bureaucracy. It is an absurd nonsense for woman, of her own energy, who is the equal of bureaucracy, who sets its boundaries, to lock herself up within it. Take her out of this empty and barren order; and if you want women’s power then make her into a queen – give her the famous *royaume secret*, which she rules not from the throne room, but from the bedroom. It is the only power that woman ever wanted and in which she will achieve what no man could achieve.<sup>16</sup>

A limited, decontextualized reading of this statement might make Colette sound like a radical feminist, quite a bit like Hélène Cixous, imagining women as an “explosive anarchic power.” However, the rest of the statement, suggesting that women rule the political sphere from the bedroom, reveals a very different view. This assertion, that women have sexual power over men, and so they do not need political power, was one of the justifications given for preventing French women from voting for nearly two decades after this interview took place.

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<sup>16</sup> “...Die Frauen sind – gottseidank – allem Bürokratischen gegenüber eine sprengende anarchische Kraft. Es ist ein absurder Nonsens, die Frau, die einzige Energie, die der Bürokratie gewachsen ist, die ihr Grenzen setzt, in diesen Organismus selber einzustellen. Nehmen Sie sie aus dieser tauben unfruchtbaren Ordnung heraus; und wenn Sie Frauenherrschaft wollen, so machen Sie sie zur Königin – geben Sie ihr das berühmte *royaume secret*, das sie nicht aus dem Thronsaal, sondern aus dem Beigemach regiert. Es ist das einzige, das die Frau je gewollt hat und in dem sie leisten wird, was kein Mann leistet” (494).

Benjamin does try to play devil's advocate at one point in the interview, using the terms of profession to argue against Colette's insistence on the natural, feminine mother-wife: "I threw into the debate 'Needs of the Times,' 'the social situation of women,' 'economic necessity,' 'female careers,' and 'Stenographers.'" As a professional woman, Colette would have been harder-pressed to make the kind of bold denunciations of professional women that she had made of political women. But she is saved from having to answer this question by a *deux-ex-machina* phone call, and concludes the interview "la sténodactylo— eh bien, monsieur, vous allez me trouver atroce—mais permettez-moi de vous le dire : la sténodactylo, c'est un fléau public..."<sup>17</sup>

Two representative reviews of Colette's novels show how important this antifeminist persona was to her reading public. Gaston Derys, in his 1902 review of *Claudine en ménage*, cites the conclusion of the novel, in which Claudine tells her husband: "ne craignez pas, cher Renaud, d'attrister votre Claudine en la grondant. Il me plaît de dépendre de vous, et de craindre un peu un ami que j'aime tant." This citation leads Derys to muse, "de dépendre de vous... Il est plaisant de constater que les singuliers avatars de Claudine l'aient conduite à des théories aussi antiféministes."<sup>18</sup> For Derys, the "pleasant" antifeminism of the text goes beyond the political disempowerment of women. Claudine's antifeminism resides on a private as well as a political level, in women's personal, even sexual submission to men.

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<sup>17</sup>“ Ich glaube den Augenblick gekommen, von neuem den avoctaus diabolic zu machen. Und ohne in die Akten der Gegenseite zu tief mich einzulassen, werfe ich einiges über die 'Not der Zeit' 'soziale Lage der Frau' 'die wirtschaftlichen Notwendigkeiten' 'die Frauenberufe' 'Stenotypistin' in die Debatte. Da läutet aber das Telefon, und meine Partnerin hat nur noch eben Zeit, mein letztes Wort aufzugreifen: 'La sténodactylo—eh bien, monsieur, vous allez me trouver atroce—mais permettez-moi de vous le dire : la sténodactylo, c'est un fléau public...'” (494-5).

<sup>18</sup> Derys, "Claudine en ménage."

Gaston de Pawlowski, in his 1913 review of *L'Entrave*, contrasts Colette's "féminisme" with that of other feminists.

La plupart de nos féministes modernes [...] malgré leur nom, ne sont que les panmasculinistes et elles brûlent volontiers ce qu'elles adorent. [...] Il est un féminisme autrement intéressant—et c'est celui de Colette—qui consiste, au contraire, à rester femme et à développer jusqu'aux limites du possible les qualités admirables et si particulières de la femme [...être] soumis avant toute chose à l'instinct, aux mouvements du cœur, aux passions de la nature.<sup>19</sup>

For Pawlowski, the antifeminist stereotype of ultramasculine modern feminists is contrasted with Colette's natural ultrafemininity.

Colette's antifeminism continues to provide a lens for scholars interpreting her biography and literary oeuvre. For example, Mona Ozouf, in the 1995 *Les Mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française*, sounds similar in some ways to Pawlowski and Derys. The "militant" and "aggressive" Anglo-Saxon feminists of her introduction are virtually indistinguishable from Pawlowski's English "panmasculinists."<sup>20</sup> Ozouf concludes, on the subject of Colette's politics, "ni suffragettes, ni amazones [ses héroïnes] n'ont aucun goût pour les rôles convenus de la révolte. Elles ne sont nullement tentées d'imiter, encore moins de conquérir, les rôles masculins."<sup>21</sup> Ozouf's take is very similar to that of Colette, in her interview with Benjamin, as well as that of Colette's contemporaries: Colette and her heroines insist on femininity, and protest "sans cesse" any masculinization of women. Liberty, according to Ozouf's Colette, "est celle de l'aiguille aimantée que indique inmanquablement le nord et ramène obstinément les

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<sup>19</sup> G. de Pawlowski, *Comoedia* (9 November 1913).

<sup>20</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Les Mots des femmes: essai sur la singularité française* (Paris: Fayard, 1995). (11).

<sup>21</sup> Though Colette was long-dead when Ozouf wrote *Les mots des femmes*, Ozouf, like Benjamin, like so many of Colette's contemporaries, cannot resist the impulse to begin her discussion of Colette in "la maison de Claudine," writing "la première chose qui saisit, en entrant chez Colette, c'est l'odeur : ça sent bon le chocolat, la cire, le pêche mûre, le pain grillé" (237). Ozouf clearly establishes, then, that her version of Colette—in her home, attached to sensuality—will fit in with longstanding models of reading this writer. Mona Ozouf, "Colette," *Les Mots des femmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). (262).

femmes à leur vocation et à leur génie. Pas d'œuvre plus féminine que celle de Colette. Pas d'œuvre moins féministe.”

Given that they span nearly a century, the coherence of these perspectives is remarkable. For all of these writers, Colette's femininity inevitably causes her to naturally understand that women should remain women, and sets her apart from dominating, masculinized feminists. None of these writers ascribe any political motivation to Colette's writing—the antifeminism is a natural extension of her prose, rather than a consciously adopted stance. This distinction is important: Colette is not politically antifeminist for these reviewers. Instead, she is naturally antifeminist, and therefore apolitical.

### **Feminist Beginnings: A False Start**

Though Colette skillfully avoided association with feminist politics throughout her life, she did maintain cordial ties with feminist activist Louise Weiss. The two were connected in a number of ways. During their marriage, Colette's second husband, Henry de Jouvenel, contributed to *L'Europe Nouvelle*, a weekly journal founded by Weiss.<sup>22</sup> The journal also published a flattering review of Colette's *Le Blé en herbe* in 1923.<sup>23</sup> Given the close attention she paid to her press, it is impossible that she missed it. Colette

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Bess, *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud : Four Activist Intellectuals and their Strategies for Peace, 1945-1989 : Louise Weiss (France), Leo Szilard (USA), E.P. Thompson (England), Danilo Dolci (Italy)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). (6)

<sup>23</sup> Dominique Braga, *Europe Nouvelle* (18 August 1923). The review is pretty standard, evoking, for example, Vinca's “instinct féminin,” and the sensual style of the book: “Mme Colette est le poète de la sensation [...] de la sensation tactile [...] ce roman est ‘velouté’ et ‘pelucheux.’” However, Braga does recognize the weakness of Phil compared to Vinca, writing that Phil's character is reduced to “un rôle passif, un peu flou, dont l'imperfection s'accuse au contraste de l'héroïne féminine.” Though Braga means this as a criticism, I think that it is in fact an insightful understanding of Phil's role in the novel, one keeping with more contemporary readings of Colette, in particular Biolley-Godino, *L'Homme-objet chez Colette* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972).



and Weiss also had acquaintances in common—Paul Valéry and Georges Duhamel in particular.<sup>24</sup>

An undated letter to Weiss provides an example of Colette’s careful evasion when faced with questions of women’s political liberation. In the letter, which lacks even a salutation, Colette writes: “J’applaudis à tout ce que des femmes, légionnaires ou non, tenteront isolément ou en groupes, en faveur de la santé publique, de la protection physique et morale de l’enfance, et dans le but d’améliorer leur propre statut. Je souhaite, à toutes, bonne chance. Pour le courage, il ne leur manque pas. Colette.”<sup>25</sup>

Weiss was known for seeking endorsement from literary and journalistic figures for her various political projects—for her 1930 “Ecole de la Paix,” she secured support from figures such as Paul Valéry, Elie Halévy and André Siegfried (Bess 9). In 1934, she founded “La Femme Nouvelle,” a feminist organization working for women’s suffrage and women’s rights and protections more broadly. It seems logical that Weiss might have asked Colette, a prominent woman and a member of the Légion d’Honneur, to support this project. If Weiss did solicit support from Colette for “La Femme Nouvelle,” she must have been sorely disappointed by Colette’s letter.

The letter is deliciously evasive. Colette offers a token of encouragement to Weiss: ‘applauding’ women’s efforts to “améliorer leur propre statut.” But Colette’s letter puts this support in terms so vague and generic as to render it meaningless. She

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur Conte, *Grandes françaises du XXe siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1995). (13).

<sup>25</sup> Colette. *Letter to Louise Weiss*. 1934? NAF:17809, 36. Though I have tentatively dated this letter to 1934, as a response to Weiss’s “La Femme Nouvelle”, it can be definitively dated to after 1922, when Colette began signing correspondence with “Colette,” rather than “Colette de Jouvenel.” I take Colette’s reference to “légionnaires ou non,” to be a reference to Colette’s status as a member of the French Légion d’Honneur. Colette became a “chevalier” in 1920, an “officier” in 1928, a “commandeur” in 1936, and a “grand officier” in 1953. (Colette was the first woman to receive this honor, Weiss, in 1976, was the third). Weiss herself became a member of the Légion d’honneur, and this “légionnaires ou non” might refer to her common status with Colette.

resists official affiliation with Weiss's cause by refusing to name any group, organization, or struggle by name. Colette lumps Weiss's political campaign for women's suffrage with "la santé publique" and "la protection physique et morale de l'enfance"—no one would reject these causes, but they are hardly intimately related. She undermines women's political organizations by expressing her support for women "isolement ou en groupes," as though the groups themselves are of minimal importance. She uses empty verbs—'applaud,' 'wish them good luck.' Her reference to courage—"pour le courage, il ne leur manque pas"—at best empty praise, might at worst be read as a veiled insult, implying that these women have courage, but are perhaps lacking in sense. In some respects, the letter could have been written by a misogynistic politician. It insults no one directly, yet it does not actually express any real support for a feminist cause, instead providing some vague platitudes about 'improving women's lives' and 'protecting children.'

This letter shows Colette's skillful maintenance of both her professional networks and her public persona. Her relationship with Weiss was not worth jeopardizing by completely disavowing a feminist cause. Colette succeeds in protecting her relationship with Weiss by producing some kind of letter of support, but also in protecting her public image as an antifeminist by refusing to actively encourage Weiss's struggle. In both of these endeavors, it seems that Colette was successful. Weiss's personal possessions, seized and destroyed by the Vichy government in the 1940s, contained letters and other articles from Colette, implying that their relationship was ongoing, in spite of Colette's evasive letter. And Colette's reputation as an antifeminist remained solid throughout her own lifetime, persisting in some form to this day.

## **Toward Liberation: Colette and Beauvoir**

Simone de Beauvoir was the first writer, as far as my research has found, to accord Colette's work value in a concrete project of women's political and social liberation. Her enthusiasm for Colette was personal, as well as political and philosophical. The two met in 1948, just a year before the publication of *Le Deuxième sexe*, at a party organized by their mutual acquaintance, the actress Simone Berriau. Jean Paul Sartre and Jean Cocteau were among the other guests. Beauvoir described their meeting in a letter to Nelson Algren. She writes, "I think you heard of Colette: she is the only really great woman writer in France, a really great writer."<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir further reveals that "I was in love with her, through her books, when I was a girl, so it meant something to me to see her." She adds, "Now she is seventy-five years old and has still the most fascinating eyes and nice triangular cat face; she is very fat, impotent, a little deaf, but she can still tell stories and smile and laugh in such a way nobody would think of looking at younger, finer women...I hope that I shall see her again."

This admiration is evident in *Le Deuxième sexe*. Colette is the most-cited woman writer in this text, with 51 distinct references to her works, according to Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier's index.<sup>27</sup> The only writers technically cited more often than Colette are male writers who have entire chapters devoted to them in the "Mythes" section—Claudel and Montherlant, with 53 and 55 citations, respectively. Beauvoir's

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<sup>26</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, Nelson Algren, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Ellen Gordon Reeves and Vanessa Kling, *A Transatlantic Love Affair : Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex*, 1st American ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

interest in Colette spans Colette's entire writing career, with citations from over a dozen works: from the 1900 *Claudine à l'école* to the 1947 *L'Etoile vespère*; from the relatively unpopular *L'Ingénue libertine* to the Goncourt-nominated *La Vagabonde*.<sup>28</sup>

The first reference to Colette in *Le Deuxième sexe* appears in the first chapter of the "Mythes" section of the book. For the most part, Beauvoir is critical of the authors she cites in this chapter for their contributions to various harmful feminine myths. However, Beauvoir's use of Colette in this section is different: Beauvoir treats Colette here as a fellow critic of patriarchy, rather than as a contributor to a myth of the feminine. In a description of the association between women and nature, Beauvoir writes "dans *La Chatte*, Colette décrit un jeune mari qui a fixé son amour sur sa chatte favorite, parce que, à travers cette bête sauvage et douce, il a sur l'univers sensuel une prise que le corps humain de sa compagne ne réussit pas à lui donner."<sup>29</sup> In this particular section of "Mythes," Beauvoir criticizes the masculine desire to achieve dominance over nature through the mystified feminine. Beauvoir believes that Colette, in *La Chatte*, does not contribute to this harmful myth, but instead critically reveals it with her text.

Beauvoir's apparent admiration for Colette continues in the second volume of the work. She attributes to Colette a "habitude sincérité" and finds that British novelist Rosamund Lehmann describes "moins franchement" than Colette a young woman's lesbian tendencies (DS, II 365, 108). In a discussion of mothers, Beauvoir praises

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<sup>28</sup> Relatively little has been written on the importance of Colette in *Le Deuxième sexe*. Emily R. Grosholz, in her essay "The House We Never Leave: Childhood, Shelter, and Freedom in the Writings of Beauvoir and Colette," describes some fascinating stylistic and poetic moments of similarity between Beauvoir's work and that of Colette, but this article is more focused on Beauvoir's stylistic attachment to Colette than to the role that Colette plays in Beauvoir's theory of women's experiences and women's writing. Helen Southworth mentions the importance of Colette in her book *The intersecting realities and fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette*. Emily Grosholz, *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir* (Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press, 2004), Southworth, *The Intersecting Realities and Fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette*.

<sup>29</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). (I, 264). Subsequent in-text references to this edition will be designated (DS, Volume, Page #).

Colette's Sido: "rares sont les cas où elle est aussi compréhensive et discrète que chez cette 'Sido' que Colette peint avec amour" (DS, II 48). Beauvoir uses the same formulation "rares sont..." at another point in the book to refer to Colette, writing, in a discussion of prostitution, "rares sont celles qui, comme la Léa de Colette, à un ami l'appelant 'Chère artiste' répondraient : 'Artiste ? vraiment, mes amants sont bien indiscrets'" (DS, II 446). These citations show Beauvoir's singular admiration for Colette and a certain insistence that Colette's writing is of a particularly high quality when compared to that of other women writers.

Beauvoir was perhaps the first writer to see Colette's works as having political consequences for women. For example, she is critical of Colette's depiction of romance in marriage in *L'Ingénue libertine*, writing: "même Colette cède à cette vague moralisante quand dans *l'Ingénue libertine*, après avoir décrit les cyniques expériences d'une jeune mariée gauchement déflorée, elle décide de lui faire connaître les délices de la volupté dans les bras de son mari" (DS II 244). Despite this negative cast, this criticism does not qualify as a harsh denunciation. Beauvoir's use of "même Colette" implies that this error is a singular aberration, a momentary lapse of judgment for a writer who is usually a much more insightful co-critic of patriarchy, rather than a consistent flaw in character or judgment. Beauvoir's criticism of Colette is possible only because she holds Colette to a generally high standard: Colette's mistake could affect the way that men think about women, the way that women think about themselves and the world. Beauvoir sees Colette's words as having political consequences, and Colette as a positive actor in relation to her own writing, a starkly different view from the antifeminists who depict Colette as deprived of political agency.

Beauvoir also sees past the myth of Colette as a natural, spontaneous writer. As the previous chapter made clear, a small handful of Colette critics also noted the “reflective” nature of Colette’s writing, but they were in the minority. The majority of Colette’s critics were convinced by and perpetuated the myth of her natural spontaneity. Beauvoir, on the other hand, remarks “on admire en Colette une spontanéité qui ne se rencontre chez aucun écrivain masculin : mais—bien que ces deux termes semblent jurer ensemble—il s’agit d’une spontanéité réfléchie : elle refuse certains de ses apports pour n’en accepter d’autres qu’à bon escient” (DS II 630). Beauvoir again ascribes authorial control to Colette, who is portrayed as a rational, choosing writer, rather than an instinctive one. Here, Beauvoir accurately diagnoses Colette criticism and provides a more attractive rereading of Colette.

Beauvoir also insists on Colette’s role as a professional, rather than a natural, writer:

Il n’est pas seulement grâce à ses dons ou à sa tempérament que Colette est devenue un grand écrivain ; sa plume a été souvent son gagne-pain et elle a souvent exigé le travail soigné qu’un bon artisan exige de son outil ; de *Claudine* à *La Naissance du jour*, l’amateur est devenue professionnelle ; le chemin parcouru démontre avec éclat les bienfaits d’un apprentissage sévère. (DS II 629)

Here, Beauvoir explicitly rejects natural, innate literary ability—“dons”—in favor of “travail” and “apprentissage.” This is a radically new approach to Colette, and one that was rarely echoed in later scholarship.

Beauvoir admires Colette’s professionalism because it allows Colette to avoid becoming stereotypically feminine. In the chapter on “L’Amoureuse,” Beauvoir praises Colette’s heroines: “les héroïnes de Colette ont trop d’orgueil et de ressources pour se laisser briser par une déception amoureuse: Renée Méré [sic] se sauve par le travail. Et

‘Sido’ disait à sa fille qu’elle ne s’inquiétait pas trop de son destin sentimental parce qu’elle savait que Colette était autre chose encore qu’une amoureuse.”<sup>30</sup> Work helps Renée Néré to overcome a “déception amoureuse”—a problem that is stereotypically associated with women. Colette herself, though she certainly had love-type relationships, is able to be “autre chose encore qu’une amoureuse” because of work. Similarly, in describing Colette’s “happy” pregnancy, a pregnancy termed by Colette’s friends a “grossesse d’homme,” Beauvoir writes: “et elle apparaît en effet comme le type de ces femmes qui supportent vaillamment leur état parce qu’elles ne s’absorbent pas en lui. Elle poursuivait en même temps son travail d’écrivain. ‘L’enfant manifesta qu’il arrivait le premier et je vissai le capuchon de mon stylo.’ D’autres femmes s’appesantissent davantage ; elles ruminent indéfiniment leur importance neuve” (DS II 358). This example is particularly interesting because of the way that it relates women, situation, and professionalism. Beauvoir approves of Colette because she does not “absorb herself” in her pregnancy. Were Colette to “absorb herself” in her pregnancy, she would be absorbing herself in her body, her biology, her situation. In this citation, as in the rest of *Le Deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir does not deny Colette’s femininity. In fact, Colette’s experiences as a woman make her texts useful to Beauvoir as she paints a careful portrait of the “lived experience” of women. However, Beauvoir avoids defining Colette’s femininity in the traditional way, as a natural, instinctive, spontaneous, earth-mother figure.

Interestingly, later in her life, Beauvoir backed away from her ardent admiration for Colette. In *La Force des choses*, she describes her meeting with Colette—the same

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<sup>30</sup> The Borde and Malovaney-Chevallier translation of *Le Deuxième sexe* conserves the typo “Renée Méré” found in this citation.

meeting that she gushed about in her letter to Algren. In this text, however, Beauvoir depicts Colette in a relatively unflattering light. Though she concedes that as a young girl she was “fascinated” by Colette, Beauvoir only admits to having liked “three or four” of her books and criticizes Colette’s writing: “sa complaisance à soi-même, son mépris des autres femmes, son respect des valeurs sûres ne m’étaient pas sympathiques.” She also describes Colette herself in negative terms: “Percluse, les cheveux fous, violemment maquillée, l’âge donnait à son visage aigu, à ses yeux bleus, un foudroyant éclat : entre sa collection de presse-papiers et les jardins encadrés dans sa fenêtre, elle m’apparut, paralysée et souveraine, comme une formidable Déesse-Mère. Quand nous dinâmes avec elle et Cocteau chez Simone Berriau, Sartre aussi eut l’impression d’aborder un ‘monstre sacré.’”<sup>31</sup> Though Colette is formidable in this portrait, she is also horrible, monstrous. Beauvoir calls attention to Colette’s curiosity regarding Sartre “elle était dérangée, en grande partie par curiosité, pour le voir, et en sachant qu’elle était pour lui l’attraction de la soirée : elle assumait ce rôle avec une impériale bonhomie.” Could Beauvoir have been disappointed that Colette, a fellow woman writer whom she admired greatly, seemed to pay more attention to Sartre than to her? Beauvoir’s use of “bonhomie” here is also intriguing—in French, the term has strongly masculine connotations, it is a word usually associated with men. Is Beauvoir masculinizing Colette in this portrait?

In spite of her generally negative portrait, Beauvoir does compliment Colette using the terms of profession, terms which were also important to Beauvoir’s use of Colette in *Le Deuxième sexe*: “elle avait vécu, elle avait travaillé” (FC 255). She concludes on a somewhat more positive note, praising the “acuity” and “naturalness” of

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<sup>31</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses*, Le Livre de poche, 2539-2540 (Paris,: le Livre de poche, 1969). (255-6).



Colette's use of language, and comparing her favorably to Jean Cocteau, also in attendance at the party (FC 255).

One might wonder why this version of Beauvoir's meeting with Colette is so different from the version found in her autobiography. In an interview with Deirdre Bair, Beauvoir revealed: "I still remember how emotional I felt when I read Colette's stories, and I don't know why I didn't try to communicate that feeling when I wrote my memoirs. Perhaps it was because at the time I was writing, I worried about giving too much credit to other writers, or too much emphasis to the influence they might have had on me. Probably it was because I was then in the process of becoming a well-known writer and I did not want to call too much attention to women writers other than myself."<sup>32</sup> It is refreshing to see how honest Beauvoir is capable of being, with herself and with Bair. However, Beauvoir's insight that she did not want to "call too much attention to women writers other than herself" seems odd, given how much attention she pays to other women writers in *Le Deuxième sexe*.

Beauvoir's strong interest in Colette may have had an impact that reached beyond *Le Deuxième sexe*.<sup>33</sup> I believe that it is one of the factors in Colette's eventual inclusion

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<sup>32</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Summit Books, 1990). (625).

<sup>33</sup> Marcelle Biolley-Godino's *L'homme-objet chez Colette* (1972) is an explicitly Beauvoirian approach to Colette's work, and was admired in the United States for its interpretation of Colette. Marcelle Biolley-Godino, *L'Homme-objet chez Colette* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972). Though Biolley-Godino acknowledges that Colette's writing is not explicitly feminist: "elle s'oppose à toute une littérature 'masculiniste' [...] mais aussi à toute une autre littérature, féministe celle-là," she explores Colette's radically new way of understanding women and their relationships with men (12). Biolley-Godino focuses strongly on the newness of this approach, referring to it in terms of an "image nouvelle de la femme," an "originalité," a "rupture," (9,12, 12). According to Biolley-Godino, the newness of Colette's approach is that she depicts men, rather than women, as objects—Colette's men are weak, passive, subaltern, and "c'est la femme qui, se posant en sujet pensant, est libre d'imposer, avec sa façon de juger, des valeurs dont elle seule l'échelle." Men are "la création d'un esprit de femme original qui voit ou rêve le monde à sa façon propre." (12). In Biolley-Godino's distinction between subject and object, we should hear a reference to Simone de Beauvoir—Biolley-Godino cites Beauvoir numerous times during the work as uses a passage from *Le Deuxième sexe* as the epigraph for the second part of the text. Biolley-Godino, like Beauvoir, sees

in canons of women's writing created by feminists in the United States during the 1970's. These feminists had read Beauvoir—she is often cited in anthologies of women's writing and feminist theory from this time, and comes up frequently in mainstream feminist publications such as *Ms. Magazine*. Further, 1970's feminists show an interest in Colette before her works are readily available in translation in the US. Whence this interest? I think that, given the significant role played by Colette in *Le Deuxième sexe*, a role that is not eliminated in the Parshley translation, (Parshley's index only lists 21 references to Colette, compared to 51 in the full text, but most of the major citations listed above are preserved in Parshley's version) Beauvoir could be one of the reasons that American feminists became interested in Colette and interpreted her life and work as feminist in spite of Colette's longstanding association with antifeminism in France.

### **A Feminist Heroine**

Beauvoir was perhaps the first to see Colette in terms of a concrete project of women's liberation, but in the United States in the 1970's, this view became much more widespread. Colette was embraced, first by publishers and readers as a woman writer and a feminist writer, and then by feminist scholars as an object of feminist academic inquiry.

An understanding of the history of the translation of Colette's works into English helps us to see how she was marketed to English-speaking audiences. Many of Colette's works were first translated into English in the 1930's. *La Vagabonde*, for example, was first translated into English in 1931, and received mixed reviews in major English-language publications. Anglophone reviewers, in sharp contrast to French reviews of the

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something new in Colette's approach to women and their relationships with men, though she never inscribes this in any kind of political discourse.

novel, were dismissive of the novel. A review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, though mostly positive, concludes that “as trivial as this novel is, it has the light, bright touch, the witty phrase of an accomplished and very practical writer.” The *New York Times* review also calls the novel trivial—it is both “slender” and “slight,” “not among the best of Colette’s novels...it is ‘trivial’ in the better sense of the word and it will be liked only by those who enjoy trivialities when they are accompanied by great charm and grace of expression.”<sup>34</sup> For French reviewers in the 1930’s, Colette was seen as one of the best, if not the best, novelists of the time, but these reviews make it clear that, for Anglophone audiences, her canonical status was far from assured.

After Colette’s death in 1954, a large number of her works were reissued in English. At this time, new reviews of the novels were more laudatory than they had been in the 1930’s.<sup>35</sup> The 1955 review of *The Vagabond* in *The New York Times* calls the novel “enchanting, sincere, and beautifully constructed.”<sup>36</sup> This version of Colette more closely resembles the traditional French version: Colette is praised for her depiction of the “beating heart of woman,” for her descriptions of nature, of sensuality in “taste and smell.” The author evokes Colette’s style in the “dappled virtuosity of language” and concludes that she is a “sensitive, probing, absorbed interpreter of modern woman.”

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<sup>34</sup> Why is it so important for these critics to maintain the belief that Colette is a minor and trivial writer? Furthermore, as “modernism” is primarily an Anglo-American phenomenon, we might wonder whether this trivializing rejection of *La Vagabonde* in the English-language press might be partially responsible for Colette’s rejection from canons of modernism. The Times Literary Supplement (April 23, 1931). “The New Woman: Renée, la vagabonde,” The New York Times Early City Edition (March 22, 1931).

<sup>35</sup> The story of Colette’s publication, both in French and English, is a lengthy and twisted one. In short, Colette’s works were published in French by a wide array of publishers—she did not have a long-running relationship with any single publisher; instead, she seems to have published with whichever publisher would give her the best percentage on a particular work. Publishers sold the translation rights to individual works to different English publishers. In the 1950’s, Knopf wanted to publish new, definitive translations of a large number of Colette’s works, but obtaining the rights to each individual work proved too difficult. This meant that her works were published by a more minor publisher, and they went out of print relatively quickly. *Colette*. Knopf Publishing Archive.

<sup>36</sup> Frances Keene, “All This is Still My Kingdom,” New York Times 13 February 1955.

By the 1970's, however, translations of Colette's works had fallen out of print. For Americans in 1974, the only readily available paperback translation was *Earthly Paradise*, a collection of Colette's writing arranged into a semi-autobiographical narrative by Robert Phelps. Feminists called for new editions of Colette's works—most notably in an April 1974 *Ms. Magazine* article written by Erica Jong, which describes the difficulty of finding American editions of Colette's works, and gives bibliographic references for locating her novels in translation. Jong writes, "it would be splendid to see all Colette's works reissued in paperback editions for use in women's studies courses—or simply for women who are hungry for the work of women."<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the 1970's, publishers responded to this increased attention to Colette by republishing translations of her works. These new translations were clearly marketed toward women readers in general and feminist readers in particular. Though the 1955 edition of *The Vagabond* features a plain cover featuring only the title of the book and its author, the 1974 edition (both by Farrar, Straus and Giroux) is a large-format paperback, with a line drawing by artist Jacqueline Schuman on the cover.<sup>38</sup> The drawing, which is in black and white, depicts a clothed woman standing in front of a mirror. The drawing contains a floral motif, evoking femininity and nature. Colette's name is much larger than the title of the novel, indicating the importance of her name as a selling point for the book. Though this cover is clearly aimed at women readers, it also evokes the artistic content of the work, by using a recognizable artist's work for the cover drawings. Further, it is not particularly salacious in nature—the woman depicted in the drawing is fully clothed, and alone.

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<sup>37</sup> Erica Jong, "Retrieving Colette," *Ms. Magazine* (April 1974).

<sup>38</sup> Farrar, Strauss and Giroux published a large number of works by Colette during this period, all of them with a similar cover layout, featuring a line drawing by Schuman, and similar use of color and font.

This edition of *The Vagabond* sold very well. Nancy Meislas—editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux—explains, in a *New York Times* interview with Herbert Mitgang: “We first started publishing Colette in uniform editions in 1950 [...] most of the books dropped out of print in the 1960’s. We began our program of reissues with the publication of ‘The Vagabond’ in 1974, and there was an enormous response from booksellers, readers, and critics.”<sup>39</sup> Both Meislas and Mitgang attribute Colette’s popularity to feminism. Mitgang points out that the publishers’ decision to rerelease Colette’s novels was “encouraged by the new awareness of her stories by women’s group and general readers”. He further observes, “the Colette revival has been extraordinary. The books have been going very well—about 15,000 a year in paperback. ‘The Vagabond,’ the fastest-selling of all, goes over 25,000 copies. One of the reasons for the revival of the books is women’s studies courses—apparently, her books are consciousness-raisers.” Though Mitgang’s tone here is lightly mocking, perhaps especially in his use of the word “apparently,” Colette’s books were important to feminist audiences.<sup>40</sup> As Anne Ketchum points out in a 1980 review of Michele Sarde’s biography *Colette, libre et entravée*, “in the wake of the movement for the liberation of women, it is only natural that Colette’s works should arouse renewed interest; Colette remains one of the few, among the writers of her time, to have challenged and condemned the established order in all its forms of repression, particularly in connection with women.”<sup>41</sup>

The Colette revival also extended to anthologies of women’s writing published during this period. Colette is very well represented here—of 22 anthologies listed in an

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<sup>39</sup> Herbert Mitgang, “Publishing: Kohout and Colette,” *New York Times* 18 February 1977.

<sup>40</sup> Jong, “Retrieving Colette.”

<sup>41</sup> Anne Ketchum, “Review: [untitled] of Sarde, Michèle, *Colette Libre et Entravée*,” *Modern Language Journal* 64.3 (Autumn 1980).

analytical index of anthologies of women's literature, 7 contain works by Colette. Though this might seem like a small number, only one anthology that includes works in translation does not include a text about or by Colette, and at times, as in the anthology *Feminine Plural*, Colette is the only author to appear in translation. Two additional anthologies contain works explicitly addressed to Colette—Erica Jong's poem "Dear Colette" and Jean Garrigue's poem "Cortège for Colette."<sup>42</sup> Both poems celebrate Colette in terms of writing and femininity. Jong writes that, "I want to write to you/ about being a woman/ for that is what you write to me." Garrigue describes Colette as a "genius of gardens," and writes "just as sensory as perfume when the touched body/ gives forth the divine humor of rain and leaves."

These anthologies are explicitly feminist: whether they are pedagogical in nature or intended to be read for pleasure, they share a number of characteristics. They affirm the political potential of women's literature, asserting that these texts have the power to transform society. "The molds of society and tradition are being smashed; the promise is being fulfilled, as this collection attests with its thought-provoking revelation of what women have done" conclude Jeanette Webber and Joan Grumman in their 1978 anthology *Woman as Writer*.<sup>43</sup> This collection, as well as several others, make specific reference to the current moment—the 1970's, as a time in which these anthologies are especially needed and relevant.<sup>44</sup> These anthologies also make specific references to feminism, evoking, for example, "the Women's Movement" and "the liberated

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Cardinale and Jay Casey, *Anthologies by and about Women : An Analytical Index* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

<sup>43</sup> Jeannette L. Webber and Joan Grumman, *Woman as Writer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978). (xx)

<sup>44</sup> In the foreword to the 1972 *Feminine Plural*, Stephanie Spinner places her text in a specific contemporary political moment: "in a time when the position of women in society is being reassessed, when old attitudes are being challenged and new ones accepted, these stories have a particular and hopeful relevance" (viii). Stephanie Spinner, *Feminine Plural; Stories by Women about Growing Up* (New York,: Macmillan, 1972).

woman.”<sup>45</sup> The editors of these anthologies also rely heavily on the concept of experience, women’s experience, as dispensing with, combating, or destroying certain myths or stereotypes related to traditional femininity.<sup>46</sup> The editors of *Woman as Writer* write that “the selections themselves clearly show how misleading the stereotype is that suggests that women’s experience is outside ‘the real world’” (xv). Here, we note the direct contrast between “stereotype” and “women’s experience,” as well as the expectation that the anthologized texts will work to provide examples of this experience.<sup>47</sup> Based on their introductions and their approaches to women’s literature in

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<sup>45</sup> In the introduction to the first edition of *Images of Women in Literature* (1973), Mary Anne Ferguson evokes the current moment, during which “images of women in life and in literature are undergoing both analysis and change” (1-2). Mary Anne Ferguson, *Images of Women in Literature* (Boston, : Houghton Mifflin, 1973). (27, 29)

<sup>46</sup> Joan Scott’s articles “The Evidence of Experience” (1991) and “Fantasy Echo” (2001) prove useful for understanding feminist appropriations of Colette during the 1970’s. In “The Evidence of Experience” Scott describes the vogue, among historians of the 1970’s and 1980’s, for relying on experience as a crucial category of analysis. Experience was similarly important for literary studies during the 1970’s. Introductions to Colette’s works published in this period, in particular in anthologies of women’s writing with pedagogical and consciousness-raising aims, reveal that Colette’s depiction of women’s experience was a crucial factor in her sudden spike in popularity during this period. Similarly, in “Fantasy Echo,” Scott describes the search for feminist foremothers (though she would likely not use this term), explaining that, in these searches for origins, feminists tended to emphasize “resemblances between actors present and past.” She points out that this seeking of resemblance enabled “individuals and groups to give themselves histories.” These readings, according to Scott, reveal more about the person reading than the text itself: “It might mean simply that such identification is established by the finding of resemblances between actors present and past. There is no shortage of writing about history in these terms: history as the result of empathetic identification made possible either by the existence of universal human characteristics or, in some instances, by a transcendent set of traits and experiences belonging to women or workers or members of religious or ethnic communities.” Here, the suggestion that feminists in the 1970’s read certain traits into Colette’s life and works because of their own desire to find women, feminists, from the past to identify with, rings true—certainly the newfound obsession with Colette’s lesbian relationships had much to do with the rising importance of lesbianism as the social and sexual secretion of feminism. A more sustained engagement with Scott would have to make some account of her critique of essentialism, found in both of these articles, as well as elsewhere in her oeuvre. In “The Evidence of Experience,” for example, Scott critiques the rise of experience as a category for analysis because, in her view, experience tends only to provide transparent access to a subject, who is always understood in terms of an essentialized identity. “Fantasy Echo” is also, as the second citation shows, concerned with essentialized, or in this case “transcendent” traits shared by members of a group. It would be easy to accuse the 1970’s feminists who found so much to love in Colette’s work of essentialism, of a limited and singular view of Woman, though this is not my goal in this chapter. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (Summer 1991). Joan W. Scott, “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (Winter 2001).

