

## Addressing Success: Fame and Narrative Strategies in Colette's *La Naissance du jour*

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To be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers—the media and their audience. The famous person is thus not so much a person as a story about a person.

—Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown* (592)

Colette, as one of France's most well-known *femmes de lettres* of the twentieth century, rebelled from Braudy's definition of a famous person. Although she is obviously "part of the story" of twentieth-century French literature, Colette struggled publicly with the images that her "storytellers" produced of her and made direct contributions to change those stories about herself. Her fame thus went through many phases over the course of her literary career and while she was sometimes left at the "mercy" of the media and her reading public, she made concerted efforts to shape her own fame. It has been difficult for critics of the past to discuss an author's urge to fame or even her desire to shape the type of fame that she enjoys without encountering a certain amount of uneasiness or resistance on the part of either the author, her public, or other critics. The urge to fame has often been viewed in a negative light, that is, as selfish, egotistical, and greedy, or as evidence of an uncontrollable hunger for power, money, and prestige, all of which have been conceived to be especially unattractive qualities for women. This cultural attitude explains in part the surfeit of gushing admiration that characterizes almost all Colette biographies, or "hagiographies," as Elaine Marks

has aptly named them (Marks xi), and the careful sidestepping of the issue of fame in most psychoanalytical or theoretical works on Colette.

It is possible that the negative facets of fame may have influenced Colette's writings, but they are not retraceable elements in her works, nor are they relevant to my project here. On the other hand, there are many positive ways of interpreting the urge to fame, such as an individual's vision for improving her position in society, or for legitimizing a particular group's role in that society. I have chosen to study Colette's attempts to reshape her fame because of the positive impacts that they had for herself, as a woman writer of the early twentieth century in France, and for her relationship to her readers, both popular and critical.

Colette's particular combination of literary reputation and public recognition is fascinating because of its crossover between the domains of "low" popular culture and "high" aesthetic movements, and because of the transition it underwent, from the naughty schoolgirl "Claudine," to the independent "Vagabonde," to the wise and respected "mother of modern French letters," as she was finally remembered. I will be studying here the techniques that Colette employed to purposefully alter her audience's reception of her, and will be focusing mainly on the complex *mélange* of autobiographical and fictional elements in her writing.

I do not wish to imply that Colette single-handedly produced her own literary reputation, exclusive of all influences from critics and her reading public. The construction of a literary reputation is not only based on a writer's work. As John Rodden notes, "Not only the quality or 'genius' of a writer's work earns him and it a literary reputation, but also an institutional network of production, distribution, and reception which circulates and values his achievement" (Rodden 4). Colette found avenues to mold her own famous persona through this institutional network, either through publicity stunts or through her reputation as a critic and journalist. Thus, during her earliest years in the limelight, Colette's manipulation of the media and their audience did not always involve writing. In her first promotional appearance in 1900, when, as a twenty-seven-year-old woman, she dressed up as her fifteen-year-old fictional schoolgirl character Claudine, Colette offered to the public a series of images that would contribute to her renown. In the particular case of the Claudine publicity poses, Colette later announced that she had been reluctant to appear as Claudine, but had felt forced to do so by her

ex-husband Willy, who had been responsible for publishing the novel *Claudine à l'école*. In this instance of author-character identification, Colette the author had been squeezed to fit into the image of Claudine the fictional character, apparently against her will and without any real control over her husband's or the media's interpretation of her.

Whether it was her husband or Colette herself who invented the idea, the publicity stunt was highly successful and produced a fad for many Claudine products—Claudine cigarettes, perfume, soap, and hats, not to mention Claudine novels. For much of her early career, the story of Colette was written not only by “the media and their audience,” as Braudy states, but by herself and her husband Willy.<sup>1</sup> When she separated from Willy around 1910 and began writing for magazines such as *Le Matin*, Colette regained much of the power to tell her own story about herself. Her role as a reviewer and journalist would put Colette in the role of “storyteller,” allowing her to form other authors' reputations and to begin undermining the power that outsiders had maintained on forming her public image.

