

Reading in Colette:
Domination, Resistance, Autonomy

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The ability to negotiate and maneuver within and outside discourses is critical to Colette's depiction of reading, writing, and, indeed, living itself. The act of reading on the part of Colette's characters, seen through a study of passages from two of her semi-autobiographical works, *My Mother's House* and *Sido*, takes place as a dynamic involving domination and resistance.¹ Such a dynamic necessarily implies a notion of subjectivity or selfhood, which I understand as arising out of discourse. For Foucault, the subject, rather than playing a "founding role" vis-à-vis language or discourse, is instead a "complex and variable function" of that discourse (118). While Foucault is certainly not alone among poststructuralist thinkers in seeing language as existing prior to the subject, and as the primary element in shaping it, what interests me particularly in Foucault is his emphasis on language in the larger social context as transmitter of the discourses of power structures within society. According to his view, which I share, these discourses help to shape us. However, going a step further, I also understand the subject in its resistance to discourse, and in the specific context of the texts I examine, in its resistance to the discourses of a patriarchal society, and thus inherently to the power this discourse wields over women. It is through discourse and resistance to discourse that a textual selfhood—the achievement of a measure of autonomy—in Colette emerges. While much has been said on this subject with reference to the theme of writing in Colette, little attention has been paid to the "plot" I propose to trace here—that of selfhood and reading.

Tracing this plot will also bring to light a subplot, for in *My Mother's House* we find two presentations of a young reading sub-

ject. The story of the character 'Colette's' coming of age in respect to reading is recounted in the chapter called "My Mother and the Books." This is the main plot, which is set off by a subplot involving the older half-sister Juliette and her relationship to texts, told in the chapter entitled "My Sister with the Long Hair." This plot/subplot division allows for the presentation of a positively and a negatively connoted model of reading. I will first discuss the story of Juliette, for of the two it presents more dramatically the pitfalls inherent in reading. I will then move to 'Colette,' who will also negotiate with these same dangers, but more successfully.

Let us turn now to reading, beginning with Juliette. Again, the subplot involving Juliette, "[the] sister with the long hair," stands as a "means of warding off the danger of short-circuit ['the wrong solution to the problems'], assuring that the main plot will continue through to the right end" (Brooks 104). However, while Brooks is referring to a narratological danger, Juliette's model of reading presents a danger that is not only narratological but real. For Juliette's method of reading will prove to be deadly. While 'Colette' resists the texts she reads, remains in relation to them, the older sister approaches books with no sense of self; she seeks instead to be defined by the texts she reads.

As continual and as ritualistic as the references to her long hair are the references to the older sister's complete absorption in reading. In *Sido* she is described as "a girl with her head always full of romantic visions of heroes, so lost in legends that she was hardly present" (175). In *My Mother's House*, particularly in "My Sister with the Long Hair," the same images are repeated: "My sister with the too long hair might read forever with never a pause; the two boys would brush past her as though they did not see the young girl sitting abstracted and entranced, and never bother her" (8). "On Thursday mornings . . . towards ten o'clock, I would often find my long-haired sister still abed and reading . . . [s]he took no more heed of my arrival than of the cries of, 'Get up, Juliette!' coming from below stairs. She would read on. . . ." (72). The full extent of Juliette's sinister, unhealthy evacuation into reading is eventually revealed when she falls physically ill. It is, moreover, her insatiable desire to read, not only by day but even at night, by the light of lamp, candle, matches, and finally the moon, that brings illness on.

The doctor is called in and diagnoses typhoid, leaving the mother "vaguely shocked and astonished" (74). Yet this surprise at the gravity of the illness is only a foreshadowing of the shock the mother

feels when the full extent of her daughter's self-effacement and alienation is revealed. The mother and 'Colette' return to the sister's room after the doctor leaves, and the mother busies herself about the sickroom, talking cheerfully to her daughter, offering to bring her a glass of cool lemonade or to plump up her pillows. Juliette, however, makes no direct response. When she does speak she leaves the mother and the younger sister stunned by her incoherent ramblings, for it becomes clear that rather than addressing them she is conversing with the authors of the books she has read.

