

A DIFFERENT STORY: SEX AND GENDER IN COLETTE'S COMING-OF-AGE NOVELS

UNA HISTORIA DIFERENTE: SEXO Y GÉNERO EN LAS NOVELAS DE FORMACIÓN DE COLETTE

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Abstract: Colette's work charts the human life-course in the feminine, with a recurring focus on adolescence or the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Whereas the classic patriarchal version of a girl's accession to womanhood sees this in terms of her initiation into heterosexual love and desire by a more experienced male partner, Colette proposes a very different model of female coming-of-age. In her work, girls achieve their own «sentimental education» by recognising and asserting their own desires, which both encompass and transcend erotic desire. Analysis of a selection of her fiction demonstrates how her coming-of-age stories question the binary model of gender and sexuality that remained hegemonic in and beyond Colette's own lifetime, and show how her characterisation of girls and boys on the cusp of adulthood refutes culturally embedded models of gendered difference, and invites her readers to question the dominant narrative of heterosexual coming-of-age.

Keywords: Colette. Coming-of-age. Gender. Sex. Sentimental education.

Resumen: La obra de Colette sigue el curso de la vida de las mujeres, haciendo hincapié en la adolescencia o el periodo de transición de la niñez a la edad adulta. Mientras que la versión patriarcal clásica de la entrada de una niña en la adultez se fundamenta en una iniciación en el amor y en el deseo heterosexuales a través de un hombre más experimentado que ella, Colette propone un modelo muy diferente de la mayoría de edad femenina. En su obra, las chicas llevan a cabo su propia «educación sentimental» reconociendo y afirmando sus deseos, que coinciden y al tiempo trascienden el deseo erótico. El análisis de una selección de sus obras de ficción deja ver cómo sus relatos de formación cuestionan el modelo binario de sexo y género, hegemónico dentro y fuera de la vida de Colette, y demuestra cómo su caracterización de las chicas y de los chicos al límite de la edad adulta refuta los modelos culturalmente arraigados de diferenciación genérica e invita a sus lectorxs a cuestionar la narrativa dominante de la mayoría de edad heterosexual.

Palabras clave: Colette. Novelas de formación. Género. Sexo. Educación sentimental.

Colette's extensive work ranges across the human life course, particularly as lived by women. She wrote of her own happy rural childhood in auto-fictional texts such as *La Maison de Claudine* (*Claudine's House*, 1922) and *Sido* (1930), and of her daughter's early years in short texts published in the press and subsequently in various collections. Many of her fictional heroines, from the later *Claudine* novels (early 1900s) to Alice in *Duo* (1934) and *Le Toutounier* (1939), are young women in their twenties or thirties, navigating love, sex and friendship, financial survival and the question of how best to live their lives. She charted the difficult experience of ageing in a culture that values women primarily for their youthful beauty (for example in *Chéri* [1920] and *Le Képi* [1943]), and was one of the rare women authors to write of the experience of menopause, as a source of elated freedom as well as regret for the passing of youth—notably in *La Naissance du jour* (*Break of Day*, 1928)¹. Her writing of old age (*L'Étoile Vesper* [1946, *The Evening Star*], *Le Fanal bleu* [1949, *The Blue Lantern*]) both confronts the pain of physical decline and mortality, and celebrates the richness of memory and of simply being alive. As she charts the stages of a female life, Colette consistently attributes to women a robust appreciation of life's pleasures and a pragmatic will to survive that contradict and combat their social and political disadvantage as a sex.

These features are strongly present in the recurring element of her work on which I want to focus here, namely Colette's representation of the transition from girlhood to womanhood. For Colette, the ending of childhood, for a girl, means the loss of unselfconscious freedom, the forfeiture of a sense of autonomy and limitless potential that is gradually repressed as adulthood approaches by the imposition of normative codes of femininity. «Vous n'imaginez pas quelle reine de la terre j'étais à douze ans», she writes in *Les Vrilles de la Vigne* (1908):

Solide, la voix rude, deux tresses trop serrées qui sifflaient autour de moi, comme des mèches de fouet ; les mains roussies, griffées, marquées de cicatrices, un front carré de garçon que je cache à présent jusqu'aux sourcils... Ah ! que vous m'auriez aimée, quand j'avais douze ans, et comme je me regrette (Colette, 1984: 131-2)².

Becoming a woman for Colette involves loss, a fall from the grace and freedom of young girlhood, whereas the dominant patriarchal narrative presented female adolescence as a time of hopeful anticipation of fulfilment in love and marriage. In her study of female adolescence in the French novel of 1870 to 1930, Beth Gale (2010) points out that the years of transition from girl-child to woman only came to be culturally defined around the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, as the average age for marriage increased and middle-class girls at least experienced several years between puberty and (in most cases) their accession to the status of wife. Since, unlike their brothers, girls were not expected to pursue education or training for a career, these years were inevitably lived as a sort of parenthesis, a period of waiting for the life-changing moment of marriage. Gale quotes Gabrielle Houbre's description of this construction of female adolescence as a time that «begins with the dark red of the first menstrual period and ends with that of nuptial deflowering» (Houbre, 1997:

1 See Holmes 1999 for discussion of Colette's representation of the menopause.

2 «You can't imagine what a queen of the world I was at twelve. I had a solid, healthy body and spoke abruptly; two tightly woven plaits swished around me like whipcords; my hands were sunburnt, scratched and scarred, and the forehead that I now keep hidden to the eyebrows was broad like a boy's ... Oh! How you would have loved me when I was twelve, and how I miss my twelve-year-old self» (all translations from French are my own).

