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Reading the Romance with Colette in 'La Lune de pluie'

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“Reading the Romance with Colette in ‘La lune de pluie’”

The French writer Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954) had the uncanny knack for reinventing herself over the course of her long career, thus maximizing her appeal to both popular and academic audiences, and laying the foundation for her legacy as a modern writer. Serious intellectuals such as Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva have both written about her, and Hélène Cixous singled her out as one of the few women whose writing she characterized as “l’écriture féminine.” The Pléiade edition of Colette’s works provides further evidence that she has “made it” in the academy-sanctioned literary canon. Yet another feather in her cap is the volume of *Cahiers de l’Herne* devoted to Colette that appeared in 2011. Seen by many as a supreme honor, a sort of “panthéon de la littérature du XXe siècle” (Payot), the monograph, edited by Gérard Bonal and the president of La société des amis de Colette, Frédéric Maget, showcases the modernity of Colette whom they consider to be subversive and radical for her day, a woman well ahead of her times. Despite *l’Herne*’s long association with French intellectuals and the editors’ intention to promote an image of Colette as a serious modern writer, the volume was not solely aimed at an elite readership. The publishers also choose to appeal to a more popular audience by producing a 100-page “carnet” entitled *J’aime être gourmande* to accompany the 350-page monograph on Colette. This “carnet” is a reprint of short pieces that Colette produced for the magazine *Marie Claire* in 1939 where she wrote about topics ranging from her admiration for Bette Davis, her last cat, and the charming bistros of the first arrondissement, to the wonders of the mushroom. It serves as a reminder of the many faces of Colette, whose unique journey as a writer took her through a

particularly dynamic period in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France characterized by three important developments that deepened the divide between popular and literary writing and especially impacted women readers and writers: educational reforms that increased literacy rates, the rise of a mass culture of consumption, and an explosion in print media including the production and distribution of daily newspapers. As a product of mass consumption aimed primarily at the growing number of newly literate women readers, the popular novel was increasingly associated with “le roman d’amour,” the French equivalent of the romance novel (Olivier-Martin, 16).¹ “Le roman d’amour” was not only transforming the literary marketplace during Colette’s lifetime and paving the way for the billion-dollar per year romance industry we associate today with publishers such as Harlequin, it was also losing ground as a literary genre. In her history of “le roman sentimental,” Ellen Constans points to the “déclassement du roman sentimental” that occurred during the late 19th century and early 20th century, and states in no uncertain terms that “un écrivain qui veut acquérir la légitimité ne peut se risquer dans ce genre ... Ce processus de déclassement est alors un phénomène relativement récent; il s’accentuera après la première guerre mondiale. Le roman d’amour ne réintégrera jamais, en tant que genre, la littérature reconnue” (208). Despite efforts by some 21st-century scholars to dress up popular romance in the academic gowns of a legitimate literary genre, the “bodice ripper” covers and reputation of popular romance tell us otherwise. It still suffers the distinctive status as “the despised and rejected ‘other’ of modern literary writing,” according to the editors of a recent collection of critical essays on popular romance fiction (Franz and Selinger 3).²

Colette is rarely studied in the context of the evolution of the popular novel, let alone popular romance, although she put love, relationships and the sentimental lives of women at the center of much of her writing.³ As one of her husbands once remarked, “Mais tu ne peux donc pas écrire un livre qui ne soit d’amour, d’adultère, de collage mi-incestueux, de rupture? Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas autre chose dans la vie?” (3: 285). Like the romance writers of her day, Colette published her work in the feuilleton form that especially appealed to a female readership, and as a journalist she contributed articles to popular journals and women’s magazines, with many of her books specifically marketed to women readers. The path that Sidonie Gabrielle Colette forged on her way to becoming “notre grande Colette” ran parallel with that of the popular romance. As one of the few, perhaps only major French writer to be educated in the public schools of the Third Republic, Colette evolved into a reader and writer during the same period that saw the rise of the popular novel as a product of mass consumption.⁴ These circumstances provided her with an insider’s perspective on the attractions and dangers of formulaic romance that she used to navigate the growing literary divide. These elements come to light in Colette’s 1940 novella, “La lune de pluie” in which she uses a complex narrative structure to highlight key points in her formation as both a reader and writer. The first person narrator, who is also the protagonist, refers to three different time frames--the present of the story as it unfolds, which is somewhere around 1910, the moment of composing the novella, some thirty years later, and the early years of her marriage, around 1900, the period when Colette began to pen the first of the *Claudine* novels. These alternating time frames allow the narrator to describe herself being drawn into someone else’s love story in terms reminiscent of romance readers, while also providing

the opportunity for Colette to step back and reflect on her beginnings as a writer, the attraction of the romance genre, its limitations, and its potential from the perspective of a mature and established 60-something author. By reading Colette and reading along with “Colette” through this narrative framework, we can draw parallels between Colette’s era and our own in order to uncover the stigma that romance readers and writers confronted then and now, and discover the possibility of reading and writing as an active and sometimes community-related form of empowerment.⁵ As such, “La lune de pluie” can be read as an example of Colette’s modernity as the author focuses on the act of reading and anticipates the practice of many contemporary women readers of popular romance whose engagement with the genre has continued to escalate in this age of social media.