She addresses Catulle Mendès, mentions to him a visit she has received from Octave Feuillet, and in general carries on an incoherent conversation full of coquetry, references to other men, and simultaneous protestations that he, Catulle, is the only one. The mother is filled with horror as she watches "this stranger, who in her delirium called only for unknown persons." Catching sight of the younger daughter 'Colette,' whose presence she had forgotten, she brusquely orders her downstairs, and "as though overcome with shame . . . buries her face in her hands" (75).

One might note here that the particular discourse Juliette reads, and which comes to light in her delirious ramblings, reproduces a thralldom to which she is already subject in her relationship to discourse in general. DuPlessis' remarks on the discourse of romantic love are helpful in understanding this "thralldom." Juliette reads novels, the sentimental, romantic novels of Octave Feuillet, for example, in which the woman is romantically enthralled, in DuPlessis' meaning of the term, to a possessive lover having the "power of conferring self-worth and purpose upon the loved one." Within this culturally learned discourse of romantic love, DuPlessis continues, the woman is dependent, and the eroticism "born of this unequal relationship . . . may depend for its satisfaction upon domination and submission" (66-67). We see Juliette in her delirium acting out this submission to a fantasy lover, the author of the discourse within which she desires to be enthralled. This is not a coincidence. Nor is it a coincidence that Juliette is equally submissive towards a privileged symbol within this discourse of romantic love and conventional femininity, long hair. Hair functions in Colette as a figure of the relationship of women to sexuality. In patriarchal society, long hair marks the woman as the place where sexual pleasure is found, *for the other*, although she herself must not express or even feel any manifestation of it in herself. As Cohen has said about a similar figure in *Gigi* (the long skirt), it "is the sign of the taboo on

female genitals, a taboo that applies not to men but to women themselves" (801). Juliette's hair, as we have seen, comes almost to replace her name as the means by which she is identified. She is described as being a virtual martyr to the bearing and upkeep of her monstrously thick and long hair. Yet the real problem with the story of Juliette and texts, with this subplot standing as a "means of warding off . . . 'the wrong solution to the problems,' " is not just submission to the content of a particular discourse. Her submersion under hair, and within the discourse of romantic love, only renders clear for us the real danger. Her primary subjugation, with the most important consequences, exists on the level of her non-autonomy vis-à-vis discourse in general. It is this general relationship Juliette has to discourse that we will examine now, before contrasting it with that of 'Colette.'

The relationship of Juliette to texts allows us to introduce the notion, according to Chambers, of narrative as mediating relationships of desire. In a postmodern cultural landscape, the alienated or autonomous text does not exert authority over the reader as does Barthes' *lisible* or readerly text. Rather it is dependent on the other, the narratee, or person who receives the narration, who will engage with the narrator through the mediation of the text, and thus allow the text to acquire meaning and to come into being. However, since the reader will not be moved by the text's authority, s/he must be "seduced" into entering the role of narratee. And as Chambers puts it, "[w]hen we are seduced, are we not always seduced into conforming ourselves with an image: the simulacrum of one whom we believe can be loved?" (15).

The fictionalized level which a reader and writer must attain before the interchange takes place that will actualize the text—incidentally actualizing the reader and writer as well—is worth clarifying here. To begin with, a writer and reader, both concrete, physical beings, are necessarily involved. The writer must however assume a narrative voice in order to produce a text of fiction. The reader must equally play the role of narratee, if, that is to say, the pact between narrator and narratee, on which the reading of the text as fiction depends, is to remain good. Thus the reader of fiction is not only dealing with the fictionality of the "characters" or the "plot," but also with the fictionality of the "seducee" "produced within . . . [the] literary texts as the object of its seduction" (Chambers 15) with which the reader makes a provisional identification in order to engage the narrative and construct meaning. In the case of the sister, illness

and delirium bring to light, and stand as a figure of, an involvement with the text that does not recognize fictionality. She fails to make the type of provisional identification with the role of "seducee" that normally allows the reader to read, but to retain at the same time a recognition of the fictionality of the assumed role. In like manner she fails to recognize the fictionality of the narrator whose text she reads. She bypasses both fictional constructions, and enters into a direct, unmediated relationship with a fantasized figure of the author; she assumes the identity of his necessary counterpart within the discourse of romantic thralldom that his text transmits—the loved one. She does not take the role of the other necessary to reading as Chambers sees it. She seeks instead to become the same as the text, to be defined by it. Moreover, in this story of the sister, reading and relationship to discourse are posited to be no less than a matter of life and death. Juliette's existence spent in an almost total absorption in reading and the care of her long hair eventually ends in estrangement from her family and suicide.