Aside from publicity stunts and journalism, Colette's main sources of reputation production came through her novels, and principally through her semi-autobiographical narratives, both of which would reshape the public images of herself in the forms that she chose. It may be objected that the use of autobiographical confession to change one's reputation is nothing new in French literary history. Rousseau's now classic example, *Les Confessions*, could be interpreted as an authorial attempt to explain his life, to justify his perceived failings as a writer, and to manipulate the public reception of his work. However common it may be in general French literary history, Colette's urge to fame and her urge to shape that fame are two topics that have not been discussed until very recently in Colette criticism.<sup>2</sup> To study these particular aspects of Colette's persona production, I have chosen to explore one of her most well-known texts, *La Naissance du jour* (1928), because it contains narrative techniques specifically designed to manipulate her readers' reception of her.

*La Naissance du jour* is probably most renowned as Colette's ultimate work on the complex mother/daughter relations between her mother Sido and herself. Written between *La Maison de Claudine* (1922) and *Sido* (1929), this text sustains the nostalgia for the mother that Colette had begun to develop in *La Maison de Claudine* and

that she would continue to explore in the *Sido* essays.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, it justifies her efforts during this period to take new paths in her writing career. I use the term “new” paths, because the daughter’s story here is an attempt to narrate a new set of power relations not only within the private realm of the family but also in the very public arena of the celebrity writer and her admirers. By the time this work was published, Colette was a well-established novelist and popular cultural figure and she had learned early on how to market herself, first as a fictional character, then as a writer. Yet the public attention that she received during the first twenty years of her literary career was mostly popular, whether in the form of the book review or the gossip column.

Notable exceptions to the generally positive reception of the texts were the three full-length critical biographies that had been published on Colette by 1928.<sup>4</sup> These critical exceptions eventually became the rule in Colette criticism. The way in which this autobiographical novel would mark a turning point for Colette’s career is itself exceptional: she addressed the specific problems of her own reception within the pages of the book itself. In *La Naissance du jour*, Colette cites Anna de Noailles’ incredulous question, “Vous n’aimez donc pas la gloire?” ‘You don’t like fame?’, As a metaphorical response, Colette announces clearly her desire for renown among her “frères et complices” ‘brothers and peers’ and “autres créatures vivantes” ‘other living creatures’: “Mais si. Je voudrais laisser un grand renom parmi les êtres qui, ayant gardé sur leur pelage, dans leur âme, la trace de mon passage, ont pu follement espérer, un seul moment, que je leur appartenais” ‘Yes of course I do. I would like to have made a name for myself among those creatures who, having kept, upon their fur and within their soul, a trace of my passage, might have hoped, just for a moment, that I belonged to them’ (*Naissance* 304). This passage is preceded by a section on the narrator’s love for animals, thus perhaps limiting her desire for fame to the animal kingdom. However, the ambiguity of *frères et complices* leaves her declaration open to readers or other human beings, among whom she might also wish to leave “un grand renom.”

The Colette character’s efforts to change her readers’ impressions of her in *La Naissance du jour* (1928) provide a clear break from Colette’s earlier heroines. For example, in *Claudine à l’école*, the entire narrative is written from the point of view of the main character Claudine in the form of a personal diary. Claudine may complain that her father or her teachers do not understand her, but

she remains silent on the possibility of a response (negative or positive) from an outside critic or audience. *La Vagabonde*, written ten years later (1910), was also in the first-person singular, but the main character Renée begins to show a perceptive awareness of her music-hall spectators. However, even though she writes constantly about her performances, she speaks uncritically of her audience, thankful to have an admiring public. She does not attempt to change their one-sided impressions of her. In the same vein, when speaking of the book reviews of her first three novels, Renée disagrees completely with the critics, but she does not try to change her readers' views, and is content with simply stating her own personal preferences for the third text, generally considered a failure by the public (*La Vagabonde* 1084). In contrast, the Colette character of *La Naissance du jour* both directly and indirectly addresses her readers in order to shape their reception of her work. How does the text succeed in performing such a task? And why has its "mission" been understood as an autobiographical mother/daughter memoir? Both of these questions are essential for a new interpretation of *La Naissance du jour* and for a better understanding of Colette's narrative strategies with regard to the shaping of her own fame. It is these two questions that I will undertake to answer in this essay.

To begin our discussion, we must look at the dual message in *La Naissance du jour*. The text perpetuates the fame that Colette had gained up until the publication of this text, which could be summarized as the image of the daughter, whether in the form of an impish ingénue, an independent divorcée, or a seductive older woman. The novel also works to shape a different type of fame, one that Colette would enjoy more and more after the appearance of this work. This image could be characterized as the "mother of twentieth-century French literature," whose wisdom and maturity are reflected in her complex writing style. These two competing elements of authorial fame are promoted in *La Naissance du jour* through the development of a dual plot rivalry.

