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Peter G. Christensen

COLETTE (1873–1954)

French novelist. Born Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette in a small Burgundian village, she was the daughter of an army captain who had fought in the Crimea and lost a leg in the Italian campaign. Her whole literary career was to be marked by memories of her rural childhood, in which "Claudine's household" was a disorderly but sensual ambiance, with a somewhat eccentric mother, an assortment of pets, a large garden, and all the sensations of the provincial countryside. But the lost paradise of her early years caused regrets later on, when she said: "A happy childhood is a bad preparation for contact with human beings." In 1893 she married Henry Gauthier-Villars, who under the name of Willy was a celebrity of the Paris boulevards, but the marriage was ill-fated, as Willy soon reverted to the ways of a free-roving bachelor. This failure in her first marriage impressed upon the young woman the distance between love and happiness.

Some notebooks that Colette had filled with her childhood memories at Willy's behest were the starting point for her first novel, *Claudine à l'école* (1900), followed by a whole series with the same heroine which found its way to the stage. The sequel was Colette's slow conquest of her marital and literary independence. In 1906 she obtained a divorce and began to live alone in a modest apartment in Paris, soon "protected" by a strange creature, Missy, the youngest daughter of the Duc de Morny, who possessed money and a passion for the theatre. The two women appeared on the stage in daring pantomimes, a period of her life in which Colette struggled to earn her livelihood and which she recorded in *La Vagabonde* (1911) and *L'Envers du music-hall* (1913). Her

second marriage in 1912, this time to Henry de Jouvenel, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Le Matin*, to which she contributed an article a week, was no happier than the first. For a time she abandoned both the stage and her writing career and gave birth to a daughter. World War I revived her journalistic bent, and she was sent as a reporter to the Italian front. She also composed a work entitled *La Paix chez les bêtes* (1916), which depicts her withdrawal from the world of human relations into the intimate sphere of household pets. In 1920 Colette published her masterpiece *Chéri*, whose male hero confronts Léa, a woman of fifty who has not "abandoned her search for happiness."

In 1923 she divorced her second husband, and also published *Le Blé en herbe*, whose serialization by *Le Matin* was halted so as not to offend the readers. By now a successful writer, in possession of a villa at Saint-Tropez, "la Treille muscate," she issued one novel after another on the theme of the eternal combat between the sexes. In 1935 Colette married Maurice Goudekot, her faithful admirer, and settled permanently at the Palais-Royal in Paris. In her last years she composed a few more important works, among them *Gigi* (1945), while basking in her reminiscences and her literary fame.

Colette's work was more autobiographical than anyone could have admitted when it first appeared. The Claudine series features a tomboyish girl who at fifteen develops an intense crush on a pretty assistant mistress, Aimée, who tutors her in English at home, but the affair is interrupted when the domineering headmistress herself turns fond of the assistant. Aimée abandons Claudine to become the pampered favorite of her superior. Claudine even eavesdrops one day upon an intimate moment enjoyed by the two women in their dormitory quarters while their classes are running wild in the schoolrooms. Later, the headmistress implies to Claudine that she might have replaced the junior mistress as her favorite. The second

volume of the series finds Claudine in her seventeenth year in Paris, where a long illness causes her hair to be cropped and her contacts limited to her father's older sister and the latter's grandson, Marcel, a pretty and effeminate youth who is absorbed in his own affair with a male schoolmate, which has already made trouble for them at the lycée and provoked the wrathful contempt of Marcel's father. The series continues in the same vein with homoerotic as well as heterosexual interaction among the characters.

Stella Browne, in a psychological study of women authors with lesbian tendencies, mentions Colette as having been involved with two women, the film star Marguerite Moréno and an unnamed foreign noblewoman, of whom character sketches drawn with great discretion figure in *Ces Plaisirs* (1932). The entire setting of Colette's life work is the amoral, sensual world of a coterie of Parisian literati and *rentiers* in the years before World War I—an ambiance in which homosexuality was a subdued, but certainly not a major element. Colette herself enjoyed the company of male homosexuals, especially Jean Cocteau and Jean Marais, in her literary set during the years of her renown as one of the great living French authors.

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Evelyn Gettone

COLOR SYMBOLISM

In addition to their aesthetic aspect, colors acquire symbolic values, which are culturally variable. In Western civilization black is the color of mourning, while in some Asian societies white is. Many men today will avoid wearing lavender or pink because of their "fruity" associations. Yet over the centuries so many hues have been linked to homosexuality

that it would be almost impossible to eschew them all.

According to the poet Martial, several colors were associated with effeminate homosexuality in imperial Rome. He limns an exquisite "who thinks that men in scarlet are not men at all, and styles violet mantles the vesture of women; although he praises native colors and always affects somber hues, grass-green (*galbinus*) are his morals" (I, 96). While scarlet and violet were the traditional colors of effeminacy, an off-green seems to have been the new, "in" color of the day. Martial even uses the *galbinus* shade metaphorically to represent the lifestyle as a whole. In late Victorian England, Robert Hichens' novel *The Green Carnation* (1894) helped to revive the association. In 1929 an American physician, John F. W. Meagher, stated flatly, "Their favorite color is green." Whether it was or not, this assertion took hold in the popular mind, and in the 1950s American high school students avoided green on Thursday, reputed to be "National Fairy Day." Another color associated with the "decadent" 1890s was yellow, because of the London periodical that was almost synonymous with the aesthetic sophistication of that era, *The Yellow Book*. A current Russian term for a gay man is *golubchik*, from *goluboy*, "blue," evidently through association with the "blue blood" of the aristocracy of the Old Regime.

Probably the most enduringly significant sector of the color wheel is, however, the red to purple range (as Martial duly noted two thousand years ago). According to Havelock Ellis, one could not safely walk down the streets of late-nineteenth-century New York wearing a red tie without being accosted, since this garment was then the universal mark of the male prostitute. In gay slang this fashion was referred to as "wearing one's badge." Because of the "scarlet woman," the great Whore of Babylon of the Book of Revelation, that color has acquired a strong association with prostitution and adultery (cf.