We turn now to the main plot, the "right solution" to the problem of reading and relationship to discourse, that of 'Colette.' In "My Mother and the Books" we read of 'Colette's' development in relationship to discourse as embodied in the books in the family library. The story of this development is modeled on that of the traditional Oedipal coming of age story. The books are described in terms reminiscent of those used to describe family members or parents, and we recognize a Lacanian series of developmental stages in the relationship of the child 'Colette' to these books and the discourses they contain. In this, Colette's text looks beyond its time, to a poststructuralist notion of our formative influences as being not only our parents but also the discourses within which they exist. The initiations into reading by mother and father constitute an apprenticeship for 'Colette' in negotiating with these discourses, and in postmodern selfhood itself.

The mother's relationship to texts is introduced thus: "The twenty-odd volumes of Saint-Simon replaced each other nightly at my mother's bedside; their pages provided her with *endlessly renewed pleasure*" (35, emphasis added). The mother reads for pleasure, she also reads and rereads the same texts. Thus the pleasures she finds in engaging the texts are familiar pleasures—the texts are in fact like family. 'Colette's' relationship to texts is strikingly similar. She also confides that in the matter of books "[i]t is not that I read so many. *I read and re-read the same ones*" (34, emphasis

added). She continues, remembering the family books as a “warm covering of the walls of my home” (35). The original French here is particularly suggestive; “my home” in the original is the “logis natal.” The French, with its insistence on the house and its books as the locus in which the narrator actually came into the world, is crucial to appreciating the association made in Colette’s text between books and parents or family. “Almost every one of them had been there before my birth” (33), she recalls in another moment. Again, the original French is more strongly suggestive of the books’ “parental” role: “Presque tous m’avaient vue naître,” the narrator writes (37, emphasis added). For ‘Colette’ as well as for the mother, the books are integrated into the world of interpersonal relationships. And if here we are talking about books rather than texts it is with reason, for ‘Colette’s’ earliest relationship is simply with the books themselves as physical objects. “There was a time, before I learned to read, when I would curl up into a ball, like a dog in its kennel, between two volumes of Larousse,” she writes (33-34). The image of the books covering the walls of the home that we have already seen is intensified here. They no longer decorate the walls, they themselves become the walls of a “kennel” or home even closer and tighter than those of the real house, to the point where the child and the “house” seem to merge into one. We name this stage (after Lacan) in ‘Colette’s’ relationship to books the pre-imaginary, that stage at which the child as yet perceives no difference between itself and the outside world.

Gradually this relationship is replaced by another, the imaginary, the stage at which the child perceives itself as separate, whole unto itself; falsely confident in fact of this separateness and self-sufficiency, and locked into a dualistic relationship with the other (Rose 30).

In this imaginary stage, it is the images in the books—drawings or illustrations—that ‘Colette’ reads, not the words. “No love lost between me and Dumas, save that *Le Collier de la Reine* glittered for a few nights in my dreams upon the doomed neck of Jeanne de la Motte. Neither the enthusiasm of my brothers nor the disapproving surprise of my parents could persuade me to take an interest in the Musketeers” (34). It is the image of Jeanne de la Motte’s necklace that she retains, rather than the story surrounding it. However, if it is the images she retains, they are images whose status as images in questionable, for they are then likened to the holes in a length of lace. “I read the story of the Hind and that of Beauty only in Walter

Crane's pure, fresh illustrations. The large characters of his text linked up picture with picture like the plain pieces of a net connecting the patterns in lace" (34). It is of course empty spaces, or holes, that make up the "patterns in lace." For the young reader here, these images or holes are the important part, which the words serve only to support. This analogy with holes in a length of lace renders the fascination, and at the same time the fictionality, of the images—beginning with her own—that the child has progressed to the point of perceiving in this imaginary stage. As for the false yet salutary notion of the subject's separateness and inviolability that I have mentioned, it is reflected here as well. "[N]ot a single word ever passed the barrier that I erected against them," recalls 'Colette' of her practice of reading at this stage.