On the one hand, Colette writes a memoir-styled monologue in response to an epistolary "dialogue" between Sido and herself. Although there is no actual dialogue here (her mother died sixteen years before Colette started writing *La Naissance du jour*), her mother's letters act as catalysts that produce Colette's monologic discourse on aging and renunciation. The narrative concerning Sido and Colette appears to be primarily "autobiographical": personal memories, reflections on growing older, and the transcription of let-

ters from Sido.<sup>5</sup> It has usually been considered the primary text of *La Naissance du Jour*. Indeed, the text begins and ends with this narrative, which I will call the "Sido-Colette story."

On the other hand, Colette writes about a conventional romantic triangle that includes Vial, Hélène, and herself. Vial and Hélène are two of Colette's young neighbors in Saint-Tropez, where she is currently spending the summer in her newly acquired villa, "La Treille Muscate." Vial desires an affair with Colette, while Hélène secretly loves Vial. Colette, older than both, tries to turn Vial's attentions from herself to Hélène. This fictional love story, which I will call the "Saint-Tropez story," emerges only in the fifth chapter of the book and is written in a more traditionally fictional style: introduction of the conflict, then its development, crisis, dénouement, and, finally, conclusion; all centered on a heterosexual love triangle. Furthermore, the main characters of the triangle, Hélène and Vial, are both invented; that is, Colette's circle of friends in Saint-Tropez did not actually include persons named Hélène Clément or Valère Vial.<sup>6</sup>

These two plots are not neatly divided into separate sections of the book. In fact, Colette weaves the two together using the same narrator ("Madame Colette") for both the Sido-Colette story and the Saint-Tropez story, and the same first-person singular narration for both storylines. Yet there remains a clearly defined competition between the two plot lines for the reader's attention. The memoirs are presented first, thus establishing the reader's expectations for an autobiographical set of memories rather than a traditional, "novelistic" plot. Although it may be easier to follow the fictional plot of the love story, the lyrical style of the memoirs makes the Sido-Colette story remarkably powerful. Not surprisingly, it is the mother-daughter story that most Colette critics have prioritized.

Questions about the love-triangle plot arose as soon as *La Naissance du jour* appeared in 1928. In spite of them, or perhaps because of them, the work became an instant bestseller, an indication that the Saint-Tropez story did not bother her readers, but was seen as an entertaining distraction from the "main" plot of the text. Critical reviews of the book forecast its wide success particularly because of Colette's beautiful style and her portrait of Sido. However, the praise was accompanied by perplexed comments as to what should be done with the "other" component of the text (the love story). André Billy's 1928 book review gives the following description of the Saint-Tropez story: "Une ombre de roman se situe là . . . où la romancière semble ne vouloir tenir qu'un rôle de témoin. . . ."

Pourtant, l'autobiographie—la 'fatale autobiographie' des oeuvres de la femme—reprend, ici et là, ses droits" "There is the shadow of a novel here . . . in which the novelist seems to want to act only as a witness. . . . Nevertheless, autobiography—the "inevitable autobiography" of women's writing—now and then rears its head' (n. pag.).

Over the next sixty years, questions about *La Naissance du jour*'s dual narratives would not disappear. In 1968, Anne Ketchum claimed that Colette wrote a fictional section into *La Naissance du jour* only to appease editors who insisted that she write a novel, not another autobiographical text (Ketchum 224-25). In 1981, Nancy K. Miller suggested that the fictional Saint-Tropez narrative was written as an example of the principles that Colette established in the autobiographical Sido-Colette narrative (Miller 168). In 1992, Lynne Huffer labeled the Saint-Tropez love story a "response," explaining that the daughter Colette "organized a spectacle of her own" in mimicry of "the mother's epistolary model" which would allow the daughter to "recover the maternal matrix." Thus, again, the primary text remained the Sido-Colette story (Huffer 38). It seems, then, that there is a consensus among critics that the love-triangle narrative is secondary, banal, and subsumed by the main "dialogue" between the mother and daughter. However, certain questions remain. Critics cannot agree on why the love story was included: was it essentially imposed by the editors or did it represent a choice made by Colette? Nor can they agree on how the Saint-Tropez narrative functions in the work: is it an example of or in opposition to the Sido-Colette narrative? A discussion of how the two stories interact narratively and/or stylistically has been completely neglected, except for suggestions such as Miller's or Huffer's that the Saint-Tropez narrative may be interpreted as an example of the principles of renunciation established in the Sido-Colette narrative. However, by working through the position of the narrator in each plot, I will uncover hidden narrative strategies that Colette employed to perpetuate the fame that she already enjoyed while at the same time shaping that fame into a different form of recognition. These narrative strategies will not only upset the established primacy of the Sido-Colette story, but also open up a new view of the Colette-reader relationship.