Although Colette could not have foreseen the many developments that have impacted the publishing world today, the transformations she experienced and participated in provide the context for reading the romance with Colette from a contemporary and early twentieth-century perspective, with a particular emphasis on the woman reader. According to Ellen Constans, “Les femmes sont depuis des siècles majoritaires dans le lectorat du genre romanesque... et par conséquent, vers celle des histoires d’amour” (*Parlez-moi d’amour* 268). She refers to the sentimental novel as a once valued literary genre associated with canonical French texts such as *Tristan et Iseut*, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), and *Paul et Virginie* (1788), and points to the progressive deterioration of the genre that occurred in the late 19th century and early 20th century as “le roman sentimental” was transformed into “le roman d’amour.” This transformation went hand in hand with the rise of consumer culture in the middle of the 19th century, both of which suffered the stigma of being associated primarily with women, what

Joanne Hollows refers to as “a profoundly gendered anxiety over mass culture more generally” (70). Hollows describes the consequences of applying industrial modes of production to cultural products such as the publication and marketing of popular fiction, resulting in a standardized and formulaic product that had to appeal to the “lowest common denominator.” Consequently, the products of mass culture could be consumed without effort; in the case of romance, that meant “offering easy pleasures to passive consumers who had difficulty distinguishing between ‘reality’ and the fantasies they read.” (71). The example of Emma Bovary leaps to mind as the epitome of the passive woman reader. Flaubert’s masterpiece, which contrasts the author’s “high” style with the tawdry romantic texts regularly consumed by his heroine, is just one illustration of the consistent gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior that took place in the nineteenth century.⁶

If we look at the history of France, we can trace the gendered anxiety related to the rise of mass culture to the educational reforms that mandated free schooling for boys and girls beginning with the Falloux Law of 1850 and culminating with the Ferry laws in 1881. The establishment of a free, secular education system at the onset of the Third Republic resulted in a dramatic increase in literacy rates, especially for women, where the percentage of active women readers rose from 28% in 1801 to 94% in 1901 according to the figures reported by James Smith Allen. In his study of nineteenth-century readers in France, Martyn Lyons points to the reduced work week as an additional factor that gave the working class more free time which women, in particular, devoted to reading. The enormous increase in female literacy coincided with transformations in the production and distribution of print culture to make fiction more available and affordable to a new,

mostly female readership. The inexpensive manufacture of paper and improvements in the efficiency of printing presses allowed publishers to produce cheap editions for less than one franc per volume and distribute them through the magazine and newspaper subscription network in smaller and cheaper “romans à livraisons,” the French equivalent of “pulp” fiction. The educational reforms that created more readers at the beginning of the Third Republic occurred in tandem with new laws that liberalized the press, resulting in an extraordinary increase in the creation and circulation of daily newspapers in Paris and the provinces. Paris, which boasted twenty-three daily newspapers in 1881, saw that figure grow to 309 by 1910, and nearly all of them featured a *feuilleton*, or serialized story. Yves Olivier-Martin focuses on the popular novel as a social and sociological phenomenon that he links specifically to the *roman-feuilleton*, as a “formidable nouveauté culturelle du 19e siècle,” one that dominated “le marché de la production Romanesque du XIXme siècle”(10). This cultural innovation refers to the printing of stories or novels in serial installments on the bottom half of a newspaper as a cheap means of diffusing reading material to an increasingly large mass readership, “dont les femmes furent progressivement les principaux destinataires” (Olivier-Martin, 10).

Like many of her fellow authors, Colette’s works, including “La lune de pluie,” were often first published as serials, appearing in popular magazines and newspapers such as *La vie parisienne* and *Le journal*, both of which had a large female readership. Olivier-Martin singles out what he calls the “quatre grands” daily newspapers—*Le petit journal*, *Le petit parisien*, *Le matin* and *Le journal*, all of which had circulations of more than one million--as being read primarily by women due to the popularity of their *feuilletons* among the female reading public (22). Not only were Colette’s works

serialized in these popular newspapers, she was also a prolific and widely-read journalist who contributed articles regularly to dailies such as *Le matin*, where she had a semimonthly column, often publishing her opinions about topics of special interest to women such as beauty, fashion, love, gardening, motherhood, and physical culture. She was a frequent contributor to magazines that targeted women such as *Femina* and *Vogue*, and later, *Votre beauté* and *Marie-Claire*. According to Holly Grout, in her study of Colette and the business of beauty, it was these women-focused articles that, “solidified Colette’s reputation as a ‘women’s writer.’”(110-111), a reputation on which her publishers did not hesitate to capitalize. When *Les vrilles de la vigne* was first published in 1908, for example, it was featured on the cover of the November issue of the magazine, *Le sourire*, which pictured a woman reading along with this caption: “Quel livre lit-elle? Elle lit *Les vrilles de la vigne*, le livre si joliment pervers que vient de publier Colette Willy. Toutes les femmes tous les amoureux font leurs délices de ce livre si exquisément sensuel” (qtd by Mercier, *Œuvres* 1: 1530).

Colette’s public education and her early training as a writer made her particularly aware of and responsive to changes in the literary marketplace. Raised in a small town in Burgundy, her marriage to Henry Gauthier-Villars included a move to Paris where she was introduced into a stable of ghost writers directed by her husband, who signed the books created under his guidance with the penname of “Willy.” Willy was the mastermind behind a team of writers who churned out popular *romans du boulevard* in a factory-like production line according to a formula he devised and cleverly marketed. Under Willy’s tutelage, and aided by his marketing prowess and reputation, Colette created the *Claudine* series which her husband made sure contained the right combination

of innocence and spice, turning her first novels into what some consider as the most important commercial literary success of the century (Ladimer 52).