<sup>47</sup>In another example, the editors of *Woman: An Affirmation* also contrast an “awareness of stereotyping” with a “more complete portrayal of the lives of girls and women” (viii). Doesn’t this structure sort of

general, we can make two general assumptions about the way Colette's texts are meant to be understood by readers of these anthologies. Colette's texts offer insight into women's experiences, perhaps with the goal of dismantling myths, as well as working toward a transformative political goal.

There is less variety than one might think in the selection of Colette texts anthologized, given that her writing career spanned more than a half of a century. Most of the anthologies contain selections either from *Sido* or from *My Mother's House*, both autobiographical texts about Colette's childhood in which her relationship with her mother features strongly. Another anthology includes a section of *The Break of Day* in which Colette describes her feelings after her mother's death. Clearly, the Colette that we get from these anthologies is a Colette for whom her relationship to her mother was absolutely paramount. The editors of the anthologies promote this view: In *A House of Good Proportion*, Murray writes "Colette's mother, the chief influence on and the great love of her life, is beautifully memorialized in her daughter's books [...] Colette wrote about all kinds of women at all stages in their lives [...] but her pages about her mother have a special warmth."<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, although Colette's reputation in France was based on the sexually explicit *Claudine* novels, and explicit depictions of women having sex feature heavily in Colette's works throughout her career, none of the Colette works anthologized contains explicit description of sex at all. The Colette anthologized in the U.S. is relatively de-eroticized, a dutiful daughter, experiencing a close and warm relationship with her mother.

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parallel the structure of *Le Deuxième sexe*—using women's experience (*L'expérience vécue*) to combat or undermine negative stereotypes (*Mythes*)? Alice Fannin, Rebecca Lukens and Catherine Hoyser Mann, eds., *Woman: An Affirmation* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> Michele Murray, *A House of Good Proportion: Images of Women in Literature* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1973). (218).



Many of the anthologies also provide introductions to the texts, with Colette biography, an explanation of the story and why it has been chosen, and questions to guide reading. Interestingly, these introductions often misread the anthologized texts. In the most egregious example, the editors of first edition of *Images of Women in Literature*, describing the short story “The Patriarch,” explain that only the “sophisticated” narrator realizes that the father-daughter incest described in the narrative “is essentially rape.” (233). The story, published in French in 1929 as part of the collection of semi-autobiographical short stories *Sido*, describes Achille, Colette’s brother. The narrator reflects on some length about Achille’s profession as a country doctor, and then recounts the story of the *paysan* who has impregnated his daughter (though the incest is only ever hinted at). However, incest, even rural incest, was hardly an accepted practice in France in 1929, and Colette did not need to denounce the practice to Parisian reading audiences. Indeed, for the narrator, the situation is as “enchanting” as it is “abominable,” implying that the tone of the story is salacious rather than denunciatory. We should note that later editions of *Images of Women* anthologize Colette’s short story “The Other Wife,” which is about a woman who questions her marriage, rather than “The Patriarch.” In including Colette in their anthologies, the editors imply that Colette’s writing can contribute to a project of feminism or women’s liberation as it was shaped in the 1970s U.S. These authors, in including Colette in their own feminist projects, accord to her work a more political, and much more explicitly feminist, aura than it previously possessed. These anthologies portray Colette as deeply concerned with the problems of rape and incest, her writing evoking “a desire for freedom and independence.” In short, she is an author whose texts are capable of contributing to a political project of women’s liberation

through the affirmation and valorization of feminine experience and subjectivity, contrary to masculine myths. The de-eroticization of Colette in these anthologies is also important. Perhaps the easiest, cheapest kind of “liberation” that Colette’s texts might offer would be the liberation of a diverse range of sexual practices and partners, but it is not this Colette that the authors emphasize.

Other texts from the 1970s portray Colette in a very different light, as a figure for feminist, often lesbian, sexual liberation. An influential figure in the Colette revival was Erica Jong, who listed Colette among her major influences as a writer, produced blurbs and introductions for Colette translations, and wrote articles about Colette for mainstream feminist publications such as *Ms. Magazine*. It should also be noted that Jong herself had a particular public image at this time—after the 1973 publication of *Fear of Flying*, Jong was known for the “zipless fuck,” a term used in that book to evoke sex without emotion or consequences. After the publication of this text, Jong became a figurehead for feminist sexual liberation. For the April 1974 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, Jong wrote “Retrieving Colette,” an article that clearly and explicitly establishes Colette as an important figure for feminism. Though this article is ostensibly a review of Margaret Crosland’s Colette biography *Colette: The Difficulty of Loving*, it is in fact an homage to a new, feminist Colette imagined by Jong. Jong begins the review by asserting that “Colette has always seemed to me the most authentic feminist heroine of all women writers.”<sup>49</sup> If we discount Pawlowski’s backhanded use of the term in 1913, the text is the first instance of Colette being discussed explicitly as a feminist. Jong goes on to call *The Vagabond* “this most subtle of feminist novels.” Herbert Mitgang may have mockingly referred to Colette’s texts as “consciousness-raisers,” but indeed, these kinds of terms were precisely the

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<sup>49</sup> Erica Jong, “Retrieving Colette,” *Ms. Magazine* (April 1974).

words used to describe Colette's works at this time. An ad for NOW, appearing next to Jong's article on Colette, asks the question, "Now that your consciousness has been raised, are you ready for a little action?"

For Jong, Colette's feminism seems to be mostly linked to her lesbianism. In the first paragraph of her review, Jong points out that Colette had "many lovers of both sexes." She criticizes Crosland for her "evasion of the issue of Colette's lesbianism." "Was she or wasn't she? Certainly her biographer should know for sure." A paragraph later, Jong points out that "when Colette wrote her great novel about a woman alone, *The Vagabond*, she was not living alone at all—but was living with her friend and lover, Missy, the Marquise de Mornay." Jong adds "her own temporary solution to the dissatisfaction of her first marriage was a long relationship with an older woman." Though Jong briefly mentions other qualities that might make Colette a feminist, such as her professionalism and living her life by her own terms, these topics do not seem to be of primary importance to her.

Jong repurposed her essay to serve as the introduction to *The Colette Omnibus*, published in 1974 by Nelson Doubleday, and containing translations of *Chéri*, *The Last of Chéri*, *Gigi*, *The Vagabond*, and *The Shackle*.<sup>50</sup> Though this introduction, titled "Viva Colette!" retains references to Colette's feminism, it plays down Colette's lesbianism somewhat, retaining only the reference to "many lovers of both sexes." This is likely due to the different audiences for the two works—*The Colette Omnibus* was a mass-market paperback intended for a wide readership, whereas *Ms. Magazine* was intended for feminist audiences. This indicates that, in 1974, a word like "feminism" would not disqualify a book from mass appeal, a situation that is sadly very different today.

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<sup>50</sup> Colette, *The Colette Omnibus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

Between feminist anthologies and Erica Jong, we have at least two different versions of Colette being marketed to American audiences. Both Colettes are feminist, useful to projects of women's liberation and emancipation. For readers of feminist anthologies of women's writing, Colette is a dutiful daughter, a relatively asexual chronicler of women's experience, especially regarding the mother/daughter relationship. Her texts have pedagogical value. Readers who picked up Colette because of Jong, on the other hand, would have been seeking a different Colette, a lesbian Colette, a Colette who would describe titillating sexual acts and be of interest to women seeking sexual liberation as well as political liberation.

A 1982 re-edition of *The Vagabond*, in pocket format, reveals which of the two images of Colette won out, at least in her marketing to mainstream readers.<sup>51</sup> This paperback seems to be marketed to an audience of romance novel readers. The cover features a drawing of a nude woman, with a flower in her hair, seen from the back. Colette's name is introduced: "Colette, she knows a woman's heart and mind, body and soul." After the title of the novel, we are treated to a tagline: "At 33, alone in a world full of choices..." Especially given the ellipses after "choices," we might well imagine that this is a lightly pornographic novel.

Open the front cover to find praise of the novel, and, although reviews from traditional sources do appear—the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*—there is also a review from *Mademoiselle*, and one from romance novel author Danielle Steele: "I'm very fond of Colette!" Colette's femininity is mentioned in nearly every review, as is sex: the novel is "ripe, open, and without shame," Colette writes about

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<sup>51</sup> Colette, *The Vagabond* (New York: Ballantine, 1982).

“feel,” “love and sex,” and “touch.”<sup>52</sup> The popular Colette, then, had gone in a decade from consciousness-raiser to titillating romance novelist. Though the initial context of the Colette revival was feminist, this Colette has become depoliticized, sexy, rather than consciousness-raising.

## Academic Appropriations

Colette’s surge in popularity among wide audiences during the 1970’s was echoed in academic criticism. Colette was not completely forgotten by academics during the 1950’s and 1960’s, but, aside from biographies, extended academic treatments of her works were relatively rare.<sup>53</sup> The 1970’s and 1980’s saw an explosion of works of Colette criticism. Prominent feminist academics contributed to collections devoted to Colette and numerous articles and monographs were published on her each year. This increase in scholarly work was due to Colette’s status as a woman writer: essentially every work written on Colette during this period reads her through the lens of femininity, feminism, and women’s writing. In this way, academics of the 1970’s and 1980’s (and beyond) end up with a picture of Colette that is similar to the one painted by her contemporaries—that of a writer who is defined, before all else, by her femininity. However, while for Colette’s contemporaries, her femininity implied naturalness, spontaneity, instinctiveness, for

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<sup>52</sup> Some of Colette’s works have recently been republished, though few have ever been retranslated, which means that publishers are still using the 1930’s Enid McLeod translations. *The Vagabond* is one of these texts. Though I haven’t studied the translations closely, it seems surprising that so few attempts have been made to update the translations of these novels. However, *Le Blé en herbe* was recently retranslated.

Colette and Zack. Ed. and Intro. Rogow, *Green Wheat: A Novel* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2004).  
<sup>53</sup> Anne Ketchum, *Colette ou la naissance du jour: étude d'un malentendu* (Paris: Minard, 1968). Elaine Marks, *Colette* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960). Thierry Maulnier, *Introduction à Colette* (Paris: La Palme, 1954). Biographies from this period include those by Maria Le Hardouin, Margaret Crosland, and Margaret Davies.

recent academic studies, Colette's femininity has led to an increased attention to the politically emancipatory possibilities of her writing, her lesbianism, and her marginality from the male-dominated and misogynistic literary establishment of her time.

The introduction to a foundational text of Colette criticism, the 1981 *Colette, the Woman, the Writer* makes clear the extent to which Colette was read in terms of women's writing.<sup>54</sup> The title alone of this collection shows us the primary focus of the work on Colette's status as a woman. Eisinger and McCarty's introduction reinforces the idea that the main thrust of this work is a consideration of Colette as a woman writer: "For readers looking for continuity in women's writing, Colette refutes the notion that women were silent or absent from literary creation. And for those who look not to the past, but to the present struggle of women writers to speak in a mode specific to women, Colette inaugurates the search for a new literary discourse" (1). It is clear that Eisinger and McCarty intend this book to speak to Colette's status as a woman writer, writing as a woman, writing to, for, and about women.

Eisinger and McCarty also express their project in terms of a reclamation of Colette's work against the attacks of "traditional critics."

Traditional critics saw Colette's fiction as 'typically feminine' but this femininity was viewed only negatively, as 'non-male.' Colette's writing was labeled instinctive, corporeal, sensual, pagan, anomalous, outside literary history. The authors in this volume reclaim these same traits—the presence of the body, a diffuse sensuality, an unrepressed female desire, the celebration of marginality—for the female continent, recognizing them as the very elements which distinguish Colette from the male canon and draw her to her sisters (1-2).

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<sup>54</sup> Erica Eisinger and Mari McCarty, eds., *Colette, the Woman, the Writer* (University Park: Pennsylvania UP, 1981). This text, edited by Erica Eisinger and Mari McCarty is the foundational text for feminist Colette scholarship in the Anglophone academic community. Nearly every Colette scholar of note, and many prominent feminist literary critics, contributed to this landmark volume.

Though Eisinger and McCarty describe their own similarities to previous approaches to Colette in the terms of “reclamation,” it is important to note that for them, it is the valences of terms like “instinctive, corporeal, sensual” that will change in their approach, rather than the terms themselves.

They also focus on what they see as the uniquely feminine aspects of Colette’s writing, “The authors focus on those narrative techniques which depart from patriarchal convention, leading toward the generation of the female text: the reversal of sexual stereotypes, the transcendence of genre, the alteration of image structure, and the discovery of new lexical codes. We suspect that something new in women’s writing begins with Colette. The androcentric optic is displaced; a new subject appears: the woman who desires.” Eisinger and McCarty’s questions make their interest in Colette’s status as a woman writer clear: “how does a woman come into writing? How does a woman inscribe her gender into writing? How does the text of a woman writer relate to other texts? How is meaning produced in the woman’s text?”

These “gynocentric” approaches to Colette were exceedingly fruitful, but they did not change the terms in which Colette was considered. The relationship between Colette’s female body and her written texts, for example, remained a primary topic for consideration among feminist critics, as it had been for Colette’s contemporaries. For example, Diana Holmes reads Colette’s works explicitly in terms of a “return to the body” the description of “female bodily experience,” and “the determining presence of the mother-daughter bond.”<sup>55</sup> In France, Carmen Boustani’s 1992 *L’écriture-corps chez Colette* and Tania Brasseur Wibaut’s 2004 *La gourmandise de Colette* both focus on the

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<sup>55</sup> Diana Holmes, *Colette*, Women writers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991). (127-8).

relationship between writing and the female body in Colette's work.<sup>56</sup> Boustani evokes, for example, the "rythme biologique de l'écriture" (196). Julia Kristeva's work on Colette, culminating in the 2004 *Le génie féminin; Colette* also focuses on the relationship between body and text.<sup>57</sup>

The problem, and the pleasure, in reading Colette in terms of women and femininity, is evidenced by the titles of books published on Colette. A huge number of works have considered Colette's works in terms of women's writing: more than twenty monographs have taken, as their subject, Colette's relationships (some biographical, but mostly textual) with other women writers, especially Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, and Georges Sand.<sup>58</sup> At least as many books on women writers, or French women writers, have included chapters on Colette.

Colette's femininity has meant that her works and life are read as narratives of women's liberation, women's political and sexual emancipation, and feminism. In stark contrast to Colette's contemporaries, these scholars do see Colette's works as politically liberatory, as resisting and dismantling patriarchal structures. This emancipation takes

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<sup>56</sup> Carmen Boustani, *L'Écriture-corps chez Colette*, Bibliothèque d'études féminines (Villeneuve-d'Ornon: Editions Fus-Art, 1993). Tania Brasseur Wibaut, *La Gourmandise de Colette*, Espaces littéraires (Paris: Harmattan, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin: Tome 3: Colette*.

<sup>58</sup> Catherine Peebles *The Psyche of Feminism: Sand, Colette, Sarraute* (2004), Bethany Ladimer *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers* (1999), Helen Southworth's *The intersecting realities and fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette* (2004), Chantal Pommier's *George Sand et Colette : concordances et destinée* (2004) Melanie Collado's *Colette, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Marcelle Tinayre : émancipation et résignation* (2003) Laurie Corbin's *The mother mirror : self-representation and the mother-daughter relation in Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, and Marguerite Duras* (2001) Julia Kristeva's 1999-2002 series *Le génie féminin : la vie, la folie, les mots : Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette Christina Angelfours's La double conscience : la prise de conscience féminine chez Colette, Simone de Beauvoir et Marie Cardinal* (1989) Victoria Best's *Critical subjectivities : identity and narrative in the work of Colette and Marguerite Duras* (2000), Dana Handy's *As the women's world turns : innovations in the autobiographical writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Colette* (1986). Chapters on Colette appear in Adele King's 1989 *French Women Novelists*, Jennifer Waelti-Walters's 1990 *Feminist Novelists of the Belle-Epoque*, Lucille Frackman Becker's 1989 *Twentieth-Century French Women Novelists*, Martha Noel Evans's *Masks of Tradition: Women and the Politics of Writing in Twentieth-Century France* (1987) and Diana Holmes's *French Women's Writing 1848-1954* (1996).



different forms. Some critics read Colette's feminism in her sexual liberation, at least in part. Nancy K. Miller evokes the "multiplicity of desires" in *La Vagabonde* as one element of its feminism.<sup>59</sup> Alex Hughes evokes Colette's "desire to reflect on and rethink questions of gender enactment, sexual morality and desire" (150). Rachel Mesch is reluctant to term Colette's *L'Ingenue libérine* as "feminist" given that the term was only rarely associated with sexual liberation by Colette's contemporaries, though she does read the novel in terms of a narrative of the sexual liberation of the female protagonist.<sup>60</sup> Jennifer Waelti-Walters also reads Colette's feminism in terms of sexual liberation, though she ultimately concludes that this is not a very interesting kind of emancipation. She observes that "Colette has a traditional attitude toward women which makes her see emancipation in terms of sexual freedom only; this emancipation is 'naughty.'"<sup>61</sup> She concludes that "Colette's gift to literature lies in the perspicacity and sensuousness of her descriptions of women in love with men. She does not question the circumstances which surround the lovemaking. To her, emancipation is the freedom to find sensual satisfaction [...] Used or unused, they remain objects in a man's world. There is no concept of autonomous womanhood here" (155).

Other critics understand Colette's feminism in terms of her personal, biographical emancipation: Michèle Sarde's feminist biography of Colette: *Colette, libre et entravée*, published in 1978, tells the story of Colette's life through the lens of women's liberation. It is important to note that Sarde's biography essentially ends in 1923, when *Le Blé en herbe* was signed "Colette," the first time Colette signed a novel with this name. This act

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<sup>59</sup> Nancy K. Miller, "Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing," (New York: Columbia UP, 1988).

<sup>60</sup> Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge : French Women Writers at the fin de siècle* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Jennifer R. Waelti-Walters, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque : Love as a Lifestyle* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990). (140).

of women's "indépendance" becomes the crowning moment of Colette's life, the ultimate moment of a woman's liberation to such an extent that the rest of her life holds little importance for Sarde.<sup>62</sup> The story Sarde tells about Colette's life is that of a woman discovering feminist freedom, rather than a writer participating in a complicated set of social, professional, or artistic networks.

Yet others see Colette's feminism in her understanding and depiction of women's experiences. Nancy K. Miller attributes a "feminist subjectivity" to Colette's writing. Christina Angelfors insists that Colette's writing, is a "source précieuse" for feminism because of "la vision des femmes [...] elle les décrit comme elle les perçoit, à partir de sa propre expérience."<sup>63</sup> Diana Holmes writes that Colette's voice "emphasized a woman's perspective, both in the sense that contemporary events and ideas were viewed in relation to women's lives and in the sense that she wrote from a position outside normative masculine values and assumptions." In her excellent chapter on Colette in *French Women Novelists*, Adele King emphasizes the realistic, deromanticized vision of women in Colette's work, and explains that Colette's works reveal their feminism in their "advocacy of woman's right to her own specific nature" and their "refusal to place woman simply in the role of Other."<sup>64</sup>

Some writers see Colette as engaging in an explicit or implicit critique of patriarchy or gender norms in her writing. Nancy K. Miller, who refers to Colette as a "feminist modernist," explores her "feminist critique of the economics of the male gaze"

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<sup>62</sup> Michèle Sarde, *Colette, libre et entravée* (Paris: Stock, 1978).

<sup>63</sup> Christina Angelfors, *La Double conscience : la prise de conscience féminine chez Colette, Simone de Beauvoir et Marie Cardinal*, Etudes romanes de Lund, (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1989). (27).

<sup>64</sup> Adele King, *French Women Novelists : Defining a Female Style* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989). (82).

in *La Vagabonde*.<sup>65</sup> Alex Hughes suggests that Colette's works offer "a tacit critique of restrictive gender norms" manifested through their questioning of gender norms as "natural, permanent, or entirely non harmful" (150).<sup>66</sup> For Hélène Cixous, in her landmark 1975 essay *Le rire de la méduse*, Colette's works go beyond mere critique of patriarchal society to become weapons against patriarchy. Colette, as one of only three examples of *écriture féminine*, is depicted as a potentially violent, revolutionary force in the destruction of patriarchy.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to her feminism, Colette's depictions of lesbianism are also of paramount importance to critics. This sexual emancipation can also be found in Colette's lesbianism. In Elaine Marks's 1979 essay "Lesbian Intertextuality," she evokes Colette as "the foremother" of lesbian writers who "occupies a privileged place." Marks relies both on Claudine's lesbian adventures in the Claudine novels and on Colette's best work about homosexuality—*Le pur et l'impur*—as well as references to Colette's biographical liaisons with women, in order to read a powerful resistance to men and patriarchy into

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<sup>65</sup> Miller, "Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing."

<sup>66</sup> Alex Hughes, "1900-1969: Writing the Void," *A History of Women's Writing in France*, ed. Sonya Stephens (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> This alone is not especially significant, as Cixous does no analysis of Colette, and only mentions her in a footnote as an example of *écriture féminine*. Moreover, this reading of Colette is not so unusual. If Colette is a writer of *écriture féminine*, she is irrational, her writing is closely related to, produced by her feminine body. Her misogynist contemporaries also celebrated her irrationality, her femininity, her writing of the body. Perhaps the only important distinction is that for Cixous this irrationality is capable of violent social change. The femininity is the same, then, though the potential political consequences of this femininity are different. The vocabulary is the same. Cixous, "Le Rire de la méduse." Further, by 1976, Cixous had already backed away from any admiration of Colette. In an interview, published in English under the title "Rethinking Differences," when asked if Colette should be considered "a woman's text that affirms women's strength," Cixous responded, "I don't know her work very well" and went on to explain that "as far as I'm concerned, she's not that great" (82). She also distanced Colette from *écriture féminine* (though she didn't use the term) writing that "Perhaps what bothers me in Colette is precisely that there are so few things that carry her beyond herself. It's all so perfectly controlled, so well substantiated. It's not mad, it's not excessive" (82). Cixous sounds not so different from Beauvoir. Although she might have initially been taken in by Colette's reputation as a spontaneous writer, upon further reflection she recognizes that Colette's writing is in fact honed, crafted, controlled. Hélène Cixous, "Rethinking Differences," *Homosexualities and French Literature*, eds. Stambolian and Elaine Marks (1979).

Colette's works.<sup>68</sup> A surprising number of writers have taken up Colette's vanishingly brief depiction of lesbians in *La Vagabonde*, including Rachel Mesch, who, in *The Hysteric's Revenge*, suggests that, for Colette, this scene reveals the "perceived incompatibility of heterosexuality and communication."<sup>69</sup>

However, there are real consequences to the frequent reading of Colette in terms of women's literature. Because Colette is so often read as a woman writer, other approaches to Colette have been far less popular. By way of comparison, two works have been produced that, in their titles, consider Colette in terms of male writers: Liana Nissim's *Études sur le vieillir dans la littérature française : Flaubert, Balzac, Sand, Colette et quelques autres* (2008) and Michael Lucey's 2006 *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (2006).<sup>70</sup> It is clear that, in comparative works, Colette's relationships to women writers are considered to be far more important than her relationships to male writers, even when her relationships to women writers are both biographically and textually tenuous.

Whereas authors who treat Colette only in connection to other women writers marginalize her implicitly, other scholars explicitly insist on her marginality to the male-dominated literary establishment. Elaine Marks, in her influential 1960 biography, *Colette* evokes "brief contacts" with Proust, Gide, and Valéry, but insists that "Colette's

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<sup>68</sup> Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," *Homosexualities and French Literature*, eds. Elaine Marks and George Stramboulion (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1979).

<sup>69</sup> Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge : French Women Writers at the fin de siècle*. (78-79). Adrienne Rich discusses this scene in the influential essay "Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Experience," though Rich is ultimately unsatisfied by Colette's portrayal of lesbians. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Experience," *Signs* 5.4 (Summer 1980). (658). Dorothy Dinnerstein, in the 1976 *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, is similarly skeptical of Colette's portrayal of lesbians in *La Vagabonde*. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur : Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). (103).

<sup>70</sup>Liana Nissim and Claude Benoît, *Études sur le vieillir dans la littérature française : Flaubert, Balzac, Sand, Colette et quelques autres* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2008). Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*.

work developed in silence. No literary talks preceded her writing, no philosophical or aesthetic views suggested a topic.”<sup>71</sup> Marks further insists that Colette had “no ‘literary’ relationships” and that she was “very far removed from the intellectual-aesthetic sphere in which the ‘greats’ of her generation lived and created.” In a 1979 essay, Marks reiterates this marginality, writing that “Colette, the foremother, left God out and was accused by the morally serious and believing of frivolity. Critics, male and female, took their revenge.”<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, in *Colette, the Woman, the Writer*, McCarty and Eisinger work to “reclaim” the traditional view of Colette as “outside literary history,” through a celebration of her “marginality” (1-2). McCarty’s belief in Colette’s marginality informs other works as well. In “Possessing female space: ‘The Tender Shoot,’” an article about Colette’s “Le Tendron,” she asserts that “Women are Other in a world in which the structures of society, meaning, and language are defined and controlled by men. ‘On the boundary’ of the male world, women can only overcome their Otherness by becoming consciously marginal, by reveling in marginality” and describes Colette’s world as “a refuge from phallic constructs” with characters “‘on the fringe’ of society.”<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusions

This new feminist approach to Colette opened up new angles for considering her work, and allowed it to be thought in terms of social critique, something that was never possible during Colette’s lifetime, under various misogynist approaches to her oeuvre. However, Colette’s reading as a feminist meant that her works were read, almost

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<sup>71</sup> Elaine Marks, *Colette* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981). (6-8).

<sup>72</sup> Marks, “Lesbian Intertextuality.”

<sup>73</sup> Mari McCarty, “Possessing Female Space: ‘The Tender Shoot,’” *Women's Studies* 8.3 (1981).

exclusively, in terms of women—Colette’s status as a woman writer, her relationships to other women writers, her depictions of women characters and love-type relationships in her novels. These readings are not wrong. Far from it. Colette *was* a woman writer, and as we have seen in this chapter, as well as the previous one, she used her femininity to her advantage in a variety of ways. Colette’s depictions of women and her understanding of women’s experiences and relationships are absolutely among the most interesting and fruitful avenues for inquiry into Colette’s works. However, somewhat perversely, the insistence on Colette’s status as a woman writer by feminist scholars ultimately ends up interpreting Colette in many of the same terms used by her misogynist contemporaries—Colette is thought in terms of the body, in terms of love, in terms of her relationships to other women writers, marginalized from the male literary institutions of her time.

The conclusion of this chapter finds Colette in a somewhat tenuous place in literary history—celebrated both by her contemporaries and by present-day scholars for her femininity, but unlikely to be read in terms other than those of femininity.

The goal of the second part of this dissertation is to attempt some readings of Colette beyond femininity. This is not to say that I will ignore Colette’s status as a woman writer, a task that would be both very difficult and ultimately, self-defeating. Instead, the following chapters seek to first, uncover how Colette herself created and contributed to the myth of her femininity that dazzled her contemporaries and that has persisted, in some form, in scholarship on Colette to this day. Then, I will suggest ways of reading Colette alongside her contemporaries, most of whom were men, as a consummately professional writer and as a “classique moderne.”

### **Chapter 3: Cultivating Claudine: Colette's Maintenance and Use of Renown**

The first two chapters of this dissertation have shown that Colette maintained a remarkably stable literary persona throughout her life, one that endured, in some forms, even after her death. Critical and popular understandings of her oeuvre were dominated by the specter of the *Claudine* novels, and marked by femininity, naturalness, spontaneity, and literary unselfconsciousness. The homogeneity of the response to her work can be explained neither by misogynist conspiracy nor the incompetence of literary critics. I shall show that, Colette worked consciously to defend and reproduce her reputation. She herself emphasized and kept current in the critical idiom her similarity to Claudine, as well as her femininity, her sympathy with nature, for plants and animals. She encouraged the idea of her marginality to literary movements and institutions. The earlier chapters of this work have already suggested some of the ways that Colette maintained her persona as "Claudine." Her chastising letter to Apollinaire (Chapter 1) is just one example of the careful eye that she kept on her reviews. Colette explained her antifeminism (Chapter 2), as a direct consequence of her instinctive femininity, contrasted with the unnatural masculinity of "ces suffragettes."

This interpretation of Colette as a self-made literary celebrity is a substantial departure from received opinion. For reasons discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, scholars of many kinds, but especially self-consciously feminist scholars, have since her death taken Colette's image as a marginalized feminine writer to be an

accurate depiction of her situation, rather than a skillful creation. They are less interested in the feminine Colette as a self-conscious fiction, than as a liberatory reality. Michael Lucey, in *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*, does write at some length about Colette's manipulation of the Moulin Rouge scandal, in which she shared an on-stage kiss with her lesbian lover, Missy.<sup>1</sup> However, Lucey limits his discussion to this single episode, and does not interrogate the origins of Colette's renown, nor does he trace the aftereffects of this scandalous moment for her public image more broadly.

This new investigation into Colette's persona is informed by celebrity theory. Classic texts, like Edgar Morin's *Les Stars*, Richard Dyer's *Stars*, and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" provide a powerful narrative of the commodification and public consumption of the star. Colette's line of beauty products, for example, fits perfectly with Morin's analysis of the "star product," and her postcard photographs lend themselves to an analysis similar to the one performed by Dyer of the "star image."<sup>2</sup> An understanding of commodification helps us to see that Colette's capitalization on her name was also part of her professional activity—it was not greed or vanity that convinced her to put her name on a line of lipstick, but the need for material security.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Pub., 1979). Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. Morin, *Les Stars*, Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> I discuss Colette's professionalism at considerable length in the next chapter of this work: "The Professional Writer: Colette's Literary Networks." My forthcoming article on Simone de Beauvoir, "Simone de Beauvoir and Women's Writing: Dialogue and Profession," also provides some context for thinking through the specificities of women writers and professionalism, particularly the relationship between profession and breadwinning.



However, these fundamental texts tend to place much of their emphasis on the role of the spectator, or on the star-as-object. As this chapter demonstrates, Colette exercised substantial agency in the reproduction of her public image. How do we locate Colette's subjectivity and agency in these narratives? Very recent analyses of celebrity, notably those performed by Sharon Marcus, provide some context for thinking through the agency of the star in the creation of her public image; her observation that both Oscar Wilde and Sarah Bernhardt "deftly used photography, advertising, the mass press, and international travel to gain public recognition" will shape my approach to Colette.<sup>4</sup> Marcus also interrogates the specific nature of literary celebrity, writing: "since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writers had been minor celebrities, and in the Victorian era Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and Ralph Waldo Emerson achieved fame as heroes and sages. Wilde, however, was a new type: the author as feminized celebrity personality—as actress" (1016). If Wilde's literary celebrity was tied to his femininity, and to his similarity to an actress, it seems logical that similarly, Colette, celebrated for her femininity, who achieved renown in part as an actress, might have experienced a similar kind of fame.

Indeed, the role of performance in the formation of Colette's public image deserves further attention. Rather than separating Colette's personal infamy from her stage persona from her literary celebrity, I want to focus on the ways that these types of fame were intertwined. As Rachel Brownstein shows in *Tragic Muse: Rachel of the Comédie-Française*, the characters that Rachel played when she was on stage also affected the ways that she was perceived when she was not on stage: "by embodying

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus, "Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity." (1003).

storied women on stage [...] Rachel took on increments of meaning for herself.”<sup>5</sup>

Brownstein’s argument takes on a particularly fascinating valence in the case of Colette, as Colette “performed” the character of Claudine in public, but never in fact played the character on stage.

Colette’s own writing also provides a powerful analysis of celebrity. Therefore, this chapter begins with a reading of Colette’s seminal text on female performance and persona, her 1910 novel, *La Vagabonde*. Celebrity theory proves at once useful and limiting in a reading of this text that underlines the complex relationship of the central character, Renée Néré, to the audience, and the role of her own subjectivity and agency in her performance. Celebrity theory then provides a frame for thinking about Colette’s personal renown. I therefore turn next to Colette’s own entry into public life in the last years of the nineteenth century. Locating the origins of Colette’s fame in the character of Claudine, her first and most famous literary creation, I trace the ways that Colette maintained her image, through photographs, interviews, and correspondence. The second half of the chapter explores ways that, over the course of her career, Colette capitalized on her image, endorsing a literary collection, toothpicks, wine, fabrics, and finally creating a cosmetics company.

### ***La Vagabonde* and Celebrity Theory**

In *La Vagabonde*, Colette presents the attentive reader with a powerful analysis of the relationship between actress and audience. Early in the novel, the protagonist, Renée

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<sup>5</sup> Rachel M. Brownstein, *Tragic Muse : Rachel of the Comédie Française* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). (108).

Néré, a music-hall performer, receives a salacious note from an admirer: “Madame, j’étais au premier rang de l’orchestre ; votre talent de mime m’invite à croire que vous en possédez d’autres, plus spéciaux et plus captivants encore ; faites-moi le plaisir de souper ce soir avec moi...”<sup>6</sup> As Laura Mulvey points out in the landmark 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure [...] in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.” In this system, women become the “sexual object” of the male gaze.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, because Néré has appeared on stage in front of an audience, has been “looked at and displayed,” this anonymous spectator imagines that he possesses sexual access to her body. However, this situation goes one step further than the one described by Mulvey—here, the sexual access of the spectator is imaginary, but also real—though Néré does not “souper” with her admirer, plenty of women who worked in the music hall had relationships with wealthy patrons. The line between performer and prostitute is less clear than it would become for film actresses.