### Fictional Autobiography: Perpetuating Fame

Recent Colette critics have produced enlightening studies of the representations of the maternal figure and of its effect on

Colette's tone and voice throughout *La Naissance du jour*.<sup>7</sup> Their studies focus mainly on Colette's literary connection to Sido (the maternal letterwriter, muse, and model) and on psychoanalytical approaches to the muse-pupil relationship. I will mention only in passing the now (in)famous letter from Sido about her pink cactus, located on page one of *La Naissance du jour*, and the alterations that Colette made to the original letter to create a maternal character that would suit her needs for the tone of this work. Colette biographer Michèle Sarde was one of the first to point out that Colette changed several of her mother's letters before including them in the work, thereby producing a textual maternal muse who would embody the ideals of renunciation and independence that Colette herself was embracing in *La Naissance du jour* (Sarde 286-87). In Philippe Lejeune's canonical definition of autobiography, the process of alteration and reconstruction is normally considered an infringement of the "autobiographical" pact, especially when the altered text is presented to the reader as true. However, as autobiography has always contained elements of fiction, by nature of its form and structure, the Sido-Colette plot, including the altered letters from Sido, continues to be understood as the more autobiographical section of *La Naissance du jour*.

Colette rewrites her mother's letters so that Sido will appear as her maternal muse, and she informs the reader that she will not include any information about her own maternal relationship with her own daughter, Colette de Jouvenel. Thus, the only maternal images that the reader encounters in *La Naissance du jour* are those found in the "Sido" character, and the altered or censored maternal texts are designed to accentuate only the similarities between Colette and her mother. Clearly, then, the images of Colette that are created in these sections of the Sido-Colette plot are designed to perpetuate the previously established public images of Colette as an inspired daughter-figure, one who imitates her maternal muse.

However, if we look closely, there are also differences between Sido and Colette that Colette suggests indirectly within the text. One that I will emphasize, because of its relevance to the subject of fame, is the difference in class or social standing that has grown between her mother and herself. Colette now belongs to a privileged leisure class; the novel describes her summer on the French Riviera writing novels and entertaining friends. Her mother Sido, on the other hand, lived her entire adult life in a downwardly mobile, petty bourgeois environment, and her letters describe a life of hardship.<sup>8</sup> Leisure and independence in her small provincial village are rare.

The narrator describes the movements of the two women in very different modes. Sido runs from house to house in snow and wind begging for a poor neighbor's newborn child: "elle court sous la neige fouettée de vent crier de porte en porte, chez des riches, qu'un enfant, près d'un être indigent, venait de naître sans langes, nu sur de défaillantes mains nues . . ." 'she ran through the wind-driven snow from door to door, in rich neighborhoods, crying out that a child, in an indigent household, had just been born with nothing to wear, naked and in weak, naked hands . . .' (*Naissance* 278). In contrast, Colette and her friends enjoy their eleven o'clock swims in the Mediterranean and prolonged afternoon meals: "Segonzac, Carco, Régis Gignoux et Thérèse Dorny devaient quitter les hauteurs d'une colline, et manger ici un déjeuner méridional, salades, rascasse farcie et beignets d'aubergines, ordinaire que je corsais de quelque oiseau rôti" 'Segonzac, Carco, Régis Gignoux, and Thérèse Dorny were to leave the hilltop, and eat a southern lunch, salads, stuffed scorpion fish, and fried eggplant, an everyday meal which I spiced up with a roast bird' (297); "mes camarades d'été, au nombre d'une dizaine, fêtaient le temps léger et le bain tiède . . ." 'my summer friends, ten or so of them, celebrated the mild weather and the warm water . . .' (330). The urgency of Sido's visit to her neighbors in the cold winter contrasts starkly with Colette's lazy rendezvous with her neighbors to indulge in leisure activities. Sido also writes to say that she is still feeling young, and to prove it she has just finished chopping up six bundles of wood to provide for the coming winter: "J'ai aussi scié du bois et fait six petits fagots. . . Et puis, en somme, je n'ai que soixante-seize ans!" 'I also cut wood, and made six little bundles of it . . . after all, I'm only 67 years old' (296). Colette, in comparison, "returns" to nature by planting a tropical mandarin tree in her backyard, expecting to reap its benefits in ten years: "Ce tout petit mandarinier en boule, crois-tu qu'il a un bon style, déjà? . . . Dans dix ans, Vial, on cueillera de belles mandarines sur ce petit arbre" 'This tiny mandarin tree, don't you think it looks nice already? . . . In ten years, Vial, we'll pick beautiful mandarins off that little tree' (327). Colette may glorify her humble background by glorifying her mother's image, but there is no question of her returning to that lifestyle.