Colette's first novel, written from the perspective of a precocious school girl named Claudine, appeared in 1900 under her husband's penname.⁷ The *Claudine* series was wildly popular, sprinkled with provocative scenes that led one modern-day reader to compare it with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, "only set in an all-girls school" (Segal). It set off a wave of Claudine-inspired products including perfume, lotion, cigarettes, postcards and statuettes. While Willy certainly exploited his impressionable provincial bride for his own profit, he was also an innovative entrepreneur and marketing genius who taught Colette the tricks of the trade to successfully sell her fiction in an era ripe with new female readers.⁸ In many ways, Willy was a man ahead of his times who would have been right at home in today's popular romance industry where publishers such as Harlequin have hit upon a consistent formula for the romance novel that has proven to be so appealing to women readers.⁹

Despite the demand for more popular romance fiction by early twentieth-century readers like Colette and her school mates, "serious" writers began to distance themselves from the genre and what they called "women's stories." The paradox, according to Ellen Constans, is that the devalorization of the "roman d'amour" in the early twentieth century referred to earlier, actually helped facilitate "son entrée massive dans la vie quotidienne et dans la culture des couches populaires," even while it widened the gap between "le roman d'amour et le roman reconnu" (*Parlez-moi d'amour*, 209). This gulf was reinforced by the separation of male and female spheres that characterized nineteenth and early twentieth-century French society. The physical printing of *roman-feuilletons*

illustrates this separation of public (male) and private (female) with the more “serious” news, such as current events, printed on the upper half of the paper, with light romantic fiction targeting women readers relegated to the lower part of the page.

The commercial success of popular romance is rooted in the changes to the literary marketplace that began in the 19th-century and still remain in force today. In 21st-century France, romance represents a booming business with more than twelve million copies sold every year. Les Editions Harlequin, which entered the French market in 1978, dominates the very successful romance publishing market in France with seven million books sold in 2014 and 600 new titles appearing each year. Although France represents the second biggest market for Harlequin books outside of America, according to Annick Capelle, the popular romance genre is still much maligned in France today where the distinction between “high literature” and “low literature” remains especially entrenched. In fact, French bookstores will often refuse to devote shelf space to popular romantic fiction which is sold instead in supermarkets, train stations and kiosks, similar to the marketing of pulp fiction in the U.S. Séverine Olivier, who specializes in the romance genre in France, argues that “the Francophone study of popular romance fiction continues, as a rule, to act as a sort of cultural watchdog or guardian, focused on the need to disqualify the genre and to denounce the dangers it represents.” The danger romance represents in France is further complicated by its association with the dominant American mass-market since most of the romance novels sold in French do not originate with French authors, but have been translated instead from the original English.¹⁰

The gendered distinction between high culture and low culture that emerged in the nineteenth century presented a particular challenge to Colette who sought the prestige

denied to writers of romance, and yet wrote for popular venues on topics that particularly appealed to women readers. She understood what drove women to read romance, and broached this topic well in advance of reader-response criticism, and the work of scholars such as Janice Radway. Radway was one of the first academics to seriously investigate the question of how and why women read popular romance using an ethnographic approach based on interviews she conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s. While romance was typically seen in a negative light during that period as a backlash against the progress feminists were making in the women's movement since it seemed to reinforce traditional gender roles, Radway uncovered something else. Romance readers, who told Radway that they read for their own pleasure in order to escape the demands of their everyday lives, saw their reading as disruptive and unsocial acts. One reader reported her husband's resentment when she was lost in a romance novel instead of paying attention to him. These women confessed to reading in secret to avoid being criticized for indulging themselves with fictive love stories instead of cleaning the house, cooking or attending to their families. Radway concluded that romance reading could be seen as a form of protest that expressed "a deep dissatisfaction with the meager benefits apportioned to women by the very institutions [such as marriage] legitimated in the narrative" ("Institutional matrix" 438).

Anticipating the question that would drive Radway's ethnographic investigation of romance readers, Colette provides her own perspective on why women are drawn to popular romantic fiction in 'La lune de pluie.' This novella, written in 1940 when the author was sixty-seven years old, features an unnamed Colette-like professional writer, presumably in her thirties, who stumbles across an intriguing romance plot when she

hires a new secretary named Rosita Barberet to type her manuscripts. She meets Rosita on page one of the novella, and by page two she is startled to realize that her new secretary happens to live in the same apartment she herself occupied some ten years or so earlier during an unhappy period of her life following her separation from her first husband. This revelation comes in the form of a Proustian moment when the narrator grasps a mermaid-shaped window latch, and her hand remembers its shape.