Though the writer of the note was an anonymous spectator, Renee Néré’s lover, Max, further complicates Colette’s depiction of the relationship between the spectator and the actress. One would expect Max to have a relationship with Renée that moves beyond the consumption of the actress as sexual object explained by Mulvey, but this is not the case. Throughout the novel, Max makes it clear that his relationship with Néré is defined by her stage persona. Max falls in love with Néré before they have met, after having seen her perform.

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<sup>6</sup> Colette, *La Vagabonde* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1971). (9) All subsequent in-text citations refer to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” (837).

Tu lisais, assise sur la table, la lettre menaçante de l'homme que tu trompais. [...] Tu te claquais la cuisse, en te renversant de rire, et on entendait que ta cuisse était nue sous ta robe mince. Tu faisais le geste robustement, en jeune poissarde, mais ton visage brûlait d'une méchanceté si aiguë et si fine, si supérieure à ton corps accessible. (160-161)

Max's consumption of Renée while she is on stage is related to her body and to the character she plays—both are available and immediately graspable by him. The performance renders Renée's body "accessible" to Max, both visually and in an auditory fashion: he sees her body through her "robe mince" and both sees and hears her naked thigh. She is also accessible because she is an instantly recognizable dramatic trope: the figure of the evil, cheating seductress, laughing over her lover's threats, is one that is typical in melodrama.<sup>8</sup> Colette's analysis moves beyond Mulvey's in this scene. Renée Néré is a sexual object, fixed and consumed by the determining male gaze, but she is also fixed by the stereotypical depiction of women in fiction.

Max's response to seeing Renée on stage for the first time is to draw an image of her face. "Après t'avoir vue mimer l'Emprise pour la première fois, j'ai passé une heure à crayonner le schéma de ton visage [...] j'y ai réussi, et j'ai répété je ne sais combien de fois, dans les marges d'un livre, un petit dessin géométrique lisible pour moi seul" (160). Richard Dyer's analysis of the star photograph in "A *Star is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity" provides a useful basis for analyzing this image.<sup>9</sup> Dyer explains that, for the public, the "star image" provides an access to the star that is once instantaneous and authentic. The star is what she appears to be, and she is instantly graspable, consumable, by the audience. Here, Max creates a star image of Renée Néré, reducing her to a

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<sup>8</sup> Toril Moi explains that, in idealist fiction, women are frequently understood within an angel/whore paradigm. In this example, Néré is clearly playing the whore. Moi, Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Dyer, "A *Star is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," Stardom: Industry of Desire, ed. Christine Gledhill (New York: Routledge, 1991).

geometric cipher. Max's "lisible par moi seul" is fitting with Dyer's star image: the image allows Max to possess Néré even more completely than the performance. It is not insignificant that Max is drawing in the margins of a book, which evokes the fictionality of Néré's performance, and of Max's drawing. Max is ultimately more interested in the easily legible fiction of Néré than in the real person. Colette's analysis goes beyond Dyer's as it went beyond Mulvey's, because Max creates the drawing of Néré himself, rather than looking at a photograph taken by someone else, perhaps the ultimate example of fixing the star with the image.

Colette also understands, like Dyer, that when the star is not "what she appears to be" this has a "disturbing" effect for audiences. The first time that Renée meets Max in person, he seems confused by her appearance and remarks "c'est bizarre... quand on vous a vu que le soir, on ne croyait jamais que vous avez des yeux gris ... Ils paraissent bruns, sur la scène" (75). Max is troubled by the disjunction between the performer, the image, and reality—he finds it "bizarre" that Renée outside of the theater is not the same as the actress that he saw on stage. The repetition of "on" in the passage includes Max with the other audience members, all of whom expect Renée to be the representation, all of whom project their own fantasies on to her, expecting her to be the person that she portrays. This much is a standard account of celebrity.

However, Max's confusion between actress and person is troubling to Renée Néré. Here, celebrity theory is less useful: in general, celebrity theory has paid less attention to the lived experience of stars, or has tended to pathologize and psychologize the star.<sup>10</sup> Colette's narrative provides considerable insight into the effect on Néré of her

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<sup>10</sup> For example, David Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

reduction by Max into an easily consumable fiction. Renée questions whether Max could have fallen in love with her without having met her: “ça me semble si étrange qu’on puisse s’éprendre d’une femme rien qu’en la regardant...” (160). This exchange reveals Néré’s ambivalence toward being reduced to her performance, nothing more than the object of Max’s gaze. Néré seeks authentic communication with Max, but he is unable to provide it. Late in the novel, Renée criticizes a letter that Max has written to her: “votre belle écriture ... elle remplit quatre pages, huit pages, de quelques ‘je t’adore’ de malédictions amoureuses, de grands regrets tout brûlants. Cela se lit en vingt minutes ! et je suis sûre que, de bonne foi, vous croyez m’avoir écrit une longue lettre. Et puis, vous n’y parlez que de moi ? (199). Even without the presence of the gaze, Max reduces Renée to a romantic stereotype, and he can only communicate in melodramatic clichés. Renée seeks an authentic, reciprocal relationship, but because she is an object for Max, he is only able to write about her, “vous n’y parlez que de moi,” still representing her in the same way that he did when he produced the drawing.

The final breakdown of communication between Max and Renée is precipitated by a photograph that he sends her: Renée describes the image as

Une petite image, lorsque je m’apaise, lorsque je m’abandonne à mon court avenir, confiée toute à celui qui m’attend là-bas, une petite image photographique me rejette à mon tourment, à la sagesse. C’est un instantané, où Max joue au tennis avec une jeune fille. Cela ne veut rien dire : la jeune fille est une passante [...] il n’a pas pensé à elle en m’envoyant sa photographie. (222)

Renée does not feel especially jealous of this particular young woman, who is nothing more than “une passante.” However, this image does provoke anxiety for Renée because it represents her “avenir” with Max. She would become the woman in the photograph, “belle encore et désespérée, enragée dans mon armure de corset et de robe, sous mon fard

et mes poudres...” (223). Of course, Max is not able to give up his fictionalized representation of Renée. After Renée confronts him, she observes “mon ami n’a pas compris. Il a cru qu’il s’agissait d’une crise jalouse, d’une coquette alarme de femme qui veut recevoir, de l’homme aimé, la plus flatteuse, la plus facile assurance...” (229). Max can only respond to Renée’s anxiety by treating her as a stereotype, “une jalouse” “une coquette,” the staged representation that was, after all, the persona of hers with which he fell in love in the first place—the stereotyped drama of love has been played out from start to finish with no more than a minimal contribution on her part.

This sequence of events is important for two reasons. First, Renée imagines herself giving up her career as a mime, a performer, in order to be with Max. However, she has realized that Max only loves her as a performance, as a representation. He makes it clear that he will not be able to understand her once the performance is over. On another level, though, Renée realizes that, for Max, the performance will never end, whether or not her stage career does. She will give up her career on stage simply in order to become another representation, that of the bourgeois woman, wearing yet another costume: “dans mon armure de corset et de robe, sous mon fard et mes poudres.” It is not insignificant that this final break is precipitated by a photograph—Renée realizes that she will never be anything other than an image for Max, whether or not she is on stage.

The end of *La Vagabonde*, Renée’s decision to leave Max and continue with her theatrical tour, has been explained in various ways. According to various critical interpretations, Renée chooses herself, art, writing, solitude, or profession.<sup>11</sup> And, indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> These interpretations can be found in texts including: Tilburg, *Colette's Republic : Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*. Martha Evans, "Colette: The Vagabond," *Masks of Tradition: Women and the Politics of Writing in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), Eisinger and McCarty, eds., *Colette, the Woman, the Writer*.

all of these are plausible lessons to draw from the novel. But, in light of this new reading of the novel in terms of celebrity theory, it is also clear that Renée realizes that the choice, posed by Renée to Max, between representation and reality, is a false one. There is no distinction between reality and performance, and so one might as well participate in the performance of one's choosing. Early in the novel, Renée realizes that some of the spectators in the audience are women that she knew when she was married. At first, she is upset that these women recognize her, but then, she asks herself

Ces gens-là existent-ils? ... Non, non, il n'y a de réel que la danse, la lumière, la liberté, la musique... Il n'y a de réel que rythmer sa pensée, la traduire en beaux gestes. Un seul renversement de mes reins, ignorants de l'entrave, ne suffit-il pas à insulter ces corps réduits par le long corset, appauvris par une mode qui les exige maigres ? (53-54).

Sharon Marcus has suggested that we stop reading celebrity in terms of a false surface and a hidden depth, and that we see the potential agency and power in the performance of celebrity, as well as the commodification and objectification described by classic celebrity theorists like Mulvey and Dyer.<sup>12</sup> This citation is fitting with Marcus's new direction—Néré realizes in this moment what she forgets in her relationship with Max, that there is no hidden reality beneath her performance, but instead that “il n'y a de réel que la danse.” The performance is reality. This description also reverses the traditional understanding of the relationship between the female body and spectators—here, the freedom of Néré's body is an “insult” to the spectators, an aggression rather than a passive object of consumption.

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<sup>12</sup>Sharon Marcus, "Celebrity: A Surface Reading," Beyond Critique: Reading after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion (Duke University: 10 September 2010), vol. In “Salomé!!,” Marcus explains that “power in Salomé [Oscar Wilde's version] thus resides not simply in looking or being looked at but in the exhibition of presence. Salome is most powerful when she can solicit an adoring gaze but keep her audience at a physical distance, which was precisely the power of the theatrical celebrity onstage” (1010). Marcus, “Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity.”



This conclusion reveals the potential for feminist agency that is absent from much of celebrity theory. Yes, Renée Néré is sexually consumed by male audience members, but this is not the only thing that is going on. Néré is aware of the power of her image, and is able, on stage, to control her performance, to change what it means to her to be consumed. Further, her staging of the freedom of her body becomes an act of power and aggression, rather than passivity. This analysis extends beyond the stage: if women can only be, for men, actresses on stage, they can, at the very least, have some control over what role they play.

## **Claudine**

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette Willy became known to the *grand public* in her late 20s as the inspiration for the central character of a series of novels published under her husband Willy's name. After the wild success of *Claudine à l'école* in 1900, Willy encouraged Colette to emphasize the physical similarities between herself and Claudine. Every trip in public became a performance. He dressed her in Claudine's iconic schoolgirl outfit and insisted, after Claudine cut her hair in a bob in *Claudine à Paris*, that Colette cut her hair in the same style.<sup>13</sup> Photos and drawings of Willy with Colette dressed as Claudine appeared in Parisian newspapers and literary journals as early as 1901, years before Colette was publicly acknowledged as the author of the *Claudine* novels. The origin of Colette's fame, then, can be located in the character of Claudine. By

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<sup>13</sup> The haircut caused much controversy. Colette's mother did not approve of the decision to cut Colette's hair, which before the haircut was waist-length. Colette herself shows some discomfort with the decision, claiming in a letter to one of her friends that the haircut was because of accidental contact with fire, though in *Mes Apprentissages* she admits that she cut her hair because of Willy's desire to make her look like Claudine. Rachilde mentions the haircut in her review of the *Dialogues des bêtes*, and Colette responds, "merci pour moi, et pour mes défunts cheveux." Rachilde, Nelly Sanchez, "Colette et Rachilde," *Cahiers Colette* 24 (2002).

the time that she was acknowledged as the author of the books, she would already have been immediately recognizable as their source.<sup>14</sup>

A series of postcards, commissioned by Colette and Willy, are visual evidence of the strong relationship between Colette and Claudine. In all of the photos, Colette wore Claudine's schoolgirl outfit.



Figure 2: This postcard is subtitled “Willy, Colette et Toby-chien.”

Intriguingly, some of the photos are subtitled “Willy et Colette” whereas others are subtitled “Willy et Claudine” or “Claudine et Toby-chien.” The usage of Claudine versus Colette is vague—Colette is wearing the same outfit in all of the photos, so why is she sometimes Colette, and sometimes Claudine? Perhaps this is because there is no difference between the two. Colette's renown relies on this playful confusion between author and character, between fiction and reality.<sup>15</sup> What do these photos reveal about the

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Dyer explains the value to the star of appearing “in character” even when she is not on screen—this increases her authenticity. In today's era of the “total star” (as Dyer puts it) or the reality television star, the star is “in character” all of the time, and the lines between person and persona are totally blurred. Interestingly, Dyer points out that for a star to seem authentic, she must be understood as “spontaneous” and natural—she hasn't planned this image, or worked at it, this is just who she is. In so many ways, this sounds like Colette's spontaneous natural image. Dyer, *A Star is Born and the Construction of Authenticity*.”

<sup>15</sup>Michael Garval's article “Cléo de Mérode's Postcard Stardom” explores the importance of the postcard in very early twentieth-century France. According to Garval, Cléo de Mérode, an actress and dancer at the

persona of Colette/Claudine? In one photo, she kneels at Willy's feet, so she is submissive to her husband. In another, lifts up her dress to reveal a bit of ankle, so she is naughty, sexual. She is frequently with her dog, so she is a lover of animals. Colette and Willy both used these postcards for correspondence, especially with other members of the literary and artistic field.<sup>16</sup> Colette sent one, for example, to fellow writer Robert de Montesquiou.<sup>17</sup>

Colette's first contact with many members of the Parisian public was through images like these. It is unsurprising, then, to note the attention that she paid to photographic images of herself. Colette and Willy were photographed frequently, sitting for famous photographers such as Léopold Reutlinger. In a letter from this period to an unnamed photographer, perhaps even Reutlinger (he did photograph the couple during this period, and Colette mentions him in *Mes Apprentissages*), Colette reveals her careful attention to photography. She explains that she has received some of the photos from the session, three "photographies," "et la moins bonne des assises" but that apparently something has happened to the remaining photos: "le porteur a raconté à la bonne, en notre absence, une incompréhensible histoire de photographies perdues. Que s'est-il donc

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Opéra de Paris, achieved worldwide stardom primarily through the distribution of her image on postcards. Through these postcards, at the height of her fame, Mérode became the woman whose image was the most reproduced in the world. Garval points out that Mérode achieved her fame through appearing in character on postcards—as a courtesan, as a figure from classical tragedy. It is not surprising, therefore, that in her own series of postcards, Colette also appeared "in character." Mérode's postcards were sold to public audiences, and sparked widespread fame. Unfortunately, it is not clear how widely distributed Colette and Willy's postcards were, and what their primary purpose was. Certainly, Colette and Willy sent them to other writers, but were they also used in other ways to generate interest in the novels? Or were they sold separately, like Mérode's postcards? Michael Garval, "Cléo de Mérode's Postcard Stardom," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 7.1 (Spring 2008).

<sup>16</sup> These images prefigure in some ways 1950's star photographs. Richard Dyer and Edgar Morin both analyze the star photograph—essentially, this image provides us with access to the star that is more immediate and more authentic than a film. Dyer, *Stars*, Morin, *Les Stars*.

<sup>17</sup> Colette. *Postcard to Robert de Montesquiou*. 1912? NAF:15161.

passé ? et où sont les autres ?”<sup>18</sup> These kinds of photos appeared in advertisements for the books, newspaper articles, books devoted to the couple. A 1903 “sondage” on “Le Bien et le mal qu’on pense des coquettes,” in which Colette and Willy participated, features a massive photo of the couple, far larger than the photo of any other participant.<sup>19</sup> The size and prominence of the photo shows the importance of the image in creating Colette’s particular renown.

In 1902, after Polaire (the stage name for actress Emilie Marie Bouchaud) became famous for playing Claudine, Willy would take the two women out, dressed in matching outfits. Colette and Polaire became known as Willy’s “twins” (the English word was used).



Figure 3: In this photo of Willy and the “twins,” Colette and Polaire are almost indistinguishable—in hair color, attire, expression. To further confuse viewers, Polaire is holding Colette’s dog, Toby-chien, in the photo.

In the photo, Polaire is immediately recognizable as the actress who portrays Claudine on stage. Colette’s physical and sartorial similarity to her is striking. But this photograph was taken years before Colette ever appeared on stage (and Colette never portrayed

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<sup>18</sup> Colette. *Letter to unnamed recipient*. Before 1912. NAF, 24266, 40.

<sup>19</sup> “Le bien et le mal qu’on pense des coquettes...” *La Vie Heureuse* (15 December 1903). Colette and Willy give answers to the ‘survey,’ in which they playfully disagree, and their answers appear alongside a photograph of them together. The content of this particular survey, focused on women and love, does nothing to undermine a connection between Colette, and women and amorous relationships.

Claudine on stage). If Polaire is the theatrical version of this character, then Colette must be the real-life one. She is not *portraying* Claudine, she *is* Claudine.

Discussions of Claudine/Colette in texts from the time provide a much fuller picture of her qualities than images alone. Two of Willy's friends produced books about the couple at his behest in order to increase the popularity of *Claudine*. Jean de la Hire, mostly known as a writer of popular novels, wrote the 1905 *Ménages d'artistes*, a text which explicitly focused on Willy's "artistic" relationship with Colette. Eugène de Solenière, a music critic, produced a 1903 biography, *Willy*, that contains long descriptions of Colette.<sup>20</sup> Both books also contain plenty of photographs. In both works, the authors emphasize Colette's similarity to Claudine, and establish her image as natural and feminine. Hire's Colette sits, bathed in light, "Toby-Chien sommeillant dans un rais de soleil" (141) Solenière exclaims "ah ! Colette exquise, que vous avez bien su être le féminin de Willy et que vous devez lui donner du goût !" (41). Further, Hire spends pages describing the minutest differences between Colette and Claudine, noting, for example, the different names of the villages where they were born, a comparison that ultimately serves to emphasize the overwhelming similarities between the two. Though Hire claims not to care whether Colette "est Claudine entièrement, ou Claudine beaucoup, ou Claudine un tout petit peu," we note that in this formulation, there is never any question as to whether Colette "is" Claudine—it is only a question of degree (117).

During their marriage, Willy carefully controlled the public image of Claudine, and by extension, the image of Colette. For example, to Alphonse Séché, who suggested the production of a 'Claudine Calendar,' Willy writes: "A votre place, je ne publierais

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<sup>20</sup>Hire, *Ménages d'artistes: Willy et Colette*, Eugène de Solenière, *Willy*, 2. éd. ed. (Paris,: P. Sevin et E. Rey, 1903).

pas le ‘Calendrier de Claudine’ sous ce titre. Ce n’est pas le style de Claudine, c’est mieux, c’est différent. Et j’userais trop de temps à claudiner votre texte. Trouvez un autre truc, ou changez les noms. Mais pas de Claudine comme signature. ‘Le Calendrier d’une amie de Claudine’ suffirait très bien.”<sup>21</sup> Willy sees that Claudine has a specific image, and that every public iteration of this image must be carefully controlled.

The end of Colette’s marriage to Willy did not sever her connection to Claudine, though she did make some moves to distance herself from the character. A publicity notice that Colette produced for director Lugné-Poë, as part of a 1910 tour, shows the ways that Claudine continued to be a guiding figure for Colette.<sup>22</sup> The text begins: “une enfance campagnarde, une adolescence provinciale et paisible, ou semblaient pas me destiner au rôle de Paniska, et pourtant – les Claudines en témoignent – il n’y a pas d’amour plus païen et plus passionné que le mien pour notre mère la Terre, la Terre d’où jaillissent la source, le blé et la rose.” In this text, Colette activates her pre-established public image: her relationship to Claudine and her irrational connection to nature.

Toward the end of the text, Colette announces “ma destinée quitte ici celle de Claudine [...] mon sosie, ou ma sœur plus folle –ou plus sage ? –que moi, et qui est seulement ma fille spirituelle en même temps que celle de Willy.” Here, though Colette announces that her destiny departs from that of Claudine, her sister/daughter, this announcement is made through the evocation of the connection between the two. Colette cannot escape Claudine.

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<sup>21</sup> Alphonse Séché, *Dans la mêlée littéraire (1900-1930) Souvenirs et correspondance* (Paris: Société Française d’éditions littéraires et techniques 1935). (34-5).

<sup>22</sup> Colette. *Publicity Notice*. 1910? NAF, 26460, 48. The first tour of the performance was in 1906, and Judith Thurman dates the publicity notice to 1906. But given the explicit mention of *Les Vrilles de la Vigne* and *La Vagabonde*, I suspect that this notice was really for a 1910 revival of the performance. The BNF also tentatively dates the letter at 1910.

This text also highlights Colette's marketing acumen. She concludes "pour moi, vagabonde assagie, les Bêtes sont prêtes à dialoguer de nouveau, où les Vrilles de la vigne enguirlandent de leurs vertes griffes une maison vieillotte, hantée de fantômes sereins ouverte sur un paysage aux lignes pures." Colette's stage persona and her writerly one are interdependent. *La Vagabonde*, *Les Vrilles de la Vigne*, *Les Dialogues des bêtes*—these novels will sell tickets, and the ticket-holders will buy novels. The text also reveals the ultimate coherence of Colette's persona—whether she is on stage or writing a book, she is always Claudine, natural and feminine, and those who appreciate any aspect of his persona should appreciate (and purchase) the other aspects of it.

Colette continued to rely on Claudine at other moments during her literary career—specifically, in the title of the 1920 collection of short fiction *La Maison de Claudine* and the subtitle to the 1936 *Mes Apprentissages: Ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*. Apparently, Colette grew to regret this subtitle: she removed it when she edited her complete works for the Édition de la Fleuron in 1949. Though both of these works evoke Claudine in the title, neither treats the *personnage* of Claudine. Instead, both works are seemingly autobiographical reflections on Colette's life. Both texts are narrated in the first person, and both texts indicate that the "je" is Colette. It is not coincidental that the two texts in which Colette evokes "Claudine" are her two most explicitly autobiographical writings up to this point. Colette acknowledges, at least obliquely, the centrality of Claudine to her own life, and especially to any narrative that she can create of herself. Colette's use of Claudine is also almost certainly a marketing strategy. *La Maison de Claudine* was a collection of short texts, which is not always a best-selling

genre, but it did spectacularly well, probably because French audiences were so eager to read another text about Claudine.

## **Beyond Claudine**

Willy might have been partially responsible for the birth of Colette's natural, feminine, Claudine-y public image, but Colette herself was responsible for developing, cultivating and maintaining that image long after her marriage to Willy. In interviews, Colette continued to emphasize her natural femininity, especially her marginality from literary movements and institutions. In her correspondence, we find traces of a more direct control over her image—Colette demands that newspapers insert publicity notices, insists that they publish letters and retractions, and carefully edits journal articles devoted to her life and works.

Interviews with Colette from the 1910's and 1920's shore up her natural, feminine image. Maurice Dekobra's 1910 interview includes a reference to Claudine, as well as a long reflection on her connection to animals and to women, mentioning that her furniture provides "une confortable niche pour quelques fox ou quelques bassets favoris" and describing her sympathy for female music-hall performers.<sup>23</sup> In a 1913 interview with George Martin for *Renaissance contemporaine*, Martin emphasizes her femininity: "Un mariage... l'enlève au theatre. Il nous resta la femme de lettres, l'écrivain ému, mélancolique et pénétrant des contes du *Matin* ; l'auteur de ces romans merveilleux, si finement écrits qu'ils vous prennent à l'âme : semblances de sincérité, mensonges d'un art profond. Vrais seulement parce qu'ils pourraient l'être."<sup>24</sup> In Martin's formulation,

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<sup>23</sup> Dekobra, "Chez Madame Colette Willy."

<sup>24</sup> George Martin, "Une Interview de Colette Willy," *Renaissance contemporaine* 7 (10 January 1913).



this “femme de lettres” possesses a deeply feminine connection to emotion—words like “ému,” “mélancholique” “âme” and “sincérité” remind readers of Colette’s understanding of feelings.

Martin also evokes the fleshly, bodily nature of Colette’s persona : “la danseuse passionnée, la mime qui savait tout dire avec ses yeux, avec ses bras, avec son corps va quitter le music-hall où elle triompha.” His characterization is a bit lascivious—the “tout” of the “tout dire” feels like it might be a winking acknowledgement of something. Indeed, Colette’s appearance on stage must have encouraged reviewers to understand Colette’s writing as “fleshly,” after all, she appeared nude in a performance titled “La Chair.” As the reception chapter of this dissertation showed, reviewers already used a vocabulary of sensuality to describe Colette’s writing before she appeared on stage, but it is clear that the issue of body and writing became even more present after Colette’s theatrical career. It is also important that Colette worked, for the most part, as a mime. She was silent (and often scantily clad) while performing—her body was the only “text” for the audience to read.

In all of these interviews, Colette is extremely reticent about, even hostile to, the subject of “literature.” Colette’s natural feminine writing arises from instinct, and so she does not need to think about or criticize “literature” (coded masculine). To Dekobra, she explains that she is “beaucoup trop indépendante pour remplir le rôle de critique.” “On m’a même proposé de faire de la critique de l’art et de la critique dramatique. Je ne me vois pas bien pontifiant sur la peinture contemporaine, critiquant les élucubrations des pointillistes, des hachuristes, des cubistes, des virgulistes et autres phénomènes ou déclarant doctement que M. Le Bargy est moche dans son nouveau rôle et que M. Capus

a saboté son troisième acte...” Though Colette does not use the language of masculinity and femininity in this citation, the verb “pontifier” exemplifies a certain pompous dogmatism associated with male-dominated literary and artistic criticism. In a May 1925 interview with Benjamin Péret for the *Journal Littéraire*, Colette remains frustratingly coy on the subject of literature. Peret remarks that “mes questions ‘littéraires’ amènent de la part de Colette des réponses ironiques. Je tente de ruser et de poser des questions ‘à côté’ qui, peut-être, inciteront des réponses littéraires.”<sup>25</sup> However, even Colette’s ‘réponses littéraires’ reinforce her image as a writer who is marginalized from the literary scene. When Peret asks what she thinks of “la littérature contemporaine,” Colette responds, “Pas un mot ! Vous entendez, pas un mot.... He presses, asking her to name “les écrivains les plus représentatifs de notre époque,” to which she responds “je ne veux pas faire de critique littéraire. J’ai toujours refusé d’en faire... Si je vous donnais des noms, je ferais de la critique, et non... Ce n’est pas aujourd’hui que je commencerai.” She laughs aloud in response to a theoretical question about literary movements : “distinguez-vous, à l’heure actuelle, un mouvement d’idées comparables au romantisme au siècle dernier... Ah !ah !ah !... Colette rit à gorge déployée. Distinguez-vous un mouvement, un mouvement de quoi... Ah ! non vraiment ! en voila une question ! Vous en avez de bonnes, vous ?... ”

Colette does admit to having read Balzac—“Balzac...je lis Balzac depuis mon enfance, c’est une vieille habitude.” She also responds to a question on authors who have had the most influence on her: “ils sont trop... oui...ils sont trop... Peut-être, je vais vous donner, est-ce Daudet qui a eu le plus d’influence sur moi... Alphonse...” Alphonse Daudet is an unusual choice for Colette here—she writes about Balzac frequently, but

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Peret, "Interview," *Journal littéraire* 57 (23 May 1925).

never mentions Daudet elsewhere in her work. It is intriguing that both of the authors that Colette dares to name are authors from the nineteenth century, a move that cements her distance from contemporary literary movements. Further, her “je vais vous donner” implies that this is not a “real” answer, but instead simply the answer that she has chosen to give at this moment.

These texts also show Colette’s marketing acumen—she never misses the opportunity to mention a book for sale, a performance to attend. Dekobra slyly evokes Colette’s most recent text, describing the “vrilles—non pas de la vigne, mais de ses boucles espiègles” of Colette’s hair. Colette herself describes the forthcoming *La Vagabonde*, and reminds readers of upcoming stage performances: “je paraîtrai dans le Faune, de Francis de Croisset.”

Colette’s correspondence reveals her practical and aggressive approach to increasing her renown. She was very comfortable demanding publicity from various sources. In a 1910 letter to an editor at *Comœdia*, possibly Gaston de Pawlowski, she writes, “si ça n’est pas abuser de l’offre aimable que vous m’avez fait, puis-je vous demander l’insertion— en la place la meilleure que vous pourrez lui donner— de cette photographie dans Comœdia ? Une courte légende suffira ‘Colette Willy, qui sera, pendant la première quinzaine de février, l’étoile des nouvelles Folies-Bergère, à Bruxelles.’”<sup>26</sup> To another writer at an unidentified journal, she asks, “est-ce trop demander que de solliciter l’insertion de cette photo et de cet article ? L’ami Ronsier-Duere l’arrangerait le mieux du monde, et vous l’y aviez autorisé déjà, par téléphone, il y a quelques mois. S’il vous est agréable de recevoir, dans une quinzaine, des ‘Notes de Tournée,’ je vous enverrai quelques lignes, tachant par ainsi de vous remercier d’un

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<sup>26</sup> Colette. *Letter. Possibly to Gaston de Pawlowski*. 1910? NAF, 18708, 256.

accueil charmant.”<sup>27</sup> Just as Willy used his friends to create buzz for the Claudine novels, Colette used her literary networks to generate publicity for her public appearances.

Colette’s manipulation of her image was not natural or unconscious; instead, it was deliberate and calculating. In a letter to Lugné-Poë, Colette outlines her conditions for appearing in the 1906 stage production of *Pan*, and then reminds him, as a justification for her high salary:

Avant le départ de la tournée, je suis sûre d’avoir dans *Comoedia* article et portraits,—article excellent dans *Paris-Journal*—article au *Figaro*. Pendant la tournée, j’écrirais aussi à *Comoedia* (où je deviens collaboratrice) des articles genre ‘pittoresque’ qui contiendront une publicité déguisée et utile ! N’oublie pas que Sem a fait une excellente affiche de moi, utilisée par Baret depuis deux ans, ci-joint une réduction de l’affiche en carte postale. En double couleur - elle est épatante !<sup>28</sup>

Colette is delightfully honest and straightforward about her motivations in this letter. She is fully aware of the impact of certain photographs, as well as the possibility of her journalistic writing to contain a “publicité déguisée et utile.”

A letter from Colette to Sisley Huddleston, a British journalist who wrote a number of books about Paris, including *France and the French* and *Paris in Zigzags*, shows that Colette tried to exert control even over ostensibly objective texts. Huddleston apparently sent Colette proofs of an article devoted to her before its publication. Though I have not been able to locate the article in question, Huddleston’s treatment of Colette in the 1928 *Paris salons, cafés, studios* gives us some idea of his take on her work, which is completely fitting with the standard natural, feminine Colette.<sup>29</sup> He writes that “she describes the most subtle, the most profound sensations, without disguise, without

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<sup>27</sup>Colette. *Letter to unnamed recipient*. 1910? NAF, 18708, 260.

<sup>28</sup> Colette. *Letter to Lugné Poë*. 1910? NAF:26460, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Sisley Huddleston, *Paris Salons, Cafés, Studios* (Philadelphia, London,: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1928). (364-5).

detachment, without intellectual transposition [...] she writes as the rivers flow, as the flowers bloom” (364). If we assume that the article that Colette saw was much like this one, we should not be surprised that she is generally pleased by Huddleston’s article, writing:

Je vous remercie de lignes flatteuses que vous me consacrez. Mais tenez-vous beaucoup à la citation ? Elle vient d’un vieux livre et me semble sans intérêt. En outre, je vous demande de mentionner mon dernier livre, la *Naissance du jour*, qui fait, depuis deux mois, une belle carrière et qui a eu une critique exceptionnellement bonne. J’y tiens beaucoup, excusez-moi. Les *Claudine*, je n’en rougis pas, mais je n’en suis pas fière. *La Vagabonde* est plus connue qu’elles, et sa suite *l’Entrave*. [...] Je n’ai pas ici de photos satisfaisantes. La meilleure, est la plus récente. Demandez-la de ma part à Manuel 47 rue Dumant d’Urvielle, en précisant ; la photographie avec les deux chats.<sup>30</sup>

Colette’s wish for control over Huddleston’s article is remarkable—she selects the photograph that will be shown, the texts that will be cited. This very directive letter does not sound much like the woman writing as the rivers flow described by Huddleston. Of course there could be economic reasons for Colette’s suggestions, especially given that Colette made no money from the sale of the *Claudine* novels.<sup>31</sup> It would be wrong to assume that her motivation is only economic or professional, though. She also describes her real affection for her later works, as well as their literary quality and renown.

Not all of Colette’s attempts to control her image took place behind the scenes. In a public letter to Pierre Lafitte, director of the journal *Femina*, Colette chastises him for adding a title and illustrations to an article she wrote for the journal: “je voudrais bien qu’il fût rendu à *Femina* ce qui est à *Femina*, et à moi ce qui est à moi. J’ai écrit pour *Femina* un article. Vous y avez ajouté des illustrations qui lui font beaucoup d’honneur,

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<sup>30</sup> Colette. *ALS to Sisley Huddleston*. Undated. Colette SG / Letters Lake.

<sup>31</sup> Willy sold the rights for the *Claudine* novels to Ollendorff. In spite of a protracted legal battle, Colette was not able to get the rights back.

et un titre qui m'en fait moins. Les illustrations, on peut être sur qu'elles ne sont pas de moi. Le titre on pourrait me l'attribuer. Imaginez-vous que je n'y tiens pas."<sup>32</sup> The title in question was "Impressions de Maman : les premières heures." It is true that this article was published after the birth of Colette's daughter, but she objected to being referred to as 'Maman.' She explains

Que je sois mère, cela ne regarde pas le lecteur. Je lui donne une œuvre que je souhaite littéraire, c'est l'auteur qui paraît devant lui, ce n'est pas la femme, et s'il a le droit de me juger comme écrivain, son droit s'arrête là. Or, la rédaction de *Femina* semble lui en attribuer un autre, en intitulant l'article 'Impressions d'une jeune maman.' Il y a là une nuance, et un peu plus qu'une nuance. Vous êtes trop fin, cher ami, pour ne pas l'avoir aperçue.

It is strange that Colette is so opposed to being seen as a mother—one would think that motherhood would fit well with Colette's feminine image, though perhaps not with her image as a scandalous, sexy performer. Here, unusually, Colette also hides behind the veil of literarity, insisting on the difference between her writing and her life, something she is certainly not doing when she makes reference to Claudine, for example. She also explicitly contrasts being an author with being a woman. I never want to claim that Colette is totally consistent. Even though at many other moments, Colette insists very strongly on her femininity, here, she wants to be seen as an un-gendered "littérateur," perhaps even an "homme-de-lettres." What this letter really shows, rather than Colette's perfectly coherent public image, is her overwhelming desire to assert control over her image. Even this minor deviation is swiftly and publicly dealt with—even the addition of a title and illustrations to Colette's texts (which might seem relatively minor) evokes a swift and aggressive response.

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<sup>32</sup> Colette, "Lettre de Colette à Pierre Lafitte, directeur de Femina," *Femina* (1 February 1904). Colette echoes Willy's formulation, "rendre à César" from the 1910 Paris-Théâtre controversy.

## The Collection Colette

Colette wrote for money—she supported herself, and often her husbands, through the income from her writing. At times, book sales alone were not enough, so Colette leveraged her public image in a variety of ways in order to bring in additional income. A particularly interesting instance of this is the literary collection that Colette managed between 1923 and 1925 for the publisher Ferenczi et fils. Though Colette devoted, based on her letters, a significant portion of her time to this project, her biographers have shown relatively little interest in the Collection Colette, perhaps because it has little to do directly either with her amorous affairs or her own literary production.<sup>33</sup> In my view, though, the Collection Colette is a fascinating example of the power of Colette's persona. For one, the existence of this collection shows that her image was strong enough to market books written by other writers. More, though, the Collection attests to Colette's conscious and instrumental use of her professional networks: she convinced her peers to contribute to the Collection, to write articles about it, to nominate her authors for literary prizes.