While her mother ended her life in comparatively impoverished surroundings, Colette has been successful and remains firmly grounded in her newly acquired status as writer, celebrity, and member of the artistic leisure class of France. Even though they may

appear similar in spiritual or emotional terms (due to the narrator's alteration of her mother's letters), in material terms, they lead very different lives. Both through these indirect comparisons made by the narrator and through her fictionalized autobiography in the Sido-Colette plot, Colette signals to her readers that the relationship between her mother and herself is not always one of muse-pupil, nor even one of equality. Through a close reading of Colette's "autobiographical" narrative, we find a model of mother-daughter relations that weaves together both real and fictional differences. These differences undermine the images of Colette as inspired daughter and of Sido as muse-mother that critics and readers have usually emphasized. They also begin to reveal the first part of the new claims that Colette was trying to make about herself as a successful writer. The second part, that of her status in the public realm, comes to the fore in the Saint-Tropez story of *La Naissance du jour*.

#### Autobiographical Fiction: Shaping Fame

On a first reading, the "fictional" Saint-Tropez plot is, in form at least, a traditionally "autobiographical" narrative. That is, the narration continues in the first person singular, and the narrator has the same name as the author, Madame Colette. The setting is in Colette's actual home, "La Treille Muscate" in Saint-Tropez, and some of the characters are people who actually existed — Luc-Albert Moreau, Dunoyer de Segonzac, Thérèse Dorny, Régis Gignoux, Francis Carco, and Villeboeuf were all artists, writers, and actors who knew Colette and who were in southern France while she was living there. However, the main characters of the romantic triangle, Hélène and Vial, and the triangle itself are all fictional, not based on events in Colette's life. Colette chose to narrate the story with a classic, novelistic plot, and, in great contrast to the Sido-Colette sections of the text, she retells events in progressive, chronological order.

Not only are the content and structure different in the Saint-Tropez plot; we find that the voice of the narrator, Madame Colette, changes considerably in the love-triangle narrative. Instead of searching for a higher, maternal authority or a literary muse, in the Saint-Tropez narrative sections of the work, Colette openly portrays herself as a respected literary author and authority on love, relationships, and life. In other words, she has become the muse in the Saint-Tropez narrative of *La Naissance du jour*.

For a French reader of the 1920s, this image of Colette as the muse and authority was not surprising: the name "Colette" immediately conjured up images of the well-known figure and novelist. At the time that *La Naissance du jour* was published, she had many best-sellers circulating; she was a regular contributor to *Vogue*, *Le Figaro*, and *Le Journal*, and had performed in numerous mime shows in Paris and all over France. Yet even for a casual reader of the 1990s, the idea of the narrator as muse and authority is fully supported through details included within the text. No external knowledge of Colette's life and previous literary successes is necessary, because the narrator, in traditional autobiographical form, mentions past works and fictional characters: "je consignais, incorrigible, quelque chapitre dédié à l'amour, au regret de l'amour, un chapitre tout aveuglé d'amour. Je m'y nommais Renée Néré, ou bien, prémonitoire, j'agençais une Léa" 'incorrigibly, I would set forth a chapter dedicated to love, to regrets about love, a chapter blinded by love. I would name myself Renée Néré, or else, as if by premonition, I would sketch out a Léa' (*Naissance* 286). She alludes to both her critics' comments and her summer friends' admiration for her work: "Vous ne mesurerez que plus tard, me disait Mendès peu avant sa mort, la force du type littéraire que vous avez créé" "Only later will you realize," Mendès told me a little before he died, "the force of the literary type you have created" (316).