25; Gale, 2010: 21). In patriarchal cultures, a girl's coming-of-age is conventionally presented in terms of her initiation into heterosexual love and desire, her accession to adulthood dependent on the man who will choose her and perform the rite of ending her virginity. Even those feminist novelists of the Belle Époque such as Marcelle Tinayre and Camille Pert who implicitly contested this model, by portraying young heroines whose sense of self-fulfilment depended on far more than finding a husband, tended to conclude their stories either in happy union with the chosen man, or in bleak dénouements of lonely singlehood, the marriage/defloration plot to women's lives remaining central. Colette's narratives of girls growing up are very different.

Critics have paid attention to Colette's finely drawn portrayal of adolescence, particularly in those texts that most evidently feature adolescent protagonists (notably *Claudine à l'école* [1900], *Le Blé en herbe* [1923]) —see for example Harris, 1973; Duffy, 1989; Callender, 1992³). My objective here though is to consider across a wider range of texts Colette's contestatory vision of the process of becoming a gendered adult, and particularly a woman, in (and beyond) the society of her times. My aim in this article is to explore how Colette represents the «sentimental education» that turns a girl into a woman, and how her depiction of this process challenges normative views of coming-of-age in terms of both gender and sexuality.

Mitsou

In 1919, Colette published a short novel entitled *Mitsou ou Comment l'esprit vient aux filles* — *Mitsou* (the heroine's name) or *How girls grow wise*. The sub-title, «How girls grow wise», reproduces the exact title of a well-known fable by the seventeenth-century French poet and fabulist Jean de la Fontaine, one of his «contes libertins» or libertine tales, so that Colette invites the reader to see her story in the light of this famous, much earlier and male-authored text. In La Fontaine's story in verse (1674), a young girl called Lise (the tale tells us that she is fourteen or fifteen) is clearly failing to acquire the «wisdom» required of an adult woman. She is «un oison», «a goose», described as brainless, no more capable of thought than her doll. Her mother advises her «Va t-en chercher de l'esprit, malheureuse» —«go and get yourself some brains, you silly child». The neighbours advise Lise to seek the help of a local priest, le Père Bonaventure, which she does; his «help» takes the form of relieving her of her virginity, and introducing her to sexual pleasure, which in the story's terms makes her «wise». The narrative tone is knowing, insinuating, saucy —it assumes the complicity of a male audience who will share the narrator's libertine assumptions. Père Bonaventure dispenses the gift of sexual pleasure to the naïve young girl («la charité du beau père était grande», «the good priest's charity was great») and she thus gains full possession of her wits, the good father promising to renew the gift whenever needed. Nowadays we would read this as a story of priestly paedophilia, but its tone suggests that it merely refers to a normative view of female sexual initiation as salutary, and as something for which a girl depends on a more experienced man. Lise becomes «wise», or

3 Harris highlights in particular Colette's focus on the heightened sensuality of girls at this stage of their lives: «L'exaltation sensorielle de l'adolescence est admirablement décrite dans *Claudine à l'école*» (Harris 1973: 84). Duffy analyses Colette's «extremely nuanced analysis of adolescence» (1989: 15) and Callender, referring to *Le Blé en herbe*, shows how «the oscillation between childish and adult identities patterns the novel (1992: 44).

accedes to functional adult womanhood, which here means showing herself to be enthusiastically heterosexual and gratefully compliant to a male authority figure.

So why would Colette, a writer who —although she never self-identified as feminist— both lived and wrote in thoroughly feminist ways, choose to reference this licentious, male-oriented little tale? A *conte* (a tale) or fable suggests a story that conveys a wider meaning, a moral message. The allusion to *this* tale, the tale of how Lise gained an education, announces a coming-of-age story, an *éducation sentimentale* in which physical love will play an important role. And Mitsou, Colette's heroine, is also a young woman who lacks education and who in the course of the story, through sexual love, reaches a higher level of awareness and both social and emotional intelligence. Mitsou, we might say, becomes wise. But Colette's reference to La Fontaine is ironic: her story is a riposte —a challenging reply— rather than a tribute to an esteemed forefather.