The story behind the decision, on the part of both Colette and Ferenczi, to create the Collection Colette is a murky one. Ferenczi published Colette's well-received and best-selling collection of short fiction, *La Maison de Claudine*, in 1922. This marked the beginning of their relationship, which continued throughout Colette's life, and even after

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<sup>33</sup> The Collection is not mentioned in biographies by Diana Holmes, Madeleine Lazard, and Nicole Ward Jouve. Judith Thurman's *Secrets of the Flesh*, one of the more exhaustive Colette biographies, devotes only two sentences to the Collection. Jacques Frugier's article in the *Cahiers Colette* is the only in-depth study of the Collection that I have found. Jacques Frugier, "La 'Collection Colette'," *Cahiers Colette* 5 (1983).

her death in 1954.<sup>34</sup> It was not unusual for prominent authors to take charge of selecting and editing novels for publishing houses—writers such as André Gide and Charles Péguy for example, both did it at one point or another in their literary careers. There are, however, certain peculiarities of the Collection Colette that bear noting. First, Ferenczi was not in the business, in the 1920's, of publishing “literary” novels. The publisher was much better known for its popular novels, such as the Western adventure series “Rifle d’or” and the “Nouveau Buffalo” series. We can assume that Ferenczi decided to publish *La Maison de Claudine* because Colette was a bestselling author—even if the book was not a perfect fit with their normal publications, it was almost guaranteed to be commercially successful. Their publication of the Collection Colette might well have been motivated by similar factors: since Colette was a brand name, a series of books published under the Colette brand would hopefully sell well. This leads us to the second particularity of the Collection Colette—it was named after its editor. As far as I have found, this is the only collection of this type in 1920's France. Certainly there was no “Collection Gide,” for example. It is clear that the name “Colette” was assumed to be a major selling point for these works. The announcement in the *Bibliographie de France* for the creation of the Collection explains, “en confiant à Colette, dont le grand talent est apprécié de tous, la direction de cette nouvelle collection, nous avons voulu donner au lecteur la certitude qu’elle ne comprendra que des œuvres d’une haute tenue littéraire.”<sup>35</sup> The announcement contains no information about the works themselves, except for the fact that Colette chose them, and this alone, Colette's fame, her “talent appreciated by all” is what is selling the Collection.

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<sup>34</sup> Colette. *Publishing archive of Ferenczi*. 1950-1960. CLT2:G5 0302-3.

<sup>35</sup> *Bibliographie de France* (30 March 1923).



Ferenczi's move into the "milieu littéraire traditional" was marked by a new pricing structure. The average price for books published by Ferenczi was 95 centimes, and some of their more expensive offerings sold for 3f50 and 6f75.<sup>36</sup> The Collection Colette novels were the most expensive published by Ferenczi at the time, beginning at 7f50, and increasing in price 8f50 starting in 1923. If these books sold well, they had the potential to be very profitable. In spite of the Collection Colette's higher prices, Ferenczi remained one of the least expensive publishing houses in France at this time: new works of literature usually sold for 15 francs, so starting works in the Collection at 7f50, even though it was high by Ferenczi's standards, was in fact selling the books at about half what other houses would have charged for them.<sup>37</sup>

All in all, the collection contained 22 works, of a rather astonishing diversity. The texts are wildly varied in content, style, tone and genre: a novel about a successful sports team [Marcel Berger's *L'Histoire de quinze hommes*], one or two colonial travel diaries [Philippe Soupault's *A la dérive*, Louis Charbonneau's *Mambu et son amour*], an imitation of Proust [Léon Pierre-Quint's *La femme de paille*], novels in the first person, the third person, novels that seem modern, if derivative, novels that seem distinctly old-fashioned. Only five of the 22 authors published by the Collection were women, indicating that the goal of the Collection was not to publish imitations of Colette, or examples of feminine writing more generally.

The array of authors that Colette persuaded to contribute to the Collection shows both her ambitions for it and her understanding of ways of strengthening her own literary

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<sup>36</sup> Myriam Quere, "La Maison d'édition J. Ferenczi et fils 1879-1940," Université de Paris 1, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> It would be extremely useful to see Ferenczi's publishing records from this time to get a sense of how this lower price translated into payments to the authors (and to Colette) but unfortunately there is no archive for Ferenczi et fils.

networks. Colette successfully convinced Philippe Soupault, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, and H el ene Picard, all of whom were relatively successful poets before the Collection, to publish novels with it. Francis de Miomandre, who won the Prix Goncourt in 1908 for his novel *Ecrit sur l'eau*, contributed to the Collection. Raymond Escholier, who won the Prix Femina in 1921, published his next novel with the Collection.

Colette also pursued even bigger fish, brazenly demanding novels, using, though unsuccessfully, the imperative “donnez-moi un roman” from prominent writers Paul L eautaud and Val ery Larbaud.<sup>38</sup> Not all of the novelists who wrote for the Collection were well-known, however. Emmanuel Bove, who wrote *Mes Amis*, one of the best and most-successful contributions to the Collection, was discovered by Colette during her time as the literary editor at *Le Matin*. She had published some of his short fiction under the “Mille et un Matins” rubric at that newspaper, and then asked him to contribute to the Collection.<sup>39</sup> Not all of the contributors to the Collection were apparently selected for their literary merits, however. Colette also selected a novel written by her secretary Claude Chauvi ere and another written by L eon Pierre-Quint, a prominent reviewer of novels who had more than once given one of Colette’s works a glowing review.<sup>40</sup> At least in the case of Pierre-Quint, it is probable that Colette’s selection of this work was as much about strengthening professional connections as it was about the literary merits (especially given that the novel itself is not very good).

Andr e Obey’s novel *Savreux vainqueur*, a novel written in the third person, describing the war, seems to have been chosen, at least in part, because of Obey’s

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<sup>38</sup> Colette, *Lettres   ses pairs*. (296, 297)

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Cousse and Jean-Luc Bitton, *Emmanuel Bove: la vie comme une ombre* (Paris: Castor Astral, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> For example, he contributed to the 1925 issue of *Le Capitole* devoted to Colette. Perhaps not coincidentally, the biography of Colette in this issue discusses the Collection Colette at considerable length.

physical proximity to Colette: they were neighbors. Though Obey went on to become a relatively well-respected playwright, he was unknown at the time of *Savreux*'s publication, and the novel is often left out of bibliographies of his work. In a letter to Obey, Colette writes "cher confrere et voisin, voilà *Savreux*. C'est très bien et je serai enchantée de la prendre sous la Collection Colette. Vite, finissez-le ! Pour [...] la date approximative, les droits d'auteur, voulez-vous venir au 'Matin' où je suis entre 6h et 7h1/2 ?"<sup>41</sup> This letter is one of the few traces of Colette's editorial work on the novels. Apparently, she is returning a manuscript of the novel to its author, perhaps with comments or corrections. If Colette was indeed the one discussing the "droits d'auteur" with her novelists, she was involved in the minute and economic details of the project.

Colette worked hard to publicize the Collection, both publicly and privately. She solicited interviews in two major publications—*L'Excelsior* and *Comoedia*—expressly for this purpose. Amusingly, when Colette's connection at the *Excelsior* did not respond quickly enough to her demand for an interview, she sent him a pre-fabricated text, complete with his "questions" and her "answers" so that he would be able to publish it right away. This "interview," which Colette did succeed in having published in its entirety, gives us a sense of how the Collection was sold. The interview begins: "Colette directeur littéraire d'une collection de romans ? Information grosse de promesses !" and then launches into a lengthy description of Colette, including several common Colette tropes—her "office" is nature—beside a lake, in a forest, she is followed by her two dogs.<sup>42</sup> This interview thus begins by reminding us of how we are meant to think about Colette, as a writer in touch with the natural world, with animals. It is only after the

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<sup>41</sup>Colette. *Letter to André Obey*. 1922-3. Département des Arts du Spectacle.

<sup>42</sup>Roger Valbelle, *L'Excelsior* 12 October 1923. (Pierre Boissie)

personage of Colette, mistress of the collection, has been established that the collection itself can be discussed.

Colette's other interview, which appeared in *Comoedia*, follows exactly the same format as the *Excelsior* one—an even lengthier description of Colette, in nature, watching spiders, followed by her cats, eating hazelnuts and talking about rosebushes, and then a brief exchange with an astonished interviewer.<sup>43</sup> Given the remarkable similarities in format between the two, this interview also may have been completely fabricated by Colette. The first paragraph of each interview, in which Colette describes herself, is therefore of particular interest. First, she clearly understands that it is Colette, her persona, that is going to be selling these novels. Second, these passages reveal that she was a careful manager of this persona. She produces these stock images of herself—in natural settings, with her animals – in order to sell books also bearing her name. She understands and produces the Colette that the public wants to see and (hopefully) consume.

The interviews themselves reveal less about the collection than we might like. In the *Excelsior* interview, Colette insists quite a bit on the fact that her interviewer has already heard of many of the authors in the Collection: Colette mentions “Boylesve” in a list of authors, and her interviewer interjects “Comment, René Boylesve ?” Colette responds, “Je ne connais pas d’autre Boylesve que René.” She continues, “Connaissez-vous les noms de Pierre-Quint, de Claude Chauvière, de Georges Imann ?” Her interviewer responds, “Certes, mais....” It is unlikely that any interviewer, and even less likely that any reader of this interview, would have heard of Claude Chauvière, who was Colette's secretary. The fact that the “interviewer” responds that he has “certainly” heard

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<sup>43</sup> Raymond Cogniat, “Chez Madame Colette,” *Comoedia* (20 October 1923).

of her indicates that it was important, for Colette, that the authors of the Collection were seen as well-known, as people that everyone was already familiar with. Here, Colette employs a standard advertising technique: act like something is popular already in order to make it popular. Colette's professionalism is clear in her understanding of marketing techniques. She calculates shrewdly how to sell the Collection to a Parisian literary audience.

In both interviews, Colette insists on her "métier" in the editing of these works. In the *Excelsior* interview, she asks "découvrir l'inconnu, rassurer, assurer une vocation qui vacille et doute d'elle-même, apporter au jour un nom obscur, qui brillera, est-ce que ce n'est pas un beau métier ?" Elsewhere she describes her 'duty' as editor of this collection. In *Comoedia*, her interviewer asks: "sans doute, n'êtes-vous pas seule à lire tous les manuscrits que vous devez recevoir ?" Colette responds: "Mais si, je fais cela à moi seule. Je tiens même absolument, à lire tout. Voyons, c'est mon devoir, j'ai accepté cela dans l'espoir de venir en aide à des auteurs intéressants. Je n'ai pas le droit de n'accomplir qu'à moitié la tâche que l'éditeur m'a confiée."

Colette's emphasis on "métier"—on her work, her contribution to the craft, the profession of writing—once again foregrounds Colette's role in the Collection, rather than the texts that readers will actually be purchasing. However, this insistence on her work, the image that is painted of Colette sitting with a pile of manuscripts to read, is at odds with the natural Colette in her forest office evoked by the first half of the interview. Indeed, this image of a hardworking professional Colette is at odds with the natural, instinctive, spontaneous Colette described throughout this chapter. Patricia Tilburg has written extensively on Colette's frequent evocation of her literary métier and her métier

as an actress, in interviews, letters, and her literary creations.<sup>44</sup> Here, in Colette's description of the Collection Colette, we find traces of this same insistence on *métier* so clearly understood by Tilburg. However, it is crucial to note that, although Colette mentioned her *métier* in interviews, this hardworking professional image, for whatever reason, did not truly permeate Colette's public persona. Between the natural writer and the successful and hardworking literary entrepreneur, it is clear that, in the picture of Colette that critics have painted since the Collection, the natural writer image won. The hardworking literary entrepreneur clearly held much less appeal for Colette's public, (excluding perhaps Simone de Beauvoir), and this public version of Colette never gained much of a foothold in the critical or public imagination. Colette's claim to literary taste in these interviews is also surprising, given that in interviews that took place both before (1913) and after (1925) this one, Colette so adamantly insisted that she had no literary opinions, that she had read no contemporary literature. In moments like these, we see the inconsistencies in Colette's persona.

Though Colette does not explicitly describe in either interview what drives her to choose some texts rather than others, she does use a form of the word "interesting" multiple times in both interviews. The Collection Colette does not have a coherent aesthetic or theme that unites it. Instead, what unites these works is that they are all, in one way or another, of "interest" to Colette—because they bring prestige to the collection, because they are written by her friends, or someone to whom she owes a favor. It is Colette herself who is the unifying factor of all of these disparate elements, something that is made clear in the form of her interviews—Colette is of primary

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<sup>44</sup> Patricia Tilburg explores Colette's use of the word "*métier*" in the 2009 *Colette's Republic*. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic : Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*.

importance, the works in the Collection are secondary. Biographers of several members of the Collection have noted that Colette organized dinners for her “stable” of writers, encouraging relationships between them, but also reinforcing her own role as the central figure of the Collection.<sup>45</sup> The relationships forged by Colette during this time lasted beyond the duration of the Collection—when Philippe Soupault founded the journal *Demain*, a significant number of the writers for the Collection, and Colette herself, contributed pieces.

Colette’s behind-the-scenes work for the Collection went beyond creating relationships with and between her writers—she also lobbied hard for ‘her’ novels to win prestigious literary prizes. According to Emmanuel Bove’s biographer, “elle téléphona un peu partout pour recommander l’un et l’autre, [Bove and Soupault] avec son enthousiasme familial : ‘Le prix Femina ! C’est embêtant, personne ne sait exactement les adresses de ces gonzesses.’”<sup>46</sup> Colette had a certain amount of success in this regard: the novels of both Bove (*Mes Amis*) and Soupault (*A la dérive*) received a single vote in the first round of voting for the Prix Goncourt, and Bove received seven votes in the first round of voting for the Prix Femina.<sup>47</sup> Given that Bove was a completely unknown writer before the Collection Colette, it is clear that his success in these circles was at least in part due to Colette’s influence.

In spite of these limited victories, one would be hard-pressed to label the experiment of the Collection Colette a successful one. Ferenczi apparently cancelled the

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<sup>45</sup> Cousse, Raymond and Jean-Luc Bitton. *Emmanuel Bove : la vie comme une ombre*. Paris : Le Castor Astral, 1994. Bernadette Truno, *Raymond et Marie-Louise Escholier: de l’Ariège à Paris, Un destin étonnant* (Perpignan: Editions Trabucaires, 2004). “Léon Pierre-Quint Catalogue de l’exposition,” ed. BNF (1981), vol.

<sup>46</sup> Cousse and Bitton, *Emmanuel Bove: la vie comme une ombre*. (103-104).

<sup>47</sup> Frugier, “La ‘Collection Colette’.”

Collection before it had published its full run of novels, given that a number of the authors that Colette mentioned in interviews—Jean-Paul Hippeau, Georges Iman, Georges Pioch, Gustave Téry and René Boysleve—never published novels with the Collection. Colette denied this in a 1928 letter to novelist Joseph Peyré, insisting that the Collection was not a failure, and that it was “prévue pour deux années, a duré deux années et n’a pas renouvelé son bail.”<sup>48</sup> However, aside from the few successes already mentioned, many of the novels in the Collection were never republished beyond their initial runs. This could be due to a number of factors: first, that Colette’s literary taste was not as much of a selling point as initially imagined—Colette’s own popularity was not enough to convince readers that her choices of novels were to be trusted. Second, we have to account for the fact that the majority of the novels published in the Collection are derivative, overwrought, melodramatic. It is possible that Colette’s use of the Collection to strengthen her own networks (soliciting novels from personal friends, from critics) led to a poorer quality overall of the novels in the Collection.

## **Other Products**

Colette lent her name to a few other products during her lifetime. A very large photo of Colette and her distinctive signature appear in a 1911 ad for the toothpick along with a little slogan, or perhaps a jingle. Given Colette’s signature, we are led to believe that she wrote the slogan: “l’enfant grec qui voulait ‘de la poudre et des balles’ / Au temps d’Hugo (c’est bien loin tout ça) ! m’écrit / De dire à l’auteur des Orientales / Qu’il voudrait à présent des cure-dents Négri !”<sup>49</sup> This is a reference to the poem “L’enfant”

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<sup>48</sup> Frugier, "La 'Collection Colette'."

<sup>49</sup> Colette. *Advertisement for "Le Négri"*. 1911/12? NAF:18708, 296.



from Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales*, a collection of poems (1829) inspired by the Greek war of independence. In the poem, the speaker surveys the devastation of Greece by the "Turcs," and then asks a blue-eyed child Greek child "que veux-tu?" The child responds "de la poudre et des balles."<sup>50</sup> "Colette's" reappropriation of the poem to sell toothpicks is completely bizarre. Was the poem experiencing a resurgence of popularity in 1910? I think that, especially given Colette's general reluctance to discuss "literature," we might well assume that she did not conceive of the jingle, and only signed her name to it. A Greek boy expressing a desire for violent revenge does not really fit with any aspect of Colette's image or writing up to this point in her career. And the connection of this boy to toothpicks, or of Colette to toothpicks, is equally obscure.

Similarly, in 1935, Colette produced a publicity bulletin for the Nicolas wine company, in which she suggested that hostesses should serve wine at dinners and parties, rather than cocktails. In the two-page spread, which features her image and her distinctive signature, she writes: "L'audacieuse hôtesse préfère barrer de rouge le mot 'cocktail.' Nous savons qu'en France le rouge est la couleur révolutionnaire [ ... ] Je connais le vin français et je le tutoie." Historian of Bourgogne Phillip Whalen has suggested that Colette's relationship with (inferior) wine producers dates from much earlier in her life, in fact, and that her insistence on the Burgundian grape in the 1909 *Les Vrilles de la vigne* was already a sign of her complicity with certain vineyards and wine merchants.<sup>51</sup> In this ad, however, Colette shows no particular preference for the wines of Burgundy, instead suggesting in general that hostesses serve wine rather than cocktails. Aside from

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<sup>50</sup> The poem itself, and *Les Orientales* in general, are frequently criticized for the Orientalist depiction of the "Turcs."

<sup>51</sup> Phillip Whalen, scholar of Burgundian history, has suggested that: "Colette Willy insisted that wine provided the most direct expression of *terroir*: "[i]n the vegetal realm, only the vine renders intelligibly the true essence of the soil. What faithful translation. The secrets of the soil are expressed through the grape."

her signature and image, this publicity bulletin, like the toothpaste ad, has no clear connection to Colette's reputation or literary style—certainly she is not normally known for her interest in the “révolutionnaire.” Though Colette's works might have been revolutionary, she would never admit such a thing in public, and generally cultivated a conservative image.

Colette also wrote the preface for an exposition for Soieries Ducharne, producing descriptions of, and names for, various fabrics. She writes: “c'est le végétal, ses courbes éternelles, sa fleur, sa feuille, qui nourrissent l'art de Dubost” ; “la connaissance profonde de la plante” “coquetterie et virtuosité de Ducharne.”<sup>52</sup> We see Colette's use of her image in this sentence—she evokes nature, plants and flowers, in order to give her sense of the product. She worked closely with Michel Dubost, the owner of the fabric company, on this, writing to him to suggest some names: “cher ami, que diriez-vous, pour votre moire à grandes ondes, du nom: ‘L'eau qui dort’? Il vous est loisible d'écrire ça, au goût du jour, ‘Lokidor.’ Il y a aussi ‘Lagune.’”<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that Colette also had a personal connection to Dubost; in 1925, he purchased Colette's “maison natale” in Saint-Sauveur en Puisaye, and, during her lifetime, permitted her to either use the house or rent it out for her own profits. This arrangement is known, in French, as “usufruit.” Essentially, he was a modern-day patron of her art. Colette wrote to him about money, mentioning her monetary difficulties frankly.<sup>54</sup> It is likely, then, that this particular

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<sup>52</sup> Colette, Sonia Rykiel and Catherine Laulhère-Vigneau, *Colette et la mode* (Paris: Editions Plume, 1991). (149)

<sup>53</sup> Colette, Rykiel and Laulhère-Vigneau, *Colette et la mode*. (149).

<sup>54</sup>In correspondence with Dubost, Colette is very open about her monetary difficulties, and thanks him frequently for his patronage. In a 1929 letter, she refers, for example, to “ma maison de seize-cent balles par an” (31).

arrangement resulted as much from Colette's personal relationship with Dobust as from any particular connection to the product.

In contrast with the Collection Colette, these three products are all completely commercial enterprises for Colette—she earns money selling her signature and image, she improves her financially beneficial relationship with her patron. None of these products do anything to solidify Colette's image, or to increase (in a positive way) her public renown. Indeed, it is likely that the opposite is the case, that these endeavors ultimately damage Colette's reputation because of their frankly commercial nature. Arguably, the strength of Colette's "nom" was precisely what caused her extra-literary endeavors to fail so spectacularly—she created an image of herself that was so robust that readers, consumers, did not respond well to anything outside of the image.

For sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu the power of artistic consecration permits "aux artistes consacrées de constituer certains produits, par le miracle de la signature (ou de la griffe) en objets sacrés."<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Edgar Morin explains in *Les Stars* that the celebrity product endorsement allows the star to lend her prestige to merchandise.<sup>56</sup> Though we can certainly imagine that Bourdieu is, for the most part, correct (thinking, for example, of Picasso paying for meals with nothing more than an autograph) these products, though adorned with Colette's name, do not seem to have taken on the sacred power that her texts possessed. Looking back over Colette's career as it extended into extra-literary endeavors, we must wonder if she believed too strongly in the power of her name: though it was quite effective in selling texts written by Colette, its

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<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu, "'Le Champ littéraire'."

<sup>56</sup> Morin, *Les Stars*.

power did not extend to toothpicks, or beauty products, or wine, or even books written by other authors.

### Colette's "Produits de beauté"

Colette's cosmetics company has generated more critical interest than the Collection Colette, perhaps due to the sheer bizarreness of the enterprise. Judith Thurman writes about it in some detail in *The Secrets of the Flesh*, the *New York Times* even devoted an article to the enterprise in 2009, to coincide with the release of the recent film adaptation of *Chéri*.<sup>57</sup> *Colette et la Mode* contains photographs of the store and the products, reproductions of the advertisements, and the full text of the pamphlet that accompanied the products.<sup>58</sup>

For the purposes of this study, the cosmetics company is important as an example of an attempt to capitalize on Colette's public image that ultimately backfired. This product makes more sense, at least at first, than some of Colette's other endeavors did. Certainly, Colette's literary texts reveal a deep understanding of the power of cosmetics to transform women. In the opening paragraphs of *La Vagabonde*, Renée Néré observes herself in the mirror, noting the cosmetics worn by her reflected double:

Je vais me trouver seule avec moi-même, en face de cette conseillère maquillée qui me regarde de l'autre côté de la glace, avec de profonds yeux aux paupières frottées d'une pâte grasse et violâtre. Elle a des pommettes vivres, de la même couleur que les phlox des jardins, des lèvres d'un rouge noir, brillantes et comme vernies... Elle me regarde longtemps, et je sais qu'elle va me parler... Elle va me dire : 'Est-ce toi qui est là...'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*. Christopher Petkanas, "Belles Lettres," *New York Times* (19 August 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Colette, Rykiel and Laulhère-Vigneau, *Colette et la mode*.

<sup>59</sup> Colette, *La Vagabonde*. (5-6)

The use of the third person “elle” to describe the woman in the mirror, rather than the first person “je”, hints at the transformative power of cosmetics. In many ways, a cosmetics company is perfectly fitting with Colette’s feminine persona—cosmetics are the ultimate “female” product.

The ad for the salon, which opened in 1932, explicitly refers to the source of Colette’s fame: her writing. The ad features a photo of Colette with a question written over the photo, in Colette’s handwriting: “Êtes-vous pour, ou contre le ‘second métier’ de l’écrivain?”

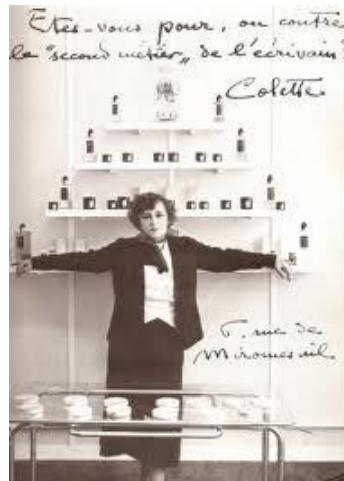


Figure 4: The ad for the beauty salon.

It is a powerful question. First, we note the evocation of “métier,” a word that Colette also used to describe her work with the Collection Colette. According to this question, the beauty products are not merely something that Colette has arbitrarily put her name to—instead, creating beauty products and providing women with makeovers is Colette’s “métier.” The insistence on professional vocation here is important—it implies that creating cosmetics is something that Colette takes as seriously as writing, Colette’s first “métier.” Indeed, though Colette’s descriptions of her various beauty products do not

capitalize on her writerly reputation in a very effective way, there is a certain elegance to her transition from writer to cosmetics engineer. The strong association between Colette and women, Colette and the body, implies that adorning the body is something that Colette would understand well.

The products themselves also capitalized on Colette's physical image and her signature: they were packaged in bright red with a line drawing of Colette and her signature on each package.



Figure 5: An image of the packaging of the "produits de beauté." Note that Colette's chin becomes the "C" in her name—writing literally becomes flesh in this image.

However, Colette's connection to her beauty products stops at the packaging. Though she wrote descriptions of the products for an instructional pamphlet, these descriptions do not sound like Colette, do not usefully deploy her image. Much of her advice sounds like standard beauty tips: "une bonne poudre n'est jamais trop fine" and "L'eau, sans savon, lave mal le visage. Avec du savon elle l'endommage souvent. Fuyez les desséchantes préparations trop riches en alcool ou en éther, les astringents trop corsés. Il y en a, Dieu merci, d'autres."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps her concluding advice to "enfin riez, si vous avez sujet de rire. Mais ne pleurez pas, sous peine de voir trop tôt votre beauté vous quitter" sounds a bit like Colette, but even this sounds more like a cliché than like a true insight into the power of Colette's product to transform women, those "creatures" she understands so well.

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<sup>60</sup> Colette, Rykiel and Laulhère-Vigneau, *Colette et la mode*. (151-3).

Like the Collection Colette, the “produits de beauté” also shows Colette’s manipulation of her social networks. Colette unabashedly used her professional connections to solicit support for the project. In a letter to Una and John Troubridge (friends of Colette’s, John was a writer in his own right, who apparently introduced her to the “Dames de Llangollen,” the portrait of whom appeared in *Le pur et l’impur*).<sup>61</sup> As this letter shows, it is impossible to separate one of Colette’s enterprises from the other—they are all happening at the same time, all deeply intertwined. The letter also strengthens her literary relationship with John, praising a recent work of his. Colette’s discussion of the beauty products in the letter shows her real enthusiasm for the project: “c’est-à-dire que juste dans le commerce et que fais des ‘produits pour la beauté.’ A vrai dire, j’en ai toujours fait, mais je veux en vendre. Laboratoire, usine, cartonnage, boutique (modeste) et surtout merveilleux produits.” Of course, it is possible that Colette’s enthusiasm here is completely mercenary—she is talking up her products to convince John and Una to invest, or to buy the products. She doesn’t mention investors here, but other letters seek investors. For example, in a 1931 letter to Natalie Clifford Barney, she mentions, at the very end, as if an afterthought: “Autre chose. Un commanditaire de la société ‘Colette, fards et parfums’ est très malade. Je voudrais que cette maladie ne nous retardât pas davantage. As-tu sous la main un, ou deux, ou même trois commanditaires qui le remplaceraient. Je n’ai pas besoin de te dire que c’est *commerciallement très sérieux*. Minimum de la commandite 50.000. L’homme très malade marchait pour 200.000.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In fact, in the same letter that mentions the beauty products, Colette writes “je voudrais avoir l’autre portrait des dames de Llangollen ! Il n’est pas eu carte postale ni photographie ? J’aime ces deux filles, et à vrai dire, cher Una, je me f... pas mal de la consommation ou de l’abstention !” This is totally unrelated to the beauty salon, but delicious, especially her not giving an “f...” as to whether or not the two women consummated their relationship.

<sup>62</sup> Colette, “Lettres à Nathalie Clifford-Barney,” *Cahiers Colette* 18 (1996). (22)

In spite of all of Colette's efforts, the beauty products were a resounding failure. In fact, some have speculated that Colette's experience in applying stage makeup was what led her to put far too much makeup on the test subjects for her beauty salon, and that this experience might be partially responsible for the eventual failure of the enterprise.<sup>63</sup> The store closed entirely after only a few years, and Colette believed that the beauty products prevented her from being promoted in the French Légion d'Honneur. In a letter to her friend Fernand Vandérem, she writes, "cher ami, je lis 'Candide' ici. C'est bien à vous de mettre au point cette ridicule histoire. Mais que je meure si je sais la date de ma rosette. Maurice s'est affectueusement occupé de ma cravate, mais... Je ne vois pas que les défaire seule avait joué. On m'assure que le Conseil de l'Ordre n'aime pas que je fabrique des produits (excellents) de beauté. Car un écrivain français ne doit vivre—et à l'occasion mourir, que de sa plume."<sup>64</sup> Colette clearly sees the stakes of being a writer in France at this moment—in order to be consecrated by the Légion d'Honneur, she can make money from writing, but not from any other enterprise. Further, though she might portray herself as living on the margins of literary society, she clearly cares very deeply, "que je meure," about being recognized by important literary institutions.

Though Colette mostly blames her delayed promotion on her beauty salon, she also suggests that her public image itself, over decades, might be the reason for her lack of consecration. "On m'assure aussi, mais que ne m'assure t-on pas, que pour certains conseillers du même ordre, je suis restée une dangereuse, perverse, cavalcadant 'créature' de music-hall..." This letter marks how Colette's image came full circle—early in her life, she cultivated her image as dangerous, for example by pursuing the

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<sup>63</sup> Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*. Petkanas, "Belles Lettres."

<sup>64</sup> Colette. *Letter to Fernand Vanderem*.



Moulin-Rouge scandal. She didn't shy away from connecting her literary career to her music-hall career, she explicitly emphasized the connection between the two. Now, as Colette seeks consecration, this image, which she herself cultivated, is returning to haunt her.

Colette sees the literary field, as described as Pierre Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art*, remarkably clearly. She is denied consecration because of her pursuit of extra-literary income: she is not the “autonomous” artist, producing art for art's sake, that is most consecrated by the French literary establishment. Her friend Marcel Proust, for instance, who had only the honorable money-troubles of the spendthrift *rentier*, is the very image of the sacred writer. Her connection to vaudeville and music-hall, both unconsecrated art forms, associated with non-autonomous art production, further prevents her from achieving the heights of consecration she seeks.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusions

Colette's correspondence and interviews reveal a deep and extremely modern understanding of renown—like stars of today, Colette understands the importance of developing and cultivating a brand, the potential to use that brand to sell products. Her correspondence also hints at the constraining nature of celebrity: she cannot move past, for some, her image as a dangerous, scandalous music hall performer. Though Colette's renown seems to have had a generally positive impact on reviews of her novels, as the first chapter showed, at least two reviewers objected to Colette's stage career specifically

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<sup>65</sup> In the introduction to this dissertation, I suggest that, although Bourdieu's description of the “champ littéraire,” is largely useful, his implication that writing for money necessarily leads a writer to produce lower-quality art, especially in the case of women writers, should be reconsidered.

because it seemed like a vulgar pursuit of renown. It cannot be a coincidence that these two are also among the most prominent writers to respond to Colette's texts. Rachilde's paragraph-long review of *La Vagabonde* never once mentions the text, and instead focuses solely on the question of women who dance on stage, an act that Rachilde finds both "vulgaire" and, bizarrely, "bourgeois."<sup>66</sup> Rachilde dismisses Colette's own dancing as "amateur" and then insists that Colette's writing is preferable to her acting: dancing is only "l'art de salon ... alors que sa littérature peut être l'art tout court. Ce que je préfère aux exercices...de salon" (678). Apollinaire describes Colette's stage career in dismissive and lascivious terms, explaining that "après avoir tenu le monde au courant de ce qui se passait dans son ménage, elle a voulu montrer publiquement comment elle s'en passait [...] Colette Willy a pensé qu'elle devait aussi donner son corps en spectacle."<sup>67</sup> In the same review, Apollinaire implies that Colette's true talent is writing, rather than dancing. It cannot be coincidental that the two reviewers who understood the most about writing were also the most critical of Colette's stage career—seeing her dancing as a cheap way to gain publicity, or as a distraction from her true talent.

Sensitized as we now are to these questions, it becomes clear that throughout her literary oeuvre, Colette expresses a complex, if sometimes skeptical, relation to renown.

In *Mes Apprentissages*, she writes:

Pour ma part je les fuyais [les hommes que les autres hommes appellent grands], attristée que leur renommée ne les vît que pâlistants, soucieux déjà de remplir leur moule, de se ressembler, un peu roidis, un peu fourbus, demandant grâce en secret, et résolu à 'faire du charme' en s'aidant de leur petitesse, lorsqu'ils ne forçait pas, pour éblouir, leur lumière de déclin.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Rachilde, *Mercure de France* (16 December 1910).

<sup>67</sup>Louise [pseud. Guillaume Apollinaire] Lalanne, "Littérature féminine," *Les Marges* (1909). Cited in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres en prose*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1977-1993).(922-3).

<sup>68</sup>Colette and Pichois, *Œuvres*. (III, 983).

Here, renown is crushing and homogenizing, rendering its victims pale and stiff. This is perhaps reminiscent of Renée Néré's ambivalence toward her own on-stage persona in *La Vagabonde*. However, we note that Colette is not discussing renown in general in this citation, but instead "leur renommée," the renown of these so-called great men. Could it be that her view of her own renown was different? And, of course, we must still wonder if this is part of her skillful self-mythologizing. Since Colette's image was that of a marginalized, natural writer, her texts themselves must reveal her distance from the literary institutions of her time, including those institutions that fueled writerly renown. These are questions, however, that we are only prepared to ask having done the work of this chapter.

## Chapter 4: A Professional Writer: Colette's Literary Networks

Colette was a professional because she had to be: throughout her life, she supported herself, and at times her husbands, through writing and other professional activities. Even Henry de Jouvenel (a baron, after all), was not independently wealthy: he edited *Le Matin* for income, not as a hobby. The previous chapter explored ways that Colette earned her living by lending her name and public persona to a variety of products. In this chapter, I will explore Colette's professional activities as a writer: she made money by selling books, by working as a literary editor at *Le Matin*, by writing the libretto for an opera ballet. All of these activities were dependent on Colette's impressive professional networks, her relationships with other writers, editors, and journalists.

Bourdieu's work on the sociology of culture informs this reconstruction of the literary field of 1900-1930. In Bourdieusian terms, the chapter traces Colette's accumulation of symbolic capital through her participation in various literary institutions (the salons, maintaining a literary correspondence) and then her transformation of this symbolic capital into economic capital, during her time as the literary editor at *Le Matin*, for example. However, as I observed in the introduction to this dissertation, Colette's professionalism presents some difficulties to a Bourdieusian interpretation of the literary field. As Bernard Lahire points out, Bourdieu neither accounts for the other professional activities of writers, nor does he evince much respect for artists who produced art in order to make money, such as those involved in "journalisme, vaudeville, feuilleton."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lahire, ""The Double Life of Writers"."