The text continues to evoke 'Colette's' sense of herself as an inviolable reader. Nothing persuaded her, at this stage, to permit the Musketeers to her intimacy, as we have seen, and she wonders what later becomes of "that tremendous determination not to know, that quiet strength expended on avoidance and rejection" (34).

At the same time, if she is at this stage serenely virginal, with unquestioned defenses against intrusion and invasion, the books are as well. "Perhaps those most hermetically sealed were the dearest," she muses:

I have long forgotten the name of the author of a scarlet-clad Encyclopedia, but the alphabetical references marked upon each volume have remained for me an indelible and magic word: *Aphbicécladiggalhymaroidphorebstevanzy*. And how I loved Guizot whose ornate green and gold was never opened! And the inviolate *Voyage d'Anacharsis*! If the *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* ever found its way to the Quais, I wager that a label would proudly proclaim its condition as 'mint.' (35)

The books also resist invasion and violation. Moreover, their very closed and secretive nature is the key to their fascination for 'Colette.'

At a certain point this changes, and 'Colette's' relationship with books becomes a relationship with texts, existing now within the realm of the symbolic. "Labiche and Daudet wormed their way early into my happy childhood, condescending teachers who played with a familiar pupil. Mérimée came along with them, seductive and severe, dazzling my eight years at times with an incomprehensible light" (34). 'Colette' begins to be aware of books as continuing discourse,

rather than simply the mysterious, alluring promise of discourse. With this comes the beginning of conflict—gone is the relationship between two distinct entities who have the power to remain mutually impenetrable if they so wish. Labiche and Daudet “worm their way”; there is the beginning of a violation of her perceived self-sufficiency and self-containment. We enter here the stage where discourse is perceived as incarnating a law, a law described in terms of a phallogocentric power with phrases such as “condescending teachers,” “seductive and severe,” and “incomprehensible light.”

At this point begins the intervention of both parents in ‘Colette’s’ apprenticeship as reader. It is the mother’s that dominates the chapter, as well as its title.

As we have already seen, the mother takes pleasure in reading, and would like to share that pleasure with her daughter. We will see now that the mother also contests what she reads. In discussing her readings with ‘Colette’ the mother takes the discourses within them to task. In particular, ‘Colette’ recounts her mother’s reaction to the same discourse within which we saw Juliette enthralled, the discourse of romantic love. She recalls learning early that “love is complicated, tyrannical and even burdensome, since my mother grudged the prominence they [the books] gave to it.” The mother asks: “[d]id none of these lovesick people you read of have children to rear or a garden to care for?” (35). It is her mother’s mediation of ‘Colette’s’ relationship to discourse that is crucial in her apprenticeship as resistant reader. The mother does assume the role of narratee, unlike Juliette, as her daughter watches and listens. She must in order to read texts as fiction. However, she does it grudgingly, in critiquing it, as she critiques the text that her role as narratee would produce. Thus ‘Colette’ as apprentice learns the fictionality of this role and the text it produces, its contingency and non-infallibility. Through the contestation of discourse that she witnesses she is made aware of the pushiness, the invasiveness, the colonizing nature of discourse, and of the act of reading as dialog with it and as resistance.

This is the first step in the apprenticeship ‘Colette’ undergoes under her mother’s guidance, a recognition of the fictionality of fiction, and of the necessary combativeness of reading. The mother’s implicit empowerment of her daughter as reader becomes, however, even more explicit and direct as she discusses with her daughter texts ‘Colette’ might read

I hardly know what literary coldness, healthy on the whole, protected me from romantic delirium, and caused me—a little later, when I sampled certain books of time-honoured and supposedly infallible seductiveness—to be critical when I should by rights have fallen an intoxicated victim. There again I was perhaps influenced by my mother, whose innate innocence made her inclined to deny evil, even when her curiosity led her to seek it out, and to consider it, jumbled up with good, with wondering eyes.