First, unlike La Fontaine's protagonist, Mitsou is not a naïve young virgin. She is young, but she is the kept mistress of an affluent industrialist who sponsors her career as a music-hall dancer: her stage name (which is the only name we have for her) is composed of the initial letters of the two companies he runs (Minoteries Italo-Tarbaïses + Scieries Orléanaises Unifiées = MITSOU). Mitsou is the product of her working-class origins, for Colette was one of the very few writers to depict clearly the limited types of employment available to women of her generation, and the harsh conditions and low pay of those who entered the superficially glamorous entertainment industry. As a performer in the music-hall, a profession she has chosen in preference to a life of domestic service or manual labour, Mitsou does not earn enough to keep herself in anything resembling comfort —thus like so many of her fellow performers, with resigned pragmatism she has become a kept woman. And her middle-aged protector L'Homme Bien («the Respectable Man», as he is designated in the novel) is no Père Bonaventure in that he dispenses no sexual or romantic awakening, no revelation or transformation of the heroine. Mitsou's relations with him are cordial, for he is a kindly man and fond of her, but her «education» is self-education, gained through her relationship with the «Blue Lieutenant» (named for the colour of his uniform) which forms the novel's central narrative thread.

It is World War I, and the Blue Lieutenant (Robert) is on leave from the Front. He accompanies a friend to the music-hall, and the two young soldiers are invited backstage by Mitsou's friend and fellow dancer, Petite-Chose, only to find themselves hidden in the wardrobe of Mitsou's dressing room when the stage manager threatens to discover their illicit presence behind the scenes. Robert is a middle-class boy, young like Mitsou and conscripted straight from secondary school, equally in need of a «sentimental education»: as he later writes to Mitsou, he is one of a generation of men whose coming-of-age years were stolen by the war: «[la guerre] a fait de nous des hommes, et je crois qu'il nous manquera toujours d'avoir été des jeunes gens» (Colette, 1986: 683)⁴.

From their first meeting Mitsou and Robert feel a strong mutual attraction, and when Robert returns to the Front they write to each other, his well-educated eloquence contrasting only superficially with Mitsou's own ungrammatical but intelligently expressive style. At his next leave they meet again and this time they go to a restaurant for dinner together, and after Mitsou's evening performance they return to her apartment and make love. She is dazzled by the unaccustomed beauty of a young male body, described from Mitsou's point of view with Colette's habitual close, sensual attention to the

4 «The war turned us into men, and I think we will always miss the youth we never had».

bodies of both sexes: waking in the night as Robert sleeps, Mitsou «ne se souvient que d'un plaisir exceptionnel, celui d'avoir tenu contre elle un beau corps qui embaumait en s'échauffant comme un bois odorant qu'on frotte» (1986: 705)⁵.

Robert in turn is fascinated and enchanted by Mitsou, though acutely aware of the social chasm that divides them, and of the precarity of his own life as a front-line soldier. Both have to negotiate the awkwardness of their different class origins—he is shocked by the vulgarity of her taste, she finds his fastidiousness about bodily functions and etiquette strange and laughable—and of the codes of love and sex that they have learnt so differently. But Mitsou has the subtle perceptiveness needed to understand what is happening, with what Robert mentally describes as her «sens fins, et une telle aptitude à éprouver ce qu'on ne raisonne point» —«delicate senses, and ability to feel what is inaccessible to reason» (1986: 708). Her new experience of sex as an expression of love enables her to grow and develop. As she writes to Robert: «N'empêche qu'une femme qui a une obstination en amour, ça pousse vite. Ça fleurit, ça sait prendre une tournure, une couleur...» (716)⁶. In *Mitsou*, as another critic puts it, Colette creates «un portrait puissant d'une jeune femme en train d'acquérir son indépendance» (Rogers, 2023 : 87)⁷.

What will happen to the relationship—even if Robert survives the war—remains open, but Mitsou ends her story equipped with a critical rather than fatalistic view of her dependence on «L'Homme Bien», a new perspicacity and a new confidence in her own emotions. In the letter that closes the story, Mitsou declares her love for Robert —«Mon amour, mettez-vous une chose dans la tête: c'est que je vous aime» («My love, get one thing into your head: it's that I love you», 1986: 715)—but also affirms her sense of resilience that can survive his possible rejection: «Si tu me réponds 'adieu Mitsou', je ne mourrai pas» («If you reply 'farewell Mitsou', I won't die»). As Bernard Bray puts it, Mitsou's possibly brief though intense love story is not the defining event of her life but rather «a point de départ, elle l'a compris, de son progrès personnel, qui permettra peut-être à ce même bonheur de surgir de nouveau» (1986: 1517)⁸. In Colette's version of the La Fontaine fable, girls «become wise» not by passively receiving the sexual wisdom of older men, but by experiencing their own desires, both sexual and emotional, and engaging in a reciprocal relationship with all its complexities. Robert too, through his encounter with Mitsou, gains a more subtle and tender understanding of others and of relationships, as his last letter to Mitsou shows. In Colette's world young men too need to «become wise».

Claudine

When Colette wrote *Mitsou*, she was in her forties and had been writing for almost twenty years. But her coming-of-age stories had never followed what in the early 1900s was the hegemonic model of how girls become women—that is, the model of young girls as innocent and naïve until the

5 «Remembers only the exceptional pleasure of having held against her a beautiful body fragrant in its warmth like a wood that when rubbed releases a warm, sweet smell».

6 «A woman who falls wilfully in love grows fast. She blossoms, takes a different direction, a new colour...».