Furthermore, in spite of his sociological understanding of the literary field, Bourdieu shows relatively little interest in the productive professional networks that writers maintained.

These networks are at the heart of this study. Though Colette pretended, in interviews and in autobiographical texts, to be marginalized from the literary institutions of her time, her correspondence reveals the extent and depth of her relationships with other writers and artists. Being a professional writer in France in the early part of the twentieth century meant spending a great deal of time creating and maintaining vast social networks.<sup>2</sup> The collected correspondence of professional writers like André Gide fills volumes. This correspondence, even when it was personal in nature, served to cement relationships between figures in the literary field. Colette is no exception: aside from letters to her daughter and her mother, the majority of her correspondence is with other writers, artists, actors, editors, directors, and journalists. Colette's social networks were an integral part of her existence as a professional writer and literary figure; in order to understand this existence, then, we must attend to the material traces of these networks and relationships in the archives, as well as more or less veiled treatments of them (even of their absence) in Colette's prose. Further, as this work goes against the grain of Colette scholarship, it is useful to provide a certain richness of detail in these examples.

This picture of Colette as a skilled manipulator of literary institutions is not a common one among Colette scholars. Resistance to viewing Colette as socially and literarily well-connected as well as resistance to viewing Colette as a professional writer,

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<sup>2</sup> This is born out, for instance, by recent work on the *Nouvelle Revue française*. Auguste Anglès, André Gide et le premier groupe de La Nouvelle Revue française (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), Jean Schlumberger, Gilbert-Lucien Salmon and Pascal Mercier, Jean Schlumberger et la Nouvelle Revue française : actes du colloque de Guebwiller et Mulhouse des 25 et 26 décembre 1999 (Paris, France: Harmattan, 2004).

are related, and symptomatic of Colette reception in general. The common vision of Colette as a natural, feminine writer is at odds both with her professionalism and with her status as a literary insider. For example, Françoise Giraudet's scrupulous reconstruction of Colette's participation in the salons in "Willy et Colette dans les salons parisiens" concludes with an insistence on her marginality to the literary institutions that Giraudet has just carefully described. Giraudet writes that Colette "ne serait jamais une passionnée des salons. Son souci d'authenticité s'y oppose."<sup>3</sup> She adds "les limites des salons étaient trop étroites pour son talent. Elle instaure une distance créatrice, féconde, entre son environnement et son écriture." Giraudet concludes that after Colette's divorce with Willy, she was able to "quitter sans regret ce milieu d'affection littéraire."<sup>4</sup> Though she provides us with exhaustive proof of Colette's enthusiasm for the salons, she refuses to admit that Colette might be a product of salon culture—a social, rather than a natural, writer. Giraudet, as a scholar of Colette, certainly knows that many of the figures she describes Colette meeting in the salon remained major figures for her throughout her life. However, Giraudet resists this, once again because she needs to read Colette as marginalized, as resistant to literary currents.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I will first provide an in-depth reading of *Mes Apprentissages*, sketching ways in which the text upholds a marginal and non-social image of Colette, and also showing ways that the text undermines this image through Colette's lengthy and positive description of her interactions with literary and artistic figures. I will then trace Colette's literary networks, beginning with her enthusiastic and extensive participation in Parisian salons dating from her marriage to Willy in 1893. Next, I will give specific

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<sup>3</sup> Françoise Giraudet, "Willy et Colette dans les salons parisiens," *Cahiers Colette* 18 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> Giraudet, "Willy et Colette dans les salons parisiens." 142

<sup>5</sup> Feminist motivations behind depicting Colette as marginalized are discussed in Chapter 2.

examples of how Colette used her position in the literary field for personal and professional gain: selling novels, soliciting short stories and serial “feuilletons” during her time as literary editor at *Le Matin* (1918-1924), and successfully collaborating with composer Maurice Ravel to create *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* in 1925.

The change in perspective that this chapter suggests is both broad and intimate. Even Colette’s marriages are understandable as literary alliances. Certainly Colette’s first husbands Henri Gauthier-Villars (Willy) (1893-1906) and Henry de Jouvenel (1910-1924) were important in the formation of Colette’s literary and artistic networks—for example, it was with Willy that Colette first attended salons. And, though Colette had already published as a journalist before she married Jouvenel, it is not a coincidence that she became literary editor at *Le Matin*, the newspaper that he managed, while the two were married. Indeed, these relationships might well be understood in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of social capital—the “culturally, economically, or politically useful relations accumulated by a given person.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Colette’s Apprentissages**

*Mes Apprentissages*, which first appeared serially in 1935 in the weekly *Marianne*, was Colette’s most explicitly autobiographical work up to that point. The “je” in the text is Colette, and this “mémoire” contains many pieces of factual information that are verifiable in Colette’s letters and other biographical documents. Temporally, the text covers the time period of Colette’s marriage to Willy—though she rarely uses dates, the relevant years here are roughly 1893-1906. The subtitle of the work is also worth mentioning: “Ce que Claudine n’a pas dit.” The fictionality implied by invoking

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<sup>6</sup>Moi, "Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s Sociology of Culture." (1025).

“Claudine” suggests that Colette’s text should not be read as unvarnished autobiographical truth.

Based on the title, readers might well assume that *Mes Apprentissages* is a book about Colette’s professional formation as a writer. The word “apprentissage” traditionally evokes professional training: “l’action d’apprendre un métier, en particulier formation professionnelle organisée permettant d’acquérir une qualification pour un métier.”<sup>7</sup>

However, as a number of scholars have noted, the text touches only very briefly, at least on the surface, on Colette learning the “métier” of writing. In order to understand this incongruity, Jacques Dupont asserts that the text should be read as a treatment of Colette’s amorous apprenticeships rather than her professional ones.<sup>8</sup> Dupont is right to wonder whether or not this text is meant to refer to Colette’s formation as a writer. Over several hundred pages Colette describes her own writing process only briefly and vaguely. The entire drafting of seven works is reduced to a single sentence: “vite, vite j’écrivais les *Claudine* en quatre volumes, *Minne*, *Les Egarements de Minne*... *A La Retraite sentimentale*, je renâçlai.”<sup>9</sup> Colette also describes her “application et indifférence” toward the writing process (995). After Willy has warmed up her books with sexier scenes and his famous “Maugis” character, he makes her a writer as though in a single afternoon: “Il rafla en désordre les cahiers, sauta sur son chapeau à bords plats, courut chez un éditeur ... Et voilà comment je suis devenue écrivain” (1022). Indeed, she needs no training at all; though Willy offers to produce “Maugis” pages for her—“si vous

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<sup>7</sup> *Le Trésor de la langue française*.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Dupont, “Notice,” *Colette Oeuvres*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). We should also note that Simone de Beauvoir uses the word “apprentissage” when writing about Colette as a professional: “un apprentissage sévère.” It isn’t clear whether Beauvoir is evoking *Mes Apprentissages* here: she does not cite the work in *Le Deuxième sexe*. In any case, for Beauvoir, it is very clearly a professional apprenticeship.

<sup>9</sup> Colette and Pichois, *Oeuvres*. (III, 993). All subsequent in-text citations refer to this edition.



avez besoin de moi pour Maugis, me dit Willy, laissez des blancs”—Colette does not need his help. She can produce Maugis as well or better than Willy can: “je n’en laisse pas [...] mon ‘à la manière de...’ se tenait fort bien, mon Maugis parlait le pur Maugis d’origine...” (1029). When Willy asks her for “vingt pages de paysages ‘telles que vous savez les écrire,’” Colette produces them “dès le lendemain...” (1037). According to *Mes Apprentissages*, writing is certainly not something that is difficult for Colette: she oozes literature, “goutte à goutte, j’exsudais les *Dialogues des bêtes*” (1041). She devotes more pages to learning to become a mime than learning to become a writer. Writing comes to her naturally, so easily that it hardly bears description. This attitude toward writing fits with Colette’s public image as a natural, spontaneous writer: she produces these books without forethought or especial effort.

It seems clear, then, that the text is not about Colette’s apprenticeship as a writer, at least not in the sense of putting a pen to paper. Is Dupont right, then? Is this text about Colette’s amorous apprenticeships? This explanation is not very satisfying either: the emotions that Colette evinces for Willy include disdain, vitriolic hatred, but never affection. Part of the purpose of this book is clearly to attack Willy. Colette had a good reason to be angry at Willy; before his death in 1931, he published a nasty little set of letters in which he attempted to reassert his authority over the *Claudine* novels, suggesting that he wrote more of the text than Colette admitted, and also providing a “key” for reading the real-life counterparts of the characters in the work.<sup>10</sup> Colette mentions one of these letters in a letter to her friend Emile Vuillermoz: “Je lis un ravissant article, composé d’extraits de la correspondance de M. Willy où il dit, un se

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<sup>10</sup>These letters were published in book form in 1962 under the title *Indiscrétions et commentaires sur les Claudine*. Willy, *Indiscrétions et commentaires sur les Claudine*.

plaignant gentiment de ma paresse, que pour “ Minne ” je l’ai quasiment laissée besogner seul. Un de ces jours je me fâcherai, gentiment.”<sup>11</sup>

My reading suggests that Colette’s “apprenticeship” in the text is that of the literary professional rather than the *amoureuse* (as suggested by Dupont), but in the sense of literary networks rather than producing texts: in the work, Colette describes how she forged relationships with other writers and artists, how she became a writer by learning from and emulating other writers.

“Je n’ai guère approché, pendant ma vie, de ces hommes que les autres hommes appellent grands” Colette asserts in the first sentence of *Mes Apprentissages* (1983). Colette doubly rejects “great men”, both asserting her distance from them and calling the category itself into question. Though others might consider these men “grands,” Colette herself remains skeptical of the title. Then, she describes her own preference for “des êtres obscurs,” “pleins d’un suc qu’ils défendaient, qu’ils refusaient aux sollicitations banales,” and goes on to describe some of these unnamed *êtres*: an opium smoker, a little girl in a park, a wealthy man’s mistress... (1983-4). In these first pages, Colette paints a strong picture of herself, and of the text that will follow: deeply skeptical of renown, marginalized from the literary and cultural institutions of “great men,” Colette’s first autobiographical text will trace her relationships with myriad ‘obscure beings.’

However, only a few pages into the text, Colette brings up the infamous courtesan and actress Caroline Otero. Colette remarks “je l’ai peu connue. On s’étonnera de lire son nom dès les premières lignes de mes souvenirs. Il vient sous ma plume, à propos pour donner à ces pages leur ton” (1987). Colette is right—readers should be surprised to read

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<sup>11</sup> Colette. *ALS Colette to Émile Vuillermoz*. Undated. Carlton Lake Letters: Lake 51.3. This letter is also cited in the *Cahiers Colette*.

the name of the notorious “Belle Otero” in a text that announced, from its first sentences, that it would treat only obscure beings. Colette acknowledges the incongruity, and decides that the text will contain “vingt pages sur le coloré, le tonique et mystérieux éphémère; vingt lignes sur le notoire et le vénérable que les autres chantent et chanteront [...] voilà, je pense, mon rythme” (987). Colette’s six-page long reverie on Otero (far longer than her description of any of her “êtres obscurs) is one of these examples of “twenty lines” on a notorious person, notably a great woman, as opposed to a great man.

However, this “vingt pages sur le coloré [...] vingt lignes sur le notoire” does not end up describing the text any better than Colette’s initial insistence that “great men” “manque à ces souvenirs.” After Otero, Colette goes on to spend the majority of the text describing her literary and artistic relationships, most of which were, necessarily, with prominent men and women. In the book, she describes salons, “je dépeignais à ma mère les visages nouveaux de Mendès, de Gustave Charpentier, le chat noir et le lézard vert de Judith Gautier, Courteline...” (999). She mentions other writers: novelists Jules Lemaitre and Marcel Schwob, who gave Colette English books written by the likes of Twain, Dickens, and Defoe. Colette describes her relationship with the salonnière Madame Arman de Caillavet, who was also the lover of perhaps the most important writer in France at this time: Anatole France. She gives us the texture of a social life dominated by literary production and relationships.

In every case except for that of Willy, Colette shows affection for, and camaraderie with, other literary and artistic figures, even “great” ones. If we had only read the first three pages of *Mes Apprentissages*, our assumption would be that Colette would evince disdain or distrust for any “great men” who happened to make their way

into her autobiography, but this is simply not the case. Instead, she writes about preferring the D'Harcourt and La Vachette (cafés) because there, she would sit with Pierre Louÿs, Jean de Tinan, and André Lebey (1015). She writes affectionately about Louÿs, about her friend Marcel Schwob and her acquaintance Claude Debussy (1072). Even her fellow ghostwriters, the men most connected to Willy, the object of her vitriol, are remembered with affection: “nous avons gardé l'habitude, quand nous évoquons notre passé de dupes, de dire ‘dans le temps que nous travaillions aux ateliers...’” (993). About Gabriel Fauré, she writes, “les plus grands sont toujours les plus simples : je ne puis froidement me rappeler Fauré [...] Tendre, il était facilement, a dessin de séduire, a dessein de se laisser séduire...L'amitié sans but et sans exigence...” (1070).

Colette also writes about newspapers and journalism. She mentions Félix Fénéon, Jean Lorrain, and Catulle Mendès, who praised her for having created “un type” in the character of Claudine (1013). She paints an evocative portrait of the “salle de rédaction” at *L'Echo de Paris*. In this portrait Colette herself is not writing, but is waiting for Willy:

Jambes pendantes sur une banquette, et chancelante de sommeil, lasse d'apprendre par cœur les extraits, coquilles, mastics, coq-à-l'âne découpés dans les journaux et épinglés au mur, lasse de suivre un demi-songe à travers une fumée qui se déplaçait lourdement, par bancs horizontaux autour des abat-jour brûlés par le gaz, rapiécés de papiers jaunis, lasse de n'avoir pas soupé, tant de lassitudes ont fixé, dans l'olfactif de ma mémoire, l'odeur du tabac, de l'encre grasse et de la bière qu'un garçon apportait, serrant dans une seule main les anses de cinq “demis ” (1012).

The repetition of “lasse” in this text is at odds with the length of the sentence, the frenzy of the lists describing the sights, sounds, and smells of the “salle de rédaction.” And, though Colette claims to be weary, to have grown tired of these sensations, the extreme detail with which she describes them indicates a sort of affection. Here, Colette is not in a garden surrounded by flowers and small animals, but in the nerve center of modern

literary production: the newspaper room. It is essentially a powerful social space where people work together over a common task, bringing the printed word to the general public

Her description of the writers themselves, though negative, also belies a certain affection for these journalists:

Etranges lieux de labeur cérébral que ces anciennes salles de rédaction, ou rien ne respectait, ne protégeait, ne facilitait le travail de la pensée ! Chacun offensait son voisin. Reporteurs claquant les portes, chefs de rubrique au verbe haute, collecteurs de faits divers revenant trempés des commissariats de police, personne n'était gai, digne, ni jeune, ni soucieux de le paraître. (1012-13).

Though it is true that their “pensée” is not respected, and that these men are not “gai, digne, ni jeune,” it is also true that they are not “soucieux de le paraître.” Colette admires the honesty of this space its lack of pretention, even if it is frenetic and wearying. Though she does not depict herself writing in the “salle de rédaction” it is clear that journalistic writing, and that meeting and knowing journalists, was part of Colette’s writerly apprenticeship. All of this suggests that although the first pages of *Mes Apprentissages* disavow ‘literary society,’ and make gestures back to the nameless—and fameless—figures of Colette’s fictions, the text as a whole is permeated by a sense of literary community that includes the literary celebrities Colette initially rejects.

## **Professional Networks**

Colette’s professional sociability is masked and disavowed, although still present, in her autobiography—but we need not rely on her own crafted testimony. Archival evidence allows us to explore the variety of ways that Colette created relationships with other artists, actresses, journalists, and editors: meeting people (at salons, lunches,

parties), seeing and being seen (at performances), exchanging books, photographs, and letters, and acknowledging reviews of her works.

Colette began to establish her literary and artistic connections well before she ever produced a word of published prose. With her marriage to Willy in 1893, Colette began attending a substantial number of Parisian salons, and the relationships that she formed in the salons would remain her primary literary and artistic connections throughout her life. Françoise Giraudet's article "Willy et Colette dans les salons parisiens" provides a useful summary of the various salons that Colette and Willy attended together. There were a great many: Colette met most of the leading literary and artistic lights of the fin-de-siècle. She attended the Armory salon, known for "des représentants de la littérature décadante" frequented by journalists including Armand Point, Jean Lorrain, and Jean-Joseph Renaud, representatives from newspapers including the *Figaro*, the *Gaulois*, *Gil Blas*, the *Mercure de France*, and the *Revue blanche*.<sup>12</sup> There she encountered the famous lesbian "amazones" including Missy, the Marquise de Mornay, who would eventually become Colette's lover, as well as courtesan Liane de Pougy and actress Sarah Bernhardt. Of course on Tuesdays, Colette could be seen at novelist and critic Rachilde's *Mercure de France* salon along with such major figures as Alfred Vallette, Alfred Jarry, Léon-Paul Fargue, Pierre Louÿs, Paul Valéry, and Marcel Schwob. Colette also attended Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist salons.<sup>13</sup> At the salons of Henriette de Bonnières (wife of writer Robert de Bonnières) Colette met writers, journalists and politicians such as Heredia,

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<sup>12</sup> Giraudet, "Willy et Colette dans les salons parisiens." (155-158). Geneviève Dormann, *Amoureuse Colette* (Paris: A. Michel, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Cándida Smith, *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Henri de Régnier, André Gide, and Jean de Tinan. Heredia himself had a salon, where Colette encountered Proust, Gide, Cocteau, Valéry, and François Mauriac.<sup>14</sup>

There are concrete traces of Colette's involvement in the salons. Colette makes her participation in salon culture clear even in *Mes Apprentissages*, mentioning a number of prominent salon holders and attendees. Perhaps most prominent in this text is the salon of Madame Arman de Caillavet. This "célèbre amie d'Anatole France," was, when Colette suffered from a long illness, "bonne pour une malade si jeune, si peu défendue, si longtemps confinée sur un triste lit en noyer cire [...] elle posait sur mon drap un ananas, des pêches, un grand fichu de foulard noué en sac à bonbons."<sup>15</sup> However, Marcel Proust, whom Colette met at Caillavet's salon, described Colette's relationship to the salonnière in far less friendly terms in a letter to Louis de Robert:

Mme Arman prétendait que Willy, reçu chez elle en intime, avait fait la cour à sa belle-fille. Et, indignée, elle n'avait rien trouvé de mieux que de le révéler à Colette Willy et de cesser de les recevoir. A la suite de quoi, Willy prétendait que la douleur avait presque fait perdre la vue à sa femme. Comme ils avaient toujours été très gentils avec moi et que je trouvais qu'on avait mal agi avec eux, j'avais été pour une seule fois leur faire une visite (que j'avais nullement cachée à Mme. Arman, qui m'en a toujours mortellement voulu) et leur avais offert mes services auprès d'un oculiste.<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, the Willys did not respond well to Proust's offer of an oculist: he writes, "or, je crois que Willy a cru que cette démarche n'était pas spontanée, et en tout cas, le fait qu'ils fussent à ce moment-là chassés, ce qui ne les diminuait en rien dans mon estime, ne leur serait pas agréable à se rappeler."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Giraudet, "Willy et Colette dans les salons parisiens." (161). Dormann, *Amoureuse Colette*.

<sup>15</sup> Colette and Pichois, *Œuvres*. (III, 1008).

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Proust, Françoise Leriche, Caroline Szylowicz, Katherine Kolb and Virginie Elisabeth Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*, 20 vols. (Paris: Plon, 2004). (II, 178).

<sup>17</sup> Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*. (VII, 337).

It was at Caillavet's salon that Colette met Proust, sparking a friendship that would last, with the one major interruption described above, until his death.<sup>18</sup> An 1895 letter from Colette to Proust shows both their relationship and her connectedness to salon culture. Colette thanks Proust for a letter to Willy, explaining "vous êtes le seul (pourtant je crois que Fénéon avait fait la même remarque), qui avez si nettement vu que, pour lui [Willy] le mot n'est pas une représentation, mais une chose vivante, et beaucoup moins une signe mnémonique qu'une traduction picturale." She adds that Willy is "un type enfin beaucoup plus fait pour traduire sa pensée en hiéroglyphes qu'en tropes."<sup>19</sup> This is an awfully generous assessment of Willy, who in fact wrote extremely little, and certainly relied heavily on clichéd "tropes" in the texts he did produce. Colette's description of language in terms of "hiéroglyphes" and "traduction picturale" seems fitting with a fin-de-siècle, Symbolist way of approaching language. These words could as easily have been written by Maeterlinck or Mallarmé, both of whom Colette met at salons. In this letter, Colette shows her sensitivity to Symbolist salon culture: she is easily able to reproduce its ways of talking about literature.

After 1906, Colette's salon attendance declined due to the passing of the heyday of salon culture. However, Colette pursued a number of similar forms of sociability after the decline of the salons. Her enthusiastic participation in various lesbian soirées (between about 1905-1910) has been well documented.<sup>20</sup> Colette also continued to interact socially with her male contemporaries: her letters mention parties and meals with

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<sup>18</sup> They had a falling out because of the incident with Caillavet that Proust described in the letter to Robert. Proust's letters describing this falling out are really quite amusing, though I cannot come up with a reason to include more excerpts from them in this study, as they are pure gossip.

<sup>19</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*, (34-5). Anne Garréta also discusses this letter in her article: Anne Garreta, "La Vraie nature de Colette," *Libération* (8 July 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Thurman and Diana Holmes both treat these soirées in detail. Holmes, *Colette*. Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*.



nearly all of her acquaintances, including Marcel Schwob, Francis Carco, François Mauriac, and Robert de Montesquieu. Paul Léautaud, in his *Journal littéraire*, mentions lunching with Colette along with Gabriel D'Annunzio.<sup>21</sup> Whatever specificity one might want to claim for the world of the salons that she visited with Willy, Colette's 'souci d'authenticité' clearly did not prevent her from participating actively in the literary social scene long after he was dead and she had taken to sparring with his ghost in print.

Being a literary professional also involved seeing and being seen. Perhaps the most delicious example of this is Colette's desperation to see Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi*. Colette and Willy attended a reading of the play at the *Mercure de France* salon. Apparently, something about the play appealed to Colette, as she subsequently wrote to a number of people requesting, even begging for tickets for the first public performance. She wrote to Jarry himself in the fall or spring of 1896, first politely remarking on his other works [*Minutes de Sable* and *Jésus Antichrist*] and then requesting tickets to *Ubu roi*, writing "je vous supplie de ne pas m'oublier quand on jouera *Ubu roi*. Deux petites places nous feront si heureux !" <sup>22</sup> As the *générale* approached, Colette became more and more frantic for tickets, in particular writing to Rachilde and her husband, Alfred Vallette, to request tickets. On December 9, 1896, Colette wrote to the Vallettes, reminding them that the tickets had been promised to her "plus d'une fois et formellement" and begging "je vous supplie de me donner un moyen quelconque d'entrer ce soir fût-ce au Paradis." <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Léautaud, *Journal littéraire de Paul Léautaud* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*.(44).

<sup>23</sup> Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry : d'Ubu roi au Docteur Faustroll*, Les Vies perpendiculaires (Paris: La Table ronde, 1974). (253).

Though it is not certain that Colette did receive her ‘places,’ some accounts of the first performance of the play do put her and Willy in the audience, along with Valéry, Jean Lorrain, Gide, Catulle Mendès, Edmond Rostand, and Heredia, among others.<sup>24</sup> We can read Colette’s burning desire to attend *Ubu roi* in several different ways. The *Claudine* novels show us that Colette understands the value of a good scandal—perhaps she understood that *Ubu roi* would create a scandal, and wanted to be present for it. Certainly, her own manipulation of the scandal of *Rêve d’Égypte* shows that she understood the importance of a notorious performance.<sup>25</sup> Or, more charitably, she might have understood that it would be a major aesthetic event, a turning point in the development of theater. Though this is ill-fitting with the image of the marginalized Colette, who only ever read Balzac, it is more appropriate for the Colette of this chapter, the literary professional, aware of aesthetic movements. However one chooses to interpret this event, Colette’s desire to see the play is a clear indication that Colette was a full social participant in an artistic world—desperate to attend one of its most important “happenings.”

Colette’s literary networks are abundantly clear in her correspondence. Colette wrote to, and received letters from, a swarm of important novelists (Anatole France, Marcel Proust, André Gide, François Mauriac), poets (Paul Valéry, Guillaume Apollinaire, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Anna de Noailles), writers for film and theater (Alfred Jarry, Francis Poulenc) and theater directors (Lugné-Poë, Jacques Rouché). In these letters, Colette often writes about her own books, and about books that she has received from her correspondents, revealing a sensibility for contemporary literature that

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<sup>24</sup> Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry : d’Ubu roi au Docteur Faustroll*.

<sup>25</sup> Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*.

is hard to come by elsewhere in Colette's oeuvre. Unlike so many of her contemporaries, Colette never wrote literary criticism, though she wrote enough film and theater critiques to fill volumes.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, she avoided the subject of literature in interviews, insisting that she was not knowledgeable about literature, that she only read Balzac, that there were no current writers that she admired.<sup>27</sup>

Colette's correspondence with Proust is especially useful in approaching the question of how Colette interacted with her literary interlocutors. Colette and Proust exchanged a number of very complimentary letters about various works. Proust was initially reluctant to send Colette one of his books, because their relationship was strained after the incident involving Willy and the salonnière Madame Arman de Caillavet. Proust was interested in reconciling with Colette, and though he did not feel that he could send her one of his books, he suggested that their mutual friend Louis de Robert do so. "Pour Madame de Jouvenel si vous lui envoyez, *vous*, le livre, j'en serai ravi. Je lui trouve un immense talent."<sup>28</sup> As the letter was sent in 1913, the book must have been *Du côté de chez Swann*. Colette never mentions any tension between herself and Proust. By 1917, they were again friends. Proust wrote Colette a very complimentary letter regarding *Les Heures Longues*.

Je vous remercie profondément de m'avoir envoyé les *Heures longues*. [...] j'ai lu votre livre, presque tout entier, d'un trait. Je n'en suis pas encore au point de l'aveugle que vous supposez, entendant la présence et les bruits du jour, dans le tombeau sans étoiles. Je ne peux guère lire, mais je ne résiste pas aux choses ravissantes. Cette Venise de votre livre à laquelle je viens de faire allusion me paraît une des choses les plus étonnantes. Cet ensablement par mimétisme, ce

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<sup>26</sup> Colette, *Colette journaliste: chroniques et reportages 1893-1955* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), Colette, Alain Virmaux and Élisabeth Gilet, *Billets de théâtre : ballets russes, Guitry, Mistinguett, Les marches du temps* (Paris: Félin, 2008). Colette, *La Jumelle noire. [Première-quatrième] année de critique dramatique* (Paris,: J. Ferenczi, 1934). Colette, Alain Virmaux and Odette Virmaux, *Colette at the Movies : Criticism and Screenplays*, Ungar film library (New York: Ungar, 1980).

<sup>27</sup>I discuss this issue at some length in Chapter 3.

<sup>28</sup>Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*. (XII, 337).

sorbet dégusté à tâtons m'ont ravi (et ce carnaval crépusculaire des masques d'ombre) !<sup>29</sup>

Proust also wrote her in 1919 about *Mitsou*, writing that “les deux lettres finales, c’est le chef-d’œuvre du livre” He also permits himself to critique the book, ever so slightly, writing that, although Colette is a “Maître,” possessing “tant de talent admirable et profond,” the last letter is “un peu trop jolie,” and that it contains “un rien de précieux.”<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, Colette valued his opinion highly, and wrote in June 1920 that she was “inquiète” to hear his opinion of a draft of *Chéri*. She explains “c’est un roman que je n’avais jamais écrit— les autres, je les avais écrit une ou deux fois, c’est-a-dire que les ‘vagabondes’ et autres ‘entraves’ commençaient toujours un peu de vagues claudines.”<sup>31</sup> This is worth dwelling on briefly. Colette writes so infrequently about her own literary process, but here, she is acknowledging something profound in the development of her own work. Until *Chéri*, Colette’s texts were written in the first person, with female protagonists. And Colette acknowledges the similarities between these books, calling them “de vagues claudines.” Her admission, for example, that *Chéri* was a real departure from her previous literary creations, and that there was something of Claudine in *La Vagabonde*, is a much more candid view into her own writing than she gives many of her other correspondents, to whom she often complained about her “travail” in general terms, rarely touching on the substance of writing itself.

They continued to correspond. Proust wrote her a letter of mutual congratulation when they both received the Légion d’Honneur in 1920.<sup>32</sup> He sent her a copy of *Du Côté de chez Guermantes*, in which he wrote “Mais c’est embêtant de vous avoir vue de puis

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<sup>29</sup> Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*.(XVII, 33-4).

<sup>30</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*. (36-7).

<sup>31</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*. (38).

<sup>32</sup> Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*.(XIX, 486).

de ne vous connaître que comme si nous vivions à deux époques différentes, à des siècles.” Colette responded, on the subject of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*,

Je le fouille tous les nuits avant de dormir [...] le commencement de Sodome l’a [Jouvenel] ébloui. Personne au monde n’a écrit des pages comme celles-là sur l’Inverti, personne ! [...] Je jure que personne après vous, autre que vous, ne pourra rien ajouter à ce que vous aurez écrit. Qui oserait toucher, après vous, à l’éveil lépidoptère, végétal, ornithologique, d’un jupien à l’approche d’un charlus ? Tout est magnifique— et le portrait de la Princesse de Parme ! Comme je vous admire, et combien je voudrais que vous fussiez bien portant et heureux.<sup>33</sup>

Though Colette exchanged books and compliments with other writers, her relationship with Proust seems to have been somewhat special. Possibly the fact that Proust dared to criticize her, regarding *Mitsou*, had something to do with this. And her compliments of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* feel more heartfelt, more like a serious literary relationship, than much of her other literary correspondence.

André Gide wrote Colette a nice, though hilariously grudging, letter about *Chéri*. The two were not close. In fact, in his time as editor at the *Nouvelle Revue française*, Gide tended to decide that a “note,” which is when contributors wrote about several books in one short note, was “trop longue” if it included something about Colette in it.<sup>34</sup> Gide acknowledges the unexpectedness of his affection for *Chéri* in his letter, writing, “une louange que vous ne vous attendiez guère à recevoir, je gagerais bien que c’est la mienne... Moi-même, je suis tout étonné de vous écrire, tout étonné du si grand plaisir que j’ai pris à vous lire.” However, Gide is very complimentary about the book: “j’ai dévoré Chéri d’une haleine. [...] quelle intelligence, quelle maîtrise, quelle

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<sup>33</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*. (42-3).

<sup>34</sup> In his collected correspondence with Jean Schlumberger and Jacques Rivière, Gide dismisses “Notes” that contain references to Colette’s works. For example, he writes to Rivière, regarding a “Note” about *L’Entrave* in 1914 (though also other texts, so it isn’t certain that he is describing *L’Entrave* here) : “Déplorable cette note ! c’est du terne intense—et rien n’est plus mauvais pour la revue ; mieux encore vaut le mauvais, le désagréable, l’irritant...mais cette interminable note !...et sur un livre qui méritait douze lignes tout au plus.” André Gide, Jacques Rivière, Pierre de Gaulmyn and Alain Rivière, *Correspondance, 1909-1925* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998). (433).

compréhension des secrets les moins avoués de la chair !”<sup>35</sup> If the praise is from an unusual source, the compliment about the secrets of the flesh is hardly surprising; certainly Gide was far from the first to remark on the fleshly nature of Colette’s writing. His praise “quel naturel dans les dialogues !” is similarly in keeping with Colette commonplaces. He concludes “moi, ce que j’aime surtout dans votre livre, c’est son dépouillement, son dévêtissement, sa nudité.”

The letters that Colette herself wrote both help to sketch out Colette’s networks and reveal much of interest about her literary taste. Of course, since these letters are to the authors of texts, for the most part, Colette compliments, rather than criticizes, their works. Her letters reveal that she was attentive to the tactile, sensual nature of language, and to the transgression of stereotypically masculine or feminine writing.

Colette shows her concern about the physical nature of language in letters to Anatole France and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus. In 1894, she wrote to Anatole France about his novel *Le Lys rouge*: “Il est beau et il a une belle figure en volume ; je l’aime encore mieux comme ça qu’en morceaux, et c’est dans une langue douce et délectable. Qu’est-ce que vous croyez qu’a fait Thérèse après ? Eh bien ! elle n’a pas eu d’autre amant, c’est moi qui vous le dis. N’est-ce pas, elle n’en a pas eu d’autre, et surtout elle n’est pas retournée avec Le Menil ?”<sup>36</sup> Colette admires the work, and her description of the language as “douce et délectable” is a preview of Colette’s own physical, tactile, sensory prose.<sup>37</sup> But the fact that she speculates about what happens to the characters after the

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<sup>35</sup> André Gide, "Letter from André Gide to Colette 11 December 1920," *Figaro Littéraire: Hommage à Madame Colette pour ses quatre-vingts ans* (24 January 1953). I assume that the title of Judith Thurman’s biography *The Secrets of the Flesh* comes from this letter.

<sup>36</sup> Colette, "Letter to Anatole France from 1894," *Nouvelle Revue des Deux Mondes* 12 (12 December 1978).

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in a letter to Gaston Chérau, in 1913, Colette writes that in his book: “il n’y a pas une faute du langage paysan, et la force descriptif m’enchante— j’ai senti l’odeur de la ‘balle de blé’ pendant l’épisode

end of the work, that she needs to know what happens to them, seems like a refreshingly naïve approach to the text. In an undated letter to Lucie Delarue-Mardrus (a close friend, as is evidenced by Colette’s use of “tu”), Colette similarly shows her attention to the tactile, sensual nature of writing: “tes vers, verts, libres (les derniers) sont faits pour toi, non contents d’être faits par toi. Un mon ‘séant’ ne remplace pas un mot gras. Donc, employons le mot gros, qui est souvent beau, et qui est au rythme, parfois, comme une goutte d’huile sur un engrenage.”<sup>38</sup> This is not the language of someone who has no literary sensibility. There is also a strong sense of the concretization of language: words are things, and a physical, sensual appreciation for the word, for writing, which is “green” or which resembles “une goutte d’huile.” This also sounds rather modernist—the transformation of language from something natural into something more industrial, more mechanical.

Colette’s letters also reveal her appreciation for literary gender-bending. In a 1910 letter to novelist Louis de Robert, Colette writes: “j’ai lu *Un Tendre et L’Envers d’une courtisane*. Je voudrais bien avoir écrit l’un et l’autre. .. On a du vous dire souvent que votre sensibilité était tout féminine ! c’est un de ces clichés qui me mettent en fureur, la sensibilité et la délicatesse féminines, en littérature. A part trois ou quatre femmes-auteurs, leur grossièreté, leur brutalité sentimentale ont de quoi faire rougir et blesser n’importe quel homme. Cela, je ne vous l’apprend point...”<sup>39</sup> Here, Colette does at least mention other writers, though she doesn’t name names. Even this early in her life, long before *Le Pur et l’impur*, Colette reveals herself to be someone who sees gender as fluid,

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de la batteuse. Et la page sur l’heure mauvaise d’avant l’aube, et l’accouchement dans la paille— et tout, quoi ! ”Colette. *Letter to Gaston Chéreau*. 1913. MS:15609.