Je soulevai du front le rideau d'étamine, et m'appuyai de la main à l'espagnolette. Aussitôt, je ressentis le léger vertige, plutôt agréable, qui accompagne les rêves de chute et de vol... Car je serrais dans ma main l'espagnolette singulière, la petite sirène de front moulée dont ma paume, après des années, n'avait pas oublié la forme. (4: 63)

On her second visit to her old apartment, the narrator discovers that Rosita lives with her younger sister Adèle, who prefers to go by the name Délia, and that Délia is unwell. This information carries the narrator away on what she describes as “un Romanesque butin de conjectures” as she tries to imagine the causes behind the sister’s condition:

La sœur malade—et pourquoi pas folle mélancolique? Ou languissante d'un malheureux amour? Ou frappé de monstruosité, et tenue dans l'ombre? Voilà comment je suis, quand je me laisse aller. (4: 69)

The narrator indulges herself—lets herself go-- much like a romance reader flipping through the pages of a new novel. Her initial Proustian impulse--to reflect on the nature of memory and her own past-- is set aside for a different, less sophisticated mode of reading whose potential plotlines are clichéd and melodramatic. While the narrator

seems clearly capable of reading in both modes, she appears especially susceptible to the romantic elements of the story she encounters, and her questions resemble those a romance reader might ask when introduced to an intriguing new character at the beginning of a love story. When the narrator finally meets Délia and discovers that she is unhappily married, she sees the suffering young woman as an earlier version of herself. During subsequent visits she becomes increasingly obsessed with the younger sister as she searches for glimpses of her own unhappy past, and what she might have been.

Colette describes the step by step process by which the narrator is drawn into Barberet story in terms reminiscent of the romance readers interviewed by Janice Radway who identify with the heroine in order to experience the possibilities of a relationship they long for. For the narrator, this identification is quite literal. She describes opening the door to her old apartment as one would open a book in order to find “l’ancien moi-même, sa forme triste collée, comme une pétale entre deux pages” (4: 84). The temptation of the past is very strong, and the narrator comments on its overwhelming appeal for her and other writers. Besides the purely nostalgic recollection of the olden days, including details about turn-of-the-century fashion and her favorite cakes and candies that she lovingly describes, the narrator is drawn to the past by its relationship to what she became, or might have become, which she links to the role of the writer. There is also a connection with the type of reading she indulges in which is made explicit by a reference to the mermaid shaped window catch:

Ce n’est guère le rôle des écrivains, ni leur facilité, que d’aimer l’avenir. Ils ont assez à faire avec l’obligation de constamment inventer celui de leurs héros, qu’ils puisent d’ailleurs dans leur propre passé. Le mien, si j’y plonge, quel vertige! Et

quand c'est son tour d'émerger, imprévu, d'offrir à la lumière actuelle sa tête de sirène mouillée, ses jeux décevants d'hôte des profondeurs, je tiens à lui encore plus fort. Outre la personne que je fus, il me révèle celle que j'aurais voulu être. (4: 66-67)

This commentary on the difficulty of writing, of how writers draw on their own past to invent a future for their protagonists, could easily belong to the narrator experiencing a “déjà vu” moment in her former apartment, or to the older writer herself who is taking this opportunity to reflect on her craft, and relate the practice of writing to reading. For while the narrator (who is a professional writer) takes the plunge into her past, the mermaid figure who emerges represents new possibilities expressed in passive terms more reminiscent of reading than the creative act of writing, as she glimpses a different ending, one that diverges from her “real” life. The narrator is strongly drawn toward this new possibility in terms reminiscent of romance readers who choose love stories that provide them with the happy endings denied to them in their own lives. The resemblance with romance readers does not end there. The narrator describes how she is particularly susceptible to being drawn into someone else's love story at this point in her life because she is experiencing what she calls a blank or white period that she compares to the empty white spaces between chapters of a book. The narrator is between husbands and not currently involved in any romantic relationships, and she also claims to be going through the period in her life when men paid the least attention to her.¹¹ The image of a blank page is an apt one because the narrator has a void to fill that is both emotional and professional--she is in search of a love story to read and one to write. The pages she first brings to Rosita to type belong to a *roman-feuilleton* she has been commissioned to write

for *Le journal*, a large daily newspaper. The narrator's latest project reveals the sort of publishing market she must deal with to make a living. Colette's narrator, however, ultimately fails to produce the commissioned *roman-feuilleton*, which she abandons to write a series of short stories instead. In "La lune de pluie" she reveals her struggle to write a *roman-feuilleton* precisely because she is writing for a popular, presumably female audience, which expects a work of fiction that conforms to certain established patterns; in other words, the type of formulaic writing associated with popular romantic fiction. "Prenant en dégoût mon roman-feuilleton chaque fois que je tentais d'y introduire le 'mouvement', rapide et un brin de terreur, je m'étais attelée à des nouvelles pour *La vie parisienne*" (4: 69). The narrator finally concludes "Je ne savais pas écrire un roman-feuilleton" (4: 69), but while she struggles unsuccessfully to come up with a plot twist that will advance the *roman-feuilleton* she is trying to write, she is drawn into a romance plot that unfolds before her. The narrator, then, is both a "reader" of romance and someone who aspires to write one because her livelihood depends on pleasing her readers and getting her work into print.

It is on her third visit to the Barberet apartment that the narrator learns that the younger sister's health is being affected by an unhappy marriage. Unhappy marriages, the narrator admits, are not a favorite subject of hers since they remind her of her own failed relationships. She is tempted to flee from the Barberet situation as quickly as possible when a second Proustian blast from her past draws her further in. It comes in the form of a ray of sunlight which shines through a deformity in the window pane to produce a rainbow effect on the wall, what the narrator calls "la lune de pluie" after the halo that sometimes appears around the moon to announce a coming rain. Délia, a city girl who is

not as attuned to nature as the author, calls the refraction “un petit soleil triste” and sees it as a bad omen. This motif, which gives its name to the novella, refers to the parallels between Délia’s unhappy love story and the narrator’s past, and points to differences between them as readers and writers, as producers and interpreters of signs. The narrator is charmed by Délia’s interpretation of the rainy moon, and she tells Rosita “Votre soeur est un poète qui s’ignore” (4: 72).