7 «A powerful portrait of a young woman in the process of acquiring her Independence».

8 «A point of departure, as she has understood, for her personal progression, which might in time allow this experience of happiness to be renewed».

revelation of heterosexual love grants them access to adult identity and the «sagesse» (meaning both wisdom and virtue) of the womanly role.

Her first novel was *Claudine à l'école* (*Claudine at School*), famously commissioned and overseen by her first husband Willy, that entrepreneur of Belle Époque French literature⁹, and published in 1900 under his name. Willy had recognised in his young wife's recollections of her rural schooldays a market opportunity, and —at least according to Colette— more or less sequestered her in a room until she produced the first Claudine story, which was then followed by a series of sequels. They were a huge success, and with their highly popular stage adaptations and a wide range of associated *Claudine* merchandise (Claudine collars, cigarette holders, and sweets, for example) made Willy a lot of money. The Claudine figure —initially in *Claudine à l'école* a mischievous, sexually curious young schoolgirl, then in *Claudine à Paris* an innocent provincial in the big city— undoubtedly appealed to Willy's habitual readership of libertine men, not unlike La Fontaine's implied readers. But they were read too by women —even if in many cases secretly, because they would have been considered highly unsuitable for unmarried girls or respectable young wives. And the pleasure female readers took in reading the *Claudine* was surely somewhat different, for despite Willy's amendments and additions to his wife's text, the novels offered a version of female adolescence that was considerably more empowering and subversive than Willy or his male readers recognised.

Claudine, it should be said, was not a completely original creation. There were precursors in the work of other women writers. The figure of the spirited, self-assertive young girl determined to impose her own will, within the limited destinies open to a young woman at that time, recurred for example in the work of Colette's contemporary Marcelle Tinayre (1870-1948)¹⁰, and before that in the novels of Gyp (1849-1932)¹¹. The model of adolescent girlhood as a time of resistance to the domestic, curtailed destinies of adult women was already present in female-authored literature, but Colette takes this counter-model of girls' identity much further than her predecessors.

Aged fifteen as the first novel opens, Claudine is far from the naïve, modest young girl dependent on the authority of adults that her society prescribed. She is motherless, her mother having died when she was a baby, and her father is a comically absent-minded scientist, a benevolent presence but a man who scarcely notices his young daughter's activities or behaviour. Claudine is in firm control of her own day-to-day life and manifests a healthy self-confidence. Importantly, she is also in control of the narrative: the Claudine books are narrated in the first person, and Claudine is a lucid, reliable narrator, whose judgment and worldview are very rarely undermined by narrative events or by the alternative views of secondary characters. Her narrative tone is sharp, confident and irreverent from the first novel's opening lines: «Je m'appelle Claudine, j'habite Montigny; j'y suis née en 1884; probablement je n'y mourrai pas» (Colette, 1984: 8)¹².

9 Willy was the pen-name of Henri Gauthier-Villars, Colette's first husband and at the turn of the century a well-known author of light, mildly pornographic fiction, most of which was written by a team of poorly paid young writers then published under his name.

10 See for example Tinayre's novels *Avant l'amour* (1897) and *Hellé* (1899).

11 Gyp was the pen-name of Sibylle Riquetti de Mirabeau, a prolific and well-known novelist and playwright. See for example her novel *Le Mariage de Chiffon*, 1894.

12 «My name is Claudine; I live in Montigny; I was born there in 1884; I probably won't die there».

The normative ideal of female adolescence is evoked in *Claudine à l'école* by the secondary characters of some of Claudine's schoolmates, notably the Jaubert twins who annoy her intensely with their «sagesse, et leurs jolies écritures propres, et leur ressemblance niaise, des figures molles et mates, des yeux de mouton pleins de douceur pleurarde» (1984: 22)¹³.

Claudine however is neither naïve, nor gentle. Her emotions are violent, from her ardent love for her «chers bois» (the forests that surround her home village) to her anger at the stupidity of some of her fellow pupils —which sometimes erupts into physical violence— and at the lecherous, sexually predatory schools inspector, Dutertre, with his dark eyes and wolf's teeth (1984: 22). And Claudine is far from the pure young virgin awaiting a male lover to activate her desires: she is full of sensual desire for the pretty young assistant teacher, Aimée, even as she assesses with interest the physical assets of the boys in the school next door and their teachers. Bisexuality is simply normal in *Claudine à l'école*, Claudine herself weighing up the relative charms of her female and male teachers, the headmistress engaged in a passionate affair with Aimée (who is also the object of Claudine's desire) and at the same time revealed in a comic finale to be the mistress of the lecherous Dutertre. Though it reads as quite a light-hearted story, the novel contests the orthodox view that only heterosex can truly awaken a girl into adulthood. And the *Claudine* novels also question the binary model of gender, both implicitly —in the sense that Claudine possesses all the «masculine» attributes of independence, authority, intellect (she is a brilliant student), and sexual agency— and explicitly, in the girls' mocking attitude to their gender-divided syllabus and the textbooks designed to teach them «feminine» skills and decorum. Looking back on her schooldays, Claudine remembers how she and her classmate Anaïs would ridicule and parody the textbook by one Bérillon, written to teach girls the skills of domestic economy and discourage them from seeking alternative paths in life. «Ô Bérillon, que tu as amusé ces sales petites filles, dont j'étais!» («Oh Bérillon, how you made us laugh, all we dirty-minded little girls!», 265).