In the Saint-Tropez narrative, then, we find a narrator who is also a celebrity; it is through the use of this new voice that she establishes a muse-pupil relationship with her fictional neighbors. In contrast to the Sido-Colette relationship, where Sido was placed in the position of authority/author of letters and Colette in the role of admirer/reader of letters, the relationship between Colette and her fictional neighbors turns Colette into the author/authority and places her neighbors in the subordinate position of reader/admirers.

For the author-reader relationship, Colette thus provides a number of possible authorial models and influences within the text of *La Naissance du jour*: her mother's letters, her previous literary successes, and her popular image at that time in France. However, she also describes the other side of the relationship—the elements that are needed for a model reader. In the Saint-Tropez sections especially, the narrator enumerates different types of readers that she has encountered during her literary career, including what she considers poor readers, usually those readers who identify the author

with the narrator of a work. Colette notes with annoyance that both her summer acquaintances and her anonymous public often end up associating her, the author, with the narrator of her novels. She refers to the adolescent readers who write letters to her about the *Claudine* novels that they have just finished reading, where they assume that Colette the author (approximately age fifty-five at the time of *La Naissance du jour*) is still the same age as Claudine the narrator (fifteen): “Il y a des jeunes filles—trop jeunes pour prendre garde aux dates des éditions—qui m’écrivent qu’elles ont lu les *Claudine* en cachette, qu’elles attendent ma réponse à la poste restante . . . à moins qu’elles ne me donnent rendez-vous dans un ‘thé.’ Elles me voient peut-être en sarrau d’écolière, qui sait?” ‘There are young girls—too young to pay attention to copyright dates—who write me to say that they have read the *Claudine* books in secret, that they are awaiting an answer from me . . . or else they expect me to meet them in a tearoom. They might imagine me wearing a schoolgirl’s smock, who knows?’ (316). Here she uses humor to point out the absurdity of linking a narrator to the author of a text, and thus denies to some extent her connection with the book and with the reader on this level. She is not comfortable with being treated as peer to a fifteen-year-old reader and resists efforts made by her younger readers to turn her fictional character into a “real” person.

She also finds that some of her close summer friends look to her novels for clues to understanding her thoughts. She rebukes Vial promptly when he remarks that he does not remember having read a comment that she just made in any of her novels: “‘Nous n’avons que faire de mes livres ici, Vial.’ Je ne pus lui dissimuler le découragement jaloux, l’injuste hostilité qui s’emparent de moi quand je comprends qu’on me cherche toute vive entre les pages de mes romans” “‘This isn’t about my books, Vial.’ I could not hide from him the jealous discouragement, the unjust hostility that come hold of me when I realize that someone is trying to find me between the pages of my novels’ (341). Vial also tries to connect the narrator of the text to the author, but instead of assuming that she is a fifteen-year-old Claudine, he assigns her a superstar status, placed on a pedestal above ordinary, mortal friendships. Colette’s reprimand is perhaps more pronounced because of this particular reader’s (Vial’s) proximity to herself; he should know her better than a fifteen-year old reader of *Claudine* novels. She also feels more “unjust hostility” towards him because he insists on reading her as a fictional character, not as a person. Vial’s reading claims the opposite of the

teenaged reader's in that he has tried to fictionalize his real-life neighbor by assimilating her to one of her novel's heroines, rather than trying to make a fictional heroine become a living human being. He will not treat "Madame Colette" simply as a friend and neighbor (and possible lover), but as a literary figure and a fictional character.

Colette does not limit her portrayal of bad readers to popular readings of her: within *La Naissance du jour*, she also mentions two of her critics, Motherlant (304) and Mendès (316), and even takes on the criticisms of one of her ex-husbands. But rather than allowing their words and opinions to have the final say in forming public impressions of her, she critiques their short-sighted views of her works and herself, thus reappropriating the power of image production into her own hands. In response to her husband's remonstrance that she never writes about anything but love, Colette replies with irony, "Si le temps ne l'eût pressé de courir—car il était beau et charmant—vers des rendez-vous amoureux, il m'aurait peut-être enseigné ce qui a licence de tenir, dans un roman et hors du roman, la place de l'amour . . ." "If he had not been pressed for time—for he was handsome and charming—by amorous rendezvous, he might perhaps have taught me what, in the novel and outside the novel, should take the place of love . . ." (285-86). She also mentions her male readers' amazement by the fact that Colette can divulge private feelings and emotions in a published work (315). The misunderstandings that arise between Madame Colette and her various readers bring out not only the difficulties confronted by a writer when her autobiography becomes subject to public interpretation, but the autobiographer's warning to future readers not to follow the same misguided paths that past readers have.