As the narrator leaves the apartment in a good mood after seeing “la lune de pluie” reflected on the wall, she makes this confession: “J’avoue que je m’abandonnais, en descendant la pente de la colline parisienne, à l’exaltation. Le jeu des coïncidences projetait sur ma vie un faux jour inespéré” (4: 73). Her mood has been uplifted by her discovery of “l’histoire Barberet” which is barely sketched at this point. Yet the narrator describes the positive effect it has on her as a “pansement de la bécasse,” that is, a sort of temporary bandage or splint similar to what a wounded snipe is known to concoct with mud and twigs. According to the narrator, this type of “bandage” is able to provide relief through “un ordre d’événements médiocres et bien faisants.” The example she gives of a typical “pansement de la bécasse” is “une séance de cinéma, à condition que les films soient assez médiocres” (4: 73). Presumably, good films, and by extension, good literature, good music, and the company of intelligent friends, would not have the same effect, but a not-too-challenging easy read, such as romance, might provide a temporary emotional fix, especially if it concludes with an uplifting “happily-ever-after” ending. Colette’s narrative seems to confirm negative views of romance as an inferior and easily consumed literary genre that provides temporary relief to lonely women, and yet the

narrator validates it by her participation and expresses both her solidarity with those who read it, and her understanding of the need that draws readers to romance.

This solidarity with romance readers has its limits, however, as we discover when the narrator decides to tell the Barberet story to only a few of her friends. She chooses not to share it with her good friend Annie le Pène, for example, whom she fears would see the parallels with the narrator's past and accuse her of opening old wounds. She also keeps it from her mother Sido when she comes to visit, implying that the topic would fall short of her mother's high standards. She does, however, decide to tell the Barberet story to her seamstress, Marie Mallier, after first translating it into "langage banal" to suit this unsophisticated reader who might conform to Colette's idea of a typical romance reader. The hierarchy of readers that Colette presents in "La lune de pluie" may reflect a personal bias, but it also reflects the stigma attached to romance reading that Colette was well aware of, one that still exists today. In her analysis of the romance community, Miriam Greenfeld-Benovitz describes how romance readers manage others' impressions of them by covering up the book jacket, for example, reading in secret, or opting to download the ebook version which can be read more surreptitiously. This stigma is even more pronounced in France according to Agnès Caubet, the webmaster of *Les romantiques*, the only website and webzine in France devoted to popular romantic fiction. She launched the site in 2001 to help establish connections between French romance readers and publishers, and to create a forum for discussion so that romance readers, who tend to hide their reading habit from friends and family, would not feel so isolated.¹²

Anne-Marie Thiesse's study of early twentieth-century readers in France provides a context for understanding the social aspects of reading among women which are hinted

at in Colette's novella and remain in force today. She reports that women would cut out the roman-feuilleton which was printed on the lower part of the newspaper, sewing the different installments together, and then sharing these "books" with their friends. Martyn Lyons elaborates on the social aspects of reading in the nineteenth century, explaining that "The roman-feuilleton, or serialized novel, was an everyday subject of conversation between women, perhaps in much the same way as conversations about the latest episodes of a television soap opera bring people together today" (*Readers and Society* 117). To update Lyons' observation, we would have to include social media of which romance readers are particularly active users. The on-line romance community is not just limited to readers, however. Book reviewers, authors, publishers, scholars and regular readers are able to engage with each other through social media in ways that are changing the publishing industry and challenging the stereotypes of romance readers as mindless and passive.¹³ Publishers of popular romance have been especially quick to adapt to changes in market conditions with Harlequin becoming the first major publishing company to make all of its titles available in an ebook format. Responding to their readers' demands, romance publishers have developed new series of romance subgenres that range from Christian fiction and romance featuring vampires, to LGBT love stories. The adaptability of the genre to meet consumer demands is one key to the huge success that romance continues to experience.

The community aspect of romance reading plays into Colette's story when the narrator relates the tale of the Barberet sisters to her seamstress, Marie. Marie is indeed captivated and wants to hear more of their story, which strikes her as unfinished, "Ah!

Dit Marie Mallier. Ça m'avait plutôt l'air d'un commencement" (4: 74). Her reaction motivates the narrator to dig deeper into the story:

Le mot me ravit. J'y lus le plus Romanesque présage, et me jurai de connaître sans retard la sœur brune, mal mariée, qui habitait ma sombre chambre et redoutait ma 'lune de pluie. (4: 74)

The narrator is subsequently drawn further into the story of the two women in an unhealthy, almost obsessive manner. She goes out of her way to visit the Barberet sisters, bringing them goodies and pages to be typed from a poor first draft which serves as an excuse to see them and learn more about Délia's situation. Her writing seems to suffer, and although outings with her friend Annie Le Père, and a visit from her mother, provide the narrator with reprieves from her unhealthy obsession with the Barberet story, she returns to it again and again to fill an unsatisfied void in her life, to relive and rewrite the past through an identification with Délia Barberet. For Colette's narrator, however, this mode of reading so common with romance readers who tend to identify with the heroine of the novel, proves to be a poor strategy. In search of her own past and the happy ending she was denied in her first marriage, the narrator misreads what is happening in Délia's present. When the narrator runs into a good looking young man who appears to be gazing up at Délia's window, she tries to make him into a stock romance character by teasing Délia and referring to him as Délia's "amoureux du vendredi."