In the second Claudine novel, *Claudine à Paris*, Colette's heroine moves to the capital, rapidly adjusts to her new urban surroundings¹⁴, falls in love and marries an older man, Renaud, thus mirroring the classic narrative arc of female coming-of-age through sexual initiation and romance. However Colette follows the dominant model of how a girl becomes a woman only to undermine this in several ways¹⁵. If Claudine experiences a «sentimental education», it is not in the sense that desire and erotic love are suddenly revealed to her, for she was already the subject of a desiring gaze on bodies of both sexes before meeting Renaud, and her desire for him drives the relationship as much as his desire for her. Claudine as narrator pays close, sensual attention to Renaud's body, intensely conscious of the mouth she hopes will soon kiss hers: «La sienne est étroite et vive, avec une lèvre d'en bas ronde et

13 «Good behaviour, pretty, neat handwriting, naive way of looking just like each other, flat, soft faces and soppy sheep's eyes».

14 See Vodoz, 2023 for Claudine's capacity to exert her own agency and adapt to change. For Colette's heroine, adolescence is anything but a mere parenthesis between childhood and marriage.

15 Claudine herself comments on her own desire for romantic and sexual love, and on the humiliation of needing another person to «complete» her. But, she insists, «Je vous jure, je vous jure, ce n'est pas, ce ne peut pas être là l'énervement banal d'une qui a besoin d'un mari. J'ai besoin de bien plus qu'un mari, moi...» (1984: 334) —«I swear, I swear that it's not — it can't be — the banal frustration of a girl in need of a husband. My need is for much more than a husband ...».

ferme» («His mouth is narrow and vivid, the lower lip rounded and firm», 1984: 363). Determined to consummate their relationship, she blithely offers to become his mistress rather than his wife, though Renaud prefers to offer marriage. The novel almost ends, and in some editions does end, as the couple obtain the consent of Claudine's father to their wedding and retreat to her bedroom to embrace —«Et nous retournons dans ma chambre, moi toute serrée dans ses bras, lui qui m'emporte comme s'il me volait, tous deux ailés et bêtes comme des amoureux de romance» (376)¹⁶.

Already the reference to the «silly lovers» of romance casts a light irony over the scene, but in the original and now standard version¹⁷, Colette then comically subverts this classically romantic dénouement by having Mélie, Claudine's old wet-nurse who has stayed with her since childhood, erupt into the room carrying that singularly unromantic object, the cat's litter-tray. «You should have seen Renaud's face!», exclaims Claudine. And Mélie speaks, to congratulate Claudine for choosing Renaud rather than his equally handsome but unmistakably gay son Marcel; the novel ends with Mélie's pragmatic and commonsensical advice: «T'as bien raison de prendre le grand... pardi, il sera toujours bien temps, si la marchandise te plaît point, de t'appliquer le petit» (1984: 376)¹⁸.

Claudine remains a girl of her times, however unconventional, and in Renaud she hopes to find the traditional romantic figure of the older man who will reveal the mystery and joy of love and sex: «J'ai besoin d'un papa, j'ai besoin d'un ami, d'un amant» («I need a father, I need a friend, a lover», 1984: 362), she tells herself during their courtship. But the novel's humorous ending undermines the ideal of the one true love, and the next volume *Claudine en ménage* opens with her recognition of a flaw or crack in their relationship: «Hélas, il n'a d'autorité que dans les caresses. (Je reconnais que c'est déjà quelque chose)» (386)¹⁹. «Hélas, Claudine, dois-tu rester toujours maîtresse de toi-même?» («Alas, Claudine —are you always going to have to be your own mistress?», 386), Claudine asks herself, and this is exactly what she will do. The «sagesse» (wisdom) she learns in the transition from girl to adult woman is self-taught, and passes through a return to the bisexuality of her schooldays with a passionate lesbian affair in the third volume of the series, *Claudine en ménage* (*Claudine Married*, 1902).

In a sense the whole Claudine series, composed of five novels, can be read as the story of its heroine's gradual, eventful acquisition of a particularly feminine form of «sagesse» or wisdom, in other words as a prolonged form of sentimental education. Passing through stages of passionate erotic love, for people of both sexes, devoting herself to friendship (in the fourth volume, *Claudine s'en va*, 1903), experiencing travel and the social whirl of bohemian Parisian life at the start of the twentieth century, Claudine finally returns to Montigny, the place where she once lived a free, proudly independent girlhood. In the final volume, *La Retraite sentimentale* (1907), Claudine's sentimental education leads her back to a chosen solitude in her childhood home, perhaps provisional —«Nous

16 «And we went back to my bedroom, with me carried tightly in his arms as if I were flying, both of us winged with happiness like a couple of silly lovers in a romance».