<sup>38</sup> Colette, “Undated letter to Lucie Delarue-Mardrus,” *Les Pharos* (Winter 1974).

<sup>39</sup> 1910 letter cited in: Jeanne de Robert, *Le Coeur a ses raisons* (Paris: autoédition, 1987). (278-9).

attributing a feminine sensibility to a male writer. Though her contemporaries focus on her femininity, her correspondence reveals that gender categories actually seem much more fluid for Colette. Similarly, in a 1907 letter to Rachilde, Colette writes “O Rachilde [...] personne n’écrit aussi “mâle” que vous.”<sup>40</sup> It is likely that Colette’s sensibility to the ways that writing is gendered male or female is precisely what allows her to exploit these stereotypes and create herself as the ultimate “feminine” writer.

There are a few examples of Colette mentioning other writers in her letters, a few concrete examples of networks, as well as relationships. She gives a book by Marguerite Moreno to her friend Georges Duhamel. She corrects a typographical error in a version of Apollinaire’s poem “1904” edited by Francis Poulenc. She introduces theater director Lugné-Poë to a young actress.<sup>41</sup> In an extremely rare example of Colette being critical of someone, she writes in a 1904 letter to Natalie Clifford-Barney: “viens-tu à la Renaissance ce soir ? J’ai vu la pièce de l’Athénée, que je n’aime pas. On y reconnaît à chaque instant la brutalité de sentiment, cette espèce de grossièreté psychologique qui révèle une collaboration féminine. Ecrivons une pièce, Flossie, elle sera très bien.”<sup>42</sup> If

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<sup>40</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*, (47).

<sup>41</sup> Colette gives to Georges Duhamel a book by her friend Marguerite Moreno : je vous donne à lire, comme un cadeau, à Marguerite Moreno, une femme magnifiquement intelligente.”Colette, “Correspondance avec Georges Duhamel,” *Cahiers Colette* 12 (1990).

She notes an error in an edition of an Apollinaire poem in a letter to Francis Poulenc, with whom she also collaborated on a film project. “Il y a une erreur typographique dans ‘1904.’ Au huitième vers, il faudrait ‘comme Hébé qui le dieux servait’ et non pas ‘que les dieux servait.’ Peut-être l’avez-vous déjà fait corriger. Pensez aux vendages.” Francis Poulenc and Hélène de Wendel, *Correspondance, 1915-1963*, Pierres vives (Paris, : Éditions du Seuil, 1967).

To Lugné-Poë, “Cher Lugné, je t’envoie une petite Catherine Moissant, élève de Bertheau. Je ne te dis pas qu’elle est charmante. Ton terrible œil n’a pas besoin de renseignements. Naturellement, tu lui trouvais ‘une petite quelque chose’ dans Famille Royale, ou même ailleurs, tu la comblerais de joie, tu toucherais le cœur de son père, et tu me ferais plaisir.” Colette. *Letter to Lungé-Poë*. Undated. NAF:26460, 46.

To Henry de Rothschild “C’est à Astruc que j’ai dit mon très vif désir d’être invitée à l’ouverture du Pigalle—je sais bien que vous ne m’auriez pas oubliées. En même temps, je lui ai demandé de m’accueillir en qualité de critique. La Revue de Paris me demande de prendre la succession de Souday, je n’ai aucune raison de refuser. La Pigalle m’offre un beau début !”Colette. *Letter to Henri de Rothschild*. Undated. NAF:28144, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Colette, “Lettres à Nathalie Clifford-Barney.”(13-14).



“collaboration féminine” produces “grossièreté psychologique,” then Colette’s assertion that her collaboration with Clifford-Barney would be “très bien” is either an example of ironic self deprecation or hubris, either of which is rare enough in Colette’s correspondence to warrant remark.

Colette also lobbied for her friends and acquaintances to win various literary prizes. The third chapter of this work revealed one instance of this, in which Colette arranged for works in the Collection Colette to be nominated for the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Femina. This was not the only time when she used her influence to try to obtain literary prizes for members of her literary networks, however. In 1926, she wrote to a jurist for the Prix Femina, “Pensez à Claude Chauvière ! Pensez à Claude Chauvière ! Qui estimez-vous, plus qu’elle, digne de recevoir le prix ? Personne.”<sup>43</sup> To Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, in 1931, she writes “Chère Lucie, si tu as l’occasion de dire un mot favorable sur Jérémie de Pierre Varillon, dis-le. Que son nom soit, sinon jeté dans l’urne, du moins prononcé dans le débat... Ça lui fera tant de plaisir ! Je t’embrasse...”<sup>44</sup> With Claude Farrère, a member of the Académie Goncourt, we know that she was successful in her pressure to have Renée Hamon mentioned for the prize—in March 1940, she writes to him twice: “Grand Claude et cher juré des Vikings, donneras-tu le prix à Renée Hamon auteur de *Aux îles de lumière* ? Si tu as jeté sur ce livre ton bel œil infaillible, tu auras reconnu que cette bonne femme, haute comme ton genou, brûle de repartir, et encore et encore repartir. Peu de femmes ont la navigation dans le sang. Peu savent aimer ce qu’elles regardent. Qu’en penses-tu ?” She writes to him again: “Veux tu donner le prix à une petite bonne femme, mon œuf de canard, qui s’appelle Renée Hamon, auteur de *Aux*

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<sup>43</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*.(170).

<sup>44</sup>Maurice Goudeket, *Près de Colette* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956). (68-71).

iles de lumière ? C'est 'du monde propre' qui est toute seule dans la vie. Son livre sans précautions, tu dois l'aimer." Though Harmon did not win the prize, she must have been mentioned, because in April of the same year, Colette writes "Oh ! Merci pour Renée Harmon."<sup>45</sup>

Another method of maintaining literary networks is to read and respond to reviews. Colette developed a knack for this early on, before she was even acknowledged as the author of her works. She corresponded passionately with Rachilde during the Claudine years, expressing her fervent admiration for her literary *marraine*, as well as gratitude for Rachilde's (mostly glowing) reviews.<sup>46</sup> After Rachilde's review of *Claudine à Paris*, which was warm, but less enthusiastic than her ecstatic review of *Claudine à l'école*, Colette responded:

Mais vous, "ô Rachilde," vous n'êtes pas un pied, vous préférez Claudine à l'Ecole et vous me faites l'honneur de me le dire. Je suis très flattée, je vous jure, d'être traitée en homme-de-lettres et de m'entendre dire par vous " j'aime ça et ça, et j'aime moins autre chose. " [...] Que faire ? si on vous avait consultée, ce livre aurait recelé des horreurs, et eut été plus logique. Mais vous seule pouvez dire ce qu'il eut fallu. N'est-ce pas que vous continuerez d'aimer Claudine, et votre amie très reconnaissante.<sup>47</sup>

Colette is engaged in a literary apprenticeship—learning from Rachilde how to improve her writing, and also learning how to strengthen her relationships with reviewers.

Colette's "homme de lettres" remark is of some interest, for, as we saw above, Colette's views on gender are more fluid than some of her remarks on feminism would make them seem.<sup>48</sup> In response to Rachilde's critique of *Les Vrilles de la vigne*, Colette wrote: "O

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<sup>45</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*. (163-4).

<sup>46</sup> I discuss Rachilde's reviews of Colette's novels in Chapter 1.

<sup>47</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*.(47).

<sup>48</sup> Colette thanks Rachilde for all of her reviews: Colette also responded to Rachilde's 1908 critique of *Sept Dialogues des bêtes*. Colette wrote "Merci chère Rachilde, pour mes Bêtes et pour moi, et pour mes défunts cheveux. Vous me convainquez, Bête intelligente que vous fûtes toujours, que le monde irait beaucoup mieux s'il ne portait que des gens comme vous— et comme moi." (Cite this.)

Rachilde : deux ou trois critiques littéraires comme vous, et les gens seraient tous forcés d'avoir du talent, ou de point paraître au jour. Ce que vous dites des *Vrilles de la vigne*, je sais que vous le pensez. J'en ai ressenti aujourd'hui, en vous lisant, une fierté toute proche des larmes.”<sup>49</sup> Colette's flattery of critics would serve her well throughout her life, both in obtaining good reviews of her works, and in cementing her relationships with newspapers, to which she would contribute articles.

Rachilde was not the only critic with whom Colette maintained a warm relationship. In fact, not only did she acknowledge reviews, at times, she proposed corrections to them. In an unidentified letter from relatively early in her career (signed Colette Willy, therefore before 1913), Colette writes, “je vous remercie bien vivement et bien sincèrement. L'article est rédigé, avec un tact et un 'sérieux' qui me plaisent l'un autant que l'autre.”<sup>50</sup> In a letter to Paul Lombard, she writes: “voici votre article, dont je ne puis vous dire—louange mise à part—que beaucoup de bien...Je vous le dis d'ailleurs d'un air idiot, parce qu'il m'est consacré et il me gêne. Et comment voulez-vous que je sache si c'est exact, tout ce que vous pensez de moi? Je ne peux pas, mimiquement, ni littérairement, travailler 'au miroir.’”<sup>51</sup> To Edmond Jaloux, who wrote glowing reviews of *La Naissance du jour*, *La Chatte*, *Sido*, and *La Fin de Chéri*, and who also reviewed Emmanuel Bove's *Mes amis*, a novel published by Colette's “Collection Colette” with Ferenczi, she writes : “je recois le charmant, le tendre papier. Je suis bien contente que vous aimiez Sido. Mais si vous le voulez, je vous raconterai bien d'autres histoires de

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<sup>49</sup> Sanchez, "Colette et Rachilde."(159)

<sup>50</sup> Colette. *Letter to unidentified recipient*. 1913. Letters/Lake unidentified recipients. In another example, Colette thanks André Lang for a glowing review of *Mes Apprentissages*. “Le coute pour grandes personnes' voilà la courte phrase qu'il me fallait pour la bande. Tout le papier est charmant.”Colette. *Letter to André Lang*. 1936? NAF:15950, 56.

<sup>51</sup> Colette, "Letter to Paul Lombard?," *Cahiers Colette* 25 (2003).

Sido, et elles seront toutes vraies.”<sup>52</sup> We must wonder if Colette’s generous ego-stroking after each review was part of Jaloux’s motivation to consistently give positive reviews to her works.

At times, Colette also corrected proofs of reviews before their publication. To music critic Emile Vuillermoz, who wrote a number of very positive reviews of Colette (they were friends from the salons—he was another one of Willy’s ghostwriters) Colette both corrects proofs and suggests titles, for articles that are about her. In one letter, she agrees, “ou bien envoyez-moi les épreuves.” And then she returns them : “cher ami, voila le papier. Les caractères sont très beaux, et je me réjouis d’être si bien habillée. [...] PS Un titre ? C’est embarrassant. Voulez-vous : Un salon de musique (1900) ?”<sup>53</sup>

Colette also occasionally chastises reviewers for a negative review. After Jean de Pierrefeu reviews *Chéri* (a review that I would characterize, at worst, as mixed, in which he praises Colette’s talent but admits to preferring other works), she writes,

Mais qu’est-ce que vous avez, cher Pierrefeu, et d’autres, à vouloir me régénérer ? Se pencher sur des pauvres—Léa et Chéri, plus qu’elle, sont des pauvres parmi les pauvres—c’est donc si vil ? Je ne peux pas me mettre cela dans la tête, figurez-vous. Et il me semble bien que je ne n’ai jamais rien écrit d’aussi moral que ‘Chéri.’ Hochez un front désespéré, mais serrez-moi tout de même affectueusement la main. Car je vous aime beaucoup, et je vous remercie, pour le beau “papier” des Débats.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Colette. *letter to Edmond Jaloux*. Undated. Ms:9826. In another letter to Jaloux, she writes “Cher Jaloux ! (Est-ce que les deux mots n’ont pas l’air de commencer une lettre de tendres récriminations ?) Vous le savez, que ma dédicace n’a pas menti, et que j’ai tout et tout de fois pensé à vous en écrivant ‘La Chatte.’ On écrit toujours pour quelqu’un. Rarement pour quelques-uns. Jamais pour tout le monde. Un article comme le vôtre est fait pour m’enchanter.” Colette. *Letter to Edmond Jaloux*. Undated. Ms:6827.

<sup>53</sup> Colette. *ALS Colette to Emile Vuillermoz*. Undated. Carlton Lake:51.3. She thanks him for another review: “Cher ami, je viens de recevoir, par vos soins, je pense, le numéro de Noël de Madame et Monsieur dont deux pages m’appartiennent au propre. Et je n’en suis pas peu fière ! Je vous remercie affectueusement, et j’a sacrement s danser, sur cette musique que j’aime.” Colette. *ALS Colette to Emile Vuillermoz*.

<sup>54</sup> Colette. *Lettre à Jean de Pierrefeu*. Undated. NAF:14688, 234.

This letter suggests the degree of homogeneity in Colette's reviews—even one mostly positive review that contains some criticisms stands out, and merits a response. Further, this letter shows the degree of control that Colette exercised, or attempted to exercise, over reviewers—suggesting improvements to reviews, and chastising reviewers for unfair or overly negative opinions.

If we only had Colette's public image to judge by, we would not expect her to have such a rich and diverse correspondence with so many different writers. She did not merely exist inside an artistic and journalistic milieu; she participated enthusiastically in it, and worked to shape it in various ways.

### *Le Matin*

In 1910, Colette began contributing to *Le Matin*, the daily newspaper edited by the man who would become her second husband, Henry de Jouvenel. During her tenure there, it was the second-most circulated daily newspaper in Paris. As a writer for *Le Matin*, Colette produced short fictional prose, but she also wrote regular journalistic articles, covering trials, arrests, the war. Her mother worried about this turn in her career, writing in a letter “tu prends un engagement bien lourd envers *Le Matin*. C'est la fin de tes oeuvres littéraires, tes romans. Rien n'use les écrivains comme le journalisme.”<sup>55</sup> In a sense, Sido was right—the period during which Colette produced journalism for *Le Matin* was one of the least productive for her novel-writing: she wrote only two novels—*L'Entrave* and *Mitsou*—during the time between 1911 and 1918, the heyday of her journalistic production. Colette's career as a journalistic writer is relatively well-covered

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<sup>55</sup> Cited in Colette, Colette journaliste: chroniques et reportages 1893-1955.

by Colette scholars. The preface of the 2009 *Colette journaliste* covers Colette's career as a journalist in some detail.<sup>56</sup> Michel Mercier wrote an article on "Colette et Le Matin" for the *Cahiers Colette*, which revealed that, during her tenure there, she wrote 472 articles for the newspaper.<sup>57</sup> Even during Colette's lifetime, there was interest in her journalism: her friend Germaine Beaumont, for example, wrote an article entitled "Colette journaliste" in which she reminisced about this author's journalistic writing.

Between 1918 and 1924, Colette was also the literary editor and "directrice des contes" at the newspaper. She was charged with soliciting and editing short stories (and rarely poetry) for the bi-weekly "Mille et un matins" column, as well as choosing and editing novels to be published in installments in the newspaper. Colette was not the first woman to work in journalism in this capacity. Marguerite Durand founded and edited *La Fronde* in 1897, long before Colette's tenure at *Le Matin*. Nor was she the only woman writer of some prominence to be heavily involved in journalism—Rachilde, for example, was a frequent contributor at the *Mercure de France*. Further, it was not unusual for male novelists to work as editors at journals, or to contribute to newspapers themselves.

Colette's time as an editor, rather than a contributor, at *Le Matin* has been of much less interest to scholars. Judith Thurman, in her massive Colette biography, gives only a few sentences to Colette's work as the "directrice des contes."<sup>58</sup> Even *Colette journaliste* devotes no more than two paragraphs to Colette's editing work. However, Colette's career as an editor at *Le Matin* is worth our attention. Her work as an editor shows her to be a skilled manipulator of her literary networks—Colette used her acquaintances for a maximum benefit during her career as an editor. These networks are

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<sup>56</sup> Colette, *Colette journaliste: chroniques et reportages 1893-1955*.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Mercier, "Colette et 'Le Matin'," *Cahiers Colette* 20 (1998).

<sup>58</sup> Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*.

not visible from Colette's journalistic productions alone. This image of Colette is starkly at odds with the image of Colette the natural, instinctive, marginalized writer.

Colette's work as a literary editor mostly involved reading and soliciting contributions to the newspaper, and editing them (often for length). Colette's correspondence reveals that she aggressively solicited "contes" from writers, and that she pressed especially hard for short stories from writers who she knew well. For example, Colette was good friends with Georges Duhamel, and their friendship is evident in a letter to him soliciting a "conte": "Monsieur, je cours après vous. Je veux des 'papiers' de Duhamel au *Matin*, où on me charge de ressusciter les contes et nouvelles. Ne me refusez pas. Donnez-moi le moyen de vous joindre, ici entre 5 et 7, ou ailleurs. Mais c'est terriblement pressé !." <sup>59</sup> And this one 'conte' does not satisfy her: "merci pour Barouin. Je le prends avec reconnaissance, je demande, avec instance, d'autres 'papiers' !" <sup>60</sup> She is really quite insistent : "O mon infidèle conteur, je suis bien contente d'avoir à lire un nouveau Duhamel en volume, Mais par ailleurs, vous délaissez— mépris ? surmenage ? le *Matin*...Je vous en prie, un conte ! un conte ! Quand ? Tout de suite. Je vous attends, vous et lui." <sup>61</sup>

To André Billy, another friend, who would eventually be responsible for her election to the Académie Goncourt, she writes "votre inclination—et votre situation vis-à-vis de l'*Œuvre* vous permettent-elles de donner des contes au *Matin* ? Je suis chargée de la résurrection de la rubrique, et je pense à vous." <sup>62</sup> To Henry Bordeaux (writer and member of the Académie française), "voulez-vous me donner un conte avant Pâques ?

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<sup>59</sup>Cited in Goudek, *Près de Colette*. (39).

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Goudek, *Près de Colette*. (41).

<sup>61</sup>Cited in Goudek, *Près de Colette*. (43).

<sup>62</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*.(190).

C'est très grave. [...] Je suis là, implacable. Je veux des contes. Je suis là. J'attends un papier d'Henry Bordeaux. Je m'assois par terre et je pleure..."<sup>63</sup> To Pierre Benoît (also a member of the Académie française), she writes "Monsieur, j'attends ! Craignez mon ombre implacable ! Non-seulement il me faut des contes, et tout de suite, mais il me faut que vous me donniez un feuilleton pour le *Matin*. C'est comme ça. Je m'absente, jusqu'à mercredi, et vous laissez vivre encore cinq jours. Je vous attends, ici, jeudi prochain. Vous viendrez armé d'un conte ravissant."<sup>64</sup> Colette's tone in these letters is delightful—so playful, aggressive and charming. Or: this is a social animal, activating networks of mutual obligation and ritualistic threat-flirtation. The tone of these letters is also marked by Colette's femininity: we can hardly imagine a male editor writing to his contributors in quite this fashion.

In addition to soliciting contes, Colette also edited them, for length, and occasionally for other reasons. When Colette discovers an error in one of novelist Henri Barbusse's contes, she is tremendously amused by it. Colette recruits Barbusse, a prominent writer who won the Prix Goncourt in 1916 for his novel *Le feu*, as a "conteur aimé du public": "Le *Matin* me confie le soin de recruter des 'conteurs aimés du public.' Il lui faut donc ses papiers de Barbusse. Je vous en prie, venez me voir au *Matin* à 5h1/2, vite !" In a second letter, after explaining the terms of his conte—length, how much he will be paid, Colette delights in Barbusse's error:

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<sup>63</sup> Colette, *Lettres à ses pairs*. (281).

<sup>64</sup> Colette. *Letter to Pierre Benoît*. Undated. NAF:27371, 236-9. There are more of these. Here is another one to Benoit: "Il y a des personnes qui se sont faits traiter, pour moins, de ce et de cela. Où c'est-il, le roman pour le *Matin* ? Vous l'aviez promis, Pierre Benoit, et bénévolement, j'entends par là que pendant que vous le promettez à Sapène, je vous pinçais le bras, ou l'oreille, avec une vigueur toute f.. Il vous sera beaucoup pardonné, à cause de Mlle de la Forté, qui est un beau roman. Je dis beaucoup pardonné, ça ne veut pas dire tout. Je vous aurai pour les sévices—uniquement corporels d'ailleurs." Colette. *Letter to Pierre Benoit*. Undated. NAF:27371, 239.



Je ne prévois nulles autres restraints, pour parler judiciairement, sauf celle de ne pas dépasser la colonne au-dessus du feuillet. [...] Je vous offre – 300 francs par nouvelle (plus, comme prime, une controverse personnelle sur l’orthographe de la “marmoëlle d’oie.” Jamais je n’ai vu écrire “à la mords-moi l’doigt” de la sorte. Je vous expliquerai pourquoi c’est mon orthographe qui est la bonne).<sup>65</sup>

Colette explained the meaning of the expression in a letter to an unnamed female correspondent: “A la marmoëlle d’oie scandale ! Faut-il que ce soit moi, moi qui apprenne à Barbusse ce que c’est que le ‘mords-moi-l’doigt’ c’est un jeu charmant, dans un certain monde, que de pointer l’index contre les fesses (voire les cuisses) d’une dame, en lui criant ‘Mords-moi-l’doigt.’”<sup>66</sup> Colette is terribly delighted that Barbusse, apparently, heard the expression, but did not understand its meaning well enough to transcribe it properly.

Colette’s letters to contributors to *Le Matin* were not all dramatic tears and crying, or challenging literary duels at dawn—they reveal an understanding of the stakes of these submissions, both in terms of profession, and in terms of literary reputation. For example, in a letter to André Salmon (a poet, writer, and art critic most often associated with surrealism), she explains that his conte will not be one of the first published: “Celui-ci n’est pas un papier de ‘départ,’ il n’ouvrira pas le feu, ça ne vous fait rien?” She adds in a postscript, clarifying “ouvrira pas le feu,” “Je veux dire qu’il ne sera pas le premier ‘Conte du Matin,’ mais il sera le 1er des vôtres si vous le voulez.”<sup>67</sup> Colette’s concern that Salmon understand that his conte will not be among the first shows that she acknowledges that there are reasons that a writer might prefer to be one of the opening *Contes du Matin*, that this writer would not want to follow other writers. Intriguingly, this

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<sup>65</sup> Colette. *Letter to Henri Barbusse*. Undated. NAF:16533, 303-306.

<sup>66</sup> Colette. *Letter to Henri Barbusse*.

<sup>67</sup> Colette, “Letter to André Salmon,” *Cahiers Colette* 25 (2003).

conte was never published. Perhaps Salmon did not wish his conte to be published unless it was the first.

A letter to Francis Carco, which Carco references in his book on Colette, displays her attention to literary reputation while editing at *Le Matin*. In this letter, as in certain other letters, Colette puts her advice in her husband's voice, rather than her own. She writes to Carco regarding a conte that he has already submitted: "Il [Jouvenel] m'a dit hier 'Attention. C'est peut-être une série charmante qu'il commence là, mais au point de vue Matin et Carco, c'est une erreur.'"<sup>68</sup> Colette goes on to cite Jouvenel as explaining :

Carco n'a pas encore paru dans un journal à très gros tirage, mais déjà sa renommée s'est, pour cause, déjà caractérisée. Que Carco nous fasse du Nouméa plus tard, pas d'inconvénient. Mais pour la 1<sup>er</sup> fois qu'il paraîtra dans les 1000 + 1 matins, il doit, il se doit, il nous doit, d'y être le Carco que le public connaît déjà. A lui de rendre possible pour le Matin une, ou des histoires 'carcoises'.

This is a deft editorial decision. Jouvenel, or perhaps Colette, realizes the importance of renown, and of producing works, at least at first, that confirm public prejudices about the author. Once a reputation has been established, at least for a time, the author has to work with this reputation, "give the public what they want," in a certain sense. The third chapter of this work, on Colette's own reputation, revealed the ways that she gave the public the Colette that they wanted. This letter reveals the self-consciousness of Colette's reputation management, showing that she is aware of the importance of reputation, and of responding to public expectations. This was not something she did unconsciously, or subconsciously—Colette's use of her reputation is a conscious, and as we see here, a professional choice.

Why would she put her argument in her husband's voice? This is not the first time that Colette has done this—relatively often, when she was married to Willy, she wrote to

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<sup>68</sup>Cited in Francis Carco, *Colette, mon ami* (Paris: Éditions Rive-Gauche, 1955).

her acquaintances explaining “Willy croit” or “Willy dit que”. It seems pretty clear that this is Colette’s point, rather than Jouvenel’s—certainly, she had more cause to be aware of writerly reputation than he did, and more concern for Carco in particular than he did. Further, she is the editor of this series, not Jouvenel. Could it be that using Jouvenel’s voice here is yet another stratagem? Colette suspects that Jouvenel, as the editor-in-chief, opinion will be taken more seriously? Or she suspects that he will be taken more seriously because he is a man? Or, perhaps, she wants to cover up her own overriding concern with reputation management, and so she puts her own thoughts in Jouvenel’s mouth.

At the end of the letter, Colette summarizes “Jouvenel’s” advice, making it even more probable that this is her opinion, rather than that of her husband:

Je résume, cher Carco. Je rétrécis ce qu’il a dit, le Sidi. En réfléchissant là-dessus, je pense qu’il a raison. Je pense que vous pouvez nous donner une série de Carco, des personnages de Carco, une sensibilité de Carco— à la fois épanouie et frileuse— dans un milieu, a dit Sidi, “dont vous êtes actuellement le maître peintre.” Le bougre ne recule pas devant les mots, vous voyez. Je n’oserais jamais employer des termes aussi crus. Ecrivez-moi vite à ce sujet.

The Colette of this letter is fully aware of the potential power of literary renown. Here, Colette’s understanding of “une série de Carco, des personnages de Carco, une sensibilité de Carco” might just as easily be applied to her own literary career. She understands that the writer writes for an audience, and that this audience has certain desires, certain expectations. Colette clearly sees the benefits of working within these expectations, rather than resisting them.

Perhaps her most successful solicitation was her request for a conte from her good friend Marcel Proust. As Proust explains in a letter to the editor Bernard Grasset in September of 1919, he was not generally in the habit of contributing to newspapers, so

the fact that he was convinced to write a short story for Colette shows the extent of their relationship: “j’ai fait jusqu’ici des réponses négatives partout, sauf au Feuilleton d’art pour une raison personnelle, et au *Matin*, à cause de Madame Colette. (Il ne s’agit d’ailleurs là que de deux colonnes ! de quoi mettre un ‘chapeau’.)”<sup>69</sup>

Apparently, Colette was not quick enough to publish this conte, and Proust complained. She responded: “vous croyez que je néglige votre papier, quand je me débats pour forcer les cadres trop étroits, ridiculement étroits, du *Matin*. Déjà j’ai fait composer en 8. Cela ne suffit pas. Je vous en prie, et Jouvenel aussi, pouvez-vous me coupez 30 lignes ? Il passerait tout de suite. Ne m’en veuillez pas.” She adds a postscript: “Mais n’enlèves pas (dans les cas où vous consentiriez) les dépêches!”<sup>70</sup> Colette treats Proust’s text practically, as something that needs to be shorter for reasons of space, but also aesthetically; she appreciates the “dépêches” and wants him to leave them in if at all possible.

Proust was apparently displeased with the result. He complained in a letter to Sydney Schiff:

... Voici ce qui était arrivé. Mme Colette, femme du directeur du *Matin*, m’avait demandé un conte (mais vais-je arriver au bout de ma lettre, je suis si fatigué, je ne pourrai pas la finir aujourd’hui) je lui en avais envoyé un (conte) où il était question des hommes politiques connus. ... Seulement j’avais soumis ce conte à Mme Colette, elle devait en renvoyer des épreuves et je devais vous les envoyer. Voilà que juste à ce moment-là j’ai eu le Prix Goncourt. Elle n’a pas résisté à “l’actualité” a fait paraître immédiatement le conte sans épreuves, plein de fautes.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*. (XVIII, 403).

<sup>70</sup> Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*. (XX, 640). Colette often needs authors to shorten their works. She asks Hélène Picard, for example, to shorten a conte: “Je vous renverrai les trois autres beaux chants. Mais coupez-moi celui-ci—hélas—aux dimensions des contes du *Matin*, raccourcissez le—quelle vilaine besogne je vous demande. Je te renvoie les Filleules, tu pourrais en avoir besoin. Si tu les gardes pour le *Matin*, tu les resserrerais peut-être un peu ?” Colette, Claude Pichois, Hélène Picard, Marguerite Moreno and Renée Hamon, *Lettres à Hélène Picard, à Marguerite Moreno, au petit corsaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988)..

<sup>71</sup> Proust, Leriche, Szylowicz, Kolb and Greene, *Lettres : 1879-1922*. (XIX, 418).

This incident reveals Colette to be a keen literary businesswoman. She uses her personal relationship with Proust for professional gain and publishes his story, without his consent or his edits, as quickly as possible to benefit from his sudden prestige.

### *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*

Although the focus in this chapter has been on Colette as a writer, which after all was her first identity, she was not only a writer, but also a mime, and a writer for theater. Colette's collaboration with Maurice Ravel in the production of the opera-ballet *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* provides another example of the extensive nature of her professional networks.<sup>72</sup>

Colette developed the idea to write an opera with her friend and mentor Georges Wague (a director with whom she worked in the music hall, and the model for the "Brague" character in *La Vagabonde* and *L'Entrave*) and Jacques Rouché, an important theater patron and director of the Grande Revue and eventually the Opéra de Paris. The project, which was initially imagined by Colette and her collaborators as the "Divertissement pour ma fille" had a librettist (Colette) but lacked a composer. To fill this role, Colette selected Maurice Ravel, who she had met in the salon of Madame Saint-Marceaux in the 1890's. Already, we see Colette's networks at work: Wague and Rouché convince her to write a libretto, Colette selects the young composer Maurice Ravel, to whom she was connected through various salons. Though Ravel's influence was not yet at its peak when his collaboration with Colette began, he had already worked with the

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<sup>72</sup>Some parts of this collaboration are detailed in the article "*L'Enfant et les sortilèges*," as well as in various Ravel biographies. "L'Enfant et les sortilèges," *Cahiers Colette* 29 (2007).

founder of the Ballets Russes Sergei Diagelev and choreographer Vaslav Nijinski (who were responsible for the wildly scandalous 1913 *Le Sacre du printemps*) on the ballet *Daphnis and Chloé*. Finally, though there is no indication that Colette had anything to do with this, legendary choreographer George Balanchine choreographed the balletic portions of the opera. This collaboration reveals, perhaps, Colette's eye for talent: Ravel would go on to become one of the best-known composers in France, and Balanchine a worldwide dance celebrity.

Letters between Colette, Ravel, Rouché, and Wague reveal Colette as a driving force behind the project. To Rouché, she writes, "mon cher directeur et ami, Vous m'avez mis féeries en tête. [...] Je voudrais à la fois vous consulter et vous remettre deux ou trois idées. Où ? Quand ?"<sup>73</sup> In 1913, she writes to Rouché again to remind him that "je pense au Divertissement..."<sup>74</sup> In another letter, she asks him for possible composers, "gardez-vous les ballets, ou me le rendez-vous ? Avez-vous, si vous le gardez, des vues sur un compositeur plein de talent—et aussi de hâte ?"<sup>75</sup> After they settled on Ravel to compose the work, Colette's letters continued: "cher Monsieur et ami, Qui advient-il du 'Divertissement pour ma fille' ? Et de Ravel ?? J'en entendrai parler avec un grand plaisir."<sup>76</sup> In yet another letter, she complains, "hélas, on n'annonce pas le 'Divertissement pour ma fille' dans la série des Ballets français... Mon cher directeur et ami, je suis bien découragée. Je vous assure !"<sup>77</sup> As we saw with her solicitation letters for short stories, Colette is not afraid to press someone in order to get what she wants. As

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<sup>73</sup>Colette. *Letter to Jacques Rouché*. Undated. LAS Colette, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in "L'Enfant et les sortilèges."

<sup>75</sup>Colette. *Letter to Jacques Rouché*.

<sup>76</sup> Colette. *Letter to Jacques Rouché*.

<sup>77</sup> Colette. *Letter to Jacques Rouché*.

a professional, who herself often ignored deadlines, Colette understands that the way to get something done is to keep asking about it, over and over.

By 1919, the opera-ballet was taking shape, and she wrote to Ravel: “dans le même temps que vous manifestez devant Rouché le regret de mon silence, je songeais, au fond de mes neiges, à vous demander si vous vouliez encore d’un collaborateur aussi défaillant... n’ayez pas peur: ce n’est pas des coupures; au contraire. Par exemple : le récit de l’écureuil ne pourrait-il se développer ? Imaginez tout ce que peut dire de la forêt un écureuil, et ce que ça peut donner en musique !”<sup>78</sup> They also discuss the possibility of including “un rag-time” in the ballet, with Colette writing, to Ravel, “mais bien sûr des nègres en Wedgewood ! Allez-y.”<sup>79</sup>

Reviews of the opera-ballet also show Colette’s influence, to a certain extent. In general, reviews are positive. Though Colette, as the librettist, receives less attention than Ravel, reviewers do not fail to reproduce some clichés—her femininity, her spontaneity. There are a few negative moments: one review refers to the text as “puéril et futile” though the reviewer puts this critique in relatively neutral terms, using the passive voice: “soit reproché à Colette.”<sup>80</sup>

However, the critic Emile Vuillermoz, with whom Colette had a very close relationship, produced a standout review of the work. Many of the reviews praise Colette more briefly than Ravel, at times even neglecting to mention her at all. Vuillermoz’s, on the other hand, gives her all the credit for the work’s success: concluding that the work is “plus noble, plus sensible et plus élevé que celui de mainte ambitieuse tragédie en cinq actes [...] écrit dans la matière la plus riche, la plus souple, et la plus savoureuse qu’on

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<sup>78</sup> "L'Enfant et les sortilèges."

<sup>79</sup> "L'Enfant et les sortilèges."

<sup>80</sup> "L'Enfant et les sortilèges."

puisse imaginer.”<sup>81</sup> Vuillermoz also explains that any failing in the work is the fault of Ravel, rather than Colette, asserting that “certaines notations humoristiques de Colette ne supportent pas le grossièrement musical” and that Ravel is responsible for a “tendresse dangereuse pour une forme d’esprit pincé.” As was her custom, Colette responded to Vuillermoz’s review, noting his special attention to her role in *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*. “Un beau papier, cher ami, où vous me réservez plus de place, et une meilleure place, que l’on ne fit jamais au librettiste. Ça m’étonne pas.”<sup>82</sup>

*L’Enfant et les sortilèges* was a success, so much so that it was restaged a number of times during the 1920’s.<sup>83</sup> In the same way that Colette paid close attention to its progress during the inception of the piece, she also kept a close eye on restagings. She wrote to Rouché, in a letter that feels somewhat like a reproach:

Je regrette de partir pour la campagne, au moment où les journaux m’apprennent que l’Opéra reprend *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*. Du 11 au 25, je serai, et mon mari aussi, en Normandie. Ce n’est pas très bien. J’y recevrai les échos du succès. Et dès notre retour, nous entendrons l’oeuvre ravissante de celui que l’on ne nommait pas encore, lorsqu’il l’écrivait, un “grand génie français.” Je l’entendrai avec émotion. La mise en scène me sera une heureuse surprise. C’est à vous que je demanderai, dès mon arrivée, de m’en donner la joie.<sup>84</sup>

*L’Enfant et les sortilèges* is a perfect example of Colette’s use of her artistic networks: she uses her relationships with Wague and Rouché to get the project underway and to keep it going, her keen eye for talent from the salon to choose a composer, and her close relationships with music critics to assure that the work receives at least some glowing reviews that pay adequate attention to its librettist. We see that the extensive maintenance

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<sup>81</sup> Emile Vuillermoz, *Excelsior* (3 February 1926).