The man, however, is Délia's estranged husband, who, rather than winning back the affections of his wife and living happily ever after as he would according to the typical romance formula, ends up mysteriously dead. The narrator discovers that Délia has been conjuring her husband in an effort to kill him; that is, she is trying to murder

him using black magic that involves obsessively repeating his name.¹⁴ Délia describes the mental concentration of conjuring, which leaves her exhausted and gives her headaches, as “work” that she compares to that of writing a novel, only better.

“Je ne fais pas que de penser! Cria-t-elle. Je... je travaille à ma manière! C’est dans ma tête!”

---Vous préparez un roman? “. . . . “Oh! Tout de même non... Il y a un peu de ça, mais en mieux.” (4: 84-85)

At this point, the narrator’s pleasurable reading of Délia’s love story goes horribly wrong. It takes an unanticipated dark turn that seems to correspond to the “brin de terreur” that the narrator could not invent for the roman-feuilleton she failed to produce. Yet, Rosita explains that what Délia is doing is a commonplace activity that the narrator links to women’s writing:

Ce qui n’est écrit nulle part, sauf par des mains maladroites sur des cahiers d’écoliers, ou sur du papier quadrille de gris, mince, coupé aux plis, jauni aux bords, cousu de coton rouge; ce que la sorcière légua au rebouteux, que le rebouteux vendit à l’obsédée céda à une autre maudite; ce que la crédulité et la mémoire souillée d’une fille pure peuvent recueillir dans les antres qu’une ville insondable ménage entre un cinéma neuf et un bar express, je l’entendis, transmis, vanté à Rosita Barberet par des veuves victorieuses, de lubriques épouses, des fiancées délaissées et attentatoires, la rêverie effrénée des femmes seules... (4: 102).

As Colette suggests, writing, and not just reading, fills an important and often unacknowledged need for women. Research on the writing habits of nineteenth-century

French girls, for example, indicates that not only were private diaries a common practice among prenuptial girls aged fifteen to twenty, but, according to Martyn Lyons, “le journal intime” was an ontological necessity during a period of vulnerability or severe emotional stress (*Reading Culture* 178-179). Once married, girls would typically destroy their diaries, signaling the passage from adolescence to maturity.

The reference to “cahiers d’écopliers” may also point to Colette’s own beginnings as a writer when, prompted by Willy, she diligently filled notebook upon notebook with recollections of her school days. The author of “La lune de pluie,” however, has long left that stage behind, and taken control of her own narrative. The chronology of “La lune de pluie” highlights key moments in the trajectory of Colette’s development into a professional writer, from the creation of the *Claudine* series, to the unsuccessful feuilleton the narrator tries to produce as she seeks to establish herself and make a living, and finally to the writing of the novella itself. Her path as both a reader and writer parallels and diverges from that of the unhappy women her Colette-like narrator encounters.

The timing of the narrator’s encounter with Délia, which seems to take place around 1910, points to another especially significant development in Colette’s career—the publication of *La Vagabonde*. Renée Néré, the protagonist and narrator of *La Vagabonde*, describes herself as “une femme de lettres qui a mal tourné (1073).” Unable to find the time or inspiration to write after the demise of her marriage, she makes her living as a dancer, mime and actress. During the course of the novel, Renée rediscovers the joy of writing which she explicitly describes as having been born out of the pain of her marriage breaking up.

Après les premières trahisons, après les révoltes et les soumissions d'un jeune amour qui s'opiniâtrait à espérer et à vivre, je m'étais mise à souffrir avec un orgueil et un entêtement intraitables, et à faire de la littérature. (1: 1083-84)

For Renée Néré, the path back to writing eventually leads to a renunciation of love, rescuing her, in effect, from conventional romance plots, and allowing her to recover “a room of her own” so necessary to writing as Hope Christiansen, echoing Virginia Woolf, has suggested.¹⁵ Colette is quite aware that the unhappy women, widows, abandoned wives and single women between lovers referenced in “La lune de pluie,” have something in common with the narrator and romance readers more generally. They are ordinary women seeking to remake the plots of their lives in ways that are more satisfying to them through reading and, in some cases, writing. Moreover, there is a sense of solidarity as they pass information from hand to hand, empowering themselves while hiding their activity from the view of outsiders. In this respect they resemble modern-day romance readers who have finally “come out” to actively engage with the book industry and with other readers through social media such as the blog *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* whose contributors review romance novels. Romance provides a temporary fix allowing women to imagine happy endings denied to them in real life, but Colette provides an ending to her story that shakes up the stereotypes and suggests other possibilities.

“La lune de pluie” concludes with a chance encounter between the narrator and Délia, whom she sees dressed in widow's black, and consuming “un grand cornet de frites. . . avec appétit” (4: 105). While Colette leaves it up to her readers to decide if Délia had indeed succeeded in conjuring her husband to death, this is not the ending we expected, and it is one the typical romance reader would not tolerate. The readers in

Janice Radway's study, for example, overtly rejected romance novels without happy endings, often perusing the final pages before purchasing a book. In fact, the happy ending has been singled out as one of the major factors driving women to read romance for entertainment and pleasure. While Délia's "happily ever after" does not conform to the romance formula, she seems to have written a satisfactory yet unconventional ending to her own love story. Her healthy appetite, and the fact that she has been liberated from the domestic space where she was previously confined, are two indications of positive change.