17 In the Pléiade collected works of Colette, the editors returned to the original text that Colette had removed (no doubt in response to the preferences of earlier editors) for some published versions of the novel.

18 «You're right to take the old one, my chick — after all if you don't like the goods you can always go for the young one instead».

19 «Alas, his only authority is in his lovemaking. (I acknowledge that that's no small thing)».

laissons la porte ouverte pour que la nuit puisse entrer» («We leave the door open to let the night in», 1984: 955)—but happily assumed: «Je ne crains personne —ni moi-même» («I fear no-one, not even myself», 953).

Minne

Coming-of-age then recurs as a theme and narrative structure in Colette's work, always in a way that offers an alternative vision of what it means to become a woman, or indeed to become an adult human being. An early novel entitled *L'Ingénue libertine* (*The Innocent Libertine* —a typically Colettian oxymoron) is interesting in this respect. It was published initially in two volumes as *Minne* (1904) and *Les Égarements de Minne* (*The Follies of Minne*, 1905), when Colette was still with Willy and to some extent under his influence, but was then reworked and published as a single volume in 1909, under (more or less) her own name —Colette Willy— and with the new title. Minne is fourteen and a half when her story begins, and the novel will see her learn important truths through her first encounters with sex, though these are not the truths normally prescribed as what a young girl needs to learn.

As in the *Claudine*, Minne's intensity of emotion, sensuality and will to self-determination are contrasted with the modesty and reserve prescribed for proper young ladies —but here the contrast is evoked not through secondary characters but through Minne's own outward appearance, as her mother and the inhabitants of the comfortably bourgeois world she inhabits all see her, a technique enabled by the use of a third-person narrative voice. Minne looks archetypally pure and angelic: dressed in a white lacy dress, with a big straw hat, pale blonde hair and a polite manner —she is, as her mother remarks to a woman friend of hers they meet in the street, «un bien grand bébé [...] je me demande comment une fillette pareille pourra devenir une femme!» (Colette, 1984: 685)²⁰. Beneath this pleasingly perfect exterior though, there beats a passionate heart and a distinctly impolite reaction to the adults who admire her. Of her mother's friend, as she smiles and offers her hand, Minne is thinking: «Cette dame est stupide! Et laide [...] elle doit sentir mauvais toute nue» (685)²¹. Minne's imagination seethes with romantic desire for the handsome, virile gangsters she reads about in the news and occasionally glimpses on the streets of Paris. She constructs a whole fantasy life in which she is the lover of the gangster's leader, and the night brings passion and the thrill of violence: «sous la nuit, tente velouté, on tue, on aime, on secoue les pièces d'or encore poissées de sang» (726)²². But Minne makes the mistake of confusing life with fantasy and creeps out of the house one night to find her imagined lover and the life she dreams of as a gangster's mistress. Of course what she finds instead are the cold empty streets of nocturnal Paris, prostitutes whose life is far from a thrilling romance, and a lecherous, drunk older man who tries to seduce her. She returns home lost and frightened, and since her escapade is known and her reputation lost, she is more or less forced to marry her cousin Antoine to regain respectability.

20 «She's a great big baby! [...] I wonder how such a little girl will ever manage to become a woman!».

21 «That lady's stupid! She's ugly. [...] she must smell horrid when she's naked».

22 «Under the black velvet tent of the night, one kills, one loves, one rattles the golden coins still sticky with blood».

Minne's passage from girlhood dreams to adult womanhood then is supposed to be facilitated by Antoine, a young man only a year or two older than Minne, and very much in love with her. It is to Antoine then that the role of sexual initiator falls—but in a remarkably frank treatment of female sexuality, Colette has Minne find only disappointment in Antoine's arms, and set off in search of a lover who can successfully give her pleasure. The second half of the Minne story could be described as «woman in search of an orgasm». Minne seeks the opinion of other, more experienced women: their frank and eloquent discussion of the sensation of orgasm and the conditions necessary to produce it displays Colette's habitual attribution to women of a powerful sense of sexual agency. One woman describes the climax of sexual pleasure as «le plafond qui crève, un coup de gong dans les oreilles, une sorte de... d'apothéose qui m'est due, l'avènement de mon règne sur le monde...» (1984: 778)²³.

But despite her sexual adventures with a series of lovers, pleasure still eludes Minne, and though her female advisers assure her that faking it can neatly put an end to tedious encounters («pourvu qu'on crie *Ah! Ah!*, qu'on serre les poings et qu'on fasse semblant de suffoquer, ça leur suffit parfaitement», 1984: 758)²⁴, she is still determined to achieve her goal —«Ça leur suffit peut-être aux hommes, mais pas à moi!» («that might be enough for me, but not for me!», 758). Finally, in an overly neat and not wholly convincing ending, it is the devoted Antoine who enables Minne's discovery of sexual fulfilment, promising a radiant future in which sex will play an important part: «Il n'y a plus d'impossible, il n'y a plus rien à quêter, il n'y a qu'à fleurir, arrosée de volupté...» (823)²⁵. What finally fulfils Minne's desire is not the skilled sexual performance of a virile lover, but Antoine's selfless commitment to his wife's happiness: «Je veux bien qu'elle me fasse cocu, mais je ne veux pas qu'elle pleure» («I don't care if she cuckolds me but I don't want her to cry», 820).