<sup>82</sup> Colette. *ALS Colette to Émile Vuillermoz*.

<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the opera-ballet is still performed even today.

<sup>84</sup> Colette. *Letter to Jacques Rouché*.



of networks described in the second part of this chapter is not useless; instead, it can have far-reaching consequences for a writer's professional opportunities.

## **Selling Books**

Colette was a keen negotiator, and relied on her networks, as well as her relationships with editors, to secure the best deals for her works. In a letter in the correspondence of the publisher Flammarion, one editor writes to another regarding the rights and percentages for a new volume containing a text by Colette.<sup>85</sup> “Il ne serait pas possible de garantir à Colette des droits tout à fait aussi gros, mais on pourrait lui donner les droits de soixante-mille exemplaires, c'est-à-dire neuf mille francs. Commencer par lui offrir les droits de cinquante mille (elle a le caractère marchandeur).” And this editor is absolutely right. In 1927 and 1928, a pair of letters from Pierre Brisson, director of the *Annales*, indicates that his initial offer of 20,000 francs for a novel had to be increased to 30,000 francs before Colette would accept it.<sup>86</sup>

In a letter from 1934, in which an editor at Flammarion is trying to convince Colette to participate in a project, he offers the reasoning that the project “me permettra ultérieurement de vous envoyer beaucoup de chèques, et de gros chèques.”<sup>87</sup> Max Fischer, trying to convince Colette to submit a promised novel called “La nuit champêtre” also uses a monetary argument to persuade her:

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<sup>85</sup> O.A. *Letter to Ch. M-B*. 28 December 1934. CLT 2:F 20103. O.A. and Ch. M-B is the only indication of the names. If I have time, I can look into Flammarion and try to figure out who these people were.

<sup>86</sup> Pierre Brisson. *Letter to Colette*. 13 December 1927. FIG:25.16.. Pierre Brisson. *Letter to Colette*. 15 December 1927. FIG:25.16. Just to give a sense of the broad nature of Colette's networks, Brisson himself was a socialist-pacifist who was married to feminist journalist Marcelle Capy and who contributed to a number of socialist and pacifist publications in addition to editing *Les Annales*. IMEC and the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet contain a series of letters between Brisson and Colette during the Second World War that would be of interest to a study of Colette's networks in a later period than the one covered by this dissertation.

<sup>87</sup> Unnamed Flammarion editor. *Letter to Colette*. 22 March 1934 CLT 2:F 20103.

Il pouvait être intéressant pour vous de faire un volume pour la petite collection ‘Les nuits’ au moment où je vous l’ai demandé ; il serait certainement plus intéressant pour vous aujourd’hui, beaucoup plus intéressant, de donner un volume dans la ‘Collection Moderne’ (titre provisoire). ‘Les Nuits’ étaient une collection à tirage restreint ; la ‘Collection Moderne’— à tirage illimité— peut arriver, doit arriver, à donner des droits sensiblement plus élevés.<sup>88</sup>

Here, Fischer’s “intéressant” evokes personal and artistic, but more importantly, financial interest. He convinces Colette to contribute to the collection, not because of its artistic or literary merits, but because of the scale of the printing and the potential profits that Colette can garner. Colette apparently appreciated these kinds of efforts. In a letter to Alfred Valette, regarding works published with the *Mercure de France*, Colette remarks: “Fichtre non, cher ami, ce n’est pas l’habitude de ‘beaucoup de maisons’ d’édition de doubler les droits d’auteur ! Je vous félicite et vous remercie.”<sup>89</sup>

Colette went to various events to sell her books herself. After the war, she did especially well at parties for “écrivains combattants.” Before one party, she writes to an editor, “Vous n’aurez pas quelques exemplaires [de *La Chatte*] tirés pour la vente des Ecrivains Combattants le 9 ? je les mettrais à un prix... exceptionnel. Simple suggestion.”<sup>90</sup> We can hope that by “prix... exceptionnel,” Colette means that she will sell this book at an exceptionally low price in order to benefit veterans, and those who support their literary efforts. But, her use of ellipses implies another possible reading—that she put the books at an exceptionally high price.

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<sup>88</sup>Max Fischer. *Letter to Colette*. 7 January 1935. CLT 2:F 20104.

<sup>89</sup>Colette. *Letter to Alfred Valette*. Undated. CLT 2:MDF 9.36. This is signed Colette de Jouvenel, which gives us some idea of the date: between 1912 and 1924.

<sup>90</sup>Colette. *Letter to unnamed editor*. Undated. Ms:22.618. At another party for the *Ecrivains combattants*, Colette observes “En vendant de nombreuses *Vagabonde*, à l’après-midi des écrivains combattants, j’ai constaté que je m’appelais, sur toutes les couvertures : ‘COLETE’ Avec un seul t. Comment avez-vous pu autoriser qu’on se servit de ces couvertures-la ? Ce n’est flatteur ni pour vous ni pour moi. Y en a-t-il beaucoup, de ces couvertures qui ne battent que d’une T ?” Colette. *Letter to Unnamed Editor at Albin Michel*. Undated. CLT 2:ALM 2554 28.

In letters to editors at Albin Michel, Colette writes frankly about money, and about her need for more of it. She asks: “Où en est notre affaire à 6 francs ? Elle vendrait bien en ce moment-ci.” Whether Colette is thinking that the “affaire” would “go well” in the sense of selling well, or of being financially beneficial for her, either way she shows her preoccupation with money. She acknowledges checks: “Je ne crois pas qu’il y a de meilleur remède contre la grippe que celui que vous m’envoyez ce matin ! Est-ce grâce à lui que je n’ai plus que 37 0 7 ? Disons plutôt que j’ai 37 0 7 + 25.000+un très amical merci, j’ajoute à ce total imposant le plaisir de constater que vous préférez les rapports affectueux aux rapports strictement commerciaux. ...”<sup>91</sup>

As in the case of her writerly networks, Colette is publicly reluctant to acknowledge her “caractère marchandeur.” In *Mes Apprentissages*, Colette introduces her first husband Willy, who is certainly the villain of the piece, with a discussion of money: “mais j’ai mal connu l’homme qui fit semblant, toute sa vie, d’être pauvre. [...] Car non seulement il dissimulait—ce qui est humain—des biens inconnus, mais encore il empruntait aux pauvres.”<sup>92</sup> She explains that she was encouraged to write the *Claudine* series solely for income: “vite, ma petite, vite, il n’y a plus un sou dans la maison!” (992). Colette also discusses Willy’s obsession with “le chiffre”: “aux chiffres il dut ses jeux, ses joies, ses culpabilités principales” (993). She even includes a page from his ledger book, detailing various expenses in this “livre de dépenses”: “M.M\*\*\*, à valoir, 200 francs/ Hans Dichter, 50 francs. Félix Potin, 17 francs” (994). In *Mes Apprentissages*, Willy’s obsession with money, with “chiffres,” is, like everything else about him, a character flaw. The language that she uses to describe his ledger book drips with disdain;

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<sup>91</sup> Colette. *Letter to unnamed editor at Albin Michel*. 5 February 1937. CLT 2:ALM 2554 28.

<sup>92</sup> Colette and Pichois, *Œuvres*. (III, 992).

she describes his bookkeeping in terms of “chiffres-insects” and the “chiffres-grains de sable” (994). The book itself is “un Feuillet jauni glisse, couvert de chiffres, d’un vieux casier qui me suivit après mon divorce : ô stupeur, c’est une liste d’achat de valeurs, et des plus solides...” (994). Here, Colette’s lament shows that she distances herself from Willy’s preoccupation with “chiffres.”

However, at other moments, Colette seems to echo Willy’s preoccupation with having enough money. She recalls, only a few pages later, the low food prices in her rural youth, “le lait à vingt centimes le litre [...] le beurre à quatorze sous le quateron” (997). This kind of eye for prices, four decades after the fact, suggests to us that, although Colette wants to distance herself as much as possible from her ex-husband, she nonetheless has a bit of his sensibility for “chiffres.” Certainly, her letters have indicated the same thing.

### ***Chéri* and Money**

Even a cursory reading of *Chéri* indicates that money is a structuring force in this novel as well. The way money is figured in *Chéri* shows that Colette keenly and perceptively understood the power of money to order the world (a world notably where women courtesans are in charge). Colette sees the power of money as a social force.

On the one hand, money represents a fairly straightforward reversal of gender roles in the novel. Léa, a “professional” woman in the strictest (and oldest) sense of the word, “keeps” the young, beautiful Chéri. She pays his expenses, offering him “trois francs pour un taxi” before he leaves the house, for example. Both she and Chéri are

completely aware of their arrangement. She observes that "il est vrai que depuis cinq ans, j'entretiens à peu près cet enfant."<sup>93</sup>

However, their arrangement is complicated by the fact that Chéri has his own money, settled on him by his mother. Indeed Léa observes that, though she "keeps" Chéri, "il a tout de même trois cent mille francs de rente. Voilà. Est-on un barbeau quand on a trois cent mille francs de rente? Ça ne dépend pas du chiffre, ça dépend de la mentalité.... Il y a des types à qui j'aurais pu donner un demi-million et qui ne seraient pas pour cela des barbeaux ... Mais Chéri? et pourtant, je ne lui ai jamais donné d'argent.... Tout de même...." (752). Bizarrely, Léa questions whether or not Chéri is a "barbeau," which is usually a slang term for pimp. The implications of "barbeau," like "maquereau," are usually one who supports or procures prostitutes. And, indeed, Léa is herself a prostitute, though she is not supported or procured by Chéri. In this sentence "barbeau" seems to evoke a male prostitute, a gigolo, rather than a pimp. Léa's confusion over Chéri's status is marked by the large number of ellipses in the passage. Like the reader, Léa has trouble understanding the motivation behind her relationship with Chéri.

The role played by money in the novel is more complicated than a simple gender-role reversal. First, though Chéri is kept by Léa, he, like Colette's first husband Willy, is obsessed by money: he is often pictured with a "livre de comptes." Early in the novel, before Chéri is married, he arrives to interrupt Léa and 'Patron,' her lover of the moment. "Chéri qui surgissait, demi-nu mais armé d'un livre de comptes et le stylo derrière l'oreille. Voyez accolade! admirait Patron. Il a tout du caissier" (742). In this scene, Chéri complains about gas expenses: "qu'est-ce que je vois ? s'écriais de loin Chéri, trois cent vingt francs d'essence? On la boit! Nous sommes sortis quatre fois depuis quinze jours!

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<sup>93</sup>Colette and Pichois, Œuvres. (II, 752).

Et soixante-dix-sept francs d'huile! L'auto va au marché tous les jours, répondait Léa. A propos, ton chauffeur a repris trois fois du gigot à déjeuner, il paraît. Tu ne trouves pas que ça excède un peu nos conventions ?... Quand tu ne digères pas une addition, tu ressembles à ta mère. ” (742-3). This is more than a simple role-reversal. First, the physical image, of Chéri, half-naked with the expense-book, is an unexpected one. Normally, we do not think of accountants in the nude. The half-nude Chéri with the expense book is also a totally appropriate image—Léa has “bought” him, presumably, for his youth and attractiveness. His body is linked to his income. Second, Chéri is worried about money, arguing with Léa over their expenses, even though, as Léa has pointed out, she is the one who pays their bills. Why is Chéri so worried about money?

Money is also the major factor in Chéri's marriage. Though the book is set in the immediate pre-war period, Chéri and his fiancée Edmée, will have an arranged marriage. Arranged marriages were not especially common in France during this time, especially not among people who were, technically, members of a lower social class. Certainly, in Colette's fiction up to this point, arranged marriages never featured at all. This marriage, arranged both for money and as a social alliance, hearkens back to an earlier time in France's history, perhaps, and also to an aristocratic social structure. (Though they never mention this, could this be one of the reasons that the far-right was so appreciative of the novel?) For Colette, then, these courtesans are the new aristocrats.

Discussing his impending marriage Léa asks: “pourquoi l'épouses-tu ?” Chéri explains : “il y a de gros intérêts en jeu. [...] Les miens, dit-il sans sourire. La petite a une fortune personnelle. De son père? La belle Marie-Laure ne prélève pas quinze cents billets sur sa cassette particulière, hein? Quinze cents billets, de des bijoux de monde

bien. [...] Moi, j'ai plus, dit il avec orgueil." If Chéri has even more money than his bride-to-be, why does he need to marry her for her "intérêts"? Léa asks the same question, observing, "alors, tu n'a pas besoin d'argent." Chéri responds: "besoin, besoin... tu sais bien que nous ne comprenons pas l'argent de la même façon. C'est une chose sur laquelle nous ne nous entendons pas. ...". This disagreement is telling: Léa understands money practically but she cannot understand Chéri's need to accumulate income for its own sake. Chéri has a different relationship with money. As in his complaints over petrol prices (even when he wasn't paying the bills), Chéri views money differently, as an end in itself. The conversation ends when Léa asks "dis-moi, petit, qu'est-ce que tu as économisé sur tes revenus, depuis cinq ans ? [...] Sincèrement, dis... Cinquante mille par an, ou soixante? Soixante-dix?" In response, Chéri "s'assit sur le tapis, renversa sa tête sur les genoux de Léa. Je ne les vaux donc pas ?" (747). Chéri's physical gesture reveals the ways that money and sex are intertwined in the text—though Léa and Chéri have fundamentally different attitudes toward money, both understand that money and sex are inextricably intertwined.

This is made explicit in a conversation between Léa and Patron: "Leurs causeries lentes, qui réveillaient un peu chaque fois les deux mêmes dieux,—l'amour, l'argent" (742). In this novel, love and money are "les deux mêmes dieux," two forces with equal power to structure the social world of the novel. If anything, Chéri's marriage to Edmée reveals that money is the more powerful of the two. Though Colette's books are generally understood to be about love, about the intimate relationships between men and women, *Chéri* reveals the ways that the very practical aspects of daily life, the cost of tires and

petrol, having enough money to pay for these things, structure Colette's thinking about relationships as much as love and emotion do.

## Conclusions

Reflections on money, profession, and networks in Colette's life can usefully illuminate other aspects of her literary oeuvre as well. Patricia Tilburg has reflected on Renée Néré's loss of her métier as a writer in the transition between *La Vagabonde* and *L'Entrave*.<sup>94</sup> Beyond Tilburg's work, this new research on profession and money illuminates the texts in additional ways. First, in *L'Entrave*, Néré's loss of her profession as an actress is also a loss of her professional networks. The Néré of *L'Entrave* is profoundly lonely, and it is perhaps the loss of her professional relationships, as much as the loss of her work as an actress, that leads Renée into her decidedly unpleasant relationship with Jean. Immediately after observing, "je n'ai plus de métier, et je n'ai plus d'amant," Néré describes herself as "dame seule, et dame-seule très classique en somme."<sup>95</sup> Certainly, Colette describes the music-hall as a vibrant community of actresses, dancers, musicians, and directors, in texts such as *La Vagabonde* and *L'Envers du music-hall*. It is clear that Néré's solitude in *L'Entrave* provides a stark and melancholy contrast to her professional networks in the music-hall.

Money is also a structuring force in the transition between *La Vagabonde* and *L'Entrave*. Between the novels, Renée Néré inherits "vingt-mille francs de rentes, pour une femme comme moi, c'est la richesse" turning her into a *rentière* (329). This inheritance has caused Néré to stop working as a performer, an artist: "Renée Néré ne

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<sup>94</sup>Patricia A. Tilburg, "Earning her Bread: Métier, Order, and Female Honor in Colette's Music Hall, 1906-1913," *French Historical Studies* 29.3 (Summer 2005).

<sup>95</sup> Colette and Pichois, *Œuvres*. (II, 331).



‘tourne’ plus. Que je suis devenue une petite rentière [...] Une petite rentière pas riche, pas pauvre – pas jeune, pas vieille non plus—pas heureuse, mais pas triste ... ” (329). Néré’s transition from happy and fulfilled artist in *La Vagabonde* to melancholy heiress in *L’Entrave* perfectly demonstrates the conflict between Beauvoir and Bourdieu described in the introduction of this dissertation. For Néré, having an income does not make her a more autonomous artist (Bourdieu) and permit her to leave the heteronymous world of music-hall for a more aesthetically viable high-art genre. Instead, without the need to earn her living through her work, she stops working as an artist altogether.

In autobiographical texts, Colette insists on her own ambivalence toward writing—suggesting, perhaps, that writing is the way that she makes her living, but if she had enough money, she would not need to write any more. Certainly, *L’Entrave* suggests that without the material pressure to produce art, artists might stop creating altogether. Colette herself worried constantly over not having enough money: her ultimately unsuccessful commercial endeavors reveal the extent to which she approached earning her living in a practical, even mercenary, fashion. Even her maintenance of her social and artistic networks could be interpreted in monetary terms—converting social capital into economic capital. However, my sense (which could be inaccurate) is that Colette’s monetary situation was not particularly precarious: she maintained multiple houses, went on lavish vacations. A more detailed investigation into the material, practical details of Colette’s life might prove enlightening. Is it possible that, like Chéri, Colette viewed the accumulation of income as an end in itself?

## Chapter 5: Colette “classique moderne”: Colette and Interwar Literary History

Before the First World War, Colette was admired as an excellent feminine prose stylist, a delicious and at times scandalous describer of women and music-halls. After the war, however, she became:

Colette patriote. Car, je le répète, sa santé morale ne laisse rien à désirer. Fille d'un capitaine devenu percepteur, Colette devait adopter, devant la guerre, des sentiments sans mélange. Individualisme anarchique, Colette ne te connaît plus. Elle vibre désormais avec toute la France. En Colette patriote, aucune trace de [sensiblerie humanitaire] mais la fierté carrément affichée d'être Française et fille de zouave.<sup>1</sup>

In 1925, Colette is the patriotic daughter of one of France's bravest soldiers, resonating with “toute la France.” Even today, this attachment between Colette and Frenchness has not faded.<sup>2</sup> Before the war, Colette might have been favorably compared to Rachilde or George Sand, a naturally feminine counterpart to their unnatural masculinity. Comment on her ‘Frenchness’ was rare. After the war, she became “la véritable créatrice de la prose féminine française.”<sup>3</sup> Her works were placed in a grand French tradition of letters, beginning with classical Greek and Roman models, and including Racine, Rousseau, and Voltaire. How did this transformation take place? What is its significance?

This chapter explores Colette's new role in literary history during the interwar period. I begin with examples of general ways that Colette was attached to the French tradition, and then explore in some detail the emergence of a newly popular terminology

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<sup>1</sup> André Billy, *La Muse aux besicles* (Paris: La Renaissance littéraire, 1925). (22-23).

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular Ozouf, *Les Mots des femmes: essai sur la singularité française*.

<sup>3</sup> Crémieux, “Les Lettres françaises.” Crémieux's review is discussed at more length later in this chapter.

for describing French literary history, the *classique*, a concept that reviewers from many different types of publications used to describe Colette's texts, and to write about French literary history more generally. This chapter will explore the shifting definitions of *classique*, a term which was largely absent from reviews of Colette's texts before the war.<sup>4</sup> Significantly complicating the idiom of the *classique* is the *classique moderne*: a term that I have coined to describe reviewers who discuss Colette's texts in terms of a relationship between classicism and literary modernity.

This analysis frames questions about the literary history of the interwar period in general. How did the war change the ways that people thought about identity, Frenchness, and by extension, French literature? Why the sudden rise of the *classique* during this period? How does the interwar *classique* relate to the prewar iterations of this term? What were its aesthetic (and perhaps also political) stakes? What distinctions can be made between the interwar concepts of the *classique* and the *classique moderne*? What other writers were thought of in these terms?

## Literary Histories of the Interwar

As Michel Collomb points out in the introduction to *La Littérature Art Déco*, French literary history has struggled to describe and understand the interwar period. Existing terms are not adequate for describing either what is new about the period, or what unifies the varied aesthetics of the time. Collomb complains that “‘modernisme’ a l'inconvénient de désigner des courants qui existent déjà avant 1914, ‘surréalisme’ est

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<sup>4</sup>André Baunier's *Claudine en ménage* did refer to the style of the novel as “presque classique.” Hire, *Ménages d'artistes: Willy et Colette*.

trop spécialisé ‘avant-garde’ caractérise plutôt la position des artistes novateurs dans le champ socio-culturel de l’époque et contredit par définition l’idée un style collectif”<sup>5</sup> In English language sources, much time has been spent identifying various fascist currents in the interwar period, but this concern has tended to overshadow efforts to identify literary currents that crossed political boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

Some critics have written about the rise of classicism and literary modernity in the interwar period: most notably Michel Collomb in the 1987 *La littérature Art Déco* and Nicolas Di Méo in the 2010 “Le Sens de l’harmonie : l’habitus national chez Jean Giraudoux.”<sup>7</sup> Collomb’s wide-ranging study suggests that it is possible to identify a unified interwar style, a “style 1925,” and explains that this style is characterized by a preoccupation with “la pression des thèmes modernistes et le caractère encore traditionnel de la représentation” (12). Collomb focuses on features of this style: modernity, a diffuse classicism, an aesthetics of speed, anti-Americanism. Though Collomb treats other writers at some length, he does not treat Colette in any detail.<sup>8</sup>

Di Méo’s more recent work emphasizes harmony—“Les notions d’harmonie, de mesure et d’équilibre occupent une place capitale dans le discours identitaire français des années 1850-1950” (299). According to Di Méo, France conceived itself as the crowning example of harmonious diversity, “l’unité dans la diversité” and emphasized its own values, such as moderation, balance, and synthesis. Di Méo puts emphasis on the

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<sup>5</sup> Collomb, *La Littérature art déco : sur le style d’époque*. (7-8).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism : Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995)., Mark Antliff, *Avant-garde Fascism : The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Di Méo, “Le Sens de l’harmonie : l’habitus national chez Jean Giraudoux,” *French Review* 84.2 (December 2010). Collomb, *La Littérature art déco : sur le style d’époque*.

<sup>8</sup> Collomb treats Colette only vanishingly briefly in the text, mentioning her in a discussion of journalism, and citing a letter from Colette to Proust (198, 158). In his conclusion, Collomb evokes “provocations” as different as Artaud, Montherlant, Daumal, Giraudoux, and Colette, but he gives no indication of the nature of Colette’s provocation, or of how her writing might fit into the “Style Art Déco” (228).

recuperation of regional identities, the finding of unity among these diverse identities.

Though the work focuses on Jean Giraudoux, Di Méo also mentions Gide and Valéry as connected to this harmonious discourse.

Though the work of Collomb and Di Méo helps to frame this study, it is not fully able to account for Colette's status as a *classique moderne*. Neither of these works explores in enough detail the specificities of the use of the term *classique* during the interwar period, dismissing the use of the term as "diffuse," rather than attending to its shifting forms and significations. Further, I am not certain that Di Méo's notions of harmony and reconciliation are the best or the only terms for thinking about the coexistence of forms or styles described by the *classique moderne*.

The most compelling account of the *classique moderne* that I have found so far relies on the concept of Romanticism, rather than modernity, to explain conflicts over classicism in the interwar period. Yaël Dagan, in the 2008 *La NRF entre guerre et paix* explains that, even before the war, symbolist dissidents led by Charles Maurras participated in a "renouveau classique" marked by "l'attaque vigoureuse du romantisme, mêlant valeurs esthétiques, politiques et morales."<sup>9</sup> Classicism was associated with values like reason, nationalism, Catholicism, tradition, order, and masculinity, whereas Romanticism was irrational, regional, Protestant, Jewish, anarchistic, and feminine.

After the war, contributors to the *Nouvelle Revue française* worked to reclaim both classicism and romanticism, redefining classicism against the Maurrassian version. The precise terms of this reclamation, and the exact nature of the disagreement between Maurras and Gide, remain somewhat obscure. According to Dagan, who frames the

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<sup>9</sup>Yaël Dagan, *La Nouvelle Revue française entre guerre et paix, 1914-1925* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008). (288-289).

debate in terms of the aesthetics of the *NRF*, Gide and Jacques Rivière produced somewhat different definitions of classicism, with Rivière founding his theory on “une séparation artistique et morale,” whereas Gide believed that classicism was moral because of the subordination of the individual into the work of art (290). Though the terms of the debate deserve further critical attention, Dagan’s work makes it clear that, during the 1920’s, a dispute over classicism and literary modernity, which also implied a disagreement over the status of Romanticism, was a key factor in French interwar aesthetics.

Colette provides an interesting test case for this discussion, because, although she was widely associated with many Romantic qualities—especially femininity and irrationality—she was praised by the defenders of the Maurrassian *classique* for these very qualities. Colette’s femininity complicates Dagan’s argument: what can be made of an author who was praised by Maurrassians for being *classique* and *romantique* at the same time? Further, what about the fact that Colette was recuperated by both the Maurrassian *classiques* and Gide’s *nouveaux classiques*? What does this say about her status as a writer and the status of her literary oeuvre?

### **Colette and “La Tradition Française”**

After the First World War, reviewers began to talk about Colette in terms of the great tradition of (male) French literature. Henri Pourrat evokes this lineage explicitly in his review of *Le Blé en herbe* for the *NRF*, writing that “Mme Colette qui a marié au génie poétique ce ‘génie du soupçon’ que Stendhal voyait venir au monde, se place sur la

ligne même des grands écrivains à la française.”<sup>10</sup> Placing Colette in a lineage that includes Stendhal separates her from the cadre of women’s writing, and inserts her into the larger tradition of French letters. Pourrat makes reference here to Stendhal’s assertion that the “génie poétique” was dead, replaced by the “génie du soupçon,” asserting that Colette was able to combine these two divergent styles. Colette is not merely participating in the literary tradition, then; she is shaping it, changing it, the first author capable of solving the contradiction between “poétique” and “soupçon” described by Stendhal.

Some writers connect Colette to literary history more obliquely, by emphasizing her Frenchness, or the Frenchness of her writing. For example, Maurice Lena, in his review of *La Fin de Chéri* for *L’Excelsior*, concludes his glowing review by characterizing Colette’s novel as “d’une forme exquisément française et moderne.”<sup>11</sup> Lena does not specify what he might mean by a form that is ‘exquisément française,’ but it is clear that he, like Pourrat, suggests that there is something about Colette’s writing that should be thought of in terms of the larger tradition of French literature. Similarly, André Thérive introduces his review of *La Fin de Chéri* in *L’Opinion* by writing that “*Chéri* était un livre incomparable, un des plus beaux peut-être qu’on ait écrits en langue française, à l’avis même de ses détracteurs.”<sup>12</sup> It is important that both of these sentences are either the first or last sentence of the review, places where very important information

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<sup>10</sup> Pourrat, "Notes."

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Lena, *Excelsior* (9 May 1926).

<sup>12</sup> Thérive. Similarly, in a review of *Chéri* for the *Revue Universelle*, Pierre Laserre writes that “Et aussi bien ne saurais-je m’en figurer la forme de simple notation anecdotique, les modes de récits crus et naïfs que d’après les heureux exemples qu’elle nous en a donnés elle-même dans un bon français qui ne manque pas de suc.” Laserre.

about the book is given. Colette's connection to Frenchness is something that these authors emphasize in their treatment of her.

Similarly, André Germain, in his 1924 essay on *Chéri*, connects Colette's work to "la plus pure tradition des siècles parfaits" and then exclaims, "que Madame Colette est donc agréablement française !" <sup>13</sup> He clarifies what he means by "française," writing "non pas de toutes les Frances [...] mais de celle-là, limpide et sage, qui s'est formée en de lentes délices parmi les vergers de Touraine et sur les bords de l'Oise, qui a donné son miracle avec Voltaire, qui s'est achevée dans la suprême courtoisie de Jules Lemaître et d'Anatole France." Here, as for Pourrat, Colette is attached to a broader French literary tradition that includes Voltaire, Lemaître, and France. For Germain, this tradition is also tied to the physical space of France: he emphasizes the geography of Touraine and the Oise river. (Interestingly, though Colette herself was from Burgundy, the two places mentioned by Germain have nothing to do with Burgundy.) <sup>14</sup> This tradition, tied to geography, is also exclusionary: Germain writes the great tradition to which he attaches Colette is "non pas de toutes les Frances," though he does not specify which "Frances" he is excluding. Germain concludes his discussion of Colette's Frenchness by claiming that "la langue de notre pays, Madame Colette la polit avec la même assiduité que met une chatte à faire de son pelage." Here, Germain evokes Colette's femininity through her connection to animals. This larger male literary tradition, therefore, in no way reduces the

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<sup>13</sup> André Germain, *De Proust à Dada*, Sagittaire (Paris: Simon Kra, 1924).

<sup>14</sup> Di Méo has suggested that interwar reviewers worked to recuperate regional identities as a strategy for solidifying Frenchness as a reaction against homogenizing American culture. Since Germain ignores Colette's regional identity, this does not seem to be the case here. Julien Benda complains a great deal, in the 1928 *Trahison des clercs*, about how all the writers these days have got to go get rooted someplace, have got to write from the soil...and often spoil themselves doing it. This also sounds a lot like Barrès. So, the question of regionality is clearly important, but Di Méo's analysis seems unsatisfying.



discursive centrality of her femininity. She is not an un-gendered, or a masculine addition to this canon, but a distinctly feminine one.

Other reviewers also emphasize Colette's femininity, even as they compare her to male writers. Rousseau is a frequent point of reference for Colette reviewers. For example, André Billy asks, in the 1923 issue of *Le Capitole* devoted to Colette: "A qui comparer Colette ?" He answers this question: "A Jean Jacques Rousseau dont elle est une sorte de réplique féminine, a l'échelle de notre temps. Le sentiment de la nature, qui nous vient de Rousseau, elle l'a entendu..."<sup>15</sup> Fernand Vandérem, in a review of *Chéri*, writes that "ses [Colette's] Confessions étaient d'un caractère si humain, si profond."<sup>16</sup> The capitalization of "Confessions," makes it clear that Vandérem is referring to Rousseau's work here, though *Chéri* is hardly Colette's most-confessional text. Benjamin Crémieux's review of *Chéri* for the *NRF* similarly imagines Colette's texts "recueillies en un seul gros in-octavo, imprimées fin sur deux colonnes, pour faire le pendant féminin à celles de Jean-Jacques."<sup>17</sup> In all of these examples, Colette becomes a distinctly feminine version of Rousseau, attached to nature, to emotion.

Benjamin Crémieux, in his review of *Le Blé en herbe* for the *Nouvelles Littéraires*, characterizes Colette as "la véritable créatrice de la prose féminine française" and goes on to explain that "le 'phénomène' Colette, dans l'histoire de la prose française, a été aussi important que le 'phénomène' Loti, plus important même, parce que Loti est inimitable dans sa singularité au lieu que Colette a créé une tradition, ouvert au style de possibilités inconnues avant elle."<sup>18</sup> This way of thinking about Colette, as both a

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<sup>15</sup> André Billy, *Le Capitole: Numéro consacré à Colette* (1923).

<sup>16</sup> Fernand Vandérem, *Miroir des lettres*, vol. 2, 8 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1921). (228).

<sup>17</sup> Crémieux, "Les Lettres françaises."

<sup>18</sup> Crémieux, "Les Lettres françaises."

participant in French literature broadly and as a founder of a new tradition, is a new one. Colette is acknowledged as a great writer, as great, perhaps, as Rousseau or Loti, but always in the context of femininity.

### **Colette *classique***

One important way of connecting Colette to the literary history of France was through the idea of the *classique*. Beginning with *Chéri*, and continuing throughout the 1920's and 1930's, reviewers praised Colette for the classicism of her works. My research indicates that this term became much more widely used during the interwar period, though certainly the idea of French literature as neo-classical existed before the war. This classicism evokes a very specific literary history—one beginning with Greek and Roman antiquity, picking up French “classics” from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and finding its culmination in Colette's works. This classicism also excludes, at times explicitly, the literature of the nineteenth century, both romanticism and realism. Finally, though the definitions of classicism vary somewhat from reviewer to reviewer, morality and femininity are both of paramount importance to those who read Colette as a *classique*.

André Thérive, in his 1920 review of *Chéri* for the *Revue Critique des idées et des livres*, gets all three phases of the *classique* into his description of the genre of the novel : “ce genre (un drame sentimentale) : le thème élégiaque et le thème tragique, Anacréon et Racine ; il est fatale qu'ils se dégagent toujours d'un roman de passion, si amoral soit-il, et cela suffit à l'empêcher d'être immoral.”<sup>19</sup> *Chéri* is thus tied to a fifth century BCE

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<sup>19</sup> Thérive.

Greek lyric poet and a 17<sup>th</sup> century French dramatist.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Gonzague Truc, in the 1929 *Classicisme d'hier et classiques d'aujourd'hui* explains that his “classicisme d'hier” includes Racine’s *Phèdre* and Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. Truc links Colette to Racine, writing “c’est à Racine qui me fait songer Mme Colette. [...] Même netteté des lignes, même leçon, non point des mots mais des choses [...] à deux moments de la langue, une maîtrise presque égal.”<sup>21</sup>

At times, Colette was not merely the “equal” of her classical predecessors; she was their superior. Henri Pourrat, in his 1923 review of the text for the *NRF*, compares Phil and Vinca to Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, writing “beaucoup plus intelligents que la pastorale de Longus, on est en droit de dire que le *Blé en herbe* est pourtant plus naïf, naïf ayant ici son vieux sens; naturel. Plus humain, plus près de la vérité de toujours que le petit roman de la décadence grecque.”<sup>22</sup> Pourrat insists not only that *Le Blé en herbe* speaks more clearly to contemporary realities, but instead that Colette’s novel is both “plus humain” and “plus près de la vérité de toujours” than its Greek predecessor, which he terms “petit.” Colette surpasses the classical model. The degree of universality found in the “plus près de la vérité de toujours” is largely unprecedented in Colette criticism, and also quite bold—claiming that a book written that very year is more universally true than a Greek classic is a strong statement to make.

Like all constructions of a tradition or nation, the new history of the *classique* also involves a rejection: in this case, of the nineteenth century. Gonzague Truc, in the

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<sup>20</sup> Thérive similarly links all three description of a single sentence of *La Retraite sentimentale*: “une phrase, construite avec les grandes ressources classiques, comme du Tite-Live ou du Guizot et qui est un modèle de synthèse ; pensons à ce que cela suppose de force naturelle et, quoi qu’on puisse dire, de culture acquise.” In this sentence, Colette is connected to “ressources classiques” through Tite-Live, a Roman historian (59 BCE – 17 CE) and Guizot, a French orator and statesman (1787–1874).

<sup>21</sup> Gonzague Truc, *Classicisme d'hier et classiques d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles lettres", 1929). (32). Subsequent in-text citations of this work refer to this edition.