The ending, of course, ultimately belongs to the author Colette, who, by placing her narrator in the middle between past and present, between her story and that of someone else, reveals her dissatisfaction with the romance plots open to women as both readers and writers. In this sense, "La lune de pluie" recognizes and expresses the needs that draw women to reading romance, just as the narrator herself is caught up in reading "l'histoire Barberet." But this novella is also an indictment of stories based on classic plots for women that Colette explicitly rejects. Her ending implies that women can and should craft their own "happily-ever-afters" instead of relying on literary, social or other conventions to define the path to true happiness. The path that her own career took, from crafting the *Claudine* series at Willy's suggestion, to the complex narratives of her later autofiction, of which "La lune de pluie" serves as an example, is implicated in the novella's chronology and layered narrative structure. The novella illustrates how the author/narrator is able to work through, and ultimately away from, formulaic writing to arrive at her own unique style.

Colette's engagement with the writing and reading of romance in "La lune de pluie" is stated in somewhat different terms in an essay she wrote two years prior to her novella, and published in *Le figaro* under the title "Mes idées sur le roman." Colette opens that essay by declaring she has never written "un roman, un vrai, une oeuvre d'imagination pure." She then proceeds to contrast her slowly and painfully written books with the novels she reads for pleasure "avec une rapidité passionnée qui ne néglige rien, qui tient d'une sorte de violence..." (3: 1831). She follows this confession by relating a conversation with a fellow-writer whose advice she eschews when he shares with her the secret of constructing a novel according to a set plan, to reflect instead on "les tendances générales du roman actuel, son avenir probable?" Colette describes "le roman d'autrui" as a "pur produit de consommation, et comme tel la lecture Romanesque est ensemble mon nécessaire et mon luxe, ma débauche honorable, un retour aux fièvres nocturnes de l'adolescence, au don de soi que je faisais à des personnages imaginaires..." (3: 1832)

Colette's "confession" is not entirely positive, but it does affirm her affinity with romance readers--past and present--who long to lose themselves in the guilty pleasure of reading a good love story, and whose appetite for romance novels provided the basic need upon which the billion-dollar romance publishing industry would be built. Colette's situation as a reader and writer during the early twentieth century provided her with insights into the "avenir probable" of the novel, including romance. She was the creator of the *Claudine* series after all, a savvy professional writer who knew what sold, but who also sought a compromise between commercial success and the literary prestige too often denied to women writers. In that sense, Colette saw the romance genre as a trap to avoid,

or rather, to subvert to her own end. The complex narrative structure and multiple timelines she uses in “La lune de pluie” not only showcase her craftsmanship, but illustrate her adept manipulation of her readers.¹⁶ By adopting the perspective of a romance reader herself, Colette’s narrator confronts the seduction and problems of reading and writing the romance. Reading the romance with Colette’s narrator in “La lune de pluie,” we understand how easy it is to get drawn into the story when she recognizes her old apartment and sees Délia as a version of her younger self. Colette, however, does not deliver the quick emotional fix we expect from formulaic popular romantic fiction. The twist she gives to the open ending perfectly illustrates her originality—and, ultimately her modernity-- as she challenges her readers to look beyond conventions, such as formulaic romance, and appreciate the complexity of her writing which resists categorization, thus leaving open more possibilities for women readers and writers to explore.

Notes

1. Popular romance in France is known by various designations including *roman sentimental*, *roman d'amour*, *roman rose* (or *à l'eau de rose*), *roman bleu*, and *roman de gare*, and associated with publishers such as Harlequin and the series *J'ai lu pour elle*. According to Ellen Constans, *le roman d'amour* became the preferred term for Harlequin-type romances in France beginning in the mid twentieth-century where they were distinguished from *le roman sentimental* by a more formulaic type of writing that included a mandatory happily-ever-after-ending. See Constans "Roman sentimental, roman d'amour. Amour... toujours."

Anne-Marie Thiesse deals specifically with the rise of the popular novel in *Le Roman du quotidien*. She uses the term "romancier populaire" to refer to "les écrivains ayant publié des feuilletons dans les journaux populaires et ceux dont les œuvres ont paru dans les collections romanesques à bon marché" (174). Of the authors she studies, only 17% are women although "le roman sentimental" is the dominate category.

2. The International Association for the Study of Popular Romance sponsors an annual conference and publishes an academic journal. In 2015 the Library of Congress held an international multimedia symposium on the topic "What is Love? Romance Fiction in the Digital Age." Also see *The Popular Romance Project*, a website that brings together scholars, readers, writers, editors, and fans of romance fiction to elicit discussions on topics related to the romance genre. The PRP helped produce a feature-length documentary film, "Love Between the Covers" directed by Laurie Kahn, and partially funded by the NEH. For more information on recent scholarship devoted to

romance fiction, also see the academic blog, *Teach me Tonight*, and the wiki bibliography on Romance Scholarship.

3. One of the few exceptions is Diana Holmes who includes an analysis of Colette's *La Vagabonde*, and its sequel, *L'Entrave*, in *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France*. For Holmes, these novels represent "alternative versions of the romance plot with opposing conclusions" as Colette reworks and transforms the romance genre (39). Holmes's book provides a useful overview of the romance genre in France that situates Colette in relation to the romance writers of her generation.