‘This one? Oh, this isn’t a harmful book, *Minet-Chéri*,’ she would say. ‘Yes, I know there’s one scene, one chapter. . . . But it’s only a novel. Nowadays writers sometimes run short of ideas, you know. You might have waited a year or two before reading it, perhaps. But after all, you must learn to use your judgment. You’ve got enough sense to keep it to yourself if you understand too much, and perhaps there are no such things as harmful books.’ (36-37)

The daughter is empowered to enter the fray and do battle with discourse, on the assumption that she is capable of it. Her intelligence mentioned is not cited as an asset because it will allow her to understand. This is already taken for granted. Rather it will allow her to keep to herself what she will understand, but which as a child she is not supposed to understand. It will allow her to preserve social conventions, which are the only real obstacles to her reading certain books; for her ability to understand is not an obstacle, nor her ability to hold her own with the discourses they contain. The mother actually strips discourse of much of its power: “‘But it’s only a novel . . . perhaps there are no such things as harmful books.’” She questions even the discrete categories of good and evil which might be used to describe it. She sees “evil . . . jumbled up with good, with wondering eyes”; it is curiosity—again, a form of pleasure—that motivates her to contemplate them, not a desire to judge or to order reality.

If the mother is a revisionist Pandora, curious about and investigating all, yet not unleashing evil, but rather questioning the very categories of good and evil, then ‘Colette’ is a revisionist Eve. Curiosity in the face of interdiction is her reaction to the mediation of the father in her relationship to texts, yet the result of her actions is not perpetual pain and misery, but the toughening necessary to survive.

As if to highlight the contrast between mother and father, it is immediately after the mother's musing that "perhaps there are no such things as harmful books" that we come to the father. 'Colette' recounts: "[n]evertheless, there were those that my father locked away in his thuya-wood desk. But chiefly it was the author's name that he locked away." It is Zola in particular that he wants to put off limits to children, but, the narrator writes, "rather than seek in his pages for reasons that would explain why he allowed or forbade us to read him, he placed upon the index a vast, complete Zola. . . ." The contrast between mother and father is again underlined, for when 'Colette' questions this decision with her mother, we learn that "[h]er grey eyes, so unskilled at dissimulation, revealed their perplexity" (37).

The first thing we note in this act of censorship that constitutes the father's intervention in 'Colette's' coming of age as reader is that more than anything else "it was the author's name that he locked away," and this is significant. For Foucault, "[t]he author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates that status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (107). It seems to be a particular discourse that the father forbids, rather than simply a text or a book; and, as we carry further the application of Foucault's idea, the status of this discourse within society. We will see that the discourse in question is one that disempowers women; it is also a discourse enjoying strong social credence. This being the case, the father's action in forbidding it almost seems motivated by a desire to protect his daughter. However, it is paradoxically this desire to protect her from discourse which invests the discourse with the power to cause fear. Interdiction drives young 'Colette' to purloin one of the forbidden Zola novels, and we read: "I went out into the garden with my first pilfered book."³ It turns out to contain "[l]ike several others by Zola . . . a rather insipid story of heredity" which the ironic voice of the older 'Colette' proceeds to recall. It eventually leads the young reader to a scene of childbirth. A "puny wife" is described as "bringing a child into the world . . . suddenly, with a blunt, crude wealth of detail, an anatomical analysis, a dwelling on the colour, odour, contortions and cries, wherein," 'Colette' continues, "I recognised nothing of my quiet country-bred experience" (37-38). The original French communicates much more clearly the feeling of disempowerment caused by this experience of reading. Rather than "I recognised nothing of my quiet country-

bred experience,” we read “je ne reconnus rien de ma *tranquille compétence de jeune fille des champs*” (40-41, emphasis added).

Crucial here is not only the censorship of the father but also the feeling of powerlessness before the text that this engenders in ‘Colette,’ and especially the fact that this powerlessness is related to gender. For as we will see, it is in the act of reading in violation of her father’s interdiction that ‘Colette’ first feels herself not only powerless, but in a gendered position vis-à-vis the text. The father’s interdiction combines with an essentially male discourse, found in the forbidden Zola novel, of pregnancy and childbirth as disease; and ‘Colette’ continues: “I felt credulous, terrified, threatened in my dawning *femininity*” (38, emphasis added).⁴ Particularly suggestive, again, is not only the fact that she feels menaced as a gendered being, but also the word “credulous.” ‘Colette’ no longer feels able to choose whether or not to take the message of discourse; she succumbs to believing it in spite of herself.