To find an example of a good reader, on the other hand, we must return to the Sido-Colette plot of *La Naissance du jour* where Colette portrays herself as the model reader. She reads, interprets, and understands her mother's letters in such a way that her mother need never correct her daughter's interpretations. Furthermore, Colette is able to learn lessons from her readings and apply them to her own writing and life. Colette admits that her mother is obviously a better writer than she (370) and that she could never imagine or invent what her mother would have said in certain situations, given her mother's linguistic genius (336). These comments demonstrate what the model reader's response should be and how they contrast with the obstinate and poor readers' responses.

Are we to learn from the negative examples of poor readers given in *La Naissance du jour*? Perhaps yes, but the ambiguity of the narrator in Colette's autobiographical fiction makes it difficult to do so. Most Colette biographers and critics have been tempted to identify the narrator with the author of the work, just as Vial and the Claudine-reader did. The more important point here is that Colette had gained the authority to tell her readers how she felt about them and their readings of her, and would do so openly in her texts. This newly found narrative authority was expressed both in her deviations from the muse-pupil paradigm in the Sido-Colette story and in her claims to fame in the Saint-Tropez story. If we look specifically at the effects produced by her voice of authority, rather than those produced by her admiring daughter-narrative that has been emphasized over the years, we see that they produce new readings of her. These passages are written in a style that is clearly conscious of her readers' pre-conceived notions of her persona and one that is clearly aimed at reshaping that fame. Through the act of authorizing her success, both in the descriptions of her life of leisure at Saint-Tropez and in the references to her literary fame, Colette in fact developed an author-reader relationship designed to shape the reception that she enjoyed and to enable her to become part of the French literary canon of her day.

### Notes

1. Although Braudy's notion of renown as the "story about a person" was written with twentieth-century performers in mind, it is also well suited for writers, and particularly for writers whose subject matter often centers around their own lives. In France, the star system has always included not only actors, musicians, and politicians, but also writers and even literary critics.
2. See for example Michèle Sarde's "The First Steps in a Writer's Career" (1981) or Michel Mercier's "Notice" in Colette's *Oeuvres* (1991). Both articles offer explanations for some of Colette's more infamous statements about her writing and her public image. Sarde, for example, explores Colette's statement of denial: "No, I don't know how to write. In my youth, I never, never wanted to write" (16).
3. I prefer Lynne Huffer's name for these three Colette works: her "maternal cycle" (9).
4. The three full-length works include one biography: Robert Sigl's *Colette* (1924), and two works that combined critical study with biography: Paul

Reboux's *Colette ou le génie du style* (1925) and Jean Larnac's *Colette, sa vie, son oeuvre* (1927). All three tend toward the hagiographic.

5. Although it may be problematic, I use the term "autobiographical" here in a canonical sense; that is, that the work is true, that it quotes accurately from real life documents, is personal and written in the first person, that it fulfills the "autobiographical pact" with the reader that Philippe Lejeune speaks of in his article "Le pacte autobiographique." As I will demonstrate further, Colette's own particular brand of autobiographical novel does not adhere to these oversimplistic prescriptions and constantly mixes fiction with autobiography.

6. It may appear that there is an autobiographical basis for the narrator's relationship to the thirty-five-year-old Vial in *La Naissance du jour*, especially if one considers the fact that Colette's relationship with her third husband (thirty-five-year-old Maurice Goudekot) first developed during a summer vacation in Saint-Tropez. However, Colette herself, as well as Maurice Goudekot and numerous biographers and critics, have openly stated that Vial was not based on Goudekot, but rather on a young antique dealer in Saint Tropez who did not know Colette personally and who only indirectly influenced Colette's life.

7. In the collection of essays entitled *Colette: The Woman, the Writer*, Colette critics Nancy K. Miller (164-75), Joan Hinde Stewart (43-53), Erica Eisinger (85-103), and Suzanne Relyea (150-63) all develop new conceptual models that have been excellent tools for rereading Colette. More recently, Nicole Ward Jouve, in her 1987 monograph *Colette*, Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Hirsch 103-08), and Lynne Huffer in *Another Colette* study the maternal figure of Sido in Colette's mother-daughter works.

8. After her husband had squandered her family's fortune, Sido was forced to live a simple, rural life. During her last years, as a widow, she had no means of financial support and moved in with her son's family.

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