L'Ingénue Libertine makes the discovery of sexual pleasure central to a girl's coming-of-age, but makes this discovery the result of her own determined quest rather than a gift dispensed by a male lover. At the same time, through the contrasting characterisations of Minne and Antoine, the novel disputes normative models of gendered difference. For the character of Antoine introduces another singular feature of Colette's coming-of-age narratives: it is not only girls who must find their wits and wisdom through a «sentimental education», but also boys. Colette does not take for granted the process of becoming a man but examines it sympathetically, as we have already seen briefly in the case of Mitsou's Blue Lieutenant. She is interested, in other words, in the costs of hegemonic masculinity not only for women but also for men. Antoine, like some of the male protagonists in Colette's later and better-known novels (*Chéri*, Alain in *La Chatte*) is ill-fitted for the role in which a patriarchal culture casts him simply because he is male. Colette's male casualties of patriarchy are shown trying, with more or less success, and ultimately failing to perform the masculine role with all that it demands of authority, self-confidence, sexual expertise and social competence. Antoine at sixteen is awkward, clumsy, a «petit mâle ardent et maladroit» («a poor ardent, clumsy boy», 1984: 710), desperately in love with his pretty, socially more self-assured cousin and physically thrilled by

23 «The ceiling bursting open, a gong sounding in my ears, a kind of... of apotheosis which is my right, the advent of my reign over the whole world».

24 «As long as you cry 'Oh ! Oh ! and clench your fists and look like you're about to suffocate, that's all they need».

25 «There was no longer any impossible, there was no longer anything to search for, there was nothing to do but to blossom, to become rosy and happy...».

her presence. But Antoine's qualities fall much more on the «feminine» side of a culture that defines gender in binary terms. The reactions of each to a violent storm display the reversal of gender norms: Minne «s'élançait vers l'orage, vers la théâtrale lumière, vers le grondement souverain, de toute son âme amoureuse de la force et du mystère» (701)²⁶, whilst Antoine is terrified and hides his face in the pillow, teeth clenched. Antoine is embarrassed by his own desires, while Minne is determined to satisfy hers. He becomes a gentle man, willing to sacrifice pride, control, and his unique, monogamous right to Minne's body, if this means he can keep her with him: «Sois heureuse. Je ne veux rien pour moi» («Be happy. I ask nothing for myself», 820). It is these qualities that eventually lead to Minne's acceptance of him as her lover as well as her husband, the exchange of gendered attributes producing the improbable but nonetheless happy ending.

Le Blé en herbe

The most famous of Colette's novels to feature the coming-of-age of adolescent protagonists is *Le Blé en herbe* (*The Ripening Seed*, 1923). The novel takes place within the last few weeks of a summer holiday shared by the two main characters. Vinca is fifteen, Phil sixteen —both are on the cusp of adulthood but retain the «dignité revêche» («surly dignity», Colette, 1986: 1186) and the pleasure in simple physical pastimes of their childhood selves. They have been close friends and companions since infancy, spending their summers in Brittany, where the novel is entirely set, in a house co-owned by their two families. In the course of the story each will lose their virginity and thus learn something that pushes them further into adult identity. Phil is seduced by an older woman, a sophisticated Parisian visitor to the coast mostly named *La Dame en blanc* (the Lady in White), and through his relationship with her discovers extreme sensual pleasure mingled with a heightened sensitivity to the world about him, and a sense of weary relief at returning to his familiar childhood existence, «une mansuétude vague et universelle de naufragé touchant terre» («the vague, universal goodwill of a shipwrecked man reaching land», 1986: 1223). Vinca, angry that Phil's first experience of sex has been with someone other than herself, joins him in the garden one night and asks that he kiss her, which leads in turn to the two making love.

Colette's precise but gracefully elliptical account of their lovemaking captures the awkwardness of inexperienced bodies —«Mais la possession est un miracle laborieux» («But possession is a laborious miracle», 1986: 1267)— and Vinca's moment of pain at penetration —«Il entendit la courte plainte révoltée, perçut la ruade involontaire» («He heard her brief gasp of shock, felt her involuntary recoil», 1267)—, but also their shared pleasure in the mingled familiarity and newness of each other's bodies. Though focalised mainly from Phil's point of view —«Mon Dieu, que la bouche de Vinca est inévitable et profonde, et savante dès le premier choc...» («Heavens, how deep and inevitable Vinca's mouth is, and how quickly she knows how to use it», 1267)—, the narration makes very clear that Vinca is an equally willing and passionate partner in the event: like Mitsou, Claudine and Minne, Vinca is the active subject of her own desires, rather than the innocent virgin deflowered by a more experienced lover²⁷.

26 «Flings herself into the storm, into the theatrical light and the majestic rumbling with her whole soul, that soul in love with violence and mystery».

27 Thus even in adolescence Colette's heroines «prennent autant qu'elles donnent, et leur 'maître' n'est qu'un partenaire de plaisir à égalité» (Biolley-Godino 1972: 61).