Whatever the particular objection of the father to Zola, his solution to the problem—unlike her mother’s—is to judge, to condemn and to forbid. This very gesture belies a belief in the power of discourse, for otherwise there would be no reason *to* forbid. This powerlessness which he feels before the text is communicated to the daughter by the act of interdiction, a powerlessness rendered even greater in her case by the factor of her gender.

Thus the lesson of the intervention of the father in ‘Colette’s’ apprenticeship as a reader is one that reinforces the notion of the power of discourse, and of that power as coming from the male, specifically the father. For the interdiction by the father sends not only the message of the power of discourse over the reader, here the female child, but it also construes that power as something to which he *as father* is presumably privy, since he has the means to allow or forbid access to it. Moreover, in this particular instance of the Zola novel (as we saw earlier in the case of Juliette), this passive and submissive involvement with the text—gendered through the fact of interdiction by the father—is coupled with the reading of an actual text whose content reproduces this passivity, helplessness and, victimization in a gendered way.

It is left to the mother to remonstrate with the discourse which had been invested with such power, after ‘Colette’ has fainted and come to again: “ ‘There, there now. There’s nothing so terrible as all that in the birth of a child. . . .’ ” She even adds: “ ‘and what business was it of Zola’s, anyway?’ ” (39). For the mother, pain in child-

birth has a different meaning; rather than signifying woman's near-fatal enslavement to her biology, it foretells the bond between the mother and child: " '[t]hey do say that children like you, who have been carried so high in the womb and have taken so long to come down into the daylight, are always the children that are most loved, because they have lain so near their mother's heart and have been so unwilling to leave her' " (38).

Thus we come full circle, back to the role of the mother in 'Colette's' coming of age as reader; her modeling of a recognition of the fictionality of fiction and of resistance to it, assuming the power inherent in the role of narratee. Reading for the mother is primarily aesthetic and has to do with pleasure; the father's is tied to meaning and judgment. The father invests discourse with power and himself feels overawed by it. The mother does not; she even goes so far as to read Corneille in church, substituting a discourse of her choice for the sermon of the priest, as well as debating points with him on which she is not in agreement (MMH 111-12). Thus 'Colette's' experience of reading under the influence of her father's intervention is disempowering and threatening, even to the point of making it impossible at the time of reading under his intervention to call up "the exorcising voice" (38)—her mother's, with her alternate version of the tale of childbirth. But after her bout with physical collapse—as with Juliette—this method of reading seems to make the reader physically ill. The mother's voice welcomes her back to the world, dispelling not just the content of the frightening text read, but the power of discourse in general that this episode of interdiction also served temporarily to set up. Thus while the father's intervention in 'Colette's' apprenticeship disempowers her as a reader and as a female being, the mother's empowers her, as both.

Thus I have argued that a positively connoted reading in Colette, that learned by the character of the same name, involves an engagement of the self with the other, while a negatively connoted reading, exemplified by Juliette, involves a loss of self. From a feminist perspective, the point goes beyond aesthetics alone, and engages the question of ethics. Reading involves survival of the self within structures of domination that can be seen in ways of reading as well as in the content of texts read. As the case of Juliette and her "wrong solution" to the problem illustrates, reading in Colette carries a polemical message, challenging readers of whatever gender to read for the "right solution," that is, the construction of an intact self.

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Notes

1. My term "semi-autobiographical" is purposefully ambiguous, for the relationship of the textual 'Colette' of *My Mother's House* and *Sido* to the Colette of real life is by no means a simple one of identification or conflation. Huffer has recently chronicled the tendency, longstanding and still prevalent in critical studies on Colette, to "conflat[e] Colette's life with her work" and to read " 'woman' as 'experience' " (15). Yet Colette's plots themselves point to the need to recognize the fictionality of discourses and other textual constructs, from characters to narrators and narratees. In Flieger's term, *My Mother's House* and *Sido* are "fictional autobiography, tales in the first person where 'Colette' herself is identified as the narrator" (6). She goes on to say that this "fictional autobiography" in Colette's case "might be considered a kind of autofiction, the result of a creative act that crafts a textual or narrative persona, but that finally reveals few facts about the biographical person" (10).