<sup>22</sup> Henri Pourrat, *Nouvelle Revue Française* 21 (1 September 1923).

introduction to *Classicisme d'hier*, makes his disdain for both the “Romantiques” and the “Naturalistes” apparent, finding Zola to be both “répugnant” and “monstrueux” (2). In his discussion of Colette, his crowning example of classicism, he reproaches her for a bit of complacency in her language, an overuse of certain expressions, characteristics he blames on Victor Hugo: “nous ne saurions pas d’ailleurs la rendre responsable [for her complacency]. Ce n’est pas sa faute si elle est venue après Victor Hugo” (33). André Thérive’s review of *Chéri* reveals a similar distaste for the nineteenth century. Thérive concludes that:

[I]l n’y a pas de lieu de récriminer contre ce qui est ; et s’il peut exister une certaine valeur éducative dans une œuvre, quelle qu’elle soit, qui marque de la discipline d’esprit et un art classique, nous ne refuserons jamais de la trouver dans les livres de Colette. Leçons de clarté, de psychologie et de raison, n’est-ce pas assez pour justifier de telles œuvres que j’aime à croire qui dureront encore, en honneur au siècle vingtième, alors que Madame Sand ne sera plus depuis longtemps ni lisible ni lue ?<sup>23</sup>

It seems odd that Colette would be so beloved by a movement that rejected nineteenth-century aesthetics, since these texts, both explicitly and implicitly, provide models for Colette’s own work. Colette is the author, after all, who claimed never to have read any writer but Balzac.

Colette’s classicism is strongly linked to morality, specifically to the fact that, like Racine, she can depict unpleasant and immoral things in her work while maintaining a high moral tenor (unlike the terrible novelists of the nineteenth century). About Colette, his best example of a *classique*, Truc writes that her classicism is in her literary style, her “sens innée du meilleur français” and in her pathetic description of the immorality of Chéri and Léa, who are not even human, but instead hardly distinct from animals, with

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<sup>23</sup> Thérive.

“aucun souci pourtant, aucune trace d’idée d’une vie spirituelle ou morale quelconque, des primitifs [...] bêtes” (31-2). André Thérive also uses classicism to defend the morality of *Chéri*, explaining, in a description of Chéri and Léa’s relationship:

Colette prend assez au sérieux le pathétique de la passion charnelle presque entièrement. Ceci est déjà du classicisme. Il n’y a aucune licence dans *Manon Lescaut*, la licence y est présupposée, devinée à la rigueur ; pourtant *Manon Lescaut* n’est pas une œuvre timide. Mais pour un grand écrivain, qui ordonne sans effort chaque élément de son œuvre la question de la décence ne se pose même pas ; et par décence il faut entendre aussi celle qui se garde des allusions et des réticences polissonnes autant que des tableaux appuyés.<sup>24</sup>

Again, the “classicisme” of the work is proved by an analogy to the eighteenth-century novel *Manon Lescaut*; indeed, it is Colette’s status as a “grand écrivain,” the equivalent, in this formulation, of Prévost, that shelters her work from charges of indecency.<sup>25</sup> It is intriguing that, for both of these authors, Colette’s characters are scandalous, indecent animals, overcome by their own “instincts” because this is often precisely the language used to describe Colette herself. For these writers, however, Colette herself is not a writing animal, but a deep moralist depicting human animals.

Colette’s classicism is also tied to her femininity. Certainly, her femininity and morality ought to be seen as inextricably linked: Colette’s work was moral because it was feminine. Pourrat explains:

On parle de classicisme. Qu’on puisse renoncer au terrain conquis en divers domaines, cela ne s’imagine guère ; disons pour parler vite, à un certain sens des choses naturelles, à certaines amitiés végétales, animales ; aux lumières, aussi,

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<sup>24</sup> Thérive.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Eugène Marsan, in a review of *La Naissance du jour*, compares Colette to classical moralists: “elle travaille avec le calme audacieux de nos moralistes classiques.” Or, again, Truc connects the “classique” both to literary style and to morality: “Les thèmes les plus pénibles, les plus scabreux, les moins ragoutants, furent traités par la littérature qui a su prendre au comble du crime ou au sein de l’ignominie une allure auguste : qu’on examine de quoi sont faits (*Edipe Roi* ou *Phèdre*. [...]) un âge classique sait ordonner les détails dans un ensemble où, à la fois, ils acquièrent leur prix et perdent la laideur ou la bassesse qu’ils empruntaient des circonstances ; l’acte monstrueux reprend dans une trame ou un large pan de vie est façonné, une valeur morale.”

portées dans la vie obscure de l'âme où s'élaborent esprits et sentiments—et *Le Blé en herbe* va loin dans la peinture de l'homme et de la femme naissants. Le romancier doit, tout en donnant peu, tout avoir, tout donner. Le classicisme n'est pas une sorte d'ascétisme, mais du linéaire : c'est, quand le mot est valable, la nature et l'ordre. Et le *Blé en herbe*, tout de notre époque, reste d'allure classique.<sup>26</sup>

The novel's allure is classical because of its treatment of nature and order.<sup>27</sup> It is useful to note, in Pourrat's discussion of the *classique*, the references to animals, plants, and nature—aspects of Colette's writing that are frequently connected to her femininity, rather than her classicism. Pourrat seems to have no difficulty transferring to the category of classicism already well-established aspects of Colette's writerly identity. Clearly, the commonplaces of Colette reception do not fall away with the rise of the *classique*, but they are instead incorporated into Colette's classicism. In some ways, this makes perfect sense—Colette was praised for her natural femininity, and since this femininity was “natural,” which is to say, “inherent to all women throughout time and space,” it is logical that it is easily connected to a very long history of literature.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Truc makes the connection between femininity and classicism explicit, explaining “Elle lui [l'homme] demande des sentiments, souvent des sensations, non des raisons [...] elle estime qu'au seuil de la vieillesse l'homme, pour la femme, doit rester le soin principal” (31). Colette is Truc's best example of classicism because she writes about sensations and feelings rather than reason, and she sees that men must be women's principle concern.

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<sup>26</sup> Pourrat.

<sup>27</sup> Though Pourrat is writing for the NRF here, he sounds pretty similar to things that Maurrassians wrote in the *Action Française*.

<sup>28</sup> The universality of the classic, here put into relief through Colette and the universal feminine, is a subject that deserves further attention.

Interestingly, for Gaston de Pawlowski, Colette's femininity prevents her from the status of *classique*, rather than permitting her to achieve the heights of that status.<sup>29</sup> After acknowledging the classical resonances of *Le Blé en herbe*, and after pointing out some of its many virtues, Pawlowski asks "d'où vient, cependant, que ce livre n'efface point pour nous le souvenir de tant de chefs-d'œuvre classiques ? Pourquoi ne prend-il pas place immédiatement dans nos bibliothèques à côté des œuvres éternelles qui souvent ne le valent point par le détail ?" Pawlowski responds to his own question: "c'est que Colette est une femme avant tout, c'est-à-dire instinctive, et que ses œuvres manquent presque toujours cette construction que nous exigeons lorsqu'il s'agit d'une œuvre d'art." Pawlowski's commentary on the role of gender in art is very interesting. First, it should be noted that, immediately before he asked this question, Pawlowski writes that there are pages in the novel that "personne n'égalera jamais et qui sont de toute beauté." Pawlowski is certainly not saying that Colette's works are without literary merit. Instead, the relationship between Colette's works and a wider literary canon seems to be more complicated. There are aspects of Colette's writing, in particular the beauty of her prose, that equal some of the greatest classics of literature, and yet, Pawlowski cannot imagine including Colette among these classics because she is a woman. Her instinct, the very characteristic for which she is lauded by so many of her other critics, is precisely that which prevents her works of art from being true chefs-d'œuvre.

Pawlowski then asks himself if it might not simply be that he is unfairly prejudiced against Colette's writing style "ce n'est peut-être—la chose est possible—qu'un préjugé ? Est-il absolument nécessaire, pour qu'un roman soit parfait, qu'il ait un commencement, une fin, des préparations, un point culminant et un dénouement ? qu'il

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<sup>29</sup> G. de Pawlowski, "Le Blé en herbe," Annales politiques et littéraires (7 October 1923).

soit conduit par une idée directrice et que s'en dégage une conclusion et une morale ?” Pawlowski concludes, however, that because of “habitudes séculaires,” these conditions still seem to be necessary in order that a work of art seem to be complete, and that for this reason, Colette’s works will remain something less than masterpieces—“un chef-d’œuvre coupé dont on ne nous donnerait que les pages du milieu.” It is fascinating that Pawlowski attributes the failure to see Colette’s works as masterpieces to “habitudes séculaires” rather than to some deep and abiding aesthetic truth. Though I might disagree with Pawlowski’s definition of masterpiece, his insight here, that it is a combination of Colette’s femininity and “habitudes séculaires” that cause her to be excluded from the highest canon of the classics of literature, is a remarkably prescient one.

Despite the disagreements in the above reviews, it is none the less clear that classicism, as a critical idiom, became generalized in writing about Colette with *Chéri*, and cemented with reviews of *Le Blé en herbe*. This classicism shared some characteristics: an emphasis on morality and femininity, a conception of the history of the *classique*, but was far from coherent. And, though we might be tempted to attach this neo-classical language to the aesthetics of the far-right, only two of the *classique* reviewers were in fact attached to the racial purist French right (Thérive and Truc). Both Pourrat and Pawlowski were collaborators with the center-left *Nouvelle Revue française*. The political diversity of these reviewers indicates that the political aesthetics of the *classique* are worth pursuing.



## **Colette *classique moderne***

Though the meaning of the term *classique* shifted from one writer to the next, use of the term *classique* itself was quite widespread. However, for reviewers who resisted the idea that Colette was simply a neo-classical writer, a female Rousseau or a she-Racine, finding a single term to describe the innovation, the originality, the modernity of Colette's writing was not an easy task. Some used words like "original" or "moderne," some describe the modernity of Colette's characters and settings. A surprising number used terms from nineteenth-century literature to suggest the modernity of Colette's writing: mentioning symbolism, impressionism, romanticism. The *classique moderne* is a useful concept for explaining all of these efforts because there was no unified term, at the time, for comprehending the harmonious reconciliation of classicism and literary modernity that reviewers ascribed to Colette's works. The *classique moderne* is even more difficult to define than the *classique*, but *classique moderne* reviews do share a number of characteristics: a desire to describe the literary innovation of Colette's writing, a borrowing of terms from the nineteenth century to describe literary modernity, a continued insistence on the femininity of Colette's prose.

In 1928, in the avant-gardist review *Point et virgule*, Louise Martial (one of the rare female reviewers of Colette) lamented Colette's frequent association with the "néo-classique," writing:

Des historiens de la Littérature française ont qualifié néo-classique, la partie la plus récente de l'œuvre de Colette. 'Son génie, disent-ils, semble se tourner de plus en plus vers l'art de nos écrivains des 17<sup>e</sup> et 18<sup>e</sup> siècles. Il entre en sympathie à la fois avec les formes les plus modernes de la sensibilité et avec les puissances permanentes de la vie et de la mort.' Parce que Colette a écrit *Le Blé en herbe* et *Chéri*, on veut l'apparenter aux classiques. Je ne vois ni la nécessité, ni la justesse de cette assertion. Pourquoi déformer la caractéristique de son art ? En quoi les

deux romans, précédemment nommés, ramènent-ils leur auteur trois cent ans en arrière ?<sup>30</sup>

Here, Martial describes with useful clarity and humor the discussion of Colette as a *classique*—by 1928 so common as to almost be a cliché. Martial’s discomfort with classicism only goes so far, as Martial is happy to conclude her review by asserting that Colette’s writing is “l’art essentiellement ‘dionysiaque.’”<sup>31</sup> Martial makes a good point, though—certainly some reviewers must have seen that Colette was not really writing Racine plays, or Greek tragedies, or eighteenth-century confessions.

It is not insignificant that Martial describes Colette as “une romantique [...] L’Eve moderne.” Those writers who described Colette as a *classique moderne* were much less critical of the nineteenth century than their *classique* counterparts, frequently using terminology borrowed from the nineteenth<sup>h</sup> century to evoke Colette’s modernity. Eugène Marsan, for the wide-audience *Comoedia*, describes Colette’s modernity in terms of “symbolisme” writing that Colette is at once influenced by the moral calm of “les classiques,” and yet, “les touches poétiques et voilées quelquefois un peu trop mystérieuses le rattachent au symbolisme.”<sup>32</sup> Pierre Laserre, a frequent contributor to the *Action Française*, compares Colette to Plato and Racine, but also characterizes *La Maison de Claudine* as “de l'impressionnisme pur.”<sup>33</sup> Further evoking the nineteenth century, an anonymous review of *La Naissance du jour* describes the text as a “une Confession lyrique, ce sera, un peu, ses ‘Contemplations’...”<sup>34</sup> The text is both linked to the *classique Confessions* of Rousseau and the Romantic-era *Contemplations* of Victor

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<sup>30</sup> Martial.

<sup>31</sup> This might be a category from Nietzsche.

<sup>32</sup> Marsan, “Du Sentiment à la personne.”, Laserre.

<sup>33</sup> Marsan, “Du Sentiment à la personne.”, Laserre.

<sup>34</sup> *Liberté* (2 April 1928).

Hugo. This borrowing of terms from the nineteenth century also shows the difficulty of describing the originality of Colette's texts.

Other writers found different terms to describe the classical modernity of Colette's writing. Maurice Lena, in his review of *La Fin de Chéri*, puts the classicism and modernity of Colette's text quite explicitly, describing her talent as "d'une fraîcheur d'aquarelle, d'un modernisme suraigu, mais dont la netteté relève de l'art classique."<sup>35</sup> Fernand Vanderem, in a review of *Le Blé en herbe*, writes that the novel is "du tour le plus neuf et le plus moderne, on lui sent la fermeté, la solidité, le grain du plus pur classique."<sup>36</sup> It could be that these writers borrow terms from art history, evoking impressionism, art, or watercolors, because of the lack of a unifying term to describe literary modernity in French.<sup>37</sup> Further, in these examples, classicism and modernity are not in conflict, or tension; instead, they are in harmony with one another.

Further investigation of the *classique moderne* reveals additional nuances of the term. Henri Keller-Lautier, in his review of the *Le Blé en herbe* for the *Nouvelle Revue Critique*, compares the main characters of the novel to Daphnis and Chloe, but writes that, although Colette transposes these two characters into a modern setting "là s'arrête la comparaison."<sup>38</sup> Instead of reading the novel as a relatively uncomplicated updating of

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<sup>35</sup>Lena, "Les Livres." Lena uses the word "modernisme," a term that is generally not used to describe French literary experimentation during this period. Though the idea of modernism in the British sense of high modernism is certainly not what Lena intends, it is also clear that this term was more in use in France in the first part of the twentieth century than previously acknowledged. However, I'm not quite certain how to distinguish between the definitions, for these French writers, of "moderne," "modernité," and "modernisme."

<sup>36</sup> Vandérem, *Miroir des lettres*.

<sup>37</sup> André Germain also makes oblique references to the classical and the modern in his review of *Chéri*: "Et par son exemple philosophique nous concevons mieux la solidarité humaine, et comme les existences même les plus opposées, dès qu'elles ont un sens et une sagesse, se complètent, tout ce que le patient bonheur d'une épouse chaste doit aux préparations et aux essais bien menés d'une de ces préceptrices de la jeunesse qu'Athènes comptait en grand nombre et qui manquent à l'équilibre de la vie moderne." Germain, *De Proust à Dada*.

<sup>38</sup> André Keller-Lautier, *Nouvelle Revue Critique* 7 (15 September 1923).

Longus's tale, he reads it as a "retournement psychologique" which "a mieux qu'une valeur de paradoxe, il s'appuie sur des dons d'observations qui sont peut-être les plus clairs et les plus minutieux de ce temps." Though Keller-Lautier does not use the word "modern" here, it is clear that he sees Colette's work as in some ways both influenced by its classical model and very much of its own time. Keller-Lautier's "mieux qu'une valeur de paradoxe" suggests that this combining of classical and modern modes goes beyond simple juxtaposition and becomes a more pleasing reconciliation of the two. Keller-Lautier concludes by remarking that "s'il y passe encore de ces bouffes voluptueuses et chaudes, le vent qui les apporte n'a pas traversé la pestilence d'un mauvais lieu, il nous arrive chargé de l'odeur pure d'un calme paysage, aux classiques perspectives. Car Mme Colette, dans son originalité, ne dédaigne point de demander au classicisme, dont elle connaît les vertus, la charpente de ses récits." Keller-Lautier's evocation of the "la pestilence d'un mauvais lieu" might well be a reference to the "bad air" of romanticism: Colette's text borrows from classical morality, leaping over the infection of the immoral romantics. Though in general the reviewers of the "*classique moderne*" were not interested in morality or in attacking the nineteenth century, Keller-Lautier's review serves as a reminder that these concepts were not used consistently: for him, Colette's combination of classicism and originality sounds not dissimilar from Truc's neo-classicism.

Fernand Vandérem focuses on the femininity of Colette's writing and characters in his 1921 discussion of her work, writing that:

Malgré argot, autos, music-hall, ses héroïnes participent de ce recul païen. Sous leurs tailleurs de cheviotte et parmi leurs fougueuses idylles montmartroises, elles sont cent fois plus grecques que tant de Lais en péplum d'Opéra-comique. Lorsque Mitsou ou la Vagabonde quittent toutes frissonnantes leur baignoire

modern-style, on croirait les voir sortir du frais Illysus. Un jour, par leur archaïsme, elles finiront par faire du tort à Théocrite, à Longus, à Lucien...<sup>39</sup>

Vanderem's description is amusingly prescient, as Colette would indeed write a text (*Le Blé en herbe*), only a few years later, that perhaps did 'faire du tort à Longus.' Vandérem also shows us the harmony between classicism and modernity in Colette's text—in spite of the "argot" and "autos," Vandérem is still able to understand Colette's heroines in terms of their connections to classical models. Here, Vandérem, focuses in particular on Colette's depiction of women—his assertion of the "recul païen" might well evoke the natural femininity of Colette's heroines also mentioned by Truc.

Eugène Marsan, in his review of *La Naissance du jour*, observes that "notre temps se plaît à joindre symbolisme et classicisme."<sup>40</sup> Marsan's assertion makes it clear that the *classique moderne*, as it has been described here, was not only a phenomenon of Colette reception. Instead, it was a wider phenomenon, something that was common in the "temps" of the interwar period. Though reviewers describing Colette as a *classique moderne* were far from coherent in their views, further investigation into the uses of this term could reveal the texture of the interwar literary history more broadly.

### **Initial Research on the *classique moderne***

Of course, arguably, the relationship between tradition and innovation has been an issue for writers since the dawn of modernity. In France, Baudelaire struggled with the relationship between tradition and literary innovation. A richer treatment of this issue

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<sup>39</sup>Vandérem, *Miroir des lettres*.

<sup>40</sup>Marsan, "Du Sentiment à la personne."

would explore the shifting relationship between tradition and modernity both before and after the First World War.

Some initial investigations into these questions have proved fruitful. First, the word “classique” was used far more in reviews after the war than it was before. A Google Ngram (a graph of word-use frequency over a large number of texts) indicates that, in French, use of “classique” and “Classique” rose dramatically in the years 1918-1926. Further, pre-war reviews that discuss authors in terms of a connection to literary tradition more often use terms other than “classique,” such as “ancien” or “antique” to describe the classicism of the texts.

In the case of André Gide, though reviews of his texts before the war do evoke the connection of these works to classical models, none of these reviews use the word “classique,” preferring other terms. For example, Emile Faguet, in a 1902 review of André Gide’s *Philoctète*, writes, “enveloppant le conte antique de son âme moderne et lui donnant le tour d’esprit et la couleur philosophique qu’il aurait sans doute s’il était conçu aujourd’hui, ou demain, par l’un de nous.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Rachilde observes that “Prométhée, en costume moderne, a une conscience, son aigle, son ambition, je ne sais pas bien, car André Gide est plein de dessous mystérieux.”<sup>42</sup> Though the “antique” alongside the “moderne” looks a lot like the “classique moderne,” the difference in language is important.

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<sup>41</sup>Emile Faguet, “La Semaine dramatique,” *Le Journal des débats* (21 July 1902). Faguet further explains: “de même, M. André Gide, tout à l’heure dans son Prométhée mal enchaîné, aujourd’hui dans son *Philoctète* reprend les héros antiques en leur donnent une tenue moderne, et certainement il les altère.”

<sup>42</sup>Rachilde, *Mercur de France* 116 (August 1899). Eugène Gilbert, writing about the same text in the same year writes that: “le monde moderne et le monde ancien, les hommes de tous les temps y sont tournés en parfaite dérision.” Eugène Gilbert, *La Revue générale* LXX.11 (November 1899).

During the war, reviews of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Le Poète assassiné* reveal similar formulations. In 1916, an anonymous reviewer for *L'Oeuvre* writes that the text is "respectueux des traditions et néanmoins accueillant au modernisme"<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in 1917, George Valdemar for *La Caravane* writes that "en tant que styliste, Guillaume Apollinaire perçoit de la langue française les fibres les plus secrètes manie en virtuose les arcanes les plus sensibles, connaît les origines anciennes [...] Et cependant qu'ultra moderne, tant par sa conception que par sa forme, 'Le Poète Assassiné' (qui compose la partie essentielle du livre, dont il nous est dévolu de parler) est de nos mœurs littéraires théâtrales et artistiques une pénétrante satire et découle de Rabelais, et de Jarry à la fois."<sup>44</sup> Here, the modern of Apollinaire is described using "moderne," "ultra-moderne," and even "modernisme," but his connection to literary tradition is described in terms of "tradition," "arcane," or "ancien" but never "classique" or "classicisme."

Then, after the war, reviewers do use the word "classique" to describe Gide: For example, in Daniel Mornet's discussion of André Gide in his *Histoire de la littérature française* he describes Gide's work as at once classic and incompatible with a classical sensibility.

L'œuvre d'A. Gide est fort complexe. Elle est, dans sa forme, très classique. [...] Les héros de la *Porte étroite* auraient pu être les héros d'un roman classique. [...] Le dénouement est la résignation de Juliette. Elle épouse un homme honnête et sage, part au loin, élève ses enfants, se dit heureuse. Ou plutôt ce serait le dénouement d'un roman classique. Mais, dans la paix du bonheur conquis, l'être profond surgit et tourmente. [...] Au contraire de l'œuvre classique, le roman n'aura pas de dénouement.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>"L'Oeuvre littéraire," *L'Oeuvre* (19 November 1916). The reviewer adds "il n'a d'autre ambition, nous dit-il, que de conformer son esthétique au vers d'André Chénier : 'Sur des pensées nouveaux faites des vers antiques.' L'écrit de Guillaume Apollinaire reflète des influences de Voltaire, de Henri Heine, de Charles Nodier, de Villiers de l'Isle Adam, du symbolisme et même du Wells."

<sup>44</sup>George Valdemar, *La Caravane* (March 1917).

<sup>45</sup> Mornet, *Histoire de la littérature et la pensée française*.

Now, after the war, the word “classique” appears in discussions of Gide’s oeuvre. For Mornet, Gide is a *classique moderne*, combining the form and characters of the “roman classique” but lacking a classical dénouement. An investigation of the interwar “classique moderne” would certainly include Gide alongside Colette.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusions

Reinserting Colette into the context of the French 1920’s reveals aspects of Colette’s reception, and also illuminates the period more broadly. These kinds of insights would not be visible from a close reading of Colette’s literary texts, which do not reveal a particularly classical sensibility. *Chéri* does not include any classical references at all. And though *Le Blé en herbe* does, they are so minor as to be insignificant: when the text was serialized in *Le Matin*, one of the chapters was entitled “Daphnis” and at one point, Phil is described as “moins ignorant que Daphnis.”<sup>47</sup> Both of these references evoke the Greek romance, attributed to Longus, *Daphnis et Chloe*.<sup>48</sup> In the case of Colette, her literary texts alone are not enough to provide insight into her place in the literary field more broadly. However, once she is reinserted into the literary field, we can see not only Colette’s place, but also the suggestions of the ways that this field was shaped and structured in general.

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<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, Gonzague Truc rejects the classicism of both Gide and Giraudoux, (and Marcel Proust) writing: “Nous refuserons par exemple cette qualité à M Andre Gide, bien qu’il y pretende. Nous goutons, moins que d’autres, sa forme agréable bien que souvent terne et parfois singulière, nous le croirions capable de délicatesse et de grandeur s’il savait, pour le profit de l’esprit, dans les valeurs humaines, recevoir et rejeter. Mais précisément il ne choisit point ! [...] Giraudoux n’est pas classique non plus” (20). Truc, *Classicisme d’hier et classiques d’aujourd’hui*.

<sup>47</sup> Colette, *Oeuvres*. (II, 1201).

<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, Maurice Ravel, with whom Colette collaborated on *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, created an opera-ballet based on Longus’s text in 1912. Colette was certainly familiar with the ballet—in addition to her relationship with Ravel, she also reviewed it for *Le Matin*.



This material suggests further investigations into the literary field of 1920-1930, from a literary-historical angle as well as a Bourdieusian one. When, and why, did the idea of the “classique” become so formative for French critics? What are the particular valences of this term? This seems to be a debate over classical and Romantic literature—what about medieval literature?<sup>49</sup> What language did critics use to describe literary innovation, and what is the relation of literary modernity to the *classique*? What writers were considered to be *classiques*? *Classique modernes*? And by what publications? What is the relationship between literary history and French identity in these narratives? How did the war influence the need to solidify the French identity? To what extent are all of these terms merely recapitulations of ideas that existed before the war, and to what extent are they new?

Even in the case of Colette, my analysis remains partial. Her recuperation by Maurrassians like André Thérive and Gonzague Truc is of particular interest—we might have expected these writers, who celebrated the “classique” for its association with masculinity and rationality, to reject Colette, as they did Gide and Proust, for her irrational femininity. Instead, for Truc, Colette is the best example of a “classique d’aujourd’hui.” Why are these writers so eager to call Colette a *classique*? What does her recuperation bring to their side of the debate? Are they just seeking any classical woman writer, or is there something particular about Colette that makes her appealing to the *classiques*? Did Colette do anything to encourage this interest?

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<sup>49</sup> Helen Solterer evokes the interwar longing of the extreme right for a return to a medieval past: “Charles Maurras and the Action Française, disenchanted with the French Republic, continued calling for a return to monarchy, heralding the Middle Ages, despite the papal condemnation of their movement.” Helen Solterer and Gustave Cohen, *Medieval Roles for Modern Times : Theater and the Battle for the French Republic* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010). (3). And what did the  *NRF*  think of the medieval?

## **Conclusion: The First Modern Woman Writer**

Colette's status as a woman writer is well established. The ways in which Colette was a modern woman, perhaps especially in terms of sexual liberation, have also been extensively documented. However, as the introduction to this work suggested, Colette's status as a modern writer is less assured. This dissertation, considering Colette as a modern writer, has the more fundamental goal of establishing her as perhaps the first modern woman writer: in her professionalism, her celebrity, and also the modernity of her literary production.

As a New Woman (as much as she resisted the label), Colette found financial as well as sexual freedom. She did not rely on her husbands to support her, but earned her living in a variety of ingenious ways, from selling books and performances, to marketing toothpicks and wine, to developing a cosmetics line, to working as a literary editor. Before Colette, prominent woman writers like George Sand and Madame de Staël did not earn their livings through writing—relying on inheritance or husbands as their primary source of income. In this way, then, Colette is the first professional woman novelist.

Though Colette was not the first author to be attached to a marketing campaign with associated consumer goods, (this honor might go to Victor Hugo, or to Richardson's Pamela) what woman writer before Colette sold such an extensive range of products? Colette's self-promotion should also be seen as deeply modern. Although Sharon Marcus and Rachel Brownstein have shown that actresses before Colette manipulated their celebrity images, Colette was perhaps the first French woman author to so clearly

understand the value of fame, even infamy. Colette also speaks to the celebrity status of the modern woman writer. Look on the back of a novel by Nora Roberts: rather than a blurb of the book, the entire back cover of the text will be dominated by a photograph of Roberts. It is her physical image, as much as her name or her literary talents, that sells the book. For Colette, too, her physical image was of paramount importance: though she wrote before author-photographs appeared on book covers, photos of her appeared in ads for her books, in posters publicizing her stage performances, on souvenir postcards. More so than any male writer, or any female writer before her, Colette's writerly persona was dominated by her physical image. Colette's "star products" were also thoroughly modern: Danielle Steele and Jackie Collins have both gone into the beauty business, lending their names, images, and personas to cosmetics, perfume, jewelry. Colette's understanding of personal branding is perhaps even postmodern: like a 21<sup>st</sup> century reality television star, she staged publicity stunts (the *Rêve d'Égypte* scandal), chastised publications that dared to portray her in a light that was "off-message," (her letter to *Femina*) scrawled her signature over a variety of bizarre products (toothpicks).

Colette's modernity can also be found in her literary production and reception, using fictionalized autobiography in *Mes Apprentissages* to shore up her public image, for example. Her analysis of fame and persona in *La Vagabonde* reveal a deeply modern understanding of the woman on stage, and understanding both of the potential to be objectified in the performance and of the power of the performance. Her analysis of money and power in *Chéri* reveals a practical and businesslike approach to income rare among her contemporaries. And, in her interwar reception as a *classique moderne*,

Colette became a powerful figure through which her contemporaries debated aesthetic questions.

The introduction to this work described the forgetting of Colette, her exclusion from recent literary histories of France. This loss is a major one, not just for Colette scholars or scholars of French literature, but for writing and reading audiences more broadly. The historically resituated Colette that I describe in this dissertation is relevant to the study of the position of women writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most noticeably in terms of the marginalization of women writers into the genre of “chick lit.”

Novelist Jennifer Weiner explains that having one’s work labeled as chick lit is “a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the chick lit label is sexist, dismissive, and comes with the built-in implication that what you’ve written is a piece of beach-trash fluff with as much heft and heart as a mouthful of pink cotton candy that doesn’t deal with anything other than boys and shoes.”<sup>1</sup> Young adult novelist Maureen Johnson adds that “Perhaps we still need to consider the fact that female stories are consistently undervalued, labeled as ‘commercial,’ ‘light,’ ‘fluffy,’ and ‘breezy,’ even if they are about the very same topics that a man might write about. If we sell more, it is simply because we produce candy—and who doesn’t like candy?”<sup>2</sup> Labeling a work as feminine and then assuming that it is about “female” topics—doesn’t this sound exactly like what happens to Colette? It is precisely the rendering female of Colette’s work that makes it legible, as “littérature féminine,” to her critics. And, we have to note that Colette is really the first prominent

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Weiner, FAQs, 2011, Available: <http://www.jenniferweiner.com/faqs.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Maureen Johnson, Sell the Girls, 22 September 2010, Available: <http://www.maureenjohnsonbooks.com/2010/09/22/sell-the-girls/>.

modern French woman writer to experience this—though George Sand was a well-regarded writer, and a woman, as we saw in the previous chapters, her work was frequently coded masculine. Colette’s work, on the other hand, is understood as truly, and in every way, female: *Claudine* is perhaps the first example of “chick lit.”

Authors of “chick lit” have recently expressed concern over the lack of critical attention given to fiction written by and for women. As Jennifer Weiner explains:

The *New York Times* continues to review bestselling mysteries and thrillers written by and for men and continues to ignore the entire chick-lit genre, save for the occasional sentence in the rare seasonal roundup. The Times still leads the way when it comes to ignoring or deriding books written by, and for, women, and its practice has been adopted by many non-Times book critics, who enjoy lecturing lady writers with the nerve to complain about the lack of coverage they receive that they should be content with popular and financial successes and should not look at, for example, a John Grisham or a Steven King and wonder when they get to the top of the bestseller lists and get reviewed, too.<sup>3</sup>

This was not true for Colette—her books were taken seriously by male and female readers, reviewed by the most important publications of her time. However, we must wonder if this devaluing of literature for and by women has been partially responsible for the forgetting of Colette today. Has Colette become a writer of “chick lit”? Are her books read by only women and not taken seriously by male literary scholars like Antoine Compagnon, not included in grander narratives of French literature?

Given these problems, how should we approach women’s writing today? What should feminist literary criticism look like now? This dissertation has been, at times, quite critical of much of Colette scholarship, and especially so for certain kinds of explicitly feminist work. My goal was not to dwell on the problems in the work of other

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Weiner, *Good in bed : a novel*, Kindle Edition ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 2001).

feminist critics. It should be clear enough that this dissertation relies in a number of ways on their scholarship. Instead, I want to ask the question, what can feminist literary criticism look like today when both feminism and literature are categories very much in question? There are a number of ways of answering this question. One would be to recuperate new objects for feminist criticism, to broaden or deepen a feminist literary canon. But this was not my project. Colette has been a proper object of feminist literary criticism since its instantiation. Another way of doing feminist inquiry would be to approach the terms and concepts of feminism—exploring the move from thinking about sex to gender, or lesbian to queer. This is not my project either.

Rather, I return to Colette and read her in a new context, one that is historicized and social. This reveals a number of surprising things: her novels were not as scandalous as we might have thought, indeed, critics celebrated their morality far more often than they attacked their immorality. Our image of Colette, as a marginalized women writer who only read Balzac, was in fact a fiction that Colette herself created and sustained. This image obscured a very well-connected professional writer who maintained close relationships with important writers, journalists, and editors of her time. This new context also helps us to see Colette's relentless pursuit of income, through writing, journalism, and artistic collaboration as well as selling her image for advertising. These qualities are not visible when Colette is exclusively interpreted as a woman writer, alongside George Sand or Marguerite Duras. We need the historical context of Colette's life and writing to see all of these new aspects of Colette.

Ultimately, this contextual approach could be useful beyond the study of Colette. Certainly other women writers who have also been major objects of feminist inquiry could also benefit from such a historically and socially contextualized approach. And some have—Simone de Beauvoir, for instance. But it could be that writers who have been seen as especially feminine, especially *woman*, have been left behind in these recuperative efforts, and could most benefit from the approach exemplified in this dissertation. Even contemporary chick lit authors might benefit from this kind of analysis. As the first modern woman writer, Colette is a crucial figure for understanding the history of French literature, but also the development of the category of women's writing more generally. If she is lost from literary history, then we lose a powerful figure for understanding, for critiquing the state of women's writing today.

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## **Biography**

Kathleen Antonioli was born on June 11, 1982, in Missoula Montana. She attended Lewis and Clark College between 2000 and 2004, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in French and in English, with honors in French, magna cum laude, Phi beta kappa. She attended Duke University between 2005 and 2011, receiving a Master of Arts degree in Romance Studies in 2008. She has published one article: “Colette responds to Louise Lalanne: Guillaume Apollinaire’s ‘bienveillante rosserie,’” which is forthcoming in the Winter 2011 issue of *French Studies Bulletin*. She has received a number of awards from the Duke University Graduate School, including the Summer Research Award, the James B. Duke Award (2005-2010), the Alene Webb Award (2008), and the International Travel Award (2007). She has also received fellowships and awards from the Department of History, the Center for Canadian Studies and the Program in Women’s Studies: the Anne Firor Scott Award (2011), the Ernestine Friedl Award (2010), and fellowships for study in Quebec (2006, 2007).