The relationship between Phil and Vinca nonetheless takes place within an acknowledged framework of traditionally gendered roles. Phil envisages the future for which he is destined: studies, military service, and a white-collar job, while Vinca accepts that she will stay at home and help with domestic tasks until she marries. But within this there runs a persistent thread of cross-gendering, or bi-gendering. The narrator draws sympathetic but mildly ironic attention to Phil's performance —rather than innate sense— of masculinity: «Il tendit les poings, bomba sa poitrine demi-nue, défia l'horizon» («He clenched his fists, expanded his bare chest and hurled defiance at the heavens», 1986: 1193); «il rayonnait d'intolérance et d'une sorte de désespoir traditionnel» («He radiated intolerance and a sort of traditional despair», 1194)²⁸. Phil is also frequently feminised through imagery: after his seduction by the Lady in White, his plaintive features are «moins pareils à ceux d'un homme qu'à ceux d'une jeune fille meurtrie» («less like those of a man than those of a violated young girl», 1225); he suffers «crises de féminité» («attacks of femininity», 1197); his new sexual experience leaves him with an enhanced sensitivity to all sensory experience, a tendency to recoil from even minor acts of violence (such as Vinca catching a fish with a hook) and a frequent inclination to burst into tears. Conversely, Vinca climbs and swims with all the mobile freedom allowed to children and boys, manifests a «mépris, tout viril, pour la faiblesse suspecte du garçon qui pleurait» («an altogether virile contempt for the suspect weakness of the boy in tears», 1228) and wonders at Phil's wincing as she crushes a crab underfoot. The cross-gendering extends to Camille, the Lady in White: she is an authoritative figure, the dispenser of sexual initiation and pleasure, her voice, smile and general manner repeatedly described in terms of masculinity: «Elle raillait d'une manière virile» («she mocked him in a virile way», 1197); «elle... reprit son sourire aisé et presque masculine» («she smiled again with that lazy, almost masculine smile», 1217).

Above all, though, the traditional and normative scenario in which (like Lise, with whom my argument began), the end of virginity is a transitional moment that changes a girl into a wiser, more amenable woman, is here evoked and disputed. The morning after Phil and Vinca have —at Vinca's instigation— made love for the first time, Phil waits with some trepidation to see the new, no longer virginal Vinca: perhaps she is crying, he thinks, imagining how he will comfort her: «pauvre petit compagnon, auxiliaire courageux de ma cruelle besogne» («you poor little pal, bravely backing me in my cruel task», 1986: 1269). But when Vinca appears at her window, she is anything but distressed: smiling, she waters the flowers in the window box and hums a tune. Where Phil's reaction to his first sexual experience was one of extreme emotion and physical weakness, Vinca has simply absorbed making love into her everyday life. The novel ends on Phil's inner monologue as he «contempla sa propre petitesse, sa chute, sa bénignité: 'Ni héros, ni bourreau... un peu de douleur, un peu de plaisir... je ne lui aurai donné que cela... que cela...'» (1270)²⁹.

The discovery of sexual pleasure remains a key moment in Colette's account of coming-of-age, but it is an experience actively willed by her female protagonists rather than dispensed by a male lover. In pondering that he is thus «neither a hero nor an executioner», Phil wistfully evokes the androcentric ideal of virile sexuality that his culture has taught him.

28 In her representation of gender, Colette prefigures Judith Butler's theory of gender as essentially performative (Butler 1990).

29 'pondered his own insignificance, his downfall, his kindness. «Neither a hero, nor yet an executioner... a little pain, a little pleasure... that's all I shall have given her, that and nothing else... nothing.»'

Conclusion

In Colette's stories of coming-of-age, first experiences of love and sex play a vital role for young people of both sexes. But whereas the traditional patriarchal scenario exemplified by La Fontaine's fable—and explicitly referenced in *Mitsou*—allots very different roles to the two sexes, Colette queries any binary definition of gender and thus of sexual roles. Her boys and young men are emotionally, humanly fragile, and find it hard to live up to culturally embedded ideals of courageous, forceful virility; her girls are robustly adaptable, strong-willed and sure of their own desires. Her fiction both evokes and subverts the commonplaces of female coming-of-age narratives, through heroines who maintain a vibrant sense of their own agency from girlhood through to womanhood, and who refute the idea that female sexual initiation is necessarily transformative, or depends on the intervention of a more knowledgeable man. Her fiction also challenges the assumption that a «sentimental education» is a mainly female affair, drawing attention to the complexity of the process for boys and to the hazards of learning how to perform prescribed gender roles for the male as well as the female sex. Though the majority of her stories centre on heterosexual relations, the bisexuality of protagonists figuring mainly in the early work, the subversion of heteronormativity is pursued at a textual level through the close, sensual attention paid to bodies of both sexes. Reading Colette means experiencing in imagination the bodies of both male and female protagonists as objects, as well as subjects, of desire. In these senses, Colette not only depicts alternative forms of the archetypal «sentimental education», but also offers such an education to her readers.

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