2. Well before *My Mother's House* Colette had written another anti-plot to that of Juliette and reading, that of Minne in *The Innocent Libertine*, a fictional heroine whose name, frequently accompanied by an endearment to become "Minne chérie," suggests strongly 'Colette's' own nickname given her by her mother: Minet-Chéri. Minne reads of a leader of a gang, "Curly," in the newspaper, and constructs a fantasy life around him with which she engages as does Juliette with her texts. She enters into a direct, unmediated relationship with the text that this fantasy—constructed from newspaper stories, and which she has created—constitutes, and assumes within it the identity of a character, that of the queen of Curly's band and his lover. We even note a scene very reminiscent of the one in *My Mother's House* where Juliette, ill, converses with her "lover"; Minne, also ill, is heard "mutter[ing] indistinct words: 'He's asleep . . . he's pretending to be asleep . . . the queen . . . Queen Minne . . .'" (66). That she has read of him in the newspaper rather than in a novel leads her actually to escape from her home one night in an attempt to run away with a person she has seen in the street and who she is convinced is he—an attempt at merging lived experience with her fantasy constructs created through reading that does not succeed. In the second half of the book, the object of Minne's quest (an older Minne, married now), has become knowledge of sexual pleasure, "the brief, convulsive bliss that she sought with a persistence that was already becoming discouraged" (105). The novel ends, after Minne's and her husband Antoine's mutual acceptance of each other and love, with Minne's

initiation into this knowledge, with this “miracle [that] had succeeded in creating the real Minne” (209). At this point, looking back on herself:

Minne smiled, in the shadowy room, with a touch of contempt for the Minne of yesterday, that frigid child in quest of the impossible. There was no longer any impossible, there was no longer anything to search for, there was nothing to do but flower, to become rosy and happy, nourished only by the vanity of being a woman like other women. (212)

In fact, in this early and surprisingly optimistic novel, written still under the tutelage of Colette's first husband Willy, Minne's violation of the taboo on female sexual pleasure surpasses and makes irrelevant the earlier Minne, engaged in a method of reading that makes her ill, and “enthralled,” in DuPlessis' meaning of the term, in an alienating, potentially paralyzing and obliterating discourse of love.

3. Again, ‘Colette’ in the matter of books is an Eve figure; it is in the garden that she tastes her first forbidden fruit.

4. Bertrand-Jennings speaks of how in *L'Assommoir*, for example, “Gervaise's culpable laziness and indulgence seem responsible for her misery as well as for that of her class” (74, my translation), which is certainly to be expected in Zola where Gervaise is not unique in being destined in a determinist fashion for failure. However, this pessimism, even *mauvaise foi*, weighs particularly heavily with the female characters in the Rougon-Macquart series, because of “a myth of woman [in the Naturalist school] conceived as the physiological being *par excellence*, the most likely prey for envelopment by her milieu, the privileged site of neuroses, sensuality experienced as an unmasterable force, mystical madness” (DuBois 10, my translation). Zola's female characters are thus clearly particularly helpless in the face of a doom predetermined by biology. Adrienne Rich, in her chapter “Hands of Flesh, Hands of Iron,” fills in details which allow us to recognize this “myth of woman” as consonant with actual practices and discourses surrounding childbirth in Europe. She describes some of the gynecological and obstetrical practices through European history that have led us to a stage where “the process of labor . . . becomes tinged with cultural reverberations of terror, and a peculiar resonance of punishment” (133). She also speaks of how childbirth moved from an activity in which women assisted each other to a male domain in which technology unavailable to women, coupled with misogynist attitudes, rendered women children or objects in their own process of giving birth. Citations she provides from a 1760 treatise against male midwifery written by Elizabeth Nihell, a graduate of the Hôtel Dieu midwifery school, echo ‘Colette's’ reaction to what she finds in the Zola novel to a surprising degree. Rich paraphrases Nihell thus, including a direct quote from her treatise: “Men have justified

their intrusion into the profession by '*forging the phantom of incapacity in women*' " (147, emphasis added), and we marvel at the closeness: "I recognised nothing of my quiet country-bred experience," a closeness even more striking in the original French, where we read: "je ne reconnus rien de ma tranquille *compétence*" (emphasis added).

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