4. Colette completed the entire cycle of secular primary education in her village school which provided her with what Patricia Tilburg calls a "laic optic" through which she viewed the values of the new Republic.

5. Some critics refer to the Colette-named narrators that are common in Colette's work as "Colette" to distinguish the narrator from the author, although the distinction is often not clear. The interplay between fiction and the author's biography is extremely complicated in the case of Colette where the first-person narrator, sometimes named Colette, is also the protagonist whose life closely resembles the author's. While this is a feature of "autofiction," a term invented by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 who credits Colette as one of the first to write in this mode, Colette's complex game of mirrors is a unique case about which much has been written. See, for example, Stéphanie Michineau and Janet Beizer.

6. Andreas Huyssen, for example, contrasts Flaubert's modernism with Emma's reading habits and refers to Flaubert as the master voice of an aesthetic based on the "uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read" (189). Martyn Lyons

discusses the relationship between the publishing industry in France and the rise of new readers. Of particular relevance is his chapter “Reading Women: from Emma Bovary to the New Woman,” (*Readers and Society* 81-99).

7. The *Claudine* series, which appeared with “Willy” listed as the author, includes *Claudine à l’école* (1900), *Claudine à Paris* (1901), *Claudine en ménage* (1902) and *Claudine s’en va* (1903). Colette finished the series with the publication of *La Retraite sentimentale* in 1907 which she signed “Colette Willy.” She would not begin signing her work as “Colette” until 1922.

8. Paul D’Hollander’s study of Colette provides the most comprehensive account of the role that Willy played in Colette’s life and early career. For a discussion of how Colette learned to produce and control her public image, see Tama Lea Engelking, “Ceci n’est pas Colette,” and Frédéric Maget, “Un cas exemplaire de manipulation de l’image par Colette.”

9. Pamela Regis describes a happy ending, known as HEA, as “the one formal feature of the romance novel that virtually everyone can identify” (9). *Romance Writers of America* (RWA) defines the two essential components of every romance novel as a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. See the RWA website which also includes industry and reader statistics. Harlequin Enterprises provides writers with specific guidelines to follow for each subgenre of romance they produce.

10. According to their website, the Toronto-based company publishes more than 110 titles each month in 34 different languages, with more than half of their inventory sold overseas. Their vast inventory of books originates with English-language versions that are then translated into other languages with some cultural elements adjusted for specific

audiences. The “Anglo” perspective that dominates Harlequin is particularly problematic in France where the government has sought to protect the national cultural identity from the global impact of America’s cultural expansionism. See Rob Kroes on this issue.

11. Colette uses this same image in the opening pages of “Bella Vista” (1937) where she elaborates on the importance of these “blancs” or “périodes vides d’amour,” which cause her to abandon her personal love story in order to pay more attention to the lives around her. She describes the material she draws from these sources, which includes that of the Barberet sisters, as more “romanesque que le drame intime,” and elaborates on this distinction in her writing: “Je ne finirai pas ma tâche d’écrivain sans essayer, comme je le veux faire ici, de les tirer d’une ombre où les relégua l’impudique devoir de parler de l’amour en mon nom personnel” (*Œuvres* 3: 1097).

12. See Séverine Olivier’s interview with Caubet. Annik Houel provides additional information on French romance readers.

13. See Miriam Greenfeld-Benovitz for a definition of what constitutes the romance community, and especially the role played by social media. The website, *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, founded by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan as a social community for romance readers to discuss the books they love, provides a good example of how social media is being used by romance readers. The site, which focuses on reviewing romance novels, includes a blog and a podcast. The nearly unprecedented media coverage that E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy received also helps highlight the role of social media in bringing women readers together. For an overview, see the introduction to the special issue of *Sexualities*, devoted to reading the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon.

14. “La lune de pluie” is only one of Colette’s works in which the occult is a major theme. See Donna Norell for an exploration of this topic.

15. Colette’s rejection of the heterosexual love plot is especially obvious in her novels *La vagabonde* (1910), and *Naissance du jour* (1928). Diana Holmes points out that one aspect of Colette’s work that has influenced contemporary female writers is “the provocative deployment of those modes of writing traditionally and disparagingly attributed to women, in such a way as to subvert dominant concepts of ‘the feminine’” (“Legacy of Colette” 41). Also see Bethany Ladimer who focuses on Colette’s latter fiction to argue that: “Her works between ages 45 and 55 are marked by her attempts to come to terms with growing old and her relations with men, by her increasing attachment to the memory of her mother, and by a probing investigation of what kinds of plots lie beyond the conventional heterosexual plot already refused by Renée Néré” (57).

16. Marie-Odile André examines Colette’s manipulation of her readers in three different works, including “La lune de pluie,” as part of “une conquête progressive de légitimité” that she links to modes of reading proposed by Colette’s texts, as well as her reworking of the figure of the writer. André argues that Colette was able to retain her earlier readers with this strategy, and gain new ones, as she worked toward establishing a status for herself as a writer “dans une zone qui reste intermédiaire entre succès et prestige” (“Colette et son lecteur” 12). Although the focus here is on popular romance, Colette also sought to raise her profile as a writer by distinguishing her work from other so-called “feminine” genres such as the type of nature writing associated with the poet Anna de Noailles. See, for example, Tama Lea Engelking, “La Mise-en-scène de la

femme-écrivain,” and Anne Poskin’s discussion of Colette’s critical reception in the press which illustrates how Colette gradually distanced herself from feminine